1888

Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1888: Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1888 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1888 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural reasons the U.S. Electoral College produces winners who lose 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) 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 and the 1888 campaign. 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), Senator William B. Allison of Iowa, Russell Alger of Michigan, and Walter Q. Gresham of Indiana. Harrison was 55, a Union Civil War brigadier general. He was the grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th U.S. 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 - a wealthy banker - was the vice presidential candidate.

Harrison was 5'6" tall ("Little Ben"). 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." 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. Republicans defended high protective tariffs as essential to American manufacturing and Union veteran pensions. Democrats defended tariff reduction. The campaign was relatively conventional in style.

The 1888 campaign was structurally important for U.S. campaign finance history. Republican fundraising chair John Wanamaker 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, leading to the Australian (secret) ballot reforms of the 1890s.

The Murchison letter was another notorious 1888 campaign episode. A California Republican named George Osgoodby (using the pseudonym "Charles F. Murchison") wrote to British Minister Lionel Sackville-West in September 1888 asking which candidate Britain preferred. Sackville-West replied that Britain preferred Cleveland because Cleveland's tariff-reduction position would benefit British exports. Republicans publicized the letter to suggest Cleveland was the "British candidate" - damaging Cleveland's support among Irish-American voters. Cleveland expelled Sackville-West from the United States in October 1888.

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. The structural mechanism: each state's electoral votes equal its House seats + 2 Senate seats. The Senate-equal-state rule gives small states proportionately more electoral votes per voter than large states. The winner-take-all allocation in 48 states (Maine and Nebraska use district allocation) means that a candidate's margin within a state does not affect the electoral vote share. The combination: winning narrowly in big-EV states and losing big in small-EV states maximizes electoral efficiency.

Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1889. He governed as a high-tariff Republican. Major legislative achievements: October 1890 McKinley Tariff (raising average rates from 38% to 49.5%); July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act (first federal law against monopolies); July 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act (federal monthly silver purchases at gold prices); June 1890 Dependent and Disability Pension Act (massive expansion of Civil War veteran pensions); 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.

The 1888-1890-1892 sequence demonstrated the structural Republican-Democratic equilibrium that the 1880 election had inaugurated. Both parties were capable of winning national elections; tariff policy was the dominant economic-policy disagreement; ethnocultural voting (religious affiliation, ethnic origin, regional identity) shaped voting at the margin. The 1896 William Jennings Bryan campaign would break this equilibrium by mobilizing agrarian populism around the gold/silver question. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.

15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	

		Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1888 election tells you about the Gilded Age era that the textbook didn't?"

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; Democrats wanted 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 November 1890.

Murchison letter

The September 1888 forged letter from "Charles F. Murchison" (California Republican George Osgoodby) to British Minister Lionel Sackville-West asking which candidate Britain preferred. Sackville-West replied Britain preferred Cleveland. Republicans publicized to damage Cleveland with Irish-American voters.

Benjamin Harrison

The 23rd U.S. president (1889-93). Senator from Indiana, Union Civil War brigadier general. Grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th president). 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.

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.

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.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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 what structural reforms did it eventually produce?

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Republican Congress passed the McKinley Tariff in October 1890. Democrats gained 86 House seats in November 1890. What does this sequence reveal about the political risk of high-tariff policy?

QUESTION 7 · 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. 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. 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. The combined effect: Harrison won 233-168 EV despite losing the popular vote by 90,596.

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. October 1888 letter to Republican workers 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. Indiana decided the 1888 election by 2,348 votes. The Dudley letter became public after the election and contributed to public outrage. Structural reforms produced: (1) The Australian (secret) ballot adopted by every state by 1900 - making vote-buying harder to verify. (2) The 1907 Tillman Act prohibiting corporate political contributions to federal candidates. (3) The 1910 Federal Corrupt Practices Act requiring campaign finance disclosure. (4) The 1925 Federal Corrupt Practices Act (the major statute until the 1971 FECA). These reforms did not eliminate vote-buying entirely but made it structurally harder.

AP students should be able to articulate the reform trajectory.

QUESTION 5

The rhetorical purpose: (1) Move the tariff debate away from abstract economic theory (free trade vs. protectionism) which Republicans had dominated, toward concrete fiscal facts (federal Treasury surplus, consumer prices) which favored Democrats. (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." The framing was politically sophisticated but ultimately unsuccessful - Cleveland lost the 1888 election because tariff politics was structurally divisive and Republican defense of "American manufacturing" resonated with industrial workers in key Northern states.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 6

The McKinley Tariff (October 1890) and the 86-seat Democratic gain (November 1890) reveal: (1) Tariff policy was politically dangerous because it had immediate consumer impact - higher tariffs meant higher prices on everyday goods. (2) The 1888 election's narrow Electoral College margin reflected a fragile Republican coalition that could not absorb a controversial economic policy. (3) Voters in non-manufacturing regions (Midwestern farmers, Southern cotton farmers) saw high tariffs as redistribution from consumers to manufacturers. (4) The 1890 election was a structural verdict on Republican tariff policy - the 86-seat Democratic gain was the largest single-election House gain in U.S. history until 1932. (5) The sequence demonstrates that close elections produce policy actions that overshoot the political mandate; the 1890 backlash produced Cleveland's 1892 victory. The lesson: economic policy with immediate consumer impact is politically dangerous because it gives voters concrete grievances they can punish at the polls.

AP students should be able to articulate the political-economic dynamic.

QUESTION 7

Cleveland states: 18 states - the Solid South (11 former Confederate states), the 4 Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware), New Jersey, Connecticut, 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, Nebraska. The Electoral College's structural bias: the Senate-equal-state rule (2 EV per state regardless of population) gives small states proportionately more electoral votes per voter than large states. Combined with winner-take-all allocation in 48 states, the result is that candidates who win narrowly in big-EV states and lose big in small-EV states maximize electoral efficiency. In 1888: Cleveland's 65-82% Southern margins were "wasted"; Harrison's 14,373-vote NY margin delivered 36 EV. The map structurally favors the Republican coalition because Republican strongholds are concentrated in big-EV Northern states.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural Electoral College bias.

Discussion prompts

1. The 1888 result was the third presidential election (after 1824 and 1876) in which the popular-vote winner lost the Electoral College. Identify two structural features of the Electoral College that enabled the 1888 divergence and explain whether the divergence reflects a constitutional design feature or an unintended consequence.

2. The "blocks of five" vote-buying scheme by W.W. Dudley raised public concerns about campaign finance and election integrity. Identify three specific 1880s-1900s structural reforms that addressed these concerns and assess whether they were structurally sufficient.