

# Chinese Exclusion Act

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A Nuanced Approach

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# Dominant Narrative: Racism to Policy, YES, but how?

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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 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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

# International Factor

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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

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The "Long Depression of 1870s" AKA "Panic of 1873"

Unemployment level rose 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

# Domestic Politics 2

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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

 ← 1872 <b>November 7, 1876</b> 1880 →		
All 369 electoral votes of the <b>Electoral College</b> 185 electoral votes needed to win		
Turnout	81.8% <sup>[1]</sup> ▲ 10.5 pp	
		
Nominee	<b>Rutherford B. Hayes</b>	Samuel J. Tilden
Party	Republican	Democratic
Home state	Ohio	New York
Running mate	<b>William A. Wheeler</b>	Thomas A. Hendricks
Electoral vote	185	184
States carried	21	17
Popular vote	4,034,311	4,288,546
Percentage	47.9%	50.9%

## 1880 United States presidential election

 ← 1876 <b>November 2, 1880</b> 1884 →		
All 369 electoral votes of the <b>Electoral College</b> 185 electoral votes needed to win		
Turnout	78% <sup>[1]</sup> ▼ 3.8 pp	
		
Nominee	<b>James A. Garfield</b>	Winfield Scott Hancock
Party	Republican	Democratic
Home state	Ohio	Pennsylvania
Running mate	<b>Chester A. Arthur</b>	William H. English
Electoral vote	214	155
States carried	19	19
Popular vote	4,446,158 <sup>[a]</sup>	4,444,260 <sup>[a]</sup>
Percentage	48.3%	48.2%

# Domestic Economy

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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

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- Gold, Martin B. (2012) *Forbidden Citizens: Chinese Exclusion and the U.S. Congress: A Legislative History*. TheCapitol.Net, Inc. 616pp.
- Lee, Erika (2003) *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*. University of North Carolina Press. 348pp.
- Atkinson, Robert (2005) *The Past and Future of America's Economy: Long Waves of Innovation That Power Cycles of Growth*. Edward Elgar Pub. 368pp.
- Lovell, Julia (2015) *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of Modern China*. Harry N. Abrams. 512pp.

# Questions & Discussion

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