

### Infighting, Fusion, and Fraud in the Election of 1872

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## Feature Essay

Rasmussen, Hans C.

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When asked why American politics had become so exceptionally volatile in recent years (at least one chamber of Congress has flipped in six of the last nine elections), political strategist Karl Rove instinctively found an historical parallel from a century and a half ago.

Well, it’s interesting. Go back to the last time this happened—the Gilded Age. After the election of 1872 and the reelection of Ulysses S. Grant, for the next quarter of a century we have five presidential elections in a row in which nobody gets 50 percent of the vote. We have two years of Republican president, House, and Senate, two years of a Democratic president, House, and Senate, and the rest of the time there’s divided government starting with the capture of the House in 1874 by the Democrats for the first time in eighteen years in what’s called the “Victory of the Brigadiers,” because so many former Confederate officers are elected . . . But we had intense partisan competition and there was a constant change in the control of the House of Representatives and the election of the only Democrat twice between James Buchanan and FDR in Woodrow Wilson.<sup>1</sup> Our politics are broken like they were in the Gilded Age.<sup>2</sup>

As this month marks the sesquicentennial of the US presidential election of 1872, this installment of *Civil War Treasures* explores some of the LSU Libraries’ resources for studying that last election before everything went totally sideways for the rest of the nineteenth century. This contest, in which the Democratic Party endorsed a dissident Republican ticket headed by Horace Greeley of all people in a desperate attempt to bring Reconstruction to a close, was uncompetitive both for Grant and for Republicans in Congress because of the Democrats’ profound weakness at the time, making the political crisis of the Gilded Age that began with the Democratic windfall of 1874 all the more astounding.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers of *Civil War Book Review* naturally might object to this statement, as Grover Cleveland twice won election during this period, but I assume Mr. Rove refers only to *consecutive* electoral victories by Democratic presidential candidates.

<sup>2</sup> “Karl Rove on the 2022 Election and America’s Political Landscape,” *GoodFellows*, Hoover Institution, October 4, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYk18nFc1JY>

The presidential election of 1872 would have held considerably less drama had not the Liberal Republicans, a dissident rump faction, bolted the Republican Party in disgust from Radical Reconstruction and the scandals of the Grant administration. They convened in Cincinnati during May 1-3 to nominate Horace Greeley on a platform calling for civil service reform and an end to Reconstruction among other things. The Liberal Republicans knew nominating Greeley would be problematic to white southern voters to say the least, so they issued *Mr. Greeley's Record on the Questions of Amnesty and Reconstruction, from the Hour of Gen. Lee's Surrender* less than a month later.<sup>3</sup> This collection of five editorials from Greeley's *New-York Tribune* aimed to demonstrate his conciliatory attitude toward the defeated states and prove unambiguously that the Liberal Republican nominee had not been "a consistent enemy of the South," but only a persistent foe of slavery while it existed.

The Liberal Republican convention in Cincinnati instantly became the butt of humor for the regular Republicans, who unanimously and unsurprisingly nominated Grant to run for reelection at their convention in Philadelphia (June 5-6). *That Convention, or, Five Days a Politician* was a wicked satire on the Liberal Republican convention, insultingly dubbed "the 'Dolly Varden Muster,' composed of disaffected Republicans, together with a very fair sprinkling of the worst elements of the dead Democracy."<sup>4</sup> Viewed through the eyes of a fictitious neophyte delegate from Illinois, it lampooned actual people who attended: "Long John" Wentworth, former Congressman and mayor of Chicago; George Francis Train, Union Pacific Railroad founder and famous circumnavigator; and Susan B. Anthony, who was arrested and convicted for voting in the 1872 election. Naturally, the book savaged Horace Greeley both in prose and through numerous cartoons by Frank Beard, a prolific late nineteenth-century book and magazine illustrator.

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<sup>3</sup> Horace Greeley, *Mr. Greeley's Record on the Questions of Amnesty and Reconstruction, from the Hour of Gen. Lee's Surrender* (New York, 1872). Hill Memorial Library's copy is bound with *Proceedings of the Liberal Republican Convention, in Cincinnati, May 1st, 2d and 3d, 1872* (New York: Baker & Godwin, 1872) [Hill Memorial Library Rare 973.7 G81M]

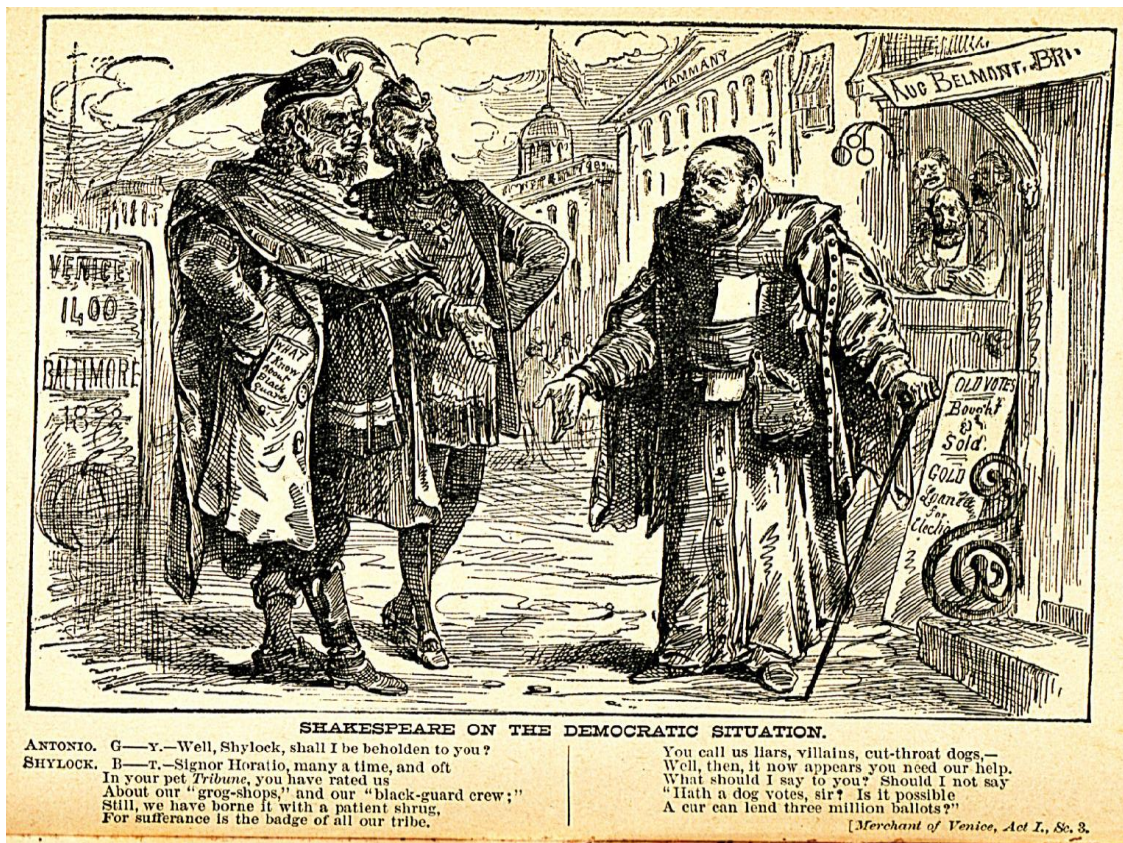
<sup>4</sup> *That Convention, or, Five Days a Politician* (New York: F.G. Welch & Co., 1872) [Hill Memorial Library Rare E675 .W46] A Dolly Varden outfit was a brightly colored calico costume for women popular at the time, so this quip implied that the Liberal Republicans were a hodge-podge of assorted malcontents.



This Frank Beard cartoon compares Greeley to Charles Blondin, a French tightrope walker who crossed the Niagara River in 1859. To “go up Salt River” was a nineteenth-century political colloquialism meaning to lose an election. The tablet in Greeley’s pocket reads “What I know about keeping my balance,” a joke alluding to his book, *What I Know about Farming* (1871).

Seeing no other possible way to defeat the immensely popular president, the Democrats, still tainted with the treason of the war, opted for a fusion ticket by endorsing the Liberal Republican nominees at its own convention in Baltimore (July 9-10). This alliance of convenience set off the Republican campaign machine. Chicago-based journalist Everett Chamberlin quickly cranked out *The Struggle of '72*, a dense examination of the upcoming presidential campaign designed to bolster the regular Republican cause.<sup>5</sup> The first half extolled the Republican Party in general and Grant in particular, while the second attacked “the so-called Liberal Movement” with a backhanded biography of Horace Greeley, a list of eleven reasons why he was unfit to be president, and condemnation of Liberal Republican connivance with the Democrats, as exemplified in this cartoon, one of many that spiced up the book.

<sup>5</sup> Everett Chamberlin, *The Struggle of '72: The Issues and Candidates of the Present Political Campaign* (Chicago: Union Publishing Company, 1872) [Hill Memorial Library Williams JK2263 1872 .C5]



In this cartoon based upon Act I, Scene 3 of *The Merchant of Venice*, Liberal Republican presidential nominee, Horace Greeley (Antonio), and Missouri governor and vice-presidential nominee, Benjamin Gratz Brown (Bassanio), seek votes from August Belmont (Shylock), the DNC chairman whose party Greeley previously had vilified in his *New-York Tribune*. William "Boss" Tweed of Tammany Hall looks out the window on the right.

*The Struggle of '72* included a chapter on "Grant and the Colored Race" that imaginatively discredited Greeley, one of America's most tireless abolitionists, while demonstrating "that Grant was one of the negro's earliest, staunchest, most practically valuable friends." A more convincing endorsement appeared in *U.S. Grant and the Colored People*, a speech delivered by Frederick Douglass in Washington on July 17 and subsequently printed for the campaign.<sup>6</sup> Concerned that "there are many dissemblers and falsifiers of the Greeley party in the South who are seeking the control of the colored voters, by declaring to them that President Grant is not, and never has been, a faithful and sincere friend of my race," Douglass outlined Grant's many services to freedmen over the previous decade. Unbeknownst to him, the Equal Rights Party nominated Douglass as its vice-presidential candidate alongside Victoria Woodhull,

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Douglass, *U.S. Grant and the Colored People* (Washington, 1872) [Hill Memorial Library LLMVC E185.2 .D73 1872 LARA]

arguably the first woman to run for the nation's highest office. She had announced her candidacy in 1870<sup>7</sup> and the following year published *The Origin, Tendencies and Principles of Government*, an anthology of her writings on political history and philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Not unexpectedly, the election reached unimagined heights of peculiarity in Louisiana, where a fusion ticket of the Liberal Republicans and Democrats marched behind Governor Henry Clay Warmoth, a Republican whose conflicts with the pro-Grant customhouse faction of the party had driven him into the arms of the Liberals.<sup>9</sup> The *Political Manual* prepared by authority of the State Central Committee of the Liberal Party of Louisiana advised “the friends of Greeley and Brown” in how to organize temporary local Liberal campaign clubs with a readymade constitution, bylaws, and resolutions.<sup>10</sup> A simple, fragile **Republican Party Election Ticket** serves as a small reminder that the regular Republicans also vied for votes in Louisiana with Grant and gubernatorial candidate William Pitt Kellogg at the top of their ticket.<sup>11</sup>

Unsurprisingly, no one really knows who won the election in Louisiana. Both sides tried to certify their own candidates. A **Certification of Louisiana Presidential Election Returns**, signed and sealed by Governor Warmoth, certified the election of presidential electors for Louisiana. Those eight electors subsequently certified that they cast eight abstaining votes for president (Horace Greeley had died on November 29 before the Electoral College could vote) and eight votes for Benjamin Gratz Brown for vice president.<sup>12</sup> An alternate slate of electors siding with Grant eventually was invalidated in the Electoral College, leaving Louisiana with no say in the national tally. The dispute over who was the rightful governor of Louisiana, William Pitt Kellogg (R) or John McEnery (D), precipitated its own drama with mob violence and legal counterclaims. The anti-Republican “Committee of Seventy” issued its *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Committee of Seventy to Review the Decisions of the Supreme Court of Louisiana in the Cases Growing out of the General Election of November 1872* while the Republicans countered with *The Louisiana Adjustment: Abstract of the Evidence of Governor*

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<sup>7</sup> “The Coming Woman,” *New York Herald*, April 2, 1870.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria C. Woodhull, *The Origin, Tendencies and Principles of Government* (New York: Woodhull, Claflin & Co., 1871) [Hill Memorial Library Rare JF125 .M4]

<sup>9</sup> Sawako Takahashi, “The 1872 Presidential Election in Louisiana” (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1974), 46-48.

<sup>10</sup> *Political Manual* (New Orleans, 1872) [Hill Memorial Library LLMVC JK2391 .L52 L8 1872]

<sup>11</sup> Republican Party Election Ticket, Mss. 2880, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. [Hill Memorial Library LLMVC Ephemera Collection Subgroup I]

<sup>12</sup> Certification of Louisiana Presidential Election Returns, Mss. 3921, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. [Hill Memorial Library MISC:C]

*Kellogg's Election in 1872 and the Frauds of the Fusionists.*<sup>13</sup> Both are spectacularly boring legal arguments only a law professor could tolerate. After a few months of rival administrations and vicious acrimony, Grant backed Kellogg by force of arms. Grant also easily won reelection as president without any need of the eight questionable Electoral College votes Louisiana Republicans tried to give him. It is anyone's guess who really won the contests for president and governor in Louisiana in 1872. It was an election that just begged to be denied.

*Hans Rasmussen received an MA degree in history from Louisiana State University and an MLIS degree in archives and records enterprise from the University of Texas at Austin. He worked as an archivist and catalog librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi until 2006 when he joined the Louisiana State University Libraries. He has served as Head of Special Collections Technical Services in the LSU Libraries since 2013.*

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<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Committee of Seventy to Review the Decisions of the Supreme Court of Louisiana in the Cases Growing out of the General Election of November 1872* (New Orleans, 1873) [Hill Memorial Library LLMVC F375 .C68]; *The Louisiana Adjustment: Abstract of the Evidence of Governor Kellogg's Election in 1872 and the Frauds of the Fusionists* (New Orleans: Printed at the Republican Office, 1875) [Hill Memorial Library LLMVC F375 .L943]