

# The presidential election of 1880 politics essay



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Throughout the history of United States Presidential Elections, there have been many memorable campaigns and races for the right of one citizen to become the next President of the United States of America. These elections have been filled with gripping scandals, nail-biting finishes, unforgettable blunders, and their fair share of mudslinging. The Presidential Election of 1880 was of no exception, and encompassed all of the aforementioned aspects and more. It is at this pivotal time in 1880 that the country was continuing to mend itself from the self-inflicted wounds of secession and of a controversial presidency stemming from the election of 1876. With Rutherford B. Hayes foregoing a second term in office, the stage was set for a memorable election year, one fought amongst both some new and familiar faces. It would be the candidates' party's views on some crucial issues, along with the pageantry of the candidates themselves, that would decide the outcome of this election. Up until the last day of campaigning, both Democrats and Republicans believed that their respective nominees would win the executive branch. However, after much time and effort, only one man would become President. Ultimately, the office of the presidency would come at a price no party could have predicted.

The candidates that would eventually emerge as the front-runners for their parties weren't favored much as the campaigns for the presidency began in 1880. At the start of the campaign, the Republican Party was divided into 3 distinct factions: the Stalwarts, the Reformers, and the Half-Breeds.

The Stalwarts were conservatives who opposed civil service reform, conversely supported the patronage system, favored protectionist tariffs, and endorsed a third-term for former-President Ulysses S. Grant. The

Reformers were liberals who advocated civil service reform and free trade. The Half-Breeds were moderates who accepted some degree of civil service reform, implemented piecemeal over time.[1]

By May 1880, former-President Grant was probable to win the nomination of the Republican Party. However, James Garfield, an Ohio representative and former Union general, was gaining recognition as a possible surprise candidate. At this time in the campaign, Garfield was actually supporting John Sherman, the U. S. Secretary of the Treasury. The two men had struck a deal earlier in which Garfield was to campaign for Sherman because he had helped Garfield become a senator-elect recently. When the time had come, Garfield, along with his fellow Ohioans, made the trek to Chicago for the Republican National Convention, which was set to begin on June 2, 1880. It is here that Garfield would become part of one of the most thrilling party conventions ever. He began his climb towards nomination by being elected the head of the Committee on Rules shortly following the commencement of the convention. After a riveting, impromptu speech before the convention, support for Garfield hit a new high. In fact, his popularity was so great that Roscoe Conkling, a prominent Republican figure who was attending, remarked: " New York requests that Ohio's real candidate and dark horse come forward..."[2]

This support would carry over into the nomination when on the 34th ballot, seemingly out of nowhere, Wisconsin awarded her 16 votes to Garfield. This, in turn, started a stampede among the Half-Breed and other anti-Grant supporters in favor of Garfield. On the 36th ballot, James Garfield was nominated with 399 votes, a monumental upset for those who predicted the

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nomination of Grant, the Half-Breed leader James G. Blaine, or even John Sherman. Mystery still surrounds the fact whether Garfield planned to usurp the nomination the way he did, seeing as though entries from his personal journal are left blank during the Republican National Convention, which would give insight to his inner thoughts and ambitions. Nevertheless, Chester A. Arthur was chosen to be Garfield's running mate in an attempt to secure the support of the Stalwarts and to win New York for the Republicans.

The nomination of the Democrats was hardly less inspiring. In the early stages of the campaign, U. S. Senator Thomas Bayard was the likely candidate to be nominated and had much support in the South. As of May 1880, though, General Winfield Scott Hancock was drawing attention in the Deep South. Although for the most part they were convinced that the movement towards Hancock was insignificant, " the shadow of another 'general on horseback' continued to alarm some of Bayard's supporters." [3] Perhaps those wary Bayard supporters had a reason to be distressed, for at the Democratic National Convention in Cincinnati, a fiery, Irish delegate from Pennsylvania named Daniel Dougherty made a rousing speech in favor of Hancock's nomination. Mayhem ensued as thousands of delegates began cheering for Hancock. In fact, after the second ballot, Hancock was nominated with the incredible amount of 705 votes. The former favorite, Bayard, only got 2. Quickly after, William H. English was chosen to be the vice-presidential nominee.

The choice of English was based on sound political logic. Hancock, as it was argued, by uniting Irving Hall and Tammany Hall would carry New York, and Indiana would certainly follow English, her own native son. Thus Indiana's 15

electoral votes and New York's 35 in addition to the solid South's 138 would spell victory for the Democrats for the first time since 1856.[4]

At these same conventions where the two primary candidates were selected by their parties, the party platforms were also revealed. The Republican platform stressed the need for protective tariffs that would disproportionately benefit American labor, a reformation of civil service through the use of a series of tests to ensure qualifications for applicants, restricted immigration from China, and separate, non-public funds to pay for the establishment of sectarian schools. The platform commended President Hayes, a Republican, for his service to his country and proceeded to shame the Democrats by comparing them to the rebels of the Civil War.[5]The Democratic platform, in turn, recalled the "Great Fraud of 1876", the name given by some to the event in which Rutherford B. Hayes was elected President after losing to Democrat Samuel J. Tilden in the popular vote and winning the electoral vote by one through a potentially shady agreement. Furthermore, the Democratic platform called for a less powerful central government, a cease to all Chinese immigration, civil service reform, lower tariffs, and "free trade." [6]The platform also included that there would only be a "tariff for revenue only." In time, this last plank of the platform would prove to be the bane of Candidate Hancock's existence.

During this election, the impact of major third parties was minimal. All three of the major third parties nominated their choices for president in June/July of 1880 and all three of their nominees were military generals. The Greenback party, the most influential of the three third parties, stood for labor reform (shorter hours, better conditions, no child labor), for economic reform

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(payment of debts, restrictions on monopolies, regulated currency), restriction on Chinese labor, and for the end of sectional disunity. It can be argued that this platform wouldn't have been found too unreasonable. However, the Greenbackers made a critical blunder when they invited Socialists into their convention, which no doubt lost them some votes. The other two third parties were the Prohibitionists and the Anti-Masons. The Prohibitionists were against the consumption of alcohol and its party platform explicitly revealed the dangers of it. The Anti-Masons believed their mission was to " expose, withstand, and remove secret societies, Free masonry in particular, and other anti-Christian movements, in order to save the churches of Christ from being deprived." [7] Having such a narrow objective hurt the Prohibitionists and Anti-Masons. In the end, the only way that a third party could have any impact on the election was if its votes were absorbed by either the Democrats or the Republicans.

Among the foreign and domestic issues brought to light during this presidential campaign, those of Chinese immigration, sectionalism, and protective tariffs were the primary ones contemplated. By 1880, an overwhelming number of Chinese immigrants had traveled to the west coast of the United States in search of jobs. These Chinese workers worked for less than an American would and many westerners worried for their own job security. This disdain for immigrants was felt most in California. Although both party platforms called for restrictions to such immigration, many Californians were wary of Candidate Garfield's sincerity to the cause. This was due to the fact that a year and a half earlier Garfield had voted against a bill that was inconsistent with the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, a treaty which

provided limitless Chinese immigration. Later, Garfield tried to reassure western states that he would handle the immigration issue with their concerns in mind, though many doubted his sincerity.

The issue of sectionalism reemerged when Republicans once again began "waving the bloody shirt", a reference to the South's secession some 20 years earlier. Numerous pamphlets and songs were created by Republicans to associate the southern and more Democratic states, as well as Hancock himself, with secession. One such song included the lines:

A Union General leads, my boys

Secession on the field

We'll meet it with brave deeds, my boys:

Once more foredoomed to yield![8]

These pieces of propaganda were made to make people believe that if Hancock were elected, he would give all power to the former-rebellious southern states. Democrats believed that this accusation was simply absurd. Nevertheless, these actions taken by the Republican Party showed that almost two decades after the Civil War started, reunification was still a delicate issue.

Lastly, tariffs were, arguably, the most important issue. Both parties had different stances on the matter. The Republicans argued for a protective tariff. They believed that by protecting American business, wages for workers would remain at a high level. The Democrats, however, believed in a

" tariff for revenue only." This would open the doors for free trade. Critics of this idea believed that American manufacturing would crumble and that this action would spell disaster for the wages of laborers. " American laboring men were everywhere solemnly warned by signs, handbills, documents, and newspapers that, unless they wished to be reduced to the pittance that Europeans called wages, they had better vote the Republican ticket." [9] Among these three issues discussed, the tariff issue would no doubt play a huge role in deciding who won the election.

The way in which each campaign was conducted and the various major events that occurred during them created momentum swings at different times for each candidate. Garfield more or less conducted a type of " front porch" campaign. This campaign consisted of him welcoming voters into his home in order to become more familiar with their needs and to appear concerned. He actually had his campaign managers and fellow Republicans do much of his work across the nation. These Garfield supporters would wave the " bloody shirt" issue and poke at Hancock's inexperience in politics. Mockery pertaining to the latter was shown in a Republican pamphlet called " A Record of the Statesmanship and Political Achievements of General Winfield Scott Hancock." This particular pamphlet included only blank pages. Following an early defeat in the Maine state elections, Republicans began to channel immense sums of money in order to step up the campaign effort. After all, the Democrats had presumably spent \$100, 000 in Maine in just one week! Large businesses were eager to help the Republican cause, as they had an interest in its success. After Secretary of State Carl Schurz made speeches in San Francisco almost exclusively regarding business interests, it



became clear that economic issues would take precedence over all other concerns. In addition to the efforts made by Secretary of State Schurz, Senator Conkling and former-President Grant also campaigned for Garfield; at one rally in Warren, Ohio the two spoke to a crowd of approximately 40,000 people!

The Democrats, for the most part, tried to remind the public of the corrupt Election of 1876 in which President "Rutherford" had been elected. However, these actions were put on hold temporarily as Hancock struggled to make clear his views on the tariff issue. His knowledge on this subject was questioned so greatly that he was made fun of in a cartoon by the famous Thomas Nast. The cartoon "depicted Hancock on a speaker's platform whispering in a companion's ear, 'Who is Tariff and why is he for revenue only?'"[10]At a major Democratic rally sponsored by Tammany Hall in New York, Hancock asked Senator Bayard to discuss the tricky tariff issue for him, a somewhat acknowledgement of his own inability to do so gracefully.

When the Democrats could afford to take the offensive, Garfield's character was within their "crosshairs". Two very big scandals gave them significant amounts of ammunition against Garfield: The Credit Mobilier Scandal and the Morey Letter. During the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, the leading directors of the Union Pacific Railroad Company hired themselves out to a fake company that they had created, named Credit Mobilier, in order to keep the remaining surplus money. Many Congressmen were given bribes in the form of stock in this fake company in order to keep quiet. On February 18, 1873, a committee found that Garfield had received a check for \$329 for dividends from his share of stock. During the campaign, Democrats marked

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numerous buildings with the number " 329" in order to remind voters of Garfield's doubtful past. A second scandal to rock the Republican campaign was that of the Morey Letter. On October 18, 1880, a letter supposedly written by Garfield to H. L. Morey of Massachusetts was discovered on the desk of the publisher of New York Truth. Its contents contained convincing evidence that Garfield supported Chinese immigration. It included that he felt that " individuals or companies have the right to buy labor where they can get it cheapest" and that the United States has " a treaty with the Chinese Government which should be religiously kept..."[11]Although it was later proved to be a forgery, some of Garfield's credibility was lost. It certainly didn't do him any good to wait a whole week before openly denying it! Thus the Democrats were able to gain support by attacking Garfield throughout their campaign.

This onslaught of Garfield's character abruptly came to a stop when Hancock made a severe political blunder just a little over a week before the election. In an interview with the Paterson Daily Guardian, Hancock attempted to clarify his " tariff for revenue only." While stating the case that he would in fact favor American businesses, he concluded by saying that " the tariff question is a local question." Although he was correct in context, this statement made it appear as though he was out of touch and not concerned with everyday working men. This had an adverse impact on his campaign with little time to recover. Nevertheless, as both party's campaigns winded down and the candidates braced for Election Day, each candidate firmly believed that he had won the Presidency.

" The news of 3 A. M. is fully justified by the morning papers...We have at least 212 electoral votes, a small majority in the House and the Senate nearly or quite a tie." [12] Thus were the words written by James A. Garfield in his journal on November 3, 1880 when he learned he was to be the 20th President of the United States. When the official results were revealed, Garfield had won 214 electoral votes to Hancock's 155. By these numbers, Garfield seemed to have won easily; however, the popular vote was extremely close with Garfield possessing roughly 4, 453, 337 votes to Hancock's approximate 4, 444, 267 votes. The difference between these two tallies was the equivalent to . 1% of the total population. To date this is the closest margin of victory in the popular vote in any U. S. Presidential Election.

Not only was this election the closest in the popular vote, but it also had one of the highest voter turnouts in United States history, 79. 4%. This percentage is only passed by the turnout in the elections of 1840, 1860, and 1876 (notably all previous elections). In recent years, the voter turnout has been significantly lower. In the last five Presidential Elections, voter turnout has ranged from 49. 08% to 57. 48%. For the past 20 years, on average only about 53% of the total population has been involved in choosing our President. This is certainly not healthy for our republican form of government, in which an active population must remain involved politically in order for greater representation of the masses. At least in the Presidential Election of 1880, the people accepted their responsibility as citizens and participated in a remarkable fashion to choose the next President.

President James Garfield owed much of his victory to the battleground state of New York. New York's 35 electoral votes were ultimately the difference in the election. The solid South had given her 138 votes for Hancock, as can be seen in the electoral map that follows:

[http://profbutler.watermelon-kid.com/images/maps/HIST1302\\_Part\\_1/800px-1880\\_Electoral\\_Map.gif](http://profbutler.watermelon-kid.com/images/maps/HIST1302_Part_1/800px-1880_Electoral_Map.gif)

This left him with only 47 more votes to secure in order for him to become President. Unfortunately, Hancock could only muster 17 additional votes; a combined 8 from California and Nevada, no doubt influenced by the Morey Letter, and 9 from New Jersey, the only northern state to go for the Democrats. The Democrats failed to carry New York in part due to the divisions between Irving Hall and Tammany Hall. At the time, there was also speculation that New York might have gone Republican for another more sinister reason. In July of 1880, George W. Atkins, a friend of Garfield's, had written him about the idea of bringing 3, 000 voters from Vermont, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania along with 6, 000 Canadians to New York to vote for the Republicans. No evidence was ever found that Garfield had used this strategy. However, many Democrats swore that they had been deceived. Nevertheless, Garfield received a superfluous amount of congratulatory letters, including one peculiar letter from Willie Madden of Number One, Hanson Place, Brooklyn, New York: " I am a little boy five years old.... I am sorry Arthur has to be President when you die. I would like to know whether you are a bad man or a good one.... If not, I think Arthur must take your place." [13]

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This prophetic letter would prove no more eerie than on July 2, 1881. On that fateful day, President Garfield was on his way to celebrate his 25th college reunion and was standing at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D. C. when he was shot twice. His assailant was the Stalwart Charles Guiteau, who was upset with the President after he had been denied the position of U. S. Consul in Paris on six different occasions. Guiteau thought that it was unfair that many Half-Breeds had received government jobs (ie. James Blaine had been chosen Secretary of State), and the Stalwarts appeared to have been denied these "rewards". After being rushed to safety, doctors tended to the President. Alexander Graham Bell used a primitive form of the metal detector to try to locate one bullet in Garfield's back, but to no avail. After 80 days of suffering, President Garfield died. This assassination drew much sympathy from the public for their fallen President and much loathing for the Stalwarts. Chester A. Arthur would now become President. Although there was much speculation on how he would act as President, from an early stage he made it known that he supported the movement towards the adoption of the merit system of awarding government jobs to those most competent. As for Guiteau, he was hanged on June 30, 1882.

Although the Presidential Elections of 1880 and 2012 occurred 132 years apart, certain aspects of each have made a comparison of the two possible. One major campaign factor that is unique to both election years is the use of money on the campaign trail. During the Presidential Election of 1880, James Ford Rhodes, a historian of the day, wrote that in Indiana "money was used to an extent hitherto unknown in American politics." [14] He was referring to

the use of money to buy votes for either candidate. In fact, at one time Garfield was told that there were " 30, 000 merchantable votes in the state [Indiana],...which side will manage to buy the most of them is the question." [15] This new era of corruption in politics through the use of money indeed snuck its way into the Presidential Election of 1880. In 2012, a new era in campaign spending has likewise occurred. In 2010, Citizens United [a political action committee (PAC)] sued the Federal Election Commission in the Supreme Court on the basis of unfair campaign spending restrictions. Citizens United won its suit. The ruling established that as long as the free use of money is considered the same as free speech, then corporations and unions have the right to give unlimited amounts of money to presidential candidates. In 2012, campaign spending has hit a new high and shows no sign of stopping in years to come.

Another comparison to be made between these two election years is the issue of immigration. In 1880, Americans on the west coast of the United States were concerned with the influx of immigration coming from China. Americans were alarmed that these Chinese workers would steal jobs away from them. In the Presidential Election of 2012, Hispanic immigration was one subject of controversy. The Republicans have tended to believe in harsher immigration laws, whereas Democrats for the most part believe in altering laws to accommodate immigrants. The main difference between the immigration issue of 1880 and 2012 is that in 1880, there was the call to restrict the legal immigrants from China. In 2012, there have been pleas from many to stop the illegal immigration from the Hispanic countries to the south. Another difference that is important to note is that the positions of the

two parties have relatively switched sides since 1880. Back in 1880, the Democrats, and not the Republicans, were the ones proposing stricter immigration laws.

The last comparison between these two elections is that both sets of campaigns have consisted of substantial amounts of mudslinging. In the Presidential Election of 1880, both candidates attempted to paint the other in a bad light. Garfield poked at Hancock's inexperience in politics while Hancock attempted to discredit Garfield by bringing up scandal after scandal. In 2012, television viewers have been bombarded with commercials detailing flaws in the candidates. One ad supporting President Obama connected Mitt Romney with the death of a woman who had not been able to afford healthcare after her husband's workplace was shut down by Romney's company, Bain Capital. Likewise, pro-Romney ads have attacked Obama's government spending and business experience as well as his handling of the economy. While some might think it's wrong to attack one's opponent so openly, these two elections have shown that it takes an aggressive, offensive strategy to sway the masses.

In retrospect, the Presidential Election of 1880 was one of the most exciting to date. From Garfield's surprise nomination to Hancock's plight regarding the tariff issue all the way to Garfield's eventual narrow victory in the popular vote, the Presidential Election of 1880 proved to be especially intriguing. It seems ironic, as it would be, that Garfield would fall victim to the bullets of an assassin shortly into his term as President. Garfield's legacy lived on though through Chester A. Arthur, who, as mentioned previously, upheld Garfield's policies. Perhaps Garfield said it best when he wrote in his <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidential-election-of-1880-politics-essay/>

journal: " Some civil service reform will come by necessity after the wearisome years of wasted presidents have paved the way for it." [16] We will never know how the world would have turned out had Garfield survived or if it would have even made a difference. However, we can take some comfort in knowing that today's politicians have the luxury of analyzing previous elections so that they can be knowledgeable of the past while still looking forward to the future.

By Joseph San Nicolas

Notes