CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1892

Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

A 75-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

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1892: Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1892 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1892 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 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. 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 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 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 (which raised the real burden of farm debt); railroad monopoly pricing (which exploited captive farmers); eastern bank power (which controlled credit); and political corruption (which had been exposed by the 1880s scandals). The Populist movement's structural origins were in the Farmers' Alliance (Southern and Northern, 1880s) and the Knights of Labor (industrial labor, 1869-1886).

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. The July 1892 Coeur d'Alene mine strike in Idaho involved similar Pinkerton violence. Both incidents damaged the Republican Party's pro-labor message.

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. 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. 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 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 structural causes: overbuilding of railroads in the 1880s; the McKinley Tariff's reduction of imports (which reduced gold inflows); 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 responses: (1) Repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in November 1893 - alienating silver Democrats. (2) Defended the gold standard - alienating agrarian Democrats. (3) Negotiated with J.P. Morgan in February 1895 for a $65 million gold loan to the Treasury - alienating populist Democrats. (4) Used 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 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. Many Populist demands would be enacted in the 1900s-1930s: 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), banking regulation (Federal Reserve Act 1913), labor protections (Wagner Act 1935). Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.

15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.

5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1892 election tells you about the Gilded Age era that the textbook didn't?"

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. 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. The most comprehensive third-party platform in U.S. history.

Free silver

The Populist demand for free coinage of silver at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio. Would have expanded the money supply, raised commodity prices, devalued debt.

Bourbon Democrats

The conservative wing of the Democratic Party in the late 19th century. Fiscally conservative, hard-money (gold standard), low-tariff, civil-service-reform. Cleveland was the dominant Bourbon Democrat figure. The Bourbon Democratic coalition was destroyed by the Panic of 1893 and the 1896 Bryan campaign.

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 May 1893. Banks failed (642 in 1893); industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894. The worst U.S. depression up to that point. Caused by railroad overbuilding, McKinley Tariff, Sherman Silver Purchase Act pressure on gold reserves.

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 killed 10 people on July 6, 1892. Damaged Republican pro-labor message.

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 "paternalism" passage is the structural articulation of Bourbon Democratic political philosophy. 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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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 lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearned." What political philosophy does this articulate?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Cleveland's gold-standard defense during the Panic of 1893 alienate his Democratic coalition?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain why the Populist Party could not be sustained as a third party beyond 1896.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know the 22 EV figure.

QUESTION 3

The Omaha Platform was the July 4, 1892 founding platform of the Populist Party. Demands: (1) free coinage of silver at 16:1; (2) federal regulation/ownership of railroads, telegraphs, telephones; (3) graduated income tax; (4) direct election of U.S. senators; (5) 8-hour workday; (6) secret (Australian) ballot; (7) immigration restriction; (8) civil-service reform; (9) postal-savings bank; (10) government loans to farmers. Many demands 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 railroad regulation (Hepburn Act 1906), postal-savings (1910).

AP students should be able to articulate the Omaha Platform.

QUESTION 4

Cleveland's 1893 inaugural articulates classical liberal (Bourbon Democratic) political philosophy. 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. (4) Free markets - economic decisions should be made by individuals, 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. Cleveland's version was particularly stringent and would clash directly with the Populist demand for federal intervention in railroads, currency, and labor. The 1896 Bryan campaign would attempt to move the Democratic Party away from Bourbon liberalism toward agrarian populism. The 1932-1968 New Deal coalition would complete the structural transformation.

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

QUESTION 5

Cleveland's gold-standard defense during the Panic of 1893 alienated his Democratic coalition in four specific ways: (1) The November 1893 repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act alienated silver Democrats (Western/Southern miners and farmers who depended on silver purchases). (2) The continued gold-standard defense alienated agrarian Democrats (Southern and Western farmers facing deflation). (3) The February 1895 J.P. Morgan gold loan ($65 million from a syndicate including Rothschild) alienated populist Democrats (who saw it as confirmation of eastern-bank power over the federal government). (4) The use of federal troops in 1894 to break the Pullman Strike (citing federal mail interference) alienated labor Democrats. The cumulative effect: the Bourbon Democratic coalition (Northern industrialists, Southern conservatives, urban professionals) survived; but the Bryan Democratic coalition (Western farmers, silver miners, labor) emerged in opposition. The 1896 Democratic Convention would nominate Bryan over Cleveland's favored candidates - completing the structural transformation of the Democratic Party.

AP students should be able to articulate the coalition-breaking mechanism.

QUESTION 6

The Populist Party could not be sustained as a third party beyond 1896 for three specific structural reasons: (1) The 1896 Democratic Convention nominated William Jennings Bryan on a free-silver platform - effectively absorbing the Populist agenda within the Democratic Party. The Populist convention nominated Bryan as its own candidate; the "fusion" eliminated the Populists' independent identity. (2) Populist demands were structurally tied to agrarian and silver-mining grievances; as the U.S. economy industrialized (1880-1920), the Populist constituency declined as a share of the national electorate. (3) Many specific Populist demands were enacted by 1913 (graduated income tax, direct election of senators, secret ballot) - eliminating the structural grievances that had motivated Populist mobilization. The Populist Party effectively dissolved after 1900; the 1908 candidate Thomas E. Watson won only 0.6% of the popular vote. The Populist movement's political achievements were institutionalized rather than sustained as a third party. The lesson: successful third-party movements typically achieve their policy demands and dissolve, rather than sustaining as independent political organizations.

AP students should be able to articulate the third-party dissolution mechanism.

QUESTION 7

Cleveland states: 23 states - Solid South (11 former Confederate states), 4 Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware), Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, plus West Virginia and Wisconsin. Harrison states: 16 states - New England except Connecticut (5 states), Pennsylvania, Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, plus several Western states. Weaver states: 6 states - Kansas (10 EV), Colorado (4 EV), Idaho (3 EV), Nevada (3 EV), 1 of 3 EV in North Dakota, 1 of 4 EV in Oregon. The Populist geographic pattern: concentration in (a) agrarian Plains/Western states with structural deflation distress; (b) silver-mining states with structural economic dependence on government silver purchases. Populist support was geographically determined by economic structure - not by partisan history. The Populist coalition could not extend to (a) the industrial Northeast (where workers prioritized tariff over silver); (b) the Solid South (where racial politics dominated economic complaints). The Solid South was particularly resistant: Populist attempts at biracial agrarian alliance in the South would be defeated by 1898 by Democratic Party racial reaction.

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

Discussion prompts

1. The Populist Party in 1892 won 22 electoral votes - the first significant third-party Electoral College breakthrough since the Civil War. Identify two structural conditions in late 19th-century America that produced the Populist movement and explain why it could not be sustained as a third party beyond 1896.

2. The Panic of 1893 began two months after Cleveland's inauguration. Identify three specific causes of the panic and explain how Cleveland's gold-standard response (or non-response) shaped the November 1894 Republican landslide and the 1896 Bryan campaign.