

TOP TEN CLOSEST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Love them or hate them, presidential elections rear their ugly heads every four years like swarms of locusts, but Americans generally get through them with relatively good humor. Unfortunately, like the Super Bowl, most of them are not particularly competitive, giving them poor entertainment value. Every once in a while, however, there is a real barn burner or an election is stolen, occasionally making things interesting. As such, below is my list of the ten most hotly contested presidential elections in history.

10. JAMES MADISON over DEWITT CLINTON, 1812:



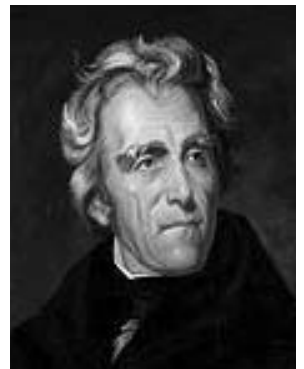
Perhaps the first of the genuinely close elections, five foot four inch tall James Madison managed to beat a guy named Clinton (no, not *that* Clinton). It wasn't all that close really—50.4% to 46.7% of the popular vote—but in an era when many elections were more like coronations than true competitions, that was considered pretty close. Unfortunately, all that Mister Madison got for his troubles was a war with Britain and a burned out White House.



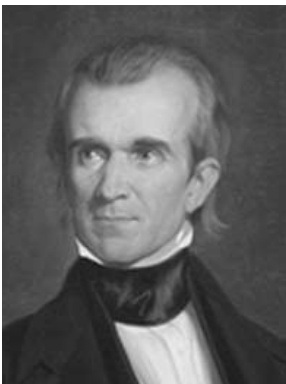
9. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS over ANDREW JACKSON, 1824:



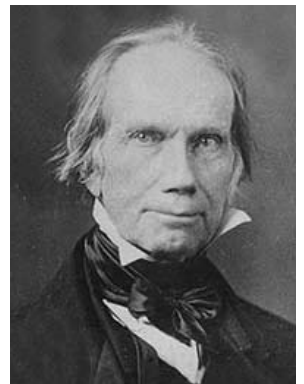
Actually, this one wasn't close at all; Jackson easily beat former president John Adam's son, John Quincy, by a whopping eleven percentage points. The problem was he failed to take the majority of the total electoral vote cast, sending the whole thing to the House of Representatives to pick a winner. Not remarkably, they simply voted along party lines and gave the election to the distant second-place winner, Adams. Jackson would get his revenge, however, by trouncing Mister Adams four years later and serving two terms, which is something neither John Quincy nor his father, John Adams were ever able to do.



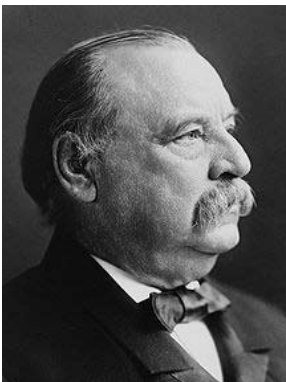
8. JAMES K. POLK over HENRY CLAY, 1844:



This one really was close, with the victorious Polk besting one of the real political power brokers of his day, Henry Clay, by a mere 40,000 votes out of some 2.6 million cast. Fortunately, Polk turned out to be a fairly successful president who successfully prosecuted a war with Mexico and accomplished a number of other initiatives during his brief tenure in the Oval Office, and probably would have been a shoo-in for a second term had not poor health discouraged him from seeking a second term.



7. GROVER CLEVELAND over JAMES BLAINE, 1884:



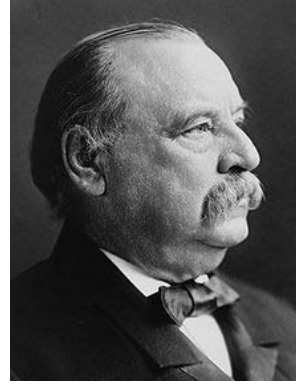
In the first of two non-consecutive terms, New York Democrat Grover Cleveland managed to swim against the popular Republican tide of the late nineteenth century by squeaking out a 25,000 vote win (just 3/10th of a percent) to beat the favorite, James Blaine from Maine. Blaine might have won handily had he been from a state other than Maine, whose population at the time was something like thirty six people. Fortunately for the portly Cleveland, he hailed from the great state of New York, at the time the most populous state in the union, which gave him all the electoral votes he needed to win. Apparently it's true: location really *is* everything!



6. BENJAMIN HARRISON over GROVER CLEVELAND, 1888:



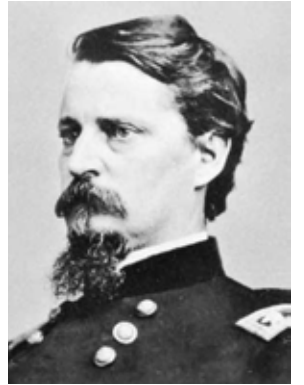
Four years after besting Blaine, Cleveland got his come-uppance when he lost to the grandson of the country's 11th president, William Henry Harrison. (He was the president best remembered for managing to die a month after being sworn in.) The only problem was, Cleveland actually won the popular vote by 100,000 votes (out of some eleven million cast) but lost the electoral vote, demonstrating that it's not whether you win that counts, but *where* you win. Not to worry; W.H. Harrison's grandson proved to be a dud and Grover got another shot at the White House four years later, this time beating ol' Ben by three percentage points and 132 electoral votes.



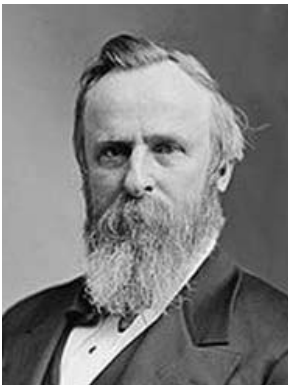
5. JAMES GARFIELD over WINFIELD HANCOCK, 1880:



In the aftermath of the Civil War the Republican Party was badly divided on a number of issues, which threatened to split the party and give the presidency to a Democrat for the first time in 24 years. It was touch and go there for awhile, but finally Ohio Governor Jim Garfield beat the distinguished Civil War General Winfield Hancock by a razor thin 2,000 votes (1/10th of one percent). Unfortunately, all he got for his troubles was a bullet to the chest from a deranged office seeker and the unwanted title of second president ever to be assassinated.



4. RUTHERFORD B. HAYES over SAMUEL TILDEN, 1876:



After eight years of Ulysses S. Grant's corrupt and incompetent administration and other four years of Chester Arthur's unpopular reign, voters were finally ready for change and let the country know it by electing New York Democrat Samuel Tilden president, who easily beat his opponent by a comfortable 3 percentage points and over 200,000 votes. The only reason you never heard of President Tilden is because there was a little problem with that electoral vote thing again, with Tilden falling just short of a clear majority needed to claim victory. After some partisan shenanigans, however, Hayes was awarded one more electoral vote than Tilden, putting the tea-toting Hayes



into the White House. Actually, there may have been more involved in this than many suspect; some historians believe that an informal deal was struck to resolve the dispute: in return for Democrat acquiescence in Hayes' election, the Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South, thereby ending Reconstruction. I wonder if Al Gore had thought of that?

3. JIMMY CARTER over GERALD FORD, 1976:



In the fall of 1976 Americans were apparently so angry at Tricky Dick Nixon for Watergate, and then for Ford for pardoning him, that they took out their ire on the nice but somewhat hapless Jerry Ford by electing a Georgian peanut farmer president in a race that wasn't decided until the wee hours of the morning. How close was it? Had Ford managed to pull out Ohio, it would have been all over for the former Governor of Georgia and Jerry Ford would have been given the reigns for real. Unfortunately, things didn't work out so well for Carter either, as he was to feel the sting of the electorate's ire himself four years later and lose to some former Hollywood actor



whose name escapes me just now.

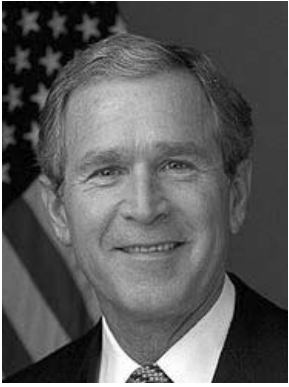
2. JOHN F. KENNEDY over RICHARD NIXON, 1960:



Probably the first really close race of the modern era, the dashing young senator from Massachusetts barely squeaked out a victory over Ike's heir apparent, Vice President Richard Nixon, by a mere 112,000 votes out of 69 million cast (a difference of less than 1/10th of the popular vote cast). It is said that had not deceased voters in Cook County broken heavily for the Massachusetts senator, Tricky Dick would have begun his reign of terror eight years earlier than he eventually did.



1. GEORGE W. BUSH over AL GORE, 2000:



In what was arguably the most screwed up election ever, even the TV networks couldn't decide whether Florida was a red state or a blue state, and finally compromised by making it a shade of chartreuse. Though Gore won the popular vote by half a million votes, hanging chads in Broward County were not considered real votes and Bush won by default. Considering everything that happened over the next eight years, he probably wishes he'd lost.



BONUS TRIVIA FACT: Apparently being president is healthier than being vice-president. Of the 47 men who have held the office of Vice-President, six died while in office as compared to just four presidents. Of course, no veep has ever been assassinated, so the job has that going for it.