1888

Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

A 50-minute lesson on the 1888 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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1888: Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural reasons the U.S. Electoral College can produce a winner who loses the popular vote. For each, identify the specific 1888 state-level outcome that demonstrates the mechanism.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 5-7, 1888 St. Louis convention. Allen G. Thurman of Ohio - a longtime Senator known as "the Old Roman" - replaced the late Thomas A. Hendricks (who had died November 25, 1885, eight months into Cleveland's first term) as the vice presidential candidate. Cleveland had governed as a fiscally conservative reform Democrat. His December 6, 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 in the late 19th century, 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 in 1888), Senator William B. Allison of Iowa, 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 U.S. president, died after 31 days in 1841 - the shortest presidency in U.S. history) and the great-grandson of Benjamin Harrison V (1726-1791, a signer of the Declaration of Independence). Levi P. Morton of New York - a wealthy banker and former Minister to France - was the vice presidential candidate.

Harrison was 5'6" tall (the Democratic nickname "Little Ben" was both a height jab and a comparison to his "Great Ben" grandfather). He was formal, dignified, and reserved - widely seen as cold to people. The famous remark about Harrison: "He could shake hands with 10,000 people without giving offense and lose 10,000 friends with one personal interview." He was a respected lawyer, Senator from Indiana, and former Union general, 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 December 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. The campaign was relatively conventional in style. Both candidates campaigned in the 19th-century manner - relatively little personal campaigning, primary engagement through written messages, surrogate speeches, and party-organized rallies 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 (equivalent to roughly $13 million in 2024 dollars). The money was used for massive Republican organizing in Indiana, New York, and other key states, including significant vote-buying operations.

The "blocks of five" letter by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley to Republican workers in October 1888 was the most notorious vote-buying scheme. Dudley instructed Republican workers 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 Dudley letter became public after the election and contributed to public outrage over campaign finance practices. The 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.

The critical state-level outcomes: Harrison won New York (36 EV) by 14,373 votes; Indiana (15 EV) by 2,348 votes (the "blocks of five" state); Ohio (23 EV) by 19,599 votes; Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. Cleveland's margins in the Solid South were huge: Texas (Cleveland 65%, Harrison 25%); Alabama (Cleveland 67%, Harrison 32%); Mississippi (Cleveland 73%, Harrison 26%); South Carolina (Cleveland 82%, Harrison 17%). These big Southern margins accumulated to Cleveland's 90,596 popular-vote lead but did not translate to additional electoral votes.

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 were "wasted" votes - they did not translate to additional electoral votes beyond the state's allocated share. Harrison's narrow wins in big Northern industrial states were maximally efficient: a 14,373-vote margin in New York delivered 36 EV; a 2,348-vote margin in Indiana delivered 15 EV.

Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1889. He governed as a high-tariff Republican. The major legislative achievements of his administration: the October 1890 McKinley Tariff (raising average rates from 38% to 49.5%); the July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act (the first federal law against monopolies); the July 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act (federal monthly silver purchases at gold prices); 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 (the largest single-election gain in U.S. House history until 1932), giving them a 235-88 majority. The 1890 result was a structural verdict on Republican tariff policy. Harrison faced Cleveland in the 1892 rematch and lost - Cleveland won 277-145 EV with 5,556,918 popular votes (46.0%) to Harrison's 5,176,108 (43.0%). Cleveland's 1892 victory was the first decisive Democratic margin since 1856.

10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

Tariff

A tax on imported goods. Republicans in 1888 wanted high protective tariffs to shield American manufacturing from foreign competition. Democrats wanted tariff reduction. Cleveland's December 1887 annual message focused entirely on tariff reduction, making it the defining issue of 1888.

"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.

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 86 House seats in the November 1890 midterm. Repealed by the 1894 Wilson-Gorman Tariff under Cleveland's second term.

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"). Won 233 EV to Cleveland's 168 despite losing popular vote by 90,596.

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.

Sherman Antitrust Act

The July 1890 federal law prohibiting "every contract, combination... or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States." The first federal law against monopolies. Sponsored by Senator John Sherman of Ohio. Initial enforcement was weak; Theodore Roosevelt would use it against Northern Securities in 1902.

Annual Message to Congress (Tariff Message)

GROVER CLEVELAND, DECEMBER 6, 1887

Cleveland delivered this entire annual message to Congress on tariff policy - the first president to dedicate an entire annual message to a single policy issue. The message was a deliberate political gamble: it made tariff reduction the defining issue of his administration and the 1888 campaign. The message did not explicitly call for free trade; it called for reduction of "the unnecessary surplus" of tariff revenue. Cleveland believed the federal Treasury surplus (about $94 million in 1887) represented excessive taxation of consumers. Republicans responded by defending high tariffs as essential to American manufacturing and Union veteran pensions. The 1888 election would be fought entirely on this single issue.

> *"The amount of money annually exacted, through the operation of present laws, from the industries and necessities of the people largely exceeds the sum necessary to meet the expenses of the Government. Our progress toward a wise conclusion will not be improved by dwelling upon the theories of protection and free trade. This savors too much of bandying epithets. It is a condition which confronts us, not a theory. Relief from this condition may involve a slight reduction of the advantages which we award our home productions, but the entire withdrawal of such advantages should not be contemplated. The question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant."*

Cleveland, "Annual Message to Congress" (Washington, DC, December 6, 1887). Public domain.

The 1888 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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. Cite specific state-level outcomes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER
What was the "blocks of five" scheme and how did it affect the 1888 outcome?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Cleveland says in his 1887 message: "It is a condition which confronts us, not a theory. The question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant." What is the rhetorical purpose of this framing?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1888 election map, identify Cleveland's 18 states and Harrison's 20 states. What does the map reveal about the Electoral College's structural bias?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

233. Harrison 233; Cleveland 168.

Harrison's 65-EV margin was decisive.

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: Cleveland 65%, Harrison 25%. Alabama: Cleveland 67%, Harrison 32%. Mississippi: Cleveland 73%, Harrison 26%. South Carolina: Cleveland 82%, Harrison 17%. These big Southern margins accumulated to Cleveland's 90,596 popular-vote lead. But Southern electoral votes per state were small relative to population (because Southern states had been historically less populous than Northern industrial states even before disenfranchisement of Black voters reduced effective Southern population further). Meanwhile, Harrison won narrow victories in big Northern industrial states: New York (36 EV) by 14,373 votes; Indiana (15 EV) by 2,348 votes; Ohio (23 EV) by 19,599 votes; Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota. Harrison's narrow wins were maximally efficient: 14,373 votes in NY delivered 36 EV; 2,348 votes in IN delivered 15 EV.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic mechanism with specific state numbers.

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. The Dudley letter became public after the election and contributed to public outrage over campaign finance practices, leading to the Australian (secret) ballot reforms of the 1890s.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.

QUESTION 5

The rhetorical purpose of "condition not theory" framing is to: (1) move the tariff debate away from abstract economic theory (free trade vs. protectionism) which Republicans had dominated, and toward concrete fiscal facts (federal Treasury surplus, consumer prices) which favored the Democratic position. (2) Defuse the political attack that Cleveland was a "free trader" - which would have alienated industrial workers and manufacturers. By explicitly saying "the question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant," Cleveland positioned his tariff reform as moderate revenue adjustment rather than radical free trade. (3) Frame Republican opposition as defensive of an "unnecessary surplus" rather than defense of American manufacturing. The framing was politically sophisticated but ultimately unsuccessful - Cleveland lost the 1888 election because tariff politics was structurally divisive.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 6

Cleveland states: 18 states - the Solid South (11 former Confederate states), the 4 Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware), New Jersey, Connecticut, and West Virginia. Harrison states: 20 states - all of New England except Connecticut; the Mid-Atlantic except New Jersey; the entire Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota); plus California, Oregon, Nevada, Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska. The Electoral College's structural bias: Southern states had smaller electoral allocations per state than Northern industrial states. The 1880 census had allocated 36 EV to New York (the largest state), 30 to Pennsylvania, 23 to Ohio, 22 to Illinois, 15 to Indiana - the big Northern states. Texas had only 13 EV, Tennessee 12, Virginia 12, etc. The structural lesson: candidates who win narrowly in big-EV Northern states win the Electoral College even if they lose big in small-EV Southern states.

AP students should be able to articulate the EV bias geographically.