Chinese Exclusion Act

A Nuanced Approach

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The Immigrant Learning Center
Chinese Exclusion Act and the historical contexts in which the legislative came about are often overlooked.

Stories of Chinese exclusion focus too heavily on the racist ideologies of the past and overgeneralize racism to have been rampant throughout the entirety of the 19th century.

While much of it is true, it is important to understand how racism and anti-Asian sentiments translated into a policy.
International Factor

Burlingame Treaty (1868)
Established “friendly” relations between the U.S. and Qing Empire
Allowed free movement (immigration) from China to the U.S., vice-versa
Encouraged emigration of Chinese laborers to the U.S.

Qing Empire (China) severely damaged and incapable of functioning as a normal state
Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860)
Massive national debt, and sickened population
Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864)
~50 million people died
Domestic Politics 1

The "Long Depression of 1870s" AKA "Panic of 1873"
Unemployment level soared up to 14%
Between 1873-1879, more than 18,000 businesses went bankrupt, including 89 railroads, 10 states and hundreds of banks.
“Great Railroad Strikes”

Poor economic conditions led to further social divides
Tendency to cope with hardship in finding a target to blame; thinking that jobs and economic opportunities are finite resources
California hit particularly hard with economic pressure, where agitated laborers wanted to limit or completely exclude Chinese immigration. Chinese immigration and labor issues was a localized issue in CA.

How did a local CA issue become a national issue? Presidential elections between 1876-1896.

Razor thin races – needed electoral votes from CA & other West Coast states to win. Pander to the West Coast votes was THE strategy.
### 1876 United States presidential election

**November 7, 1876**

- **Turnout:** 81.8%[^1] ▼ 10.5 pp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominee</th>
<th>Rutherford B. Hayes</th>
<th>Samuel J. Tilden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home state</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running mate</td>
<td>William A. Wheeler</td>
<td>Thomas A. Hendricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral vote</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States carried</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular vote</td>
<td>4,034,311</td>
<td>4,288,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^1]:  [1]

### 1880 United States presidential election

**November 2, 1880**

- **Turnout:** 78%[^1] ▼ 3.8 pp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominee</th>
<th>James A. Garfield</th>
<th>Winfield Scott Hancock</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home state</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running mate</td>
<td>Chester A. Arthur</td>
<td>William H. English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral vote</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States carried</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular vote</td>
<td>4,446,158[^a]</td>
<td>4,444,280[^a]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^1]:  [1]
[^a]:  [a]
Domestic Economy

Labor shortages
Civil War (1861-1865) Exacerbated labor shortage
1 million male casualties.
4 million former slaves – now citizens, added onto the surplus labor, but former slaves were still more expensive than Chinese laborers.

Lessons from the westward expansion
Companies like the American Emigrant Company (AEC), 1863 learned that Chinese labor was cheaper, reliable, and had little to no risk of unionizing and/or go on strikes.

Between 1870-1880, 138,941 Chinese migrated to the U.S. (4.3% of all immigration)
1880 Census – Total Chinese population in the US: 105,465 (0.2% of 50 million)
Resources


Questions & Discussion