

The United States Election (Reversal) of 1888

The U.S. election of 1888 was not only a very close one, but one of only 3 instances in American history where the winner of the national popular vote lost the electoral college and thus failed to become president. Democrat Grover Cleveland, despite winning the popular vote, was defeated in his bid for re-election by Republican challenger Benjamin Harrison, grandson of late President William Henry Harrison. Cleveland, however, would come back to re-take the White House in 1892 when Benjamin Harrison was himself defeated in a re-election bid. The election of 1888 itself was otherwise uneventful and rather typical of its day, given the issues, parties and platforms of the era, along with the campaigns of the period. Nonetheless, the election of 1888 does stand out on account of its election reversal, which also resulted in the historic and unprecedented non-consecutive two terms of our 22nd and 24th President, Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat to win the White House since the Civil War.

Context of the Election

At the time of the election in 1888, Congress was under divided party control, with the Republicans controlling the Senate (39-37)¹ and the Democrats controlling the House of Representatives (167-152)² in the 50th Congress of 1887 to 1889. In the years following the Civil War, the Republican Party had enjoyed a position of clear superiority and dominance over the Democratic Party. However, the Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives in the 1874 “Democrat Landslide” and by 1880 the Democrats were closing the gap with the Republicans, and in 1884 the Democrats had in fact captured the White House for the first time

¹ http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/history/one_item_and_teasers/partydiv.htm

² http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/partyDiv.html

since the Civil War, with Grover Cleveland as their nominee. As such, the Democratic candidate for President in this election was in fact the incumbent President Cleveland, running for a second term. The biggest issue of the day, without question, was the issue of tariffs. Cleveland and other “Bourbon Democrats,” with their free-trade leanings, favored lower tariffs, while protectionist Republicans, such as Harrison, favored high tariffs in an effort to protect American industry from foreign competition, although it has been noted that “[in] practice the tariff was practically meaningless on industrial products, since the United States was the low-cost producer in most areas (except woolens), and could not be undersold by the less efficient Europeans. Nevertheless the tariff issue motivated both sides to a remarkable extent.”³ Despite the lack of a moral, religious, racial, or other inflammable aspect to the tariff issue, it did appear more or less to be roiling the country, or at least the dialogue between the two parties, at the time. As indicated by the dominant issue, the primary focus of the political dialogue of this period was on economics and business. Both parties, in fact, were highly pro-business and economy-focused. Rather than having differing priorities and goals, the two parties seemed, to a large extent, to have the same priorities and goals, and rather only displayed slight differences in their approaches to these desired ends. However, some other issues of the day in addition to tariffs and trade included the ever background-present issue of prohibition, as well as the formerly more prominent issue of civil service and government reform, which had flared up during the widespread corruption in the Grant administration and arguably culminated in the assassination of a president with the death of James Garfield.⁴ On the whole, however, the election of 1888 was quite similar to the previous election of 1884, and, as fate would have it, would turn out to be similar to the following election of 1892 as well.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1888

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Civil_Service_Commission

Party Primaries and Nominations

During this era, primary elections were non-existent. Party conventions run by party leaders and bosses were the standard means by which a party's nomination was determined. Unlike perhaps some other nomination contests in American history, the two nominations of Cleveland and Harrison during the 1888 election cycle was mostly consensual. Grover Cleveland was of course the incumbent Democratic President, securing his nomination without contest. James Blaine was actually the Republican favorite, having been the previous nominee in the election of 1884, but Blaine declined to seek or accept the nomination again. Many of his supporters broke off into factions favoring different candidates, and throughout the eight ballots of the 1888 Republican convention their shifting favoritism resulted in several different candidates being the leader from one ballot to the next. When a bulk of Blaine-supporters threw their weight behind Harrison, however, he was able to ride their support to victory in the convention, securing the nomination for himself on the eighth ballot.

Harrison's nomination could be interpreted as either a factional victory or an agreement on a compromise candidate, depending on the perspective of the interpreter. In one sense, the dispersed Blaine supporters may be said to constitute their own "faction," and it was ultimately their support of Harrison as a single bloc that clinched the nomination for him, as he was placing typically fourth in the primaries before he became their favorite pick.⁵ This could rightly be called a factional victory. However, at the same time, with the weighty Blaine supporters being dispersed and lacking a clear successor, they tested their support upon different candidates, and eventually "settled" on Harrison, and the convention took a full eight ballots to nominate Harrison.⁶ Looking at the nomination from this perspective, it clearly appears to be a

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Harrison

⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/bh23.html>

compromise. Perhaps the best way to interpret this would be to describe it as a *factional* agreement on a compromise candidate, with said faction holding enough weight itself to sway the outcome.

There was some divisiveness within the Republican Party in the previous election, with the “defectors” even coming to be known by their own unique term “Mugwumps”.⁷ It so happened that a Blaine supporter and spokesperson, Rev. Dr. Samuel Burchard uttered, in rebuke of the Mugwumps, “We are Republicans, and don’t propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been rum, Romanism, and rebellion”.⁵ The ‘Romanism’ remark, in particular, offended the predominantly Catholic Irish vote and turned it heavily against Blaine, costing him the nomination and further alienating the factional Mugwump segment of the Republican party. However, in 1888, there does not seem to be any comparable division or factional in-fighting of a similar magnitude. The conventions also seemed to lack any fights over a given major platform plank. Additionally, there was no major third-party candidate in this election.

Harrison’s running mate in the election was Levi Parsons Morton. Levi Morton was an active New York politician, New York Congressman, and United States Minister to France in the years preceding the election. In the years following the election, Morton would go on to become governor of his adopted home state of New York. It was very likely that Morton’s being an active politician and representative of his “home” state of New York was a major reason for his being selected as Harrison’s running mate. New York was a key swing state during this period, and its swinging toward Cleveland, another candidate claiming New York as his home, gave him the election when Blaine’s anti-Catholic and anti-Irish remarks cost him the New York’s votes in

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Election_of_1884#Republican_Party_nomination

the previous election of 1884. Ultimately, it would be New York's swinging back away from Cleveland in 1888 that would cost him the election, as well.

Ohio Senator Allen G. Thurman was selected to be Grover Cleveland's running mate in the election. Rather than possessing any particular advantage or holding any particularly appealing, unique political stance, Thurman was likely selected on account of his favorable connections within the Democratic party machine at the time, during this era of party-dominant nominating conventions run by inner party bosses and leaders, as it has been said that he was run as a "favorite son" candidate for the Democratic Party.⁸

Candidates

Benjamin Harrison⁹ was born on August 20, 1833, in North Bend, Ohio, and he died on March 13, 1901 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Benjamin was the second son of John Scott Harrison, who would later become a U.S. Congressman from Ohio. Benjamin was also the grandson of former president William Henry Harrison. Benjamin later became a member of the Indiana Bar and thus became a practicing lawyer in the State. Later, during the Civil War, Benjamin would not only serve his country, but would later ascend to the rank of Brigadier General. Benjamin was raised in a Whig household, and later became a Republican after the Whigs' demise. Following his military career, Harrison later went on to serve as a U.S. Senator for the State of Indiana from 1881 to 1887. His Senate career ended when he became elected president in 1888, and he then took office in 1889, serving one term after losing his re-election to Grover Cleveland, whom he originally defeated for re-election in 1888. Ideologically, Benjamin Harrison was a protectionist Republican, and he favored high, protectionist tariffs, regulated trade, and the fostering of economic growth and business.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_Granberry_Thurman

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Harrison

Stephen Grover Cleveland¹⁰ was born March 18, 1837, in Caldwell, New Jersey. He died June 24, 1908, in Princeton, New Jersey. After becoming a lawyer, like Harrison, Cleveland, unlike Harrison, decided not to serve in the Civil War and instead hired an able-bodied substitute to serve for him instead, as provided for in the Conscription Act of 1863. Several years later, like Harrison, Cleveland entered the political scene, and became the 34th Mayor of Buffalo, NY in 1882. Less than one year after taking office as Mayor (one day less, in fact), Cleveland became the 28th Governor of New York, serving from 1883 until 1885, when he assumed the office of President that he had won in the election of the year prior. Cleveland was defeated for his re-election bid in 1888, but would later come back in 1892 to claim his second term once and for all, becoming the only U.S. president to serve non-consecutive terms, in addition to having become one of only three men to have won the popular vote but lost the U.S. presidential election. Cleveland was a leader of the “Bourbon Democrats,” and as such he “opposed imperialism, taxes, subsidies, and inflationary policies, but as a reformer he also worked against corruption, patronage, and bossism”.¹⁰

General Election Campaign

In keeping with the tradition of the time, the incumbent President Grover Cleveland mostly refrained from actively campaigning, instead opting to give “front-porch speeches” from his home—speeches which were covered by the press, and to allow his vice-president to do some active campaigning on his behalf.¹¹ Harrison himself refrained from any major, active campaigning, and as such the election campaign was itself, as a whole, “highly restrained”.¹²

As has been stated, the primary issue of the campaign and that each candidate focused on was the issue of tariffs, and whether they should be raised or lowered.

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grover_Cleveland

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Election_of_1888#Campaign

¹² <http://www.multied.com/elections/1888.html>

With respect to whether there was a major imbalance between the parties and candidates with respect to campaign resources, there appears to have been none. Accordingly, the parties engaged in a very close competition, which resulted in an incredibly close outcome.

There appears, however, to have been no significant third-party candidate, nor any “October surprise” in this election.

Election Outcome

Incumbent President Grover Cleveland ended up receiving 5,534,488 votes, or 48.6% of the vote, giving him a plurality and making him the highest vote-getter—the popular vote winner.¹³ Benjamin Harrison ended up receiving 5,443,892 votes, or 47.8% of the vote.⁹ The next highest vote-getter was Clinton Fisk of the Prohibition Party, with 249,819 votes, or 2.2%.⁹ Coming in fourth, just behind Fisk, was Alson Streeter, of the Union Labor Party. Streeter got 146,602 votes, which comes to about 1.3% of the popular vote.⁹ Of course, these last two, Fisk and Streeter, both received no votes in the Electoral College. Only Harrison and Cleveland received any such votes. However, despite Cleveland getting more popular votes than Harrison, Harrison actually beat Cleveland in the Electoral College, with 233 votes to Cleveland’s 168 votes.⁹

Regional divisions of support were clearly evident in the electoral map of 1888, as is typical among electoral maps for virtually all U.S. elections. Cleveland’s support was clearly carried by the Southern and Mid-Atlantic states, a region which was the Democratic stronghold at the time and would continue to be well into the 20th Century—the “Solid South” as it came to be known.¹⁴ Harrison’s support, conversely, was clearly contained within the Northeast, New England, Midwest, and West Coast—equally a Republican stronghold of the time.¹⁰

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Election_of_1888

¹⁴ <http://www.presidentelect.org/e1888.html>

In terms of support from various population demographics, Cleveland's support came predominantly from Irish and Catholic voters (in most instances one and the same), as well as some anti-prohibitionist German immigrants. Cleveland risked alienating the Irish vote with his low tariff, free-trade-oriented policies, which were highly preached by the British Empire, which was a sort of "arch-nemesis," along with any who sided with it, for Irish voters. Cleveland, however, "neatly neutralized this threat [of alienating Irish voters] by pursuing punitive action against Canada (which was still viewed as part of the British Empire) in a fishing rights dispute".¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Harrison's support came from the demographic groups typically viewed as political opponents of the demographic groups supporting Cleveland. These groups supporting Harrison include British immigrants and British-sympathizers, as well as many Protestant denominations.

The election of 1888 would have otherwise been rather unremarkable and likely very much forgotten in America's history were it not for the previously mentioned fact that this election was one of only three or, arguably, four elections to produce such a particularly controversial quick as it did. The controversy that this election produced was over the fact that it resulted in what is known as an "election reversal." This refers to the occasional tendency of the U.S. Electoral College to produce two separate winners between the electoral vote and the popular vote, with the electoral vote winner being the official winner of course. This specific quirk has occurred only two other times in U.S. history: 1824 with Andrew Jackson, the plurality winner, losing the election to John Quincy Adams in the House of Representatives, and most recently in 2000, with popular vote winner Al Gore losing the election to second-place George W. Bush.

One further point which makes the election of 1888 noteworthy, in its own right, is that this election reversal against Cleveland, coupled with his triumphant return in 1892, resulted in the only instance in U.S. history where a President served non-consecutive terms. The election reversal, in all likelihood, produced outrage and cries for reforming of or “fixing” of the Electoral College. However, nothing was ultimately done to change the system and, of course, the same type of incident occurred most recently in 2000, as has been stated. As such, it is hard to identify any significant impact which the election 1888 may have had on future elections.

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