3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

# 1892

## *Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison*

A 35-minute lesson on the 1892 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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| ERA<br>Gilded Age | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>444 total |
| WINNER<br>Grover Cleveland (Democratic) · 277 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>Benjamin Harrison (Republican) · 145 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>Gold standard vs. free silver; agrarian distress; labor unrest | TURNOUT<br>75.8% |

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

# 1892: Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

## Timing

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| 5 min | **Warm-up** | When a third party wins electoral votes for the first time since the Civil War, what does it tell you about the major two parties' ability to represent voters? Why might agrarian voters in 1892 turn to a new party? |
| 15 min | **Reading** | The 1892 election was the 27th U.S. presidential election. It produced Grover Cleveland's 277-145 electoral-vote victory over incumbent President Benjamin Harrison - Cleveland's second presidency, making him the only U.S. president to serve two non-consecutive terms (until Donald Trump's 2024 victory in 2025). The election also produced the first significant third-party electoral-college breakthrough since the Civil War: the Populist Party's James B. Weaver won 22 electoral votes (6 states: Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon).<br><br>The political conditions had shifted dramatically since 1888. The McKinley Tariff of October 1890 had raised average tariff rates from 38% to 49.5% - producing immediate consumer price increases that voters punished severely. In the November 1890 midterm elections, Democrats gained 86 House seats (the largest single-election House gain in U.S. history until 1932), giving them a 235-88 majority. The 1890 result was a structural verdict on Republican tariff policy and a clear signal that the 1892 presidential election would be very different from 1888.<br><br>The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on June 21-23, 1892. The convention renominated Grover Cleveland on the first ballot. Cleveland had spent the 1889-92 period as a private lawyer in New York City but had remained politically prominent through speeches, writings, and party leadership. He was 55, dignified, and represented the Bourbon Democrat tradition - fiscally conservative, hard-money, low-tariff, civil-service-reform. Adlai E. Stevenson I of Illinois was the vice presidential candidate (grandfather of the 1952/1956 Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson II).<br><br>The Republican National Convention met in Minneapolis on June 7-10, 1892. The convention faced significant internal opposition to renominating Harrison. Many Republicans preferred James G. Blaine - Harrison's Secretary of State (1889-92), the "plumed knight" of two prior Republican nominations (1876, 1884). Blaine resigned as Secretary of State on June 4, 1892 - three days before the convention - in an apparent move to position himself for nomination. But the convention still nominated Harrison on the first ballot. Whitelaw Reid - editor of the New York Tribune and former Minister to France - was the vice presidential candidate. |

The Populist (People's Party) National Convention met in Omaha on July 2-5, 1892. The convention nominated James B. Weaver of Iowa - who had been the 1880 Greenback Party candidate - on the first ballot. The Omaha Platform (July 4, 1892) was the most comprehensive third-party platform in U.S. history. It demanded: free coinage of silver (16:1 silver-to-gold ratio); federal regulation or ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones; a graduated income tax; direct election of U.S. senators; the 8-hour workday; the secret (Australian) ballot; restriction of immigration; civil-service reform; postal-savings bank; and government loans to farmers. The Populist platform articulated the structural complaints of late 19th-century agrarian populism: deflation, railroad monopoly pricing, eastern bank power, and political corruption.

The campaign was relatively subdued by 1880s-1890s standards. Both Cleveland and Harrison were sitting or former presidents with established records; both campaigned in the conventional 19th-century manner. The major event was the July 1892 Homestead Strike near Pittsburgh - Carnegie Steel's Henry Clay Frick had locked out workers and brought in Pinkerton detectives; the resulting violence killed 10 people and damaged the Republican Party's pro-labor message. Cleveland's response was measured; Harrison's was perceived as too pro-business.

Cleveland won 277 electoral votes to Harrison's 145 to Weaver's 22. Cleveland carried 23 states; Harrison carried 16 states; Weaver carried 6 states. The popular vote: Cleveland 5,556,918 (46.0%); Harrison 5,176,108 (43.0%); Weaver 1,041,028 (8.5%); Bidwell 264,133 (Prohibition, 2.2%). Cleveland-Harrison popular-vote margin: 380,810 - the first decisive Democratic margin since 1856 (Buchanan over Frémont and Fillmore). Cleveland's 277-145 electoral-vote margin was 132 EV - the largest Democratic margin since 1856.

The Populist 22 electoral votes were the first significant third-party Electoral College breakthrough since 1860. Weaver won Kansas (10 EV), Colorado (4 EV), Idaho (3 EV), Nevada (3 EV), North Dakota (1 EV - Populists won 1 of North Dakota's 3 EV), and Oregon (1 EV - Populists won 1 of Oregon's 4 EV). The geographic pattern: Populist victories concentrated in agrarian and silver-mining Western states where the deflation and railroad complaints were structurally severe.

Cleveland was inaugurated March 4, 1893. Two months later, the Panic of 1893 began. The Reading Railroad failed in February 1893; the National Cordage Company failed in May 1893. The stock market crashed. Banks failed (642 banks failed in 1893; 491 in 1896; 158 in 1899). Industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. The Panic of 1893 was the worst U.S. depression up to that point - lasting until approximately 1897. Cleveland's second term was politically destroyed by the depression he had not caused: voters blamed Democrats for the economic collapse. The November 1894 midterm produced the largest Republican House gain in U.S. history (until 2022) - Republicans gained 130 seats, giving them a 254-93 majority. The 1894 result destroyed the Democratic coalition that had elected Cleveland.

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| | | The Cleveland-Harrison-Cleveland sequence (1884-1888-1892) demonstrated the structural Republican-Democratic equilibrium of the 1880s-1890s. The Populist 1892 breakthrough demonstrated agrarian populist mobilization. The 1893-1897 depression destroyed the Cleveland coalition and set up the 1896 William Jennings Bryan campaign that would mobilize agrarian populism within the Democratic Party - producing the structural realignment that would dominate U.S. politics until 1932. |
| **10 min** | **Worksheet** | Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers. |
| **5 min** | **Closure** | One sentence: what surprised you about this election? |

# The 1892 Election

The 1892 election was the 27th U.S. presidential election. It produced Grover Cleveland's 277-145 electoral-vote victory over incumbent President Benjamin Harrison - Cleveland's second presidency, making him the only U.S. president to serve two non-consecutive terms (until Donald Trump's 2024 victory in 2025). The election also produced the first significant third-party electoral-college breakthrough since the Civil War: the Populist Party's James B. Weaver won 22 electoral votes (6 states: Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon).

The political conditions had shifted dramatically since 1888. The McKinley Tariff of October 1890 had raised average tariff rates from 38% to 49.5% - producing immediate consumer price increases that voters punished severely. In the November 1890 midterm elections, Democrats gained 86 House seats (the largest single-election House gain in U.S. history until 1932), giving them a 235-88 majority. The 1890 result was a structural verdict on Republican tariff policy and a clear signal that the 1892 presidential election would be very different from 1888.

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The Cleveland-Harrison-Cleveland sequence (1884-1888-1892) demonstrated the structural Republican-Democratic equilibrium of the 1880s-1890s. The Populist 1892 breakthrough demonstrated agrarian populist mobilization. The 1893-1897 depression destroyed the Cleveland coalition and set up the 1896 William Jennings Bryan campaign that would mobilize agrarian populism within the Democratic Party - producing the structural realignment that would dominate U.S. politics until 1932.

## Key words

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| **Populist Party (People's Party)** | The 1892-1908 third party founded in Omaha July 1892 to represent agrarian and labor interests. The Omaha Platform demanded free silver, federal regulation of railroads, graduated income tax, direct election of senators, 8-hour workday, secret ballot. 1892 candidate James B. Weaver won 22 EV (6 states). |
| **Omaha Platform** | The July 4, 1892 founding platform of the Populist Party. Articulated structural complaints of late 19th-century agrarian populism: deflation, railroad monopoly pricing, eastern bank power, political corruption. Demanded free silver, federal regulation of railroads, graduated income tax, direct election of senators, 8-hour workday, secret ballot, postal-savings bank. |
| **Free silver** | The Populist demand for free coinage of silver at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio. Free silver would have expanded the money supply, raised commodity prices (helping farmers), and devalued debt (helping debtors). The opposing position was the gold standard. Silver vs gold dominated U.S. politics through 1900. |
| **Non-consecutive terms** | Cleveland served as 22nd president (1885-89) and 24th president (1893-97) - the only president in U.S. history to serve two non-consecutive terms until Trump's 2024 victory. |
| **Panic of 1893** | The financial crisis that began in May 1893, two months after Cleveland's second inauguration. Banks failed (642 banks failed 1893); industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. The worst U.S. depression up to that point. Caused by overbuilding of railroads, the McKinley Tariff, and the silver issue. Lasted until approximately 1897. |

# Four questions

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did Cleveland win in 1892?

( ) A. 233
( ) B. 247
( ) C. 277
( ) D. 305

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did Populist James B. Weaver win in 1892?

( ) A. 8
( ) B. 15
( ) C. 22
( ) D. 34

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was the Omaha Platform and what did it demand?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

How did the Panic of 1893 affect Cleveland's second term and the Democratic Party?

# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

277. Cleveland 277; Harrison 145; Weaver 22.

Cleveland's 132-EV margin was the largest Democratic margin since 1856.

**QUESTION 2**

22. Weaver carried 6 states: Kansas (10 EV), Colorado (4 EV), Idaho (3 EV), Nevada (3 EV), 1 of North Dakota's 3 EV, and 1 of Oregon's 4 EV.

AP students should know the Weaver 22 EV figure.

**QUESTION 3**

The Omaha Platform was the July 4, 1892 founding platform of the Populist Party. It demanded: (1) free coinage of silver at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio; (2) federal regulation or ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones; (3) a graduated income tax; (4) direct election of U.S. senators (instead of by state legislatures); (5) the 8-hour workday for labor; (6) the secret (Australian) ballot; (7) restriction of immigration; (8) civil-service reform; (9) postal-savings bank; (10) government loans to farmers. The platform articulated the structural complaints of late 19th-century agrarian populism: deflation, railroad monopoly pricing, eastern bank power, and political corruption. The platform was the most comprehensive third-party platform in U.S. history. Many of its demands would later be enacted: secret ballot (by 1900), graduated income tax (16th Amendment 1913), direct election of senators (17th Amendment 1913), 8-hour workday (Adamson Act 1916, Fair Labor Standards Act 1938).

AP students should be able to articulate the Omaha Platform.

## QUESTION 4

The Panic of 1893 destroyed Cleveland's second term and the Democratic coalition that had elected him. The depression began in May 1893 - two months after Cleveland's inauguration. The Reading Railroad failed in February; the National Cordage Company failed in May; the stock market crashed; 642 banks failed in 1893 alone; industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. The depression was the worst U.S. economic collapse up to that point, lasting until approximately 1897. Political consequences: (1) Voters blamed Democrats for the economic collapse - even though Republican tariff and silver policies had contributed. (2) The November 1894 midterm produced the largest Republican House gain in U.S. history (until 2022) - Republicans gained 130 seats, giving them a 254-93 majority. (3) The Democratic coalition that had elected Cleveland was destroyed. (4) The 1896 William Jennings Bryan campaign would attempt to rebuild the Democratic coalition around agrarian populism and free silver - but McKinley's Republican victory established the new political alignment.

AP students should be able to articulate the depression's political consequences.