AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1892

Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

A 105-minute lesson on the 1892 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1892: Grover Cleveland vs Benjamin Harrison

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 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). 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. Democrats gained 86 House seats in November 1890. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act of July 1890 had committed the federal Treasury to monthly silver purchases at gold prices. The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on June 21-23, 1892 and renominated Grover Cleveland on the first ballot. Adlai E. Stevenson I of Illinois was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican National Convention met in Minneapolis on June 7-10, 1892 and renominated Harrison on the first ballot despite significant internal opposition. Blaine had resigned as Secretary of State on June 4. Whitelaw Reid was the vice presidential candidate. The Populist (People's Party) National Convention met in Omaha on July 2-5, 1892 and nominated James B. Weaver of Iowa. James G. Field of Virginia was the vice presidential candidate. The Omaha Platform (July 4, 1892) demanded: free coinage of silver at 16:1; 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 structural late 19th-century agrarian complaints: deflation, railroad monopoly pricing, eastern bank power, 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. The July 1892 Coeur d'Alene mine strike in Idaho involved similar Pinkerton violence.

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 was inaugurated March 4, 1893. Two months later, the Panic of 1893 began. The Reading Railroad failed February; the National Cordage Company failed May; the stock market crashed; 642 banks failed in 1893; 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 responses: (1) Repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in November 1893 - alienating silver Democrats. (2) Defended the gold standard - alienating agrarian Democrats. (3) Negotiated the J.P. Morgan gold loan of February 1895 ($65 million from a syndicate including Rothschild) - 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. The 1894 result destroyed the Democratic coalition.

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). The Populist movement's political achievements were institutionalized rather than sustained as a third party.

The 1892 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, Cleveland's non-consecutive comeback demonstrated that presidential defeat is not necessarily political

		extinction - the only such instance in U.S. history until Trump's 2024 victory. Second, the Populist breakthrough demonstrated that agrarian populist mobilization was a real political force that the two-party system could not fully suppress. Third, the structural Republican-Democratic equilibrium that had begun in 1880 had reached its maximum competitive tension - both parties capable of decisive victory. Fourth, the Bourbon Democratic coalition that Cleveland represented had reached its peak; the Panic of 1893 would destroy it within 18 months, setting up the 1896 Bryan transformation of the Democratic Party.
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

Populist Party (People's Party)
The 1892-1908 third party founded in Omaha July 1892.

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.

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.

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 November 1893 after Panic of 1893.

Pullman Strike
The May-July 1894 nationwide railroad strike led by Eugene V. Debs against the Pullman Palace Car Company. Cleveland sent federal troops citing federal mail interference; Debs was imprisoned. The strike's suppression alienated labor Democrats.

Omaha Platform
The July 4, 1892 founding platform of the Populist Party. The most comprehensive third-party platform in U.S. history.

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.

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.

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.

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 "paternalism" passage is the structural articulation of Bourbon Democratic political philosophy. Two months after the inauguration, the Panic of 1893 would begin.

> *"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.

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

Inaugural Address (Second)

GROVER CLEVELAND, MARCH 4, 1893

“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.

SOURCE B

Omaha Platform

PEOPLE'S PARTY (POPULIST) NATIONAL CONVENTION, JULY 4, 1892

“We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling-places to prevent universal intimidation or bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled; public opinion silenced; business prostrated; our homes covered with mortgages; labor impoverished; and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right of organization for self-protection; imported pauperized labor beats down their wages; a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down; and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions.”

People's Party, "Omaha Platform" (Omaha, Nebraska, July 4, 1892). Public domain.

The 1892 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 1893 Inaugural) articulating Bourbon Democratic opposition to government activism. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Omaha Platform) articulating the structural Populist critique of late 19th-century American politics. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

The Omaha Platform demanded free silver, federal regulation of railroads, graduated income tax, direct election of senators, 8-hour workday, and secret ballot. Identify three of these demands that were enacted by 1938 and the specific federal legislation that operationalized each.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Panic of 1893 - which began two months after Cleveland's inauguration - destroy the Bourbon Democratic coalition?

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who drafted the Omaha Platform?

( ) A. William Jennings Bryan
( ) B. Ignatius Donnelly
( ) C. Mary Elizabeth Lease
( ) D. Tom Watson

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many House seats did Republicans gain in November 1894?

( ) A. 72
( ) B. 94
( ) C. 108
( ) D. 130

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1892 election Bourbon-Dem peak, Populist breakthrough, or pre-realignment moment? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Cleveland's 1893 Inaugural (Source A) articulates Bourbon Democratic political philosophy - limited government, individual self-reliance, opposition to "paternalism." The Omaha Platform (Source B) articulates the Populist structural critique of late 19th-century American capitalism - "corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress." Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1880-1900 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1892 election represented (a) the peak of Bourbon Democratic political dominance before the 1893-1896 collapse, (b) the structural breakthrough of agrarian populist political mobilization that would shape U.S. politics through 1938, or (c) the final pre-realignment moment before the 1896 Bryan campaign produced the structural Republican-Democratic transformation. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the Bourbon-Dem-vs-Populist-vs-realignment axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the McKinley Tariff, the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the Homestead Strike, the Panic of 1893, the 1894 Republican landslide, the 1896 Bryan campaign. 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: "the unwholesome progeny of paternalism", "the lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearned", "its functions do not include the support of the people", "It undermines the self-reliance of our people and substitutes in its place dependence upon governmental favoritism". The "unwholesome progeny of paternalism" phrase is the most rhetorically distinctive.

Cleveland's framing articulated the Bourbon Democratic political philosophy.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench", "We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin", "our homes covered with mortgages; labor impoverished; and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists", "a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down". The "corruption dominates" phrase is the most encompassing structural critique.

The Omaha Platform's preamble articulated the structural Populist critique.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Cleveland's presidential commitment to Bourbon Democratic political philosophy - articulated as the incoming President to define his administration's approach to economic policy. The function is to commit the Democratic Party to fiscally conservative, anti-paternalist, hard-money governance. Source B is the Populist Party's founding manifesto - articulated by the convention to launch a third-party movement opposing both major parties' Bourbon-influenced establishment. The function is to articulate a comprehensive alternative political vision that combined agrarian, labor, and reform constituencies. Together, the sources reveal the structural political tension of 1892: the dominant Bourbon Democratic philosophy (Cleveland) versus the emerging Populist alternative (Omaha Platform). The 1893-1896 collapse of Cleveland's coalition would resolve this tension in favor of the Populist demands - though within the Democratic rather than Populist Party.

AP students should be able to articulate the philosophical opposition.

QUESTION 4

Three Omaha Platform demands enacted by 1938: (1) Graduated income tax - 16th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified February 1913, authorizing federal income tax without apportionment among states. The first federal income tax was levied in 1913 under the Underwood Tariff. (2) Direct election of senators - 17th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified April 1913, replacing the constitutional provision that senators be chosen by state legislatures. (3) 8-hour workday - Adamson Act of 1916 established the 8-hour day for railroad workers; the Fair Labor Standards Act of June 1938 established the 8-hour day and 40-hour week as national standards with overtime pay required for additional hours. Additional Omaha demands also enacted: secret (Australian) ballot - adopted by every state by 1900; federal regulation of railroads - Hepburn Act 1906; postal-savings system - 1910 federal law; banking regulation - Federal Reserve Act December 1913; immigration restriction - Immigration Act of 1917, Emergency Quota Act 1921, Immigration Act of 1924.

AP students should be able to identify multiple Populist-to-legislation operationalizations.

QUESTION 5

The Panic of 1893 destroyed the Bourbon Democratic coalition in four specific ways: (1) Cleveland's November 1893 repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act alienated silver Democrats - making the Bourbon Democratic Party seem indifferent to Western and Southern farmer concerns. (2) Cleveland's gold-standard defense alienated agrarian Democrats - the Bourbon position was perceived as defending eastern bankers against farmers. (3) The February 1895 J.P. Morgan gold loan ($65 million from a syndicate including Rothschild) confirmed populist suspicions that the Bourbon Democratic Party was structurally tied to eastern bank power. (4) Cleveland's 1894 use of federal troops to break the Pullman Strike (citing federal mail interference) alienated labor Democrats. The cumulative effect: Cleveland personally became politically toxic to the Western and Southern Democratic base that had elected him; the 1896 Democratic Convention nominated Bryan over Cleveland's favored candidates; the Bourbon Democratic Party's structural collapse was complete.

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

QUESTION 6

Ignatius Donnelly. Donnelly (1831-1901) was a Civil War-era Republican congressman from Minnesota who had become a leading Populist intellectual. He was the author of "Caesar's Column" (1890) - a dystopian novel imagining the consequences of late 19th-century American inequality - and "Atlantis: The Antediluvian World" (1882) - an influential popular work on the lost continent of Atlantis.

AP students should know Donnelly as the Omaha Platform's author.

QUESTION 7

130. Republicans gained 130 seats in the November 1894 midterm - the largest single-election House gain in U.S. history until 2022. The gain gave Republicans a 254-93 House majority.

AP students should know the 130-seat gain as the structural verdict on the Cleveland coalition.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the Bourbon-Dem-vs-Populist-vs-realignment 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.