CHAPTER 20
Gilded Age Politics, 1877–1900

Learning Objectives

After you have studied Chapter 20 in your textbook and worked through this study guide chapter, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the characteristics of American politics at the national and state levels during the Gilded Age.
2. Discuss the major political and economic issues of the Gilded Age, and examine governmental action on these issues.
3. Explain the characteristics of American presidents during the Gilded Age, and discuss how each carried out the duties of his office.
4. Explain the social, economic, and political oppression of southern blacks during the late nineteenth century, and discuss the response of the Supreme Court to this oppression.
5. Examine the progress of the women’s suffrage movement during the Gilded Age.
6. Discuss the various forces affecting the lives of southern, midwestern, and western farmers during the late nineteenth century, and explain the social, economic, and political impact of these forces.
7. Explain the organizational and ideological development of rural activism from the Grange through the formation of the Populist Party and the 1896 presidential election, and discuss the roadblocks encountered by the Populists.
8. Explain the causes and consequences of the depression of the 1890s, and evaluate Grover Cleveland’s response to the depression.
9. Discuss the nature and extent of working-class activism during the era of protest, and explain the reaction of government officials and the public to this activism.
10. Analyze the presidential campaign and election of 1896, and explain the political and economic significance of the outcome.

Thematic Guide

In Chapter 20, we focus on the interaction of the political, economic, and social forces within American society during the Gilded Age. This period is characterized by high public interest in local, state, and national elections, political balance between Democrats and Republicans at the national level, and factional and personal feuds within the two parties. Democrats and Republicans in Congress were split on the major national issues: sectional controversies, civil service reform, railroad regulation, tariff policy, and monetary
policy. Though Congress debated these issues, factionalism, interest-group politics, and political
equilibrium resulted in the passage of vaguely worded, ineffective legislation such as the Pendleton Civil
Service Act, the Interstate Commerce Act, and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Combined with a conservative
Supreme Court, weak presidential leadership, and political campaigns that focused on issues of personality
rather than issues of substance, these factors caused the postponement of decisions on major issues
affecting the nation and its citizens.

The political impasse built up frustration within aggrieved groups in the nation. Southern blacks, who
lived under the constant threat of violence and who remained economically dependent on whites, had to
endure new forms of social oppression in the form of disfranchisement and “Jim Crow” laws. This
oppression was, in turn, upheld by the Supreme Court, which interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment
narrowly. Women were frustrated in their attempts to gain the right to vote by the sexist attitudes prevalent
in the male-dominated power structures of the era. Aggrieved workers turned to organized labor, to strikes,
and, at times, to violence (discussed in Chapter 18). Aggrieved farmers also began to organize. In
“Agrarian Unrest and Populism,” we examine the reasons for agrarian discontent and trace the
manifestation of that discontent from the Grange, through the Farmers’ Alliances, to the formation of the
Populist Party and the drafting of the Omaha platform in 1892.

The depression of the 1890s added to the woes of the United States. President Grover Cleveland failed
to deal with the crisis effectively, and an air of crisis settled over the nation. Workers’ protests multiplied;
the Socialist Party of America, under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs, reorganized; Coxey’s Army,
demanding a federal jobs program, marched on the nation’s capital; and fear of social revolution led
business owners and government officials to use brute force to control what they perceived to be radical
protest.

As the crisis persisted, the Populist Party gained ground but was hampered both by the reluctance of
voters to abandon their loyalties to the two major parties and by issues of race. At the national level,
Populists, convinced that the “money power” and its imposition of the gold standard on the nation was the
root cause of farm distress and the nationwide depression, continued to call for a return of government to
the people and crusaded for the “free and unlimited coinage of silver.”

The frustrations that had built up in the Gilded Age—an age of transition from rural to urban, from
agrarian to industrial society—came to a head in the emotionally charged presidential contest of 1896. An
analysis of the issues, outcome, and legacy of this election, which ended the political equilibrium of the age,
is offered in the last section of the chapter.

Building Vocabulary

Listed below are important words and terms that you need to know to get the most out of Chapter 20. They
are listed in the order in which they occur in the chapter. After carefully looking through the list, refer to a
dictionary and jot down the definition of words that you do not know or of which you are unsure.

epitomize

venality
avid
coalition
contentious
cajole
demented
gingerly
potentate
temperate
chicanery
enfranchise
subjugation
mandate
collateral
communal
formidable
egalitarian

vehemence

rebut

injunction

commandeer

dregs

permeate

vestige

corral

repudiate

inequity

homily

succinct

retrograde

personable
Identification and Significance

After studying Chapter 20 of *A People and a Nation*, you should be able to identify fully and explain the historical significance of each item listed below.

1. Identify each item in the space provided. Give an explanation or description of the item. Answer the questions who, what, where, and when.
2. Explain the historical significance of each item in the space provided. Establish the historical context in which the item exists. Establish the item as the result of or as the cause of other factors existing in the society under study. Answer this question: *What were the political, social, economic, and/or cultural consequences of this item?*

“Pitchfork” Ben Tillman

Identification

Significance

the Stalwarts, the Half Breeds, and the Mugwumps

Identification

Significance

“waving the bloody shirt”

Identification

Significance
the Grand Army of the Republic

Identification

Significance

the Pendleton Civil Service Act

Identification

Significance

*Munn v. Illinois*

Identification

Significance

the *Wabash* case

Identification

Significance

the Interstate Commerce Act

Identification

Significance
the *Maximum Freight Rate* case and the *Alabama Midlands* case

Identification

Significance

the tariff controversy

Identification

Significance

the McKinley Tariff of 1890

Identification

Significance

the Wilson-Gorman Tariff of 1894 and the Dingley Tariff of 1897

Identification

Significance

the currency controversy

Identification

Significance
“the Crime of ’73”

Identification

Significance

the Bland-Allison Act of 1878

Identification

Significance

the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890

Identification

Significance

Rutherford B. Hayes

Identification

Significance

James A. Garfield

Identification

Significance
Chester A. Arthur

Identification

Significance

the presidential campaign and election of 1884

Identification

Significance

Grover Cleveland

Identification

Significance

“rum, Romanism, and rebellion”

Identification

Significance

the presidential election and campaign of 1888

Identification

Significance
Benjamin Harrison

Identification

Significance

the Dependents' Pension Act

Identification

Significance

the “Billion Dollar Congress”

Identification

Significance

the poll tax

Identification

Significance

_U.S. v. Reese_

Identification

Significance
the Mississippi Plan

Identification

Significance

the “grandfather clause”

Identification

Significance

the Civil Rights cases

Identification

Significance

_Plessy v. Ferguson_ and _Cummins v. County Board of Education_

Identification

Significance

Jim Crow laws

Identification

Significance
the National Woman Suffrage Association

Identification

Significance

the American Woman Suffrage Association

Identification

Significance

Susan B. Anthony

Identification

Significance

the crop-lien system

Identification

Significance

the Grange movement

Identification

Significance
the White Hats

Identification

Significance

the Farmers’ Alliances

Identification

Significance

the subtreasury plan

Identification

Significance

the Populist (People’s) Party

Identification

Significance

the Omaha platform

Identification

Significance
James B. Weaver

Identification

Significance

the depression of the 1890s

Identification

Significance

the Cleveland-Morgan deal

Identification

Significance

the Coeur d’Alene strike

Identification

Significance

Karl Marx

Identification

Significance
Daniel DeLeon

Identification

Significance

Eugene V. Debs

Identification

Significance

Jacob S. Coxey

Identification

Significance

free coinage of silver

Identification

Significance

the presidential campaign and election of 1896

Identification

Significance
Organizing Information

To clarify what led to the agrarian revolt and the rise of populism that followed it, complete the chart “The Climate that Nurtured the Agrarian Revolt and the Rise of Populism, 1877-1896.” The chart is divided somewhat arbitrarily into two periods, 1877 to 1887 and 1888 to 1896 simply to suggest that conditions did not remain exactly the same throughout the whole twenty years. You are to indicate the racial climate, the stage of the business cycle the nation was experiencing, trends in governmental policies and ways of responding to public unrest and protests, and the kind of protesting that was being engaged in that would make the populist movement predictable. What conditions created the kind of dissatisfaction among first the farmers and then other groups that might explain the rise of populism?

After you have done that, complete the other two charts related to the agrarian revolt and populism to bring together information that might explain the fate of the populist movement. Why couldn’t or wouldn’t the groups within the movement unify enough to have greater success than they did? In this phase of the exercise list—in chronological order as far as possible—the specifics called for, whether they are actions, attitudes, decisions, groups or regions. Be concise; all you are doing in this step is providing reminders that you can use for review purposes and for guidance in composing mock essays in preparation for essay
questions you might see on your next history test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial and Inter-Regional Relations</th>
<th>Phases of Business Cycle</th>
<th>Governmental Policies and Reactions</th>
<th>Social and Political Unrest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1877 to 1880</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880 to 1883</td>
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<tr>
<td>1883 to 1896</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Difficulties on the Road to Forming a Coalition with Clout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Constituencies of the Grange, Farmers’ Alliances, Populists</th>
<th>Which Definable Groups or Regions Had the Potential To Create an Alliance?</th>
<th>What Aims, Attitudes, or Economic Factors Made These Groups Natural Allies?</th>
<th>What Aims, Attitudes, or Economic Factors Divided These Groups?</th>
<th>Outcome (In the Campaign and Election of 1895-1896)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sections of the Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Have-Nots in the Work Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Power Have-Nots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organized Politically Disaffected Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other—Race, Gender, National Origin, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comment, Outcome, or Summary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### From the Agrarian Revolt to the Populists (1877-1900), Part II

**Difficulties on the Road to Finding Support in Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where in the Government the Populists and Their Predecessors Might Have Found Support</th>
<th>Actions and Attitudes on Tariff Issues of Concern to the Populists and Their Predecessors</th>
<th>Actions and Attitudes on Currency Questions of Concern to the Populists and Their Predecessors</th>
<th>Actions and Attitudes on Price/Rate and Regulation Issues of Concern to the Populists and Their Predecessors</th>
<th>Actions and Attitudes on the Distribution of Political Power (Voting Rights) Affecting the Success of Populists and their Predecessors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
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<td>President</td>
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<td>Supreme Court</td>
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<td>State Governments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comment, Outcome, or Summary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interpreting Information

Use the information you supplied in the three Organizing Information charts to help you arrive at a reasonable explanation of why Populism did not enjoy more success than it did.

Begin by expanding your entries in the charts into full notes and then into the working drafts of three separate little discussions, one of the climate that gave rise to the movement, one of the internal problems that served as barriers to unity in and among the key groups within the movement, and a third on external forces that reduced the movement’s chances of success.

Be sure to state your one-sentence conclusion (your essay's thesis) in your essay's introductory paragraph and to indicate what the crowning blow marking the movement’s ultimate failure was. The entire working draft should explain the failure of Populism.

Ideas and Details

Objective 1

1. Which of the following characterized politics during the Gilded Age?
   a. Party allegiance among the voters was so evenly distributed that no one party predominated for very long.
   b. Americans insisted that the government actively pursue solutions to social problems.
   c. There was little public interest in national elections.
   d. Political contests were very impersonal.

Objective 2

2. In cases arising from the Interstate Commerce Act, the Supreme Court
   a. broadly interpreted the regulatory powers of Congress.
   b. established that government aid to private industry was unconstitutional.
   c. reduced the regulatory powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission.
   d. completely rejected the principle of government regulation of industry.

Objectives 2 and 6

3. The “Crime of ’73” refers to which of the following?
   a. The passage of the Dingley Act
   b. The decision by Congress to stop coining silver dollars
   c. The passage of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act
   d. The assassination of President Garfield

Objective 3

4. Which of the following words best describes the presidents of the Gilded Age?
   a. Inspiring
   b. Lazy
   c. Honest
d. Forceful

**Objective 1**

5. Which of the following was an important factor in Grover Cleveland’s defeat in the presidential election of 1888?
   a. The Republicans successfully engaged in vote fraud in Indiana and New York.
   b. The British minister in Washington publicly supported Benjamin Harrison.
   c. Cleveland’s ethnic jokes offended Irish Catholics.
   d. Cleveland offended consumers by suddenly calling for higher tariffs.

**Objectives 1 and 2**

6. The action taken by Congress on the issue of veterans’ pensions demonstrates that
   a. Congress was determined to give equal treatment to Union and Confederate veterans.
   b. memories of the Civil War no longer had an impact on national politics.
   c. Congress was opposed to all forms of welfare legislation.
   d. Congress responded to interest-group pressure.

**Objective 5**

7. Which of the following was the most common argument used by senators voting against the Women’s Suffrage amendment?
   a. If women are given the right to vote, they will demand that the nation disarm.
   b. Giving women the right to vote will interfere with their family responsibilities.
   c. Women are not well enough educated to vote.
   d. Women are too emotional to be given the privilege of voting.

**Objective 6**

8. As a result of the crop-lien system, many southern farmers
   a. were able to increase the prices they received for their goods.
   b. sank deeper and deeper into debt.
   c. were given the opportunity to become landowners.
   d. began to diversify their crops.

**Objectives 6 and 7**

9. Farmers hoped that implementation of the subtreasury plan would
   a. lower the cost of farm machinery.
   b. make second mortgages available to farmers facing bankruptcy.
   c. provide higher prices for farm products and low-interest loans to farmers.
   d. lower transportation costs for farm goods.

**Objectives 6 and 7**

10. The Omaha platform called for
    a. the establishment of national agricultural colleges in all states.
    b. a comprehensive welfare program for destitute farmers.
    c. a two-year moratorium on all debts.
    d. government ownership of railroad lines.
Objective 8

11. The broad-based nature of the 1890s depression was the result of
   a. an interdependent economy.
   b. overspeculation in the stock market.
   c. the Sherman Silver Purchase Act.
   d. the withdrawal of foreign investments.

Objective 9

12. Which of the following became the leading spokesperson for American socialism in the late 1890s?
   a. Jacob Riis
   b. Eugene V. Debs
   c. Ignatius Donnelly
   d. Leonidas Polk

Objective 9

13. To end the depression, Jacob Coxey advocated
   a. government aid to business.
   b. a return to the gold standard.
   c. tax cuts to encourage spending.
   d. the infusion of money into the economy through a federal jobs program.

Objectives 4, 7, and 10

14. The Populists were hampered in their quest for political power by which of the following factors?
   a. The Socialist Party’s endorsement of Populist candidates caused confusion in the minds of voters.
   b. Southern Populists called for equality under the law for African Americans throughout the United States.
   c. The disfranchisement of southern African Americans prevented the emergence of a biracial coalition.
   d. Their endorsement of Jacob Coxey’s demands caused voters to associate the Populists with extremist causes.

Objectives 7 and 10

15. Which of the following best explains Bryan’s defeat in the 1896 election?
   a. The silver issue prevented Bryan from building an urban-rural coalition.
   b. Bryan could not match McKinley’s spirited campaign style.
   c. The Populists refused to endorse Bryan.
   d. Endorsement of Bryan by the Socialist Party caused people to believe that he was a radical.
Essay Questions

Objective 1
1. Discuss the nature of politics, political parties, and political campaigns during the Gilded Age.

Objective 2
2. Discuss the problems that led to passage of the Interstate Commerce Act, and assess the act’s effectiveness.

Objective 2
3. Explain the tariff issue, and trace tariff legislation from passage of the McKinley Tariff in 1890 through passage of the Dingley Tariff of 1897. What were the consequences of the tariff policies of the United States during this period?

Objective 4
4. Explain the process that led to the disfranchisement of southern blacks and to the segregation of southern society by law. How did the Supreme Court respond to this process?

Objectives 2, 6, and 7
5. Explain the emergence of the farm protest movement, and examine its development through the 1896 election.

Objective 8
6. Discuss the causes and consequences of the depression of the 1890s.

Objectives 2 and 10
7. Examine the personalities and issues of the 1896 presidential campaign, and explain the election’s outcome.