K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1888

Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

A 20-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

1888

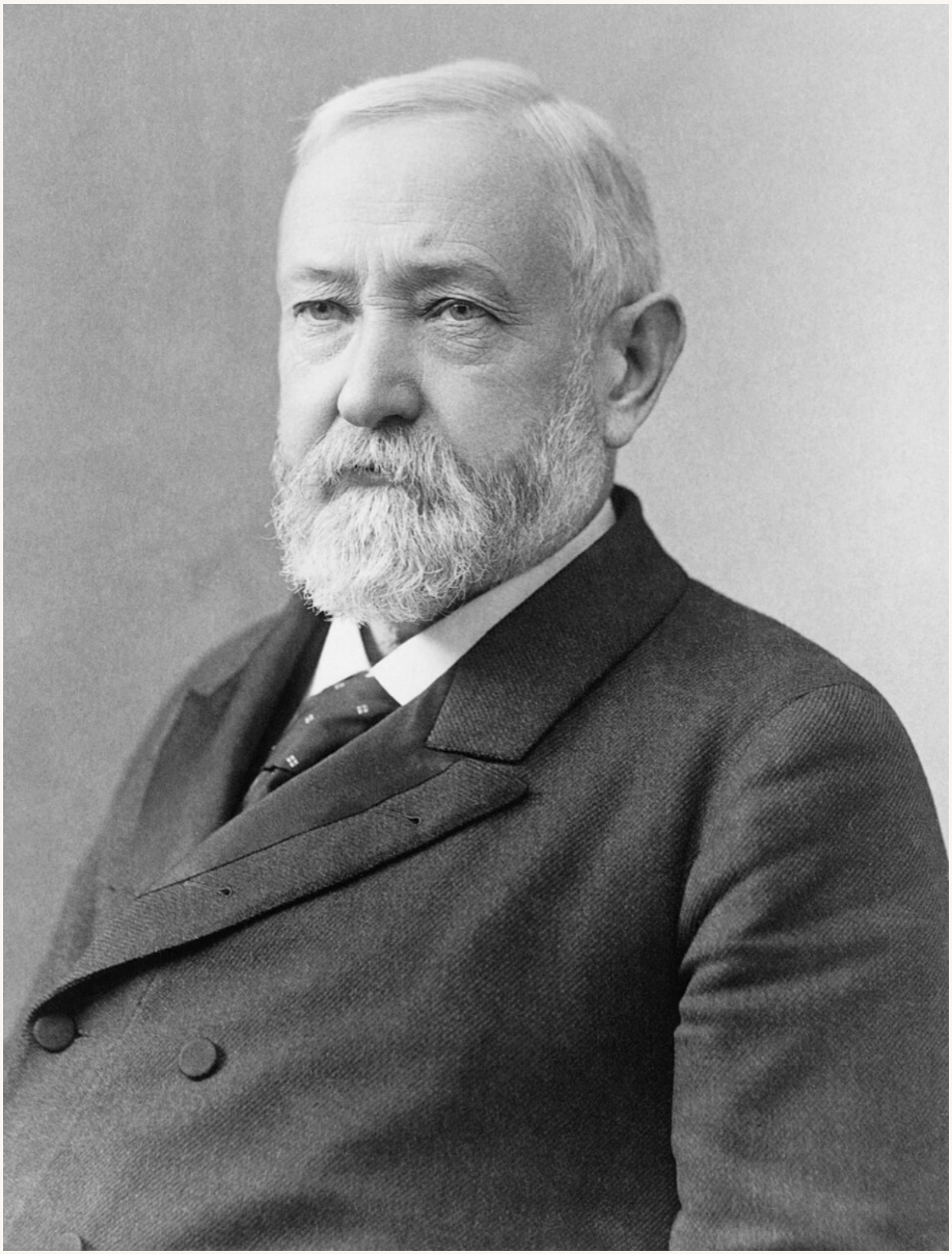
After Grover Cleveland served four years as president, it was time for another election. Cleveland wanted to be re-elected. But the Republicans wanted to win back the White House.

The Republicans picked Benjamin Harrison. Harrison was a senator from Indiana. He was the grandson of William Henry Harrison - the president who had died after 31 days in office back in 1841! Benjamin Harrison was short, formal, and a bit cold to people. He was nicknamed "Little Ben" because he was only 5'6" tall.

The big issue was the tariff. A tariff is a tax on goods coming from other countries. Republicans wanted high tariffs to protect American factories. Democrats wanted lower tariffs to make goods cheaper. Cleveland had given his entire 1887 message to Congress about lowering tariffs. He made tariff the only issue.

Look at the picture. That is Benjamin Harrison. He had a thick beard.

On Election Day, Cleveland got more popular votes than Harrison - about 90,596 more votes. But Harrison won the Electoral College 233 to 168. He won the big states of New York and Indiana by very small margins. New York was Cleveland's home state, but Cleveland lost it by about 14,000 votes. Indiana was Harrison's



Benjamin Harrison, the 23rd U.S. president. He won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote to Grover Cleveland.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 23rd U.S. president after the 1888 election?

2.

What is unusual about Harrison winning while Cleveland got more popular votes?

3.

What is a tariff and why was it the big issue in 1888?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1888 the man who got the most votes did NOT become president. Grover Cleveland won the popular vote. But Benjamin Harrison won the Electoral College. Harrison became the 23rd president.

Answer key

1.

Benjamin Harrison. He won 233 electoral votes to Cleveland's 168 - even though Cleveland got 90,596 more popular votes.

Harrison was the third president to win the Electoral College while losing the popular vote (after John Quincy Adams 1824 and Rutherford B. Hayes 1876).

2.

It is unusual because most of the time, the candidate who gets the most votes wins. In 1888, Cleveland got 5,534,488 votes and Harrison got 5,443,892 votes - Cleveland had 90,596 more votes. But Harrison won the Electoral College 233 to 168 because he won the big Northern states like New York (by 14,000 votes) and Indiana (by 2,348 votes), while Cleveland won big in Southern states where his margins were huge but each state had fewer electoral votes. The Electoral College does not count the size of victory - just who wins each state. This was only the third time this had happened (1824, 1876, 1888). It would happen again in 2000 (Bush over Gore) and 2016 (Trump over Hillary Clinton).

The 1888 result is a structural example of the popular-vote/Electoral-College divergence.

3.

A tariff is a tax on goods coming from other countries. For example, if a factory in England makes shoes for $5, and the U.S. has a 50% tariff, the English shoes will cost $7.50 when sold in the U.S. - making them more expensive than American shoes. Tariffs protect American factories from cheaper foreign competition. In 1888, Republicans wanted high tariffs to help American manufacturers. Democrats wanted lower tariffs because high tariffs made goods more expensive for ordinary people. Cleveland gave his entire 1887 message to Congress about tariff reduction - making tariff the only issue of the 1888 campaign. After Harrison won, Republicans passed the McKinley Tariff in 1890 - raising tariffs even higher. The 1890 McKinley Tariff was so unpopular that Republicans lost badly in the 1890 midterm elections, and Cleveland defeated Harrison in the 1892 rematch.

Tariff politics dominated U.S. economic debate from 1865 to 1913.