3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1888

Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

A 35-minute lesson on the 1888 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Gilded Age	ELECTORAL VOTES 401 total
WINNER Benjamin Harrison (Republican) · 233 EV	RUNNER-UP Grover Cleveland (Democratic) · 168 EV
KEY ISSUE Protective tariff policy; federal surplus management	TURNOUT 80.5%

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2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1888: Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a candidate wins more popular votes but loses the Electoral College, is the election legitimate? Why does the Constitution give us this system?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1888 election was the 26th U.S. presidential election. It produced Benjamin Harrison's 233-168 electoral-vote victory over incumbent President Grover Cleveland - despite Cleveland winning the popular vote by 90,596 votes. The 1888 result was the third presidential election in U.S. history (after 1824 and 1876) in which the popular-vote winner lost the Electoral College. The campaign focused almost entirely on the tariff issue. The Democratic Party renominated incumbent President Grover Cleveland by acclamation at the June 1888 St. Louis convention. Allen G. Thurman of Ohio replaced the late Thomas A. Hendricks (who had died in November 1885) as the vice presidential candidate. Cleveland had governed as a fiscally conservative reform Democrat: he had supported Pendleton civil-service reform; vetoed many private pension bills for Civil War veterans; supported tariff reduction. His December 1887 annual message to Congress had focused entirely on tariff reduction, making tariff the defining issue of his presidency. The political risk was substantial: tariff politics was structurally divisive, and Cleveland's tariff-reduction position had alienated industrial workers and manufacturers in key Northern states. The Republican Party met in Chicago on June 19-25, 1888. The convention nominated Senator Benjamin Harrison of Indiana on the eighth ballot over Senator John Sherman of Ohio (Garfield-era Treasury Secretary), James G. Blaine (the 1884 nominee who had declined to run), Russell Alger of Michigan, and Walter Q. Gresham of Indiana. Harrison was 55, a Union Civil War general who had risen to brigadier general by war's end. He was the grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th president, died after 31 days in 1841) and the great-grandson of Benjamin Harrison V (1726-1791, a signer of the Declaration of Independence). Levi P. Morton of New York was the vice presidential candidate. Harrison was 5'6" tall (the nickname "Little Ben" was Democratic ridicule). He was formal, dignified, and reserved - widely seen as cold to people. He was a respected lawyer and politician but lacked the personal warmth of his contemporaries. The Republican campaign emphasized Harrison's Civil War service, his Indiana base, and his support for protective tariffs and Union veteran pensions.

The campaign focused almost entirely on the tariff issue. Cleveland's 1887 annual message had set the agenda. Republicans defended high protective tariffs as essential to American manufacturing and Union veteran pensions. Democrats defended tariff reduction as essential to consumer welfare and fiscal responsibility. Both candidates campaigned in the conventional 19th-century manner - relatively little personal campaigning, primary engagement through speeches and writings rather than direct voter contact.

The 1888 campaign was structurally important for U.S. campaign finance history. Republican fundraising chair John Wanamaker (later Postmaster General under Harrison) raised over $400,000 for the Harrison campaign - the most money ever raised in a U.S. presidential race up to that point. The money was used for massive Republican organizing in Indiana and New York, including significant vote-buying. The "blocks of five" letter by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley to Republican workers in October 1888 told them to organize voters into "blocks of five" and use $2 per voter to buy their votes. Indiana decided the 1888 election by 2,348 votes; the "blocks of five" scheme almost certainly affected the Indiana outcome.

Harrison won 233 electoral votes to Cleveland's 168. Harrison carried 20 states; Cleveland carried 18 states. The popular vote: Cleveland 5,534,488 (48.6%); Harrison 5,443,892 (47.8%); Fisk 249,819 (Prohibition, 2.2%); Streeter 146,602 (Union Labor, 1.3%). Cleveland-Harrison popular-vote margin: 90,596 votes in Cleveland's favor. But Harrison won the decisive Northern industrial states: New York (36 EV) by 14,373 votes, Indiana (15 EV) by 2,348 votes (the "blocks of five" state), Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. Cleveland's margins were huge in the Solid South - but Southern electoral votes per state were smaller than Northern industrial states.

The 1888 result demonstrated the structural advantage that the Electoral College gives to candidates who win narrowly in big-EV states while losing big in small-EV states. Cleveland's big margins in Solid South states (Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, etc.) were "wasted" votes - they did not translate to additional electoral votes. Harrison's narrow wins in big Northern states (NY, IN, OH, IL, etc.) were maximally efficient.

Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1889. He governed as a high-tariff Republican: he signed the October 1890 McKinley Tariff (raising average rates from 38% to 49.5%); the July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act; the July 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act; the June 1890 Dependent and Disability Pension Act (massive expansion of Civil War veteran pensions); and the June 1892 Geary Act (renewal of Chinese Exclusion). The McKinley Tariff was so unpopular that Republicans lost the November 1890 midterm elections badly (Democrats gained 86 House seats). Harrison faced Cleveland in the 1892 rematch and lost.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.

5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1888 Election

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Key words

Tariff	A tax on imported goods. Republicans in 1888 wanted high protective tariffs to shield American manufacturing from foreign competition. Democrats wanted tariff reduction to lower consumer prices. Cleveland's December 1887 annual message focused entirely on tariff reduction, making it the defining issue of 1888.
Benjamin Harrison	The 23rd U.S. president (1889-93). Senator from Indiana, Union Civil War brigadier general. Grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th president). 5'6" tall ("Little Ben"). Formal, dignified, reserved. Won 233 EV to Cleveland's 168 despite losing popular vote by 90,596.

"Blocks of five"	The 1888 vote-buying scheme by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley. October 1888 letter to Republican workers told them to organize voters into "blocks of five" and use $2 per voter to buy them. Indiana decided the 1888 election by 2,348 votes.
John Wanamaker	The Republican fundraising chair for the 1888 Harrison campaign. Philadelphia department store owner. Raised over $400,000 for Harrison - the most money ever raised in a U.S. presidential race up to that point. Harrison appointed him Postmaster General in 1889.
McKinley Tariff	The October 1890 federal law raising average tariff rates from 38% to 49.5%. Sponsored by Rep. William McKinley of Ohio. So unpopular that Republicans lost the November 1890 midterm elections badly (Democrats gained 86 House seats). Repealed by the 1894 Wilson-Gorman Tariff under Cleveland's second term.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Benjamin Harrison win in 1888?

( ) A. 168
( ) B. 218
( ) C. 233
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

By how many votes did Cleveland win the popular vote in 1888?

( ) A. 9,070
( ) B. 57,579
( ) C. 90,596
( ) D. 231,415

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how Cleveland won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the "blocks of five" scheme and how did it affect the 1888 outcome?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

233. Harrison 233; Cleveland 168.

Harrison's 65-EV margin was decisive in the Electoral College.

QUESTION 2

90,596. Cleveland 5,534,488 (48.6%) to Harrison 5,443,892 (47.8%).

AP students should know the 90,596 popular-vote margin.

QUESTION 3

Cleveland won big margins in the Solid South states (Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, etc.) - sometimes winning 65-75% of the vote. These big margins gave him many popular votes but only as many electoral votes as the states had been allocated based on population. Cleveland's "wasted" Southern votes accumulated to 90,596 more popular votes than Harrison. Meanwhile, Harrison won narrow victories in the big Northern industrial states: New York (36 EV) by 14,373 votes; Indiana (15 EV) by 2,348 votes; Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota. These narrow wins gave Harrison maximum electoral-vote efficiency. Northern states had more total electoral votes than Southern states because Northern populations were larger. Harrison's 233-168 EV margin came from winning the high-population Northern states by small margins.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic mechanism.

QUESTION 4

The "blocks of five" scheme was the 1888 vote-buying operation by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley. In an October 1888 letter to Republican workers, Dudley instructed them to organize voters into "blocks of five" and use $2 per voter to buy their votes. The scheme was funded by John Wanamaker's $400,000+ Republican fundraising effort - the largest in U.S. presidential history up to that point. Indiana decided the 1888 election by 2,348 votes. Even if vote-buying affected only a fraction of Indiana's 1888 vote, the scheme almost certainly affected the outcome. Indiana was Harrison's home state; without the scheme, Cleveland might have won Indiana and the presidency. The "blocks of five" letter became public after the election and contributed to public outrage over campaign finance practices.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance of the scheme.