AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

# 1888

## *Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland*

A 105-minute lesson on the 1888 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

| | |
|---|---|
| ERA<br>Gilded Age | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>401 total |
| WINNER<br>Benjamin Harrison (Republican) · 233 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>Grover Cleveland (Democratic) · 168 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>Protective tariff policy; federal surplus management | TURNOUT<br>80.5% |

CONTENTS


1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
6. Long-essay-question + rubric
7. Answer key + discussion

# 1888: Benjamin Harrison vs Grover Cleveland

## AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

## Timing

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 min | **Warm-up** | Identify two structural reasons the U.S. Electoral College produces winners who lose the popular vote. For each, identify the specific 1888 state-level outcome that demonstrates the mechanism. |
| 15 min | **Reading + vocab** | The 1888 election was the 26th U.S. presidential election. It produced Benjamin Harrison's 233-168 electoral-vote victory over incumbent President Grover Cleveland - despite Cleveland winning the popular vote by 90,596 votes. The 1888 result was the third presidential election in U.S. history (after 1824 and 1876) in which the popular-vote winner lost the Electoral College. The campaign focused almost entirely on the tariff issue.<br><br>The Democratic Party renominated incumbent President Grover Cleveland by acclamation at the June 5-7, 1888 St. Louis convention. Allen G. Thurman of Ohio replaced the late Thomas A. Hendricks as the vice presidential candidate. Cleveland had governed as a fiscally conservative reform Democrat. His December 6, 1887 annual message to Congress had focused entirely on tariff reduction, making tariff the defining issue of his presidency and the 1888 campaign.<br><br>The Republican Party met in Chicago on June 19-25, 1888 and nominated Senator Benjamin Harrison of Indiana on the eighth ballot over Senator John Sherman of Ohio, James G. Blaine, Senator William B. Allison of Iowa, Russell Alger of Michigan, and Walter Q. Gresham of Indiana. Harrison was 55, a Union Civil War brigadier general. He was the grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th U.S. president, died after 31 days in 1841) and the great-grandson of Benjamin Harrison V (1726-1791, a signer of the Declaration of Independence). Levi P. Morton of New York was the vice presidential candidate.<br><br>The campaign focused almost entirely on the tariff issue. Republicans defended high protective tariffs as essential to American manufacturing and Union veteran pensions. Democrats defended tariff reduction as essential to consumer welfare. The 1888 campaign was structurally important for U.S. campaign finance history. Republican fundraising chair John Wanamaker raised over $400,000 for the Harrison campaign - the most money ever raised in a U.S. presidential race up to that point. The money was used for massive Republican organizing in Indiana, New York, and |

other key states, including significant vote-buying operations.

The "blocks of five" letter by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley to Republican workers in October 1888 was the most notorious vote-buying scheme. Dudley instructed Republican workers to organize voters into "blocks of five" and use $2 per voter to buy their votes. Indiana decided the 1888 election by 2,348 votes. The Dudley letter became public after the election and contributed to public outrage over campaign finance practices, leading to the Australian (secret) ballot reforms of the 1890s.

The Murchison letter was another notorious 1888 campaign episode. A California Republican named George Osgoodby (using the pseudonym "Charles F. Murchison") wrote to British Minister Lionel Sackville-West in September 1888 asking which candidate Britain preferred. Sackville-West replied that Britain preferred Cleveland. Republicans publicized the letter to suggest Cleveland was the "British candidate" - damaging Cleveland's support among Irish-American voters. Cleveland expelled Sackville-West from the United States in October 1888.

Harrison won 233 electoral votes to Cleveland's 168. Harrison carried 20 states; Cleveland carried 18 states. The popular vote: Cleveland 5,534,488 (48.6%); Harrison 5,443,892 (47.8%); Fisk 249,819 (Prohibition, 2.2%); Streeter 146,602 (Union Labor, 1.3%). Cleveland-Harrison popular-vote margin: 90,596 votes in Cleveland's favor.

The critical state-level outcomes: Harrison won New York (36 EV) by 14,373 votes; Indiana (15 EV) by 2,348 votes; Ohio (23 EV) by 19,599 votes; Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. Cleveland's margins in the Solid South were huge: Texas (Cleveland 65%, Harrison 25%); Alabama (Cleveland 67%, Harrison 32%); Mississippi (Cleveland 73%, Harrison 26%); South Carolina (Cleveland 82%, Harrison 17%). These big Southern margins accumulated to Cleveland's 90,596 popular-vote lead but did not translate to additional electoral votes.

The 1888 result demonstrated the structural advantage that the Electoral College gives to candidates who win narrowly in big-EV states while losing big in small-EV states. The structural mechanism: each state's electoral votes equal its House seats + 2 Senate seats. The Senate-equal-state rule gives small states proportionately more electoral votes per voter than large states. The winner-take-all allocation in 48 states means that a candidate's margin within a state does not affect the electoral vote share. The combination: winning narrowly in big-EV states and losing big in small-EV states maximizes electoral efficiency.

Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1889. He governed as a high-tariff Republican. Major legislative achievements: October 1890 McKinley Tariff (raising average rates from 38% to 49.5%); July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act (first federal law against monopolies); July 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act (federal monthly silver purchases at gold prices); June 1890 Dependent and Disability Pension Act (massive expansion

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | of Civil War veteran pensions); June 1892 Geary Act (renewal of Chinese Exclusion).<br><br>The McKinley Tariff was so unpopular that Republicans lost the November 1890 midterm elections badly. Democrats gained 86 House seats (the largest single-election gain in U.S. House history until 1932), giving them a 235-88 majority. The 1890 result was a structural verdict on Republican tariff policy. Harrison faced Cleveland in the 1892 rematch and lost - Cleveland won 277-145 EV with 5,556,918 popular votes (46.0%) to Harrison's 5,176,108 (43.0%). Cleveland's 1892 victory was the first decisive Democratic margin since 1856.<br><br>The 1888-1890-1892 sequence demonstrated the structural Republican-Democratic equilibrium that the 1880 election had inaugurated. Both parties were capable of winning national elections; tariff policy was the dominant economic-policy disagreement; ethnocultural voting (religious affiliation, ethnic origin, regional identity) shaped voting at the margin. The 1896 William Jennings Bryan campaign would break this equilibrium by mobilizing agrarian populism around the gold/silver question, producing a Republican realignment that would dominate U.S. politics until 1932. |
| **20 min** | **Source A** | Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience. |
| **20 min** | **Source B** | Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question. |
| **20 min** | **Worksheet** | Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing. |
| **20 min** | **LEQ planning** | Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay. |
| **5 min** | **Closure** | Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison. |

# Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

## Key terms

### Tariff
A tax on imported goods. Republicans wanted high protective tariffs; Democrats wanted reduction. The defining 1888 issue.

### "Blocks of five"
The 1888 vote-buying scheme by Indiana Republican W.W. Dudley. October 1888 letter told Republican workers to organize voters into "blocks of five" and use $2 per voter. Indiana decided 1888 by 2,348 votes.

### Sherman Antitrust Act
The July 1890 federal law prohibiting "every contract, combination... or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce." The first federal law against monopolies.

### Murchison letter
The September 1888 forged letter from "Charles F. Murchison" (George Osgoodby) to British Minister Lionel Sackville-West. Sackville-West replied Britain preferred Cleveland; Republicans publicized to damage Cleveland with Irish-American voters.

### Solid South
The pattern of consistent Democratic Party dominance in former Confederate states from approximately 1880 to 1960. Cleveland's 65-82% Southern margins in 1888 were structurally "wasted" votes in the Electoral College.

### Benjamin Harrison
The 23rd U.S. president (1889-93). Senator from Indiana, Union Civil War brigadier general. Grandson of William Henry Harrison (9th president). Won 233 EV to Cleveland's 168 despite losing popular vote by 90,596.

### McKinley Tariff
The October 1890 federal law raising average tariff rates from 38% to 49.5%. Sponsored by Rep. William McKinley of Ohio. So unpopular Republicans lost 86 House seats in November 1890.

### Sherman Silver Purchase Act
The July 1890 federal law requiring Treasury monthly purchases of 4.5 million ounces of silver at gold prices. Inflationary measure favored by silver-mining and agrarian interests. Repealed by Cleveland in 1893 after Panic of 1893.

### Australian ballot
The secret ballot, adopted in U.S. states between 1888 and 1900 in response to vote-buying schemes like the "blocks of five." Massachusetts first state to adopt (1888); every state had Australian ballot by 1900.

## Annual Message to Congress (Tariff Message)

**GROVER CLEVELAND, DECEMBER 6, 1887**

*Cleveland delivered this entire annual message to Congress on tariff policy - the first president to dedicate an entire annual message to a single policy issue. The message was a deliberate political gamble: it made tariff reduction the defining issue of his administration and the 1888 campaign. The message did not explicitly call for free trade; it called for reduction of "the unnecessary surplus" of tariff revenue.*

> *"The amount of money annually exacted, through the operation of present laws, from the industries and necessities of the people largely exceeds the sum necessary to meet the expenses of the Government. Our progress toward a wise conclusion will not be improved by dwelling upon the theories of protection and free trade. This savors too much of bandying epithets. It is a condition which confronts us, not a theory. Relief from this condition may involve a slight reduction of the advantages which we award our home productions, but the entire withdrawal of such advantages should not be contemplated. The question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant."*

**Cleveland, "Annual Message to Congress" (Washington, DC, December 6, 1887). Public domain.**

# Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

## Annual Message to Congress (Tariff Message)

**GROVER CLEVELAND, DECEMBER 6, 1887**

*"The amount of money annually exacted, through the operation of present laws, from the industries and necessities of the people largely exceeds the sum necessary to meet the expenses of the Government. Our progress toward a wise conclusion will not be improved by dwelling upon the theories of protection and free trade. This savors too much of bandying epithets. It is a condition which confronts us, not a theory. Relief from this condition may involve a slight reduction of the advantages which we award our home productions, but the entire withdrawal of such advantages should not be contemplated. The question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant."*

Cleveland, "Annual Message to Congress" (Washington, DC, December 6, 1887). Public domain.

SOURCE B

## Inaugural Address

**BENJAMIN HARRISON, MARCH 4, 1889**

*"It will be the duty of Congress wisely to forecast and estimate these increasing demands and to adjust our system of internal-revenue and tariff laws so as to secure that there shall not be such an excess as is now apparent. It is not advantageous to the people, but injurious, that any larger sum should be raised from them than is necessary. No tax should be levied without a real necessity. The treasury should not be congested with money that ought to be in the channels of trade. Free coinage of silver, the increased coinage of gold, and the use of the Government bonds in such manner as to limit the amount of money in circulation are remedies which, having been suggested, deserve thoughtful consideration. Earnest attention should be given by Congress to the consideration of the question how far the restraint of those combinations of capital commonly called "trusts" is matter of Federal jurisdiction."*

Harrison, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1889). Public domain.

# The 1888 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

**QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Cleveland's Tariff Message) framing the tariff debate as concrete fiscal fact rather than abstract theory. Quote it verbatim.

**QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Harrison's Inaugural) committing to protective-tariff maintenance. Quote it verbatim.

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Both sources address tariff policy but from opposite positions. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Harrison's Inaugural mentions "those combinations of capital commonly called 'trusts' is matter of Federal jurisdiction." How does this anticipate the July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act?

**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**

The 1888 popular-vote/EC divergence (Cleveland +90,596 popular, Harrison +65 EV) is one of five U.S. instances. Identify the other four and explain what they have in common structurally.

**QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

Which state did Harrison win by 2,348 votes in 1888?

( ) A. New York
( ) B. Ohio
( ) C. Indiana
( ) D. Illinois

**QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

By how many House seats did Democrats gain in the November 1890 midterm?

( ) A. 52
( ) B. 67
( ) C. 86
( ) D. 105

**QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1888 election about tariff, Electoral College, or campaign finance? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

# Long-essay-question

**LEQ PROMPT**

Cleveland's December 1887 Tariff Message (Source A) made tariff reduction the defining issue of his administration and the 1888 campaign. Harrison's March 1889 Inaugural (Source B) committed to maintaining the protective tariff system that Cleveland had attacked. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1880-1900 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1888 election's structural significance was (a) the demonstration that tariff policy was the dominant economic-policy disagreement of the late 19th century, (b) the third instance in U.S. history (after 1824 and 1876) of a popular-vote winner losing the Electoral College, exposing the structural feature of state-level winner-take-all aggregation, or (c) the campaign-finance inflection point that revealed the role of vote-buying and corporate fundraising in close elections. Defend a clear thesis.

**GRADING RUBRIC**

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the tariff-vs-EC-vs-campaign-finance axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Cleveland 1887 message, the McKinley Tariff, the Sherman Antitrust Act, the "blocks of five" scheme, the Australian ballot, the 1892 Cleveland rematch. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

Accept any of: "It is a condition which confronts us, not a theory", "the question of free trade is absolutely irrelevant", "Our progress toward a wise conclusion will not be improved by dwelling upon the theories of protection and free trade. This savors too much of bandying epithets". The "condition not theory" phrase is the cleanest framing.

Cleveland's framing moved the tariff debate from abstract theory to concrete fiscal facts.

**QUESTION 2**

Accept any of: "No tax should be levied without a real necessity", "it will be the duty of Congress wisely to forecast and estimate these increasing demands and to adjust our system of internal-revenue and tariff laws", "the treasury should not be congested with money that ought to be in the channels of trade". The "no tax should be levied" phrase appears to concede Cleveland's point but in context committed to maintaining protective tariffs as policy.

Harrison's framing was ambiguous but the McKinley Tariff would resolve it in favor of high tariffs.

**QUESTION 3**

Source A is Cleveland's presidential commitment to tariff reduction - articulated as the incumbent President to define the 1888 campaign. The function is to make tariff reduction the test of his presidency and the Democratic Party position. Source B is Harrison's presidential commitment to protective-tariff maintenance - articulated as the incoming President to reverse Cleveland's tariff-reduction direction. The function is to commit the Republican administration to the high-tariff coalition that had elected Harrison. Together, the sources reveal the structural Republican-Democratic disagreement on tariff policy that dominated U.S. economic-policy debate from 1865 to 1913.

AP students should be able to articulate the function distinction.

**QUESTION 4**

Harrison's mention of "trusts" as "matter of Federal jurisdiction" anticipates the July 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act in two ways: (1) It explicitly identifies trusts as subject to federal regulation - a constitutional position that had been contested for decades. (2) It signals presidential support for federal antitrust legislation, which the Sherman Act would operationalize. The Sherman Act was sponsored by Senator John Sherman of Ohio (the same Sherman who had been the Republican Treasury Secretary under Hayes and a perennial presidential aspirant). The Act prohibited "every contract, combination... or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States" - the first federal law against monopolies. Initial enforcement was weak; Theodore Roosevelt would use the Sherman Act against Northern Securities in 1902, establishing the precedent for the early-20th-century trust-busting era. Harrison's 1889 framing established the constitutional basis that Roosevelt would later operationalize.

AP students should know the Sherman Antitrust Act and its constitutional basis.

**QUESTION 5**

The five U.S. instances of popular-vote/EC divergence: (1) 1824 - John Quincy Adams over Andrew Jackson (Jackson won plurality popular vote; election decided in House; Adams won). (2) 1876 - Rutherford B. Hayes over Samuel Tilden (Tilden won popular vote by 254K; Electoral Commission decided 20 disputed EVs 8-7 for Hayes). (3) 1888 - Harrison over Cleveland (Cleveland +90,596 popular; Harrison +65 EV). (4) 2000 - George W. Bush over Al Gore (Gore won popular vote by 543,816; Florida decided by 537 votes after Supreme Court intervention). (5) 2016 - Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Clinton won popular vote by 2.86 million; Trump won Electoral College 304-227). Structural commonality: all five reflect the Electoral College's state-level winner-take-all aggregation - candidates who win narrowly in big-EV states and lose big in small-EV states win the Electoral College even if they lose the popular vote. The structural mechanism is: Senate-equal-state rule (2 EV per state regardless of population) + winner-take-all allocation in 48 states = electoral efficiency for candidates whose vote is geographically efficient.

AP students should know all five instances and the structural mechanism.

**QUESTION 6**

Indiana. Harrison won his home state of Indiana by 2,348 votes - the state where the "blocks of five" vote-buying scheme operated.

AP students should know the 2,348-vote Indiana margin.

**QUESTION 7**

86. Democrats gained 86 House seats in the November 1890 midterm - the largest single-election House gain in U.S. history until 1932 (when Democrats gained 97 in the Roosevelt landslide). The 86-seat gain gave Democrats a 235-88 majority in the House.

AP students should know the 86-seat figure as the structural verdict on Republican tariff policy.

**QUESTION 8**

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the tariff-vs-EC-vs-campaign-finance axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.