

The Election of 1880

The United States is now in the middle of its 49th presidential election campaign. As the 36 primaries, 16 state caucuses, and 2 national party conventions draw to a close, the press will give us the "horse-race" results. The television networks will "project" the winners on Election Night even before all the ballots are counted. In all probability, only about half of us will go to the polls. It was not always like this. Here, historian Allan Peskin reflects on the presidential campaign of 1880, pitting Congressman James Garfield against General Winfield Hancock, when politics was virtually the only game in town, and almost everyone who was eligible showed up to vote.

by Allan Peskin

One hundred years ago, 50 million Americans approached a presidential election with an eager anticipation that our more jaded age can scarcely hope to match:

❖ In tiny Warren, Ohio (population: 4,428), 40,000 people turned out in late September to hear New York's golden-voiced Senator, Roscoe Conkling, praise the Republican Party.

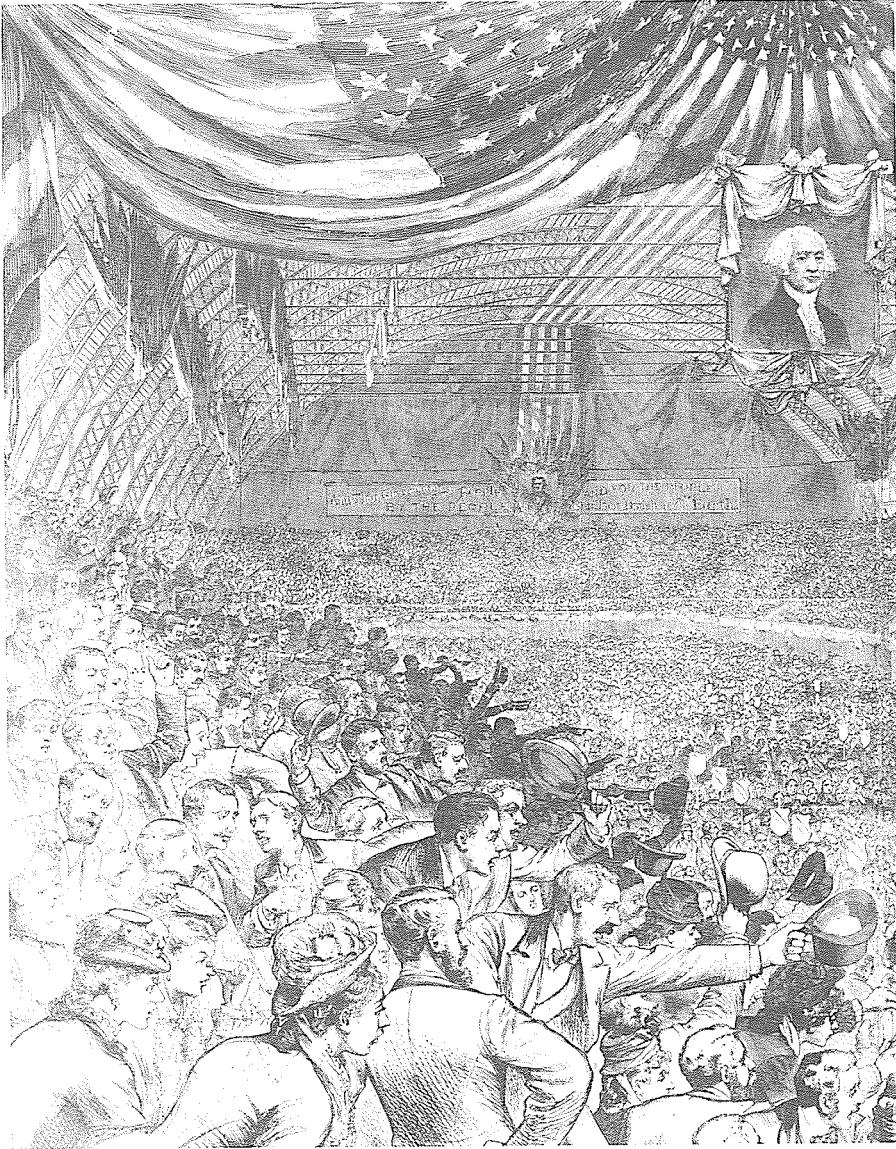
❖ In New York City, a Republican-sponsored torchlight parade that began at midnight took four hours to pass the reviewing stand.

❖ All across the country, Democrats scrawled their cryptic symbol, "329," on barns, sidewalks, and gutters, while Republicans circulated more than 12 million pieces of cam-

paign literature (one for each eligible voter).

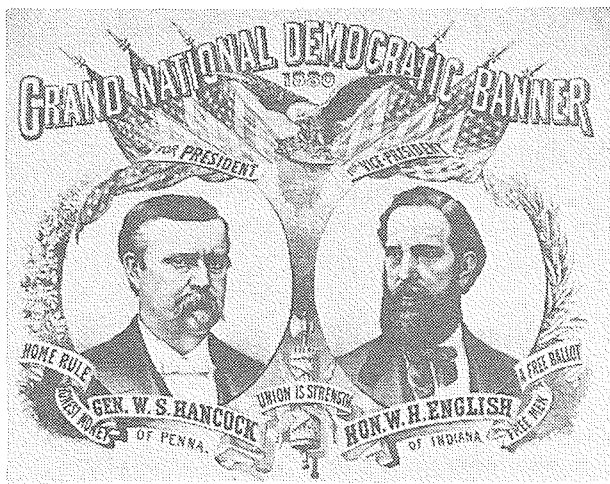
The year 1880 was a time for optimism and enthusiasm. Memories of a bitter Civil War were beginning to fade; a deep economic depression, which had begun in 1873 and stirred the nation's first serious labor strife, was starting to lift. Over a thousand European immigrants a day were arriving to man the new factories that were rapidly being built. Steam power now plowed the prairies and linked the oceans. Such new-fangled inventions as typewriters, telephones, and electric lights were beginning to give American big-city life the look of modern times.

Politics, as always, lagged behind technology. Presidents and would-be



Library of Congress.

Ten thousand spectators and 756 delegates assembled on June 2, 1880, in Chicago's Exhibition Building—"one of the most splendid barns that was ever constructed"—for the quadrennial national Republican Party convention. They adjourned six days later with General James A. Garfield, a Civil War hero, as their surprise presidential nominee.



General Winfield Scott Hancock and Indiana banker William H. English headed the Democratic ticket in 1880.

From Collecting Political Americana by Edmund B. Sullivan.
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Presidents seemed to devote more attention to refighting the sectional feuds of the past than to discussing problems posed by an industrial present.

To the modern eye, the candidates of a century ago may all seem cut from the same drab cloth—"Their gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces mixed, melted, swam together," recalled 20th-century novelist Thomas Wolfe. Yet, the politics of 1880 worked. It was a supremely logical response to a set of conditions very different from those of today.

The major difference was that in 1880 American politics was conducted within the framework of a functioning, evenly balanced two-party system. Unlike the electorate today, when nearly 40 percent of voters call themselves "Independents," Americans of the 19th century firmly

believed in party loyalty. "Dillettanti" who flitted from party to party were held in contempt. Real men, it was widely felt, stood up for their beliefs and came to the aid of their party.

Such loyalty often puzzled foreign observers. To Great Britain's scholar-diplomat Lord James Bryce, the two parties were as alike as two bottles. "Each," he said, "bore a label denoting the kind of liquor it contained, but each was empty."

Bryce missed the point. There were genuine differences between Republicans and Democrats. The stirring events of the recent past had shaped both parties in important ways.

Republicans, as they were continually reminded by party orators, belonged to the Party of Lincoln, the party that had saved the Union and struck the shackles from 4 million

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Republicans selected Chester A. Arthur as General Garfield's running mate. He became President in 1881 after Garfield was assassinated.

Di Salle Collection, Smithsonian Institution.

slaves. Their shared experiences of the Civil War gave them a common determination to safeguard their victory from Southerners and Democrats, who together threatened to disenfranchise the Negro and diminish the national government's power.

Party of the Future

To Republicans, the Northern Democrats (even those who had supported the Union) were tainted by their alliance with the South—an unfair but not totally unfounded perception. The South, along with the largely Irish Catholic immigrant populations of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, had been a traditional bastion of the Democratic coalition ever since Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr first forged it in the 1790s. Southern interests often dictated the party platform. The Democrats' support of States' rights and limited central authority ("The world is governed too much," they insisted) was based on an awareness that a nation strong enough to gov-

ern effectively might also be strong enough to protect the rights of former slaves.

It was no coincidence that college-trained men (at least in the North) generally gravitated to the Republican Party and that the reform-minded Progressive movement later drew its chief strength from their ranks. The Democrats often seemed to be a party of negations, animated by nostalgia for an imagined agrarian golden age. Their opponents appeared to be the party of the future, more in tune with the most advanced movements of the 19th century—nationalism, egalitarianism, and industrial power.

Perhaps no issue better illustrated the differences between the two parties than the perennial (and rather colorless) tariff dispute. Republicans tended to support a high tariff on manufactured imports to protect American industry from foreign competition. The Democrats' general support of low tariffs was dictated by the economic interests of the cotton-producing South, where

farmers had to sell their goods on an open world market but buy higher-priced tariff-protected domestic products.

These differences captured Americans' attention in a way that may seem hard to understand today. Never before or since has voting been so widespread as it was during this Gilded Age, the years between Reconstruction and the Spanish-American War. Only 54.3 percent of the electorate bothered to show up at the polls for the 1876 presidential election. In 1880, 78 percent of eligible voters proudly cast their ballots.*

A Sporting Element

Yet politics in the late 19th century, as today, was more than platforms and programs; there was also a certain sporting element about it. Politics was not only a game; it was virtually the only game in town. With organized religion in decline and organized sports not yet ascendant, politics filled an entertainment gap. Rallies and parades provided spectacles; Southern barbeques and Northern clambakes provided mass get-togethers; stump-speaking local politicians helped satisfy the almost insatiable appetite of 19th-century Americans for public oratory.

The political game was made even more exciting because the contestants were so evenly matched. Although the preponderance of Republican Presidents gives the impression that these were years of Republican dominance (from 1873 to 1897, Democrats occupied the White House for only eight years), the major parties were actually in a state of near equilibrium. No President

* Excluded, for the most part, were Southern blacks, who were being systematically stripped of their voting rights.

after 1872 was elected by a majority of the voters until Republican William McKinley received 51 percent in 1896, and no more than a few percentage points ever separated the winner from the loser.*

There were 10 Congresses from 1875 to 1895: Democrats controlled the House of Representatives eight times and Republicans only twice; in the Senate, this was neatly reversed. Seldom did any party enjoy a comfortable majority in either House, and in only 4 of those 20 years (1889-91 and 1893-95) did the Presidency, the House, and the Senate all belong to the same party.

With the parties so evenly balanced, with straight-ticket voting the rule, and with no sizeable reservoir of independent votes to draw upon, a presidential candidate could do no more than rally the faithful of his own party and hope that their unity and enthusiasm would be stronger than the opposition's. The "safe candidate" was not necessarily a man of eminence but a man without enemies, as Lord Bryce observed in *The American Commonwealth* (1893). "Besides," he added, "the ordinary American voter does not object to mediocrity."

Logic, not whim or passion, dictated each party's choices of standard bearers. Out of this logic, a pattern emerged. In 1880, victory required at least 185 of the 369 electoral votes. The Democrats could count on the 107 votes of the 11 former Confederate states and on those of most of the border states as

* In 1876, Rutherford B. Hayes won election with 47.9 percent of the popular votes. In 1880, James Garfield won with 48.3 percent. Benjamin Harrison's winning percentage in 1888 was 47.8, and Democrat Grover Cleveland's victories in 1884 and 1892 were achieved with 49.1 and 46.2 percent, respectively.

CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

The 1880 election capped a decade of remarkable newspaper growth in the United States. While the U.S. population expanded by 30 percent during the 1870s (due largely to immigration), the number of newspapers nearly doubled—to almost 7,000. Meanwhile, newspapermen's interests broadened; to their editorial comment and reports on politics and government were added more and more columns of business, science, and human interest stories.

Increasingly, editors chose to remain outside the political fray. The partisan newspaper had been a major means of firing up party members during the '70s, but by 1880, trade directories listed one-fourth of the nation's papers as "independent," "neutral," or "local." *New York Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid described his hopes for "independent journalism": "An end of concealments because it would hurt the party; an end of one-sided expositions . . . an end of slanders that are known to be slanders."

A predecessor of today's Associated Press covered the campaign for its 7 member papers and 348 clients. Called the New York Associated Press, it was founded in 1848 by a consortium of six New York City papers. In 1880, it spent nearly \$400,000 on domestic telegraph tolls and was expanding its foreign service to include "every part of civilized Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America."

During the summer of 1880, the AP provided ballot-by-ballot bulletins from the lengthy national party conventions in Chicago and Cincinnati. Major newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Evening Star*, also printed stories telegraphed by their own convention correspondents. Throughout the year, journalists dutifully reported the infrequent speeches of the presidential candidates' chief local allies, political events from around the country, and the comments of other newspapers on the campaign.

well. To this total of perhaps 137, they needed only to add a few large Northern states, such as New York (35 votes) and Indiana (15), and victory was theirs. Almost invariably, they nominated a New York governor and chose a Midwesterner as his running mate. (Southerners were repaid for their loyalty by being ignored.)

Among Republicans, an equally logical pattern emerged. They had to hold almost every state north of the Mason-Dixon line, which meant that

the high-electoral-vote states of the Middle West—Ohio (22), Illinois (21), Indiana—became decisive battlegrounds. They usually selected as their leader a Midwesterner with Civil War credentials to remind Americans of their party's finest hour. And since New York had the most electoral votes, the Republicans, like their foes, balanced their tickets with the Empire State in mind. Four of the five Republican vice-presidential candidates from 1876 to 1892 were from New York.

Another pattern emerged also. Republican candidates were invariably bearded, while Democratic nominees tended to be clean-shaven, except for a moustache or two.*

Only once from 1868 to 1904 did Republicans break with their traditional strategy. In 1884, they nominated an outstanding party leader, Senator James G. Blaine, for President. He was from Maine, not the Midwest, and was not a Civil War veteran. He lost.

Discrediting "Rutherford"

For Democrats, the campaign of 1880 began after the 1876 presidential election. A special commission of eight Republicans and seven Democrats had awarded 19 disputed electoral votes to the Republicans, giving Rutherford Hayes the Presidency (over Samuel J. Tilden) by a count of 185 to 184. Convinced that they had been robbed, the Democrats long devoted their energies to discrediting "Rutherford" Hayes and vindicating Tilden.

But the Democrats did not waste time on recriminations when they gathered in Cincinnati on June 22, 1880, to pick a presidential candidate. In a surprise move, the delegates turned to New York's portly, mustachioed General Winfield Scott Hancock. "Hancock the Superb" was a political innocent, valued more for his military credentials than for his

*No convincing explanation has been found for this phenomenon. Some historians subscribe to the theory that beards were an outgrowth of Civil War camp life, when razors and hot water were in short supply. Northern Republicans would have cherished these hirsute reminders of patriotic military glory. Unfortunately for this theory, photographs demonstrate that the vogue of beards began shortly before the Civil War (see John Brown and Abraham Lincoln). Furthermore, beards sprouted simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic (witness Benjamin Disraeli and Giuseppe Garibaldi).

executive abilities. The Democrats had adopted the Republican "military" strategy—a bold gamble and shrewd move. "For the first time in 20 years, [they] did not blunder," declared a Republican in reluctant admiration.

As Hancock's running mate, the Democrats selected an Indiana banker and former Congressman, William H. English, who had been out of politics since 1861.

Republicans actually had more to fear from one another. At their convention in Chicago three weeks earlier, their party had been bitterly divided. The self-styled Republican "Stalwarts," headed by the elegant and arrogant Senator Conkling, pinned their hopes on a comeback attempt by Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of the Civil War, who had left the White House in 1877 amid charges of corruption in his Cabinet.

Grant entered the convention as a



"Who is Tariff, and why is he for revenue only?", asks General Hancock (right) of Senator Theodore Randolph (D.-N.J.) in this Thomas Nast cartoon.

clear favorite, with almost half of the delegates committed to him in advance. Most of his support came from the large boss-controlled states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, where the local party conventions had been rigged in his favor.* He embodied the hopes of the party's somewhat unsavory machine element.

Grant's major rivals—Senator Blaine and the icy Treasury Secretary John Sherman—could not muster comparable strength. The convention remained deadlocked for more than 30 ballots, with Grant stymied just short of a majority. Then, in perhaps the most dramatic scene ever witnessed in a national political convention, the delegates turned to Sherman's floor manager and fellow Ohioan, Representative James Abram Garfield, who was not even an announced candidate. At the conclusion of the 34th ballot, the Wisconsin delegation suddenly cast 16 of its 20 votes for Garfield. First, the convention chamber reacted with astonished silence; next, it erupted with tumultuous cheering. "The popular chord had been touched as if by the wave of a magician," one proud Wisconsin man recalled.

A Fit of Reform

On the next go-around, Indiana added 27 of its 30 votes to Garfield's total, which reached 50. The 36th ballot brought a stampede of cross-overs, as Garfield went over the top with the necessary 378 votes. While 10,000 delegates and spectators chanted his name, and the thunder from six cannons posted outside punctuated the crowd's singing of

*Primaries did not begin to replace state conventions as a means of selecting delegates until the Wisconsin Primary was established in 1903.

"Rally 'Round the Flag" within, the surprise nominee sat impassive, perhaps the only calm man in the crowd.

The Republicans selected Chester Alan Arthur as their vice-presidential nominee. Arthur, one of Conkling's cronies, had prospered mightily as collector of customs for the Port of New York until President Hayes removed him in 1879 in a fit of reform.

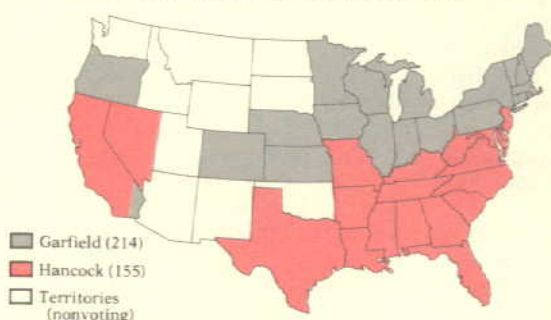
On the Porch

In retrospect, the choice of Garfield was supremely logical. He embodied all the obligatory characteristics of the typical Republican candidate: Born in a log cabin, later a respected Union general, he had served usefully in Congress for 17 years without offending any important segment of the party. He had taken middle-of-the-road positions on the issues that most divided Republicans (e.g., Civil Service reform).

Hard-working and reasonably honest by the standards of his day, Garfield had, nonetheless, been touched by scandal—most notably in the *Crédit Mobilier* affair in which, it was charged, he had accepted a \$329 bribe from Massachusetts Congressman Oakes Ames. (It was to remind the voters of this lapse that the Democrats chalked that number on sidewalks everywhere.)

Garfield was both an intellectual, whose idea of relaxation was to translate Goethe or Horace, and an affable politico, whose fairmindedness could be mistaken for indecision. Not yet 50, he had crowded into his life enough careers to satisfy the American ideal of the self-made man: canal boy, minister of the gospel, president of Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (now Hiram College), soldier, constitutional lawyer, legislator, stump speaker.

THE OUTCOME: ELECTORAL VOTES



The vote for President in 1880 still reflected Civil War alignments. One California elector broke ranks and voted for Garfield, even though the Democrats carried his state.

Speaking ability, however, would not be required in the coming contest. The idea of debates between presidential candidates did not appeal to election strategists. Moreover, local politicians were expected to go out on the hustings; presidential candidates were expected to be more dignified. Hayes advised Garfield merely "to sit crosslegged and look wise until after the election."

Impatient in such a passive role, Garfield invented a new technique—the "front-porch campaign." By staying close to his Mentor, Ohio, farm and daily receiving delegations of reporters and distinguished guests, he could maintain the appearance of diffidence even while exhorting the faithful. "Lawnfield" (as reporters dubbed the farm) became the center of national press attention, as Garfield enjoyed a "busy though pleasant summer."

Garfield forsook the comforts of home for only one extended foray, and that effort was not directed at the opposition. It was designed to conciliate disaffected fellow Republicans. Conkling was still sulking over Grant's defeat at Chicago. To jolly him back into line, a conference of Republican leaders, including Garfield, met August 5 at New York

City's Fifth Avenue Hotel. Conkling did not deign to attend, but his cronies were assuaged. Party unity was secured, at least until Election Day.

The Democrats, too, devoted most of their efforts to rallying their own followers. They also hoped that by stressing General Hancock's heroic deeds at Gettysburg 17 years earlier, they could steal some of the Republicans' patriotic thunder. The general had "saved the army from disaster, and the country from dismemberment," claimed the Democrats' *Campaign Text Book*.

A Last-Minute Hoax

However, some Republican strategists, notably Blaine, had already concluded that the time had come to lay the Civil War aside and concentrate on the new problems of the industrial age. Blaine urged that the tariff be the chief party campaign issue. Hancock naively played into his hands. In an interview, he dismissed the tariff as "a local question," an observation that Republicans gleefully seized upon as fresh proof of his ignorance.

With party unity secured and a winning issue handed them, Republican prospects seemed bright. But

the opposition still had a last-minute trick to play.

In late October, Garfield found himself the target of a classic election-eve hoax. A New York newspaper, misleadingly named *Truth*, printed a letter purportedly from Garfield advocating the importation of cheap Chinese labor. Garfield in fact had come out in favor of restricting Chinese immigration to protect "American" workingmen (most of whom were Irish-born). But Democrats happily circulated hundreds of thousands of copies of the letter on the Sinophobic West Coast.

The hoax probably cost the Republicans California (which they lost by only 22 votes), but it was not quite enough to save Hancock's candidacy. Garfield carried every Northern state except New Jersey and Nevada. The Democrats, for their part, captured every old slave-holding state. The popular vote was the closest ever: Garfield's plurality over Hancock was only 7,368 votes (less than 0.1 percent of the total). The Republicans gained a majority in the newly elected House of Representatives (their first in six years), but by only a dozen seats; the Senate, reflecting the national mood, was evenly divided, 37 to 37,* giving Vice

*Two Senators were Independents. One usually voted Republican, the other Democratic.

President Arthur a crucial deciding vote.

The election of 1880 settled little. In those days, politics was not expected to *settle* things, only to keep them running at a time when there was still uncertainty over where the country should be going.

Much has happened in the last century to change American politics. The electorate has grown—to include women (since 1920), Southern blacks (effectively since the Voting Rights Act of 1957), and 18-to-20-year-olds (since 1971)—but the result has been a net decrease in the percentage of eligible voters taking part in national elections.

In 1880, it was the political parties that mobilized voters, gave them a sense of identification with the political process, and maintained a sense of continuity from one election to the next. Today, however, the President and the candidates for President tower over party organization. The parties themselves have been gravely weakened by well-meant reforms designed to encourage "participatory democracy." As a consequence, something valuable has been lost from American politics: the vitality and enthusiasm that the voters clearly demonstrated as they cheered their candidates and went to the polls a century ago.



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