

The Shady Campaigns of the 1880's

the presidential campaigns and political climate of the Gilded Age

written December, 2000, as a term paper for Dr. Steven Riess' "The Progressive Era" course

The politics of the late nineteenth century is littered with scandal, party-crossing, factions, third parties, machines, money and intrigue. There seemed to be more mud flung by candidates than ever before and ever since. Gilded Age America was ripe for such a political fireworks show. In an historical era that found men of all callings striving to make an extra buck or two and to gain some sort of prestige, politics offered a great opportunity and the masses proved a captive audience. The presidential campaigns of Grover Cleveland found the nation's highest office up for grabs following twenty-four years of Republican rule. Both parties poured everything they had into the elections between 1884 and 1892, and in the process changed the look of their respective parties. The presidential campaigns involving candidate Cleveland reflected a nation in political motion and transition.

Electoral politics found itself in the late nineteenth century the focus of many Americans who saw it as an outlet for entertainment. Campaigns entertained in order to pull in votes. Candidates held ral-

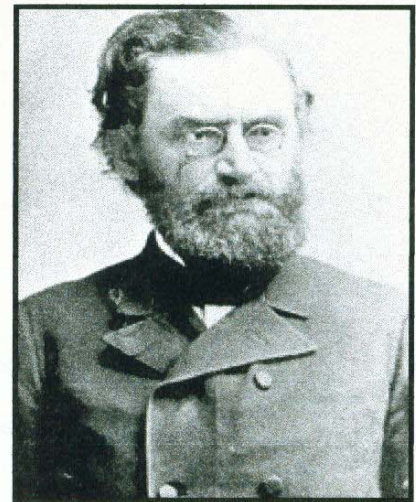


New York senator Roscoe Conkling was a leader of the Republican party at the national level. He also dominated New York's local politics.

lies, picnics, parades, and torchlight processions, all the while pushing a political position or promoting themselves.² Voter turnout during the so-called Gilded Age was unprecedentedly high, shaming past and future statistics. Between 1876 and 1896 voter turnout averaged almost eighty percent.³ Politicians, like the big businessmen who dominated the national spotlight, were celebrities in every respect and were quite comfortable taking on this new celebrity. Michigan senator and Detroit machine boss Zachariah Chandler managed to maintain a well-clothed army of servants.⁴ Politicos in what Speaker Thomas Reed referred to as "the billion dollar government" in 1890, like their counterparts in business, commanded the spotlight.

The politicians of the 1880's seemed a glamorous bunch on the outside. They seemed a group of elites destined to transcend the dirtiness and messiness of life for the average workaday American, but they were all ambitious men with what seemed an unquenchable thirst for money and power. Politics by 1884 was quickly losing its luster as the electorate was shown high level politicians using their public offices to gain power and private wealth through patronage and "creative bookkeeping." The corruption of top city politicians like William M. Tweed and Richard Croker at the local levels⁵ put many state legislatures in the position of reforming municipal charters. The corruption extended to the federal level, despite the best efforts of reformers like Missouri Senator Carl Schurz.⁶ The Grant administration was wracked with scandal and Cabinet impeachment. From the Credit Mobiliere to the Whiskey Ring, the Grant administration proved that even the highest office was not impervious to scandal. Bosses like Roscoe Conkling were controlling everything and by 1884 many felt the time had come to stop the corruption.

The 1884 election was met with great anticipation. The previous two presidents came to office in unusual manners and the people were itching for their voice to be heard for the first time, arguably, since 1872. Rutherford B. Hayes had defeated Democrat Samuel Tilden in what many Southerners considered a stolen election.



German-born political refugee Carl Schurz was an outspoken advocate of far-reaching political reform.

The election of 1876 reeked of corruption and Tilden, who won the popular vote was forced to watch Hayes take the oath of office. Hayes, referred to by those in his day as "his fraudulency" was unable to get much done in Congress.⁷ The next president, James Garfield, was killed only months into his term by an office seeker hoping to cash in on the president's campaign promises of spoils to the Stalwart faction of the party. Cronyism had proved Garfield's defeat and vice-president Chester Arthur, a Stalwart, gained the presidency. It seemed to many that Conkling was pulling all the strings at first. Arthur served as an unelected president and met great resistance by a Congress that constantly overrode his vetoes⁸, proclaiming him a fraud. Although he was legally president, like Hayes, Arthur was not the choice of the majority of the people.

The election of 1884 found itself in an environment of scandalous politicians and popularly unelected presidents. Both parties saw the opportunity of regaining their foothold on the office and looked for strong candidates. The Republicans dumped Chester Arthur, a man they put on the ballot in 1880 only to appease the now defunct Conkling faction, and, instead nominated Conkling's arch-rival James G. Blaine. Blaine was a popular and influen-

tial Congressman who the Republicans hoped would bring unity to their fractious party with his old guard conservative values and, perhaps, distance the party from the Conkling/Arthur years.⁹ Blaine had skeletons in his closet though that could not be denied. The candidate owned several properties paid for in part by “fees and commissions” granted by railroads to Blaine, the same railroads he managed to



James G. Blaine, the Republican candidate in 1884 had ties to railroading interests that caused mugwump Republicans to vote Cleveland.

help through his activities in Congress.¹⁰ The packet of letters used as evidence was not enough to put Blaine behind bars. Party faithful rushed to Blaine’s defense dubbing him the “plumed knight.”¹¹ Unlike other Congressmen, they argued, Blaine was honest about his shortcomings.

His use of the public trust for his private benefit irked some Republicans

tired of scandal. These independent Republicans¹² withdrew support from the Blaine campaign. The “mugwumps”, as they were called¹³ saw Blaine as another corrupt boss and called on the Democrats to elect a reform candidate.¹⁴ The democrats answered this plea with the nomination of Governor Grover Cleveland of New York.

Cleveland was a safe choice who appealed to the GOP mugwumps. The former mayor of Buffalo and Erie County sheriff had a strong record of fighting crime and graft. As mayor, Cleveland stood up to machine politicians, promising to put “engineering” and the “principle of economy” ahead of cronyism and partisan politics. He proved a more than able mayor and rose up the ranks of the New York Democratic party. As newly-elected governor of New York, Cleveland ignored pressure by Tammany Hall Democrats for patronage. Cleveland’s appointments were made on merit alone. He further enraged Tammany Hall by rewriting New York City’s charter to include more mayoral patronage.^{15 16} The governor quickly gained a reputation of incorruptibility and honesty in a period thirsty for such men in politics. He prided himself in offering special privileges to no one, a feature of Cleveland’s

that later came back to haunt him.

Cleveland was a strong reformer with a reputation for incorruptibility. He also held rather conservative economic views and so seemed a safe bet for mugwump Republicans who latched onto the “moral” Cleveland campaign in favor of their own party’s scandal-soaked candidate. It was not long before the mud began flying in the campaign, which became the most expensive in U.S. history.¹⁷ Cleveland was accused by enemies of fathering a child out of wedlock and was victim of several biting political cartoons.¹⁸ Although this hurt Cleveland’s previously untarnished ‘moralistic’ reputation with mugwumps, a slight downturn in the economy put the final nail in Blaine’s political coffin.¹⁹

Blaine had made another mistake in the closing days of the election. A Presbyterian minister Samuel Burchard greeted Blaine in New York (home of many Democratic voting Catholic immigrants) with a biting comment. “We are Republicans,” the minister boasted, “and don’t propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been rum, Romanism, and rebellion.”²⁰ Blaine failed to reply to this biting and offensive remark which referred to the Democratic party’s opposition to prohibition, great amounts of Catholic supporters, and history of pro-Southern sentiment during the Civil War. Newspapers, pushed by Democratic party leaders, flooded their pages with stories about the incident. Some argue that perhaps because of this incident Blaine lost enough Irish votes so that Cleveland could carry the key swing state of New York.²¹ Cleveland managed to grab a few other questionable states, eventually scraping by

Blaine in the electoral college by 37 votes. Cleveland also defeated Blaine by less than 1% in the popular vote.²² Despite the closeness of the election, Cleveland was (unlike Hayes) undeniably president. In his inaugural address Cleveland enunciated this when he said, “Amid the din of party strife the people’s choice was made, [demonstrating] the safety of a government by the people.”²³

His next four years as president were full of vetoes. Cleveland believed in a strict interpretation of the Constitution and of his duties as chief executive. He saw himself merely as the implemented of the laws passed by Congress. In his inaugural address he promised “a just and unstrained construction of the Constitution.”²⁴ Congress held the real power and prestige in the nineteenth century. He continued to see himself as a righteous watchdog, above partisan politics and offered privilege to no one. When veterans marched to receive their pensions, Cleveland refused. Cleveland rejected the 1887 Texas Seed Bill which would have aided drought-stricken farmers because he felt it was unconstitutional and that it weakened the “sturdiness of [our] national character.”²⁵



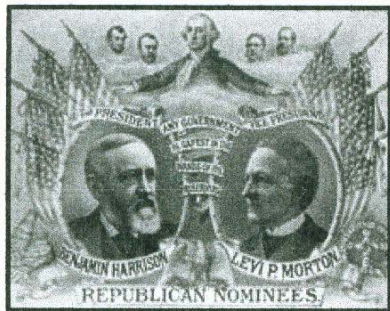
Grover Cleveland became the first Democrat elected to the presidency since James Buchanan over thirty years earlier.



This Puck cartoon entitled “The Tattooed Man” shows candidate James Blaine ashamed of and covered by tattoos symbolizing the corruption that surrounded him.

In 1887 he launched an attack on the tariff, forcing it to the forefront in what he felt would be a winning campaign issue in 1888. His 1887 state of the union address focused on what he called “unnecessary and dangerous taxation.” He called the tariff a “ruthless extortion.” Tariffs, to Cleveland, promoted favoritism for certain industries and nations. The House passed the Mills Bill with the push from Cleveland, which would have reduced the tariff. The Republican controlled Senate, arguing that the tariff promoted U.S. economic growth, killed the bill. Cleveland lost his first legislative battle, but was left with a campaign issue of some weight.²⁶ Businessmen and city industrial workers afraid of foreign competition that a lower tariff might mean remained staunchly behind the Republicans.

As the election of 1888 drew closer the Republicans mobilized and raised over \$1.3 million in corporate donations to run pro-tariff Senator Benjamin Harrison for president. Cleveland was left to spend only \$800 thousand²⁷ on his campaign as businesses abandoned him due to his unshakable anti-tariff position. He also lost the support of farmers and veterans²⁸ who looked to other voices, including third



An 1888 campaign poster featuring Benjamin Harrison, whose election to the presidency in 1888 met with some controversy.

parties for an answer to their concerns. Cleveland barely campaigned, leaving the job to his vice-presidential candidate Allen Thurman, a moderate on the tariff issue.²⁹

Harrison, a minor war hero, focused much of his campaigning on the fact Cleveland, the same man who denied veterans their pensions, avoided conscription by hiring a substitute to serve in his place.³⁰ The Catholic Irish lost by Blaine in 1884 also were courted by the Republicans from behind the scenes. A party worker, pretending to be British wrote the British ambassador asking for whom he should vote. The ambassador responded that the crown sup-

ported a Cleveland vote. Publication of this endorsement helped gain many Irish back to the GOP in New York. Cleveland's continued refusal to bend to Tammany Hall demands for federal patronage further hurt the Democrat's chances since he did not have the machine in New York City working on his behalf. It was long known that it was New York that would decide this election.³¹

The election of 1888 was, arguably, the most corrupt in our history. GOP ballots in Indiana were sold and voters were paid. In 1888 ward captains made sure bought voters stayed bought as they sat next to glass ballot boxes. Votes were handed to election clerks who stuffed the ones they liked and threw out the ones they didn't. Bought voters moved from doubtful ward to doubtful ward, some voted for two parties in the same day, many voted more than once in disguises. Harrison's campaign was in trouble in the late autumn.³² He needed Cleveland's home state of New York and his own home state of Indiana, and stopped at nothing to get them. Republican chairman Matt Quay used robber baron donations to buy out big city Democratic bosses who were cool to Cleveland. New York was not a problem for Harrison, but Indiana remained questionable.

Indiana had a reputation for voter fraud. As special prosecutor in an 1878 state election case, Harrison and U.S. Marshall W.W. Dudley indicted several Democrats on charges of voter fraud. By 1888 Dudley had risen to the position of GOP party treasurer and used his position to secure paid for votes for Harrison in the state of Indiana.³³

Harrison beat Cleveland in the electoral college, despite the charges of fraud, by 65 votes, although Cleveland won the popular vote by 1%. Once again, America was left with a president who took office based on a questionable election.³⁴

Harrison raised the tariff, signing the high McKinley tariff, which responded to the tariffs imposed by foreign countries. Meanwhile Democrats used minority tactics in Congress such as the disappearing quorum to battle Republican legislative action. Bitter partisan politics ruled Congress. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act was also passed, requiring the Treasury to buy silver. This reignited the currency issue as gold supplies in the treasury began to dwindle.³⁵ The sweeping 1890 Democratic victory in Congress, a response to opposition to Republican support for so-

cial reforms like prohibition, allowed for a resurgence of Cleveland's party in the next election.

Cleveland led a vigorous party and boasted a \$2.4 million dollar campaign purse, the largest in history up to that point.³⁶ Although he was a staunch gold-standard supporter, Cleveland united the ticket by appointing vice presidential choice Aldai Stevenson, a silverite as his running mate.³⁷ Cleveland spent the campaign attacking his pet issue, by deconstructing the McKinley Tariff of 1890. Harrison responded that voters should beware of Cleveland's "free trade tendencies."³⁸

The formation of a formidable third party signified a discontent by Americans with the powerful businesses, banks, and bought-for parties. The newly formed Populist party ran James B. Weaver for the presidency in 1892, gaining great support in the West and meeting resistance in the South where Democrats used intimidation, fraud and manipulation to keep Populist numbers low.³⁹ The movement, which found its roots in the Farmer's Alliance. The Alliance addressed the issues of lowering crop prices, rising railroad rates, and bank abuses of their loans. The party formed by the alliance carried with it great hopes that it could bring together discontented farmers with discontented workers. The Populist platform, which states that "wealth belongs to those who create it"⁴⁰, requested a graduated income tax, a silver-backed currency (inflation), government insurance on bank accounts, and public ownership of railroads. Many of their reforms (excluding the nativist speak that is peppered throughout their platform), while considered extreme at the time later became progressive causes. Weaver's respectable showing in 1892 may have sparked the Democrats to change their course in 1896 by backing the silverites and definitely reflected the people's concern about corporate influence in government.⁴¹

It is more likely, however, that Cleveland's inadequate dealings with the Panic of 1893 and the depression that followed helped push the silverites and liberals in his party to the forefront. When



Pro-tariff Republican Benjamin Harrison (above) warned voters to beware of Cleveland's "free trade tendencies."



William McKinley's tariff became the issue of the 1892 election. He would rise as the conservative Republican candidate in the 1896 election, an event which signalled a new age in American politics.

Cleveland blamed the Silver Purchase Act as the cause of the depression and forced a repeal through Congress, the economy only managed to get worse. Cleveland remained faithful to the gold standard despite this failure and sold bonds with the cooperation of J.P. Morgan (and the criticism of populists) to buy back gold. His violent breakup of the Pullman strike in Chicago may also have influenced the internal changes in the party. Cleveland and his kind were quickly becoming extinct in the Democratic party.

The election of 1892 saw many voters switch parties. Issues were up for grabs and platforms to be cemented in 1896 by liberal Democrat William Jennings Bryan and conservative Republican William McKinley⁴² were beginning to take shape. Progressivism was breathing its first breaths as Grover Cleveland found himself increasingly a political dinosaur, a Democrat from days of past. His legacy of disallowing aid to those in need, breaking unions, and supporting the likes of J.P. Morgan were becoming distasteful to voters. By the end of his term in 1896 Cleveland was a man without a party.

The elections involving candidate Grover Cleveland saw political realignment and the rising up of people sick of abuses of power by politicians and corporations. While voters did not have much of a political choice (Cleveland, Blaine, and Harrison were all quite conservative), the people remained interested in politics and came out to vote (in Harrison's case they

came out more than a few times.) With each election, pressures from the people for reform grew. This movement, which very visibly took root during the tumultuous elections of 1884, 1888, and 1892, is a direct descendent of the Progressive Era.

Endnotes

¹Term paper topic chosen based on list of suggestions. Under politics is listed "Any Presidential Election."

²Divine, Robert and T.H. Breen, et al. *America: Past and Present*, 3rd Ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p.589.

³ibid, 589.

⁴Athearn, Robert. *The Gilded Age*. (New York: Dell, 1963), p. 909.

⁵ibid, 914.

⁶Divine, p. 482.

⁷Rawley, James. "Rutherford B. Hayes," in *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*, ed. James McPherson. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2000), p. 141.

⁸Weissberger, Bernard. "Chester A. Arthur," in *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*, ed. James McPherson. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2000), p. 155.

⁹DeSantis, Vincent. "Grover Cleveland: A Biography," from <http://gi.grolier.com/presidents/ea/bios/22pcev.htm>.

¹⁰Athearn, p. 911.

¹¹ibid, p.911

¹²That is they were not supporters of either Conkling's Stalwart faction or Blaine's Half-Breed faction.

¹³From Roberts (106): "A mugwump has been described as a fellow 'who has his mug on one side of the fence and his wump on the other.'"

¹⁴Roberts, Edwin. *Elections 1964*. (Silver Spring, MD: The National Observer, 1964), p. 106.

¹⁵These progressive municipal reforms were championed by New York politician Theodore Roosevelt.

¹⁶Campbell, Ballard. "Grover Cleveland," from *American National Biography Online*. <http://www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00144.html> Oxford: Ox-

ford University Press, 2000.

¹⁷Dems spent \$1.4 million. GOP spent \$1.3 million.

Wayne, Stephen. *The Road to the White House 2000: The Politics of Presidential Elections*. (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2000), p. 28.

¹⁸Cleveland a few years later accepted financial responsibility for the child, but never admitted paternity.

¹⁹Campbell

²⁰Roberts, p. 99.

²¹ibid, 99. and McPherson, p. 378.

²²*Hammond Atlas of American History*. (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond, 1997), p. U63.

²³Cleveland, Grover. "First Inaugural Address (delivered 3-4-1885)", in *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*, ed. James McPherson. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2000), p. 378.

²⁴ibid, 379.

²⁵DeSantis, Vincent. "Grover Cleveland," in *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*, ed. James McPherson. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2000), p. 164.

²⁶Campbell, p. 4.

²⁷Wayne, p. 28.

²⁸Due to pension and relief issues as described.

²⁹Camobell, p. 5.

³⁰Not an issue against Blaine, who did the same.

³¹McPherson, p. 380.

³²Ackerman, S.J. "The Vote That Failed." *Smithsonian* 29, no. 8 (Nov. 1998), p. 36.

³³ibid, 36.

³⁴Hammond, p. U63.

³⁵Divine, p. 593.

³⁶Wayne, p. 28.

³⁷McPherson, p. 384.

³⁸ibid, 385.

³⁹Divine, p. 598.

⁴⁰"Populist Party Platform of 1892," in *A Documentary History of the United States*, 6th Ed, ed. Richard Heffner. (New York: Mentor Penguin Putnam, 1999), p. 238-240.

⁴¹ibid, p. 240

⁴²McKinley's gold standard campaign was supported by Cleveland in 1896, although Cleveland had issue with McKinley's imperialist nature.