1892

Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

A 50-minute lesson on the 1892 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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

CONTENTS

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
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1892: Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in late 19th-century America that would produce a successful third-party movement. For each, identify the specific 1880s development most responsible for the conditions.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act of July 1890 had committed the federal Treasury to monthly silver purchases at gold prices - producing structural pressure on the gold reserves that would contribute to the Panic of 1893. 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 (gold standard), 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). 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 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. James G. Field of Virginia (a former Confederate general) was the vice presidential candidate (a deliberate North-South ticket designed to break the Solid South). 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. The major events were not personal campaigning but structural economic events. 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 on July 6, 1892 killed 10 people - damaged the Republican Party's pro-labor message. The July 1892 Coeur d'Alene mine strike in Idaho involved similar Pinkerton violence. Cleveland's response to both 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 (Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, plus 1 of 3 EV in North Dakota, plus 1 of 4 EV in Oregon). 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. The geographic pattern of Populist victories concentrated in agrarian and silver-mining Western states where deflation and railroad complaints were structurally severe. Kansas (10 EV) was the largest Populist state - reflecting the structural distress of Kansas farmers in the 1880s, when wheat prices fell from $1.04/bushel in 1881 to $0.49 in 1894. Colorado (4 EV), Idaho (3 EV), and Nevada (3 EV) were silver-mining states whose economies depended on government silver

purchases.

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 1894; 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. The causes were structural: overbuilding of railroads in the 1880s; the McKinley Tariff's reduction of imports; the Sherman Silver Purchase Act's pressure on gold reserves; declining federal Treasury reserves; declining European investment in U.S. railroads.

Cleveland's second term was politically destroyed by the depression he had not caused. Voters blamed Democrats for the economic collapse - even though Republican tariff and silver policies had contributed structurally. 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.

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	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

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

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.

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.

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 in 1893); industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. The worst U.S. depression up to that point.

Homestead Strike

The July 1892 strike at Carnegie Steel's Homestead works near Pittsburgh. Henry Clay Frick locked out workers and brought in Pinkerton detectives; the resulting violence on July 6, 1892 killed 10 people. Damaged the Republican Party's pro-labor message during the 1892 campaign.

Inaugural Address (Second)

GROVER CLEVELAND, MARCH 4, 1893

Cleveland took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1893 - returning to the presidency four years after his 1889 departure. The address was relatively brief (about 2,000 words). It explicitly endorsed the gold standard ("sound and stable currency") - a deliberate signal to financial markets that Cleveland would resist Populist free-silver demands. The address also defended civil-service reform and tariff reduction. Two months after the inauguration, the Panic of 1893 would begin - and Cleveland's gold-standard defense would become the defining political issue of his second term.

> *"The verdict of our voters which condemned the injustice of maintaining protection for protection's sake enjoins upon the people's servants the duty of exposing and destroying the brood of kindred evils which are the unwholesome progeny of paternalism. This is the bane of republican institutions and the constant peril of our government by the people. It degrades to the purposes of wily craft the plan of rule our fathers established and bequeathed to us as an object of our love and veneration. It perverts the patriotic sentiments of our countrymen and tempts them to pitiful calculation of the sordid gain to be derived from their Government's maintenance. It undermines the self-reliance of our people and substitutes in its place dependence upon governmental favoritism. The lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearned and the better lesson taught that while the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their Government its functions do not include the support of the people."*

Cleveland, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1893). Public domain.

The 1892 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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 specific demands did it make?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Cleveland says in his 1893 inaugural that the government's functions "do not include the support of the people." What political philosophy does this reflect?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Panic of 1893 affect Cleveland's second term and the Democratic Party in 1894?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1892 election map, identify Cleveland's 23 states, Harrison's 16 states, and Weaver's 6 states. What does the Populist geographic pattern reveal?

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), plus 1 of 3 EV in North Dakota, plus 1 of 4 EV in Oregon.

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; (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 was the most comprehensive third-party platform in U.S. history. Many of its demands were later enacted: secret ballot (by 1900), graduated income tax (16th Amendment 1913), direct election of senators (17th Amendment 1913), 8-hour workday (Fair Labor Standards Act 1938), federal regulation of railroads (Hepburn Act 1906), postal-savings system (1910).

AP students should be able to articulate the Omaha Platform.

QUESTION 4

Cleveland's 1893 inaugural reflects classical liberal political philosophy (also called "Bourbon Democratic" or "laissez-faire liberal"). The core principles: (1) Limited government - the federal government's legitimate functions are narrow and constitutionally enumerated. (2) Individual self-reliance - citizens should depend on their own efforts rather than government assistance. (3) Anti-paternalism - government programs that "support" the people undermine individual character and republican self-government. (4) Free markets - economic decisions should be made by individuals and private markets, not government. (5) Fiscal conservatism - government should not maintain large surpluses, raise revenue through high tariffs, or engage in economic redistribution. The philosophy was dominant in 19th-century American political thought and was held by both major parties in modified forms. Cleveland's version was particularly stringent and would clash directly with the Populist demand for federal intervention in railroads, currency, and labor.

AP students should be able to identify Cleveland as a Bourbon Democrat.

QUESTION 5

The Panic of 1893 destroyed Cleveland's second term and the Democratic coalition. The depression began May 1893 (two months after Cleveland's inauguration). The Reading Railroad failed February; the National Cordage Company failed May; the stock market crashed; 642 banks failed in 1893 alone; industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. Cleveland's response was to: (1) Repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in November 1893 to protect gold reserves - alienating silver Democrats. (2) Defend the gold standard - alienating agrarian Democrats. (3) Negotiate with J.P. Morgan in 1895 for a gold loan to the Treasury - alienating populist Democrats. (4) Use federal troops to break the 1894 Pullman Strike - alienating labor Democrats. 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 Democratic coalition was destroyed.

AP students should be able to articulate the political mechanism.

QUESTION 6

Cleveland states: 23 states - the Solid South (11 former Confederate states), the 4 Border States, plus Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan (wait, Michigan went Republican); actually Cleveland won New York, NJ, CT, IL, IN, plus the Solid South + Border + WV. Harrison states: 16 states - all of New England except Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, California (split), Washington, Oregon (1/4 EV), Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota (2/3 EV), South Dakota, plus a few others. Weaver states: 6 states - Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, 1/3 of North Dakota, 1/4 of Oregon. The Populist geographic pattern: concentration in (a) agrarian Plains/Western states with structural deflation distress (Kansas), and (b) silver-mining states with structural economic dependence on government silver purchases (Colorado, Idaho, Nevada). The pattern reveals that Populist support was geographically determined by economic structure - not by partisan history. The Populist coalition could not extend to the industrial Northeast (where workers prioritized tariff over silver) or the Solid South (where racial politics dominated economic complaints).

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic Populist pattern.