

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. However, every once in a while there is a real barn burner, or an election that is stolen, to make 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 (and you thought he'd only run the two times). It wasn't all that close actually—50.4% to 46.7% of the popular vote—but in an era when many elections were more like coronations than anything else, with usually only token opposition being offered, 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.



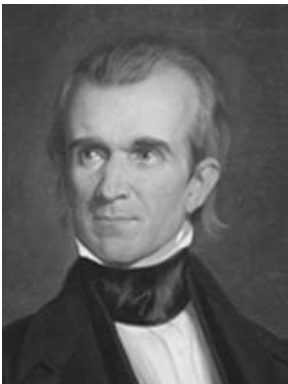
9. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS over ANDREW JACKSON, 1824:



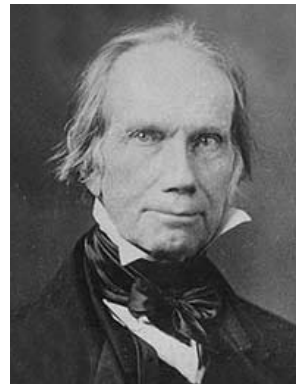
Actually, this one wasn't close at all; Jackson easily beat former president John Adam's bouncing baby boy by a whopping eleven percentage points but lost in the four-way race when he failed to take the majority of the total electoral vote cast, sending the whole thing to the House of Representatives to sort out. Not to worry, however; they simply voted along party lines and gave the election to the distant second-place winner. Jackson would get his revenge, however, by trouncing Mister Adams four years later and serving two terms, which is something neither John Quincy Adams nor his father, John Adams (2nd president), were ever able to do.



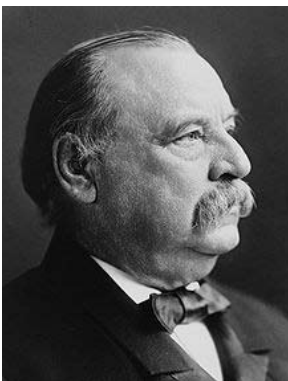
8. JAMES K. POLK over HENRY CLAY, 1844:



This one really was a barn burner, 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 (about the same number of votes that were cast in the Massachusetts special election in January of 2010). Polk turned out to be a fairly successful president however, successfully prosecuting a war with Mexico and accomplishing a number of other initiatives. He probably would have been a shoo-in for a second term, but choose not to run again for health reasons.



7. GROVER CLEVELAND over JAMES BLAINE, 1884:



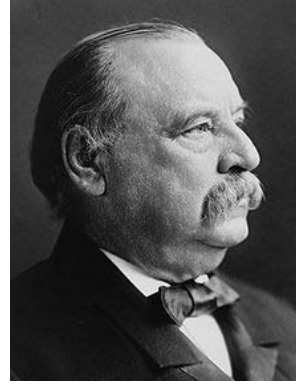
In the first of two non-consecutive terms, New York Democrat Grover Cleveland managed to swim against the popular Republican tide of the late nineteenth century by squeaking out a 25,000 vote win (just 3/10th of a percent) to upset the favorite, James Blaine from Maine. Blaine might have won handily had he been from a state other than Maine, with its population at the time of thirty six people—twenty two of which were Democrats. Grover hailed from New York. (Never underestimate the benefit of coming from the most populous state in the country.)





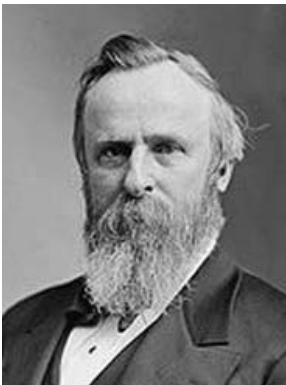
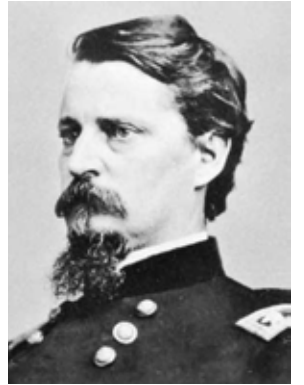
6. BENJAMIN HARRISON over GROVER CLEVELAND, 1888:

Four years later, Grover got his come-uppance for challenging the Republican hierarchy by losing to William Henry Harrison's (he was the guy who died a month after being sworn in—remember?) grandson. The only problem was, he 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 Republicans had split badly, resulting in them almost surrendering the presidency to a Democrat for the first time since 1856. It was touch and go there for awhile, but finally old Jim Garfield beat the popular Civil War General 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 unsought title of second president ever to be assassinated.



4. RUTHERFORD HAYES over SAMUEL TILDEN, 1876:

After eight years of Ulysses S. Grant's corrupt and incompetent administration, voters were 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. What, you never heard of President Tilden? Well, that's because there was a little problem with that electoral vote thing again, with Tilden falling just short of a clear majority needed to claim indisputable victory. After some partisan shenanigans, Hayes was awarded one more electoral vote than Tilden, which is why we now speak

of the Rutherford B. Hayes legend with such reverence. 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: the Compromise of 1877. In return for Democrat acquiescence in Hayes' election, the Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South, ending Reconstruction. I wonder if Al Gore thought of that?



3. JIMMY CARTER over GERALD FORD, 1976:



Okay, so the people were mad at Nixon for Watergate and Ford for pardoning Nixon, but come on, Jimmy Carter? Had Jerry just managed to pull out Ohio, it would have been all over for the peanut farmer, but alas, shriller voices prevailed. Four years later calm returned to the country and Carter was unseated by some Hollywood actor whose name escapes me right now.



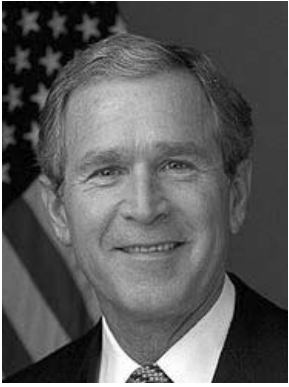
2. JOHN F. KENNEDY over RICHARD NIXON, 1960:



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, with 1/10th of the popular vote (112,000 votes out of 69 million cast). It is said that had most of the deceased voters in Cook County not 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, none of the six veeps were assassinated, so the job has that going for it.