

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 problem 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.

IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

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

- Identify each item in the space provided. Give an explanation or description of the item. Answer the questions *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*.
- 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?*

1. the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890

2. Grover Cleveland

3. “rum, Romanism, and rebellion”

4. “Ma, Ma, Where’s My Pa?”

5. the poll tax

6. the grandfather clause

7. *Plessy v. Ferguson*

8. Jim Crow laws

9. the Populist (People’s) Party

10. the depression of the 1890s

11. free coinage of silver

12. William McKinley

13. William Jennings Bryan

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 gained control 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 1 and 2

3. Which of the following hastened the move toward civil service reform?
 - a. The rejection of Chester Arthur as the Republican Party's vice-presidential nominee in the 1880 election
 - b. The assassination of President James Garfield
 - c. Public disclosure of testimony by former president Ulysses Grant before the National Civil Service Reform League
 - d. The suicide of Charles Guiteau, a disgruntled office seeker.

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 Dependents' Pension Act 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 nationalization of the oil and steel industries.
 - 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
- an interdependent economy.
 - overspeculation in the stock market.
 - the Sherman Silver Purchase Act.
 - the withdrawal of foreign investments.

Objective 9

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

Objective 9

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

Objectives 4, 7, and 10

14. Which of the following was a factor that prevented the Farmers' Alliances from uniting and from gaining political power?
- The Socialist Party's endorsement of the policies of the Farmers' Alliances caused confusion in the minds of farmers and voters.
 - Leaders of the Northern Alliance called for equality under the law for African Americans throughout the United States.
 - The disfranchisement of southern African Americans prevented the emergence of a biracial coalition.
 - Their endorsement of Jacob Coxey's demands caused voters to associate the Farmers' Alliances with extremist causes.

Objectives 7 and 10

15. Which of the following best explains Bryan's defeat in the 1896 election?
- The silver issue prevented Bryan from building an urban-rural coalition.
 - Bryan could not match McKinley's spirited campaign style.
 - The Populists refused to endorse Bryan.
 - 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 in 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.

Multiple-Choice Answers

1.
 - a. Correct. Since voters were evenly divided between the two political parties, neither party was the “majority party” during the period from 1877–1897. As a result, there were frequent power shifts that prevented the passage of effective, lasting legislation.
 - b. No. Americans generally accepted a passive federal government that did not involve itself in economic and social matters.
 - c. No. This was an age in which party identification was important; voters were interested in politics, believed their votes were important, and voted in large numbers.
 - d. No. Politics was a popular form of mass entertainment and people formed strong loyalties to politicians and political parties. Consequently, political contests were often deeply personal.
2.
 - c. Correct. In the *Wabash* case the Supreme Court ruled that only Congress could limit railroad rates involving interstate commerce. However, in cases arising under the Interstate Commerce Act, the Court narrowly interpreted those powers. In so doing, the Court reduced the regulatory powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission.
 - a. No. Although the Supreme Court placed responsibility for the regulation of interstate commerce in the hands of Congress through the *Wabash* case, the Court did not broadly interpret those powers in cases arising under the Interstate Commerce Act.

- b. No. The Interstate Commerce Act did not extend government aid to private industry; therefore, the Court did not rule on this issue in cases arising under the Interstate Commerce Act.
- d. No. In the *Wabash* case the Court accepted the principle of government regulation of industry by holding that only Congress could limit railroad rates involving interstate commerce. This decision was not overturned by the Court in cases arising under the Interstate Commerce Act.
3. b. Correct. After the election of James Garfield to the presidency in 1880, Charles Guiteau, who had actively campaigned for Garfield, requested a patronage position in the diplomatic corps. After having been rebuffed several times, Guiteau shot President Garfield twice in the back as the president was about to board a train in Washington, D.C. This act along with revelations about the spoils system during Guiteau's trial are factors that led Congress to pass the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883.
- a. No. Chester Arthur was in fact chosen as the Republican Party's vice-presidential nominee in the 1880 presidential election.
- c. No. Former president Grant never testified before the National Civil Service Reform League.
- d. No. Charles Guiteau did not commit suicide. After having been found guilty of the assassination of President James Garfield, Guiteau was executed on June 30, 1882. 4. c. Correct. The presidents during the Gilded Age did not evoke much of an emotional response from the electorate, but they were honest, honorable, and proper.
- a. No. The presidents during the Gilded Age were not “inspiring” figures to most of the electorate.
- b. No. The presidents during the Gilded Age were hardworking men and may not accurately be described as lazy.
- d. No. Believing that it was their job to execute the laws passed by Congress, the presidents during the Gilded Age may not be described as forceful or active.
5. a. Correct. Partly as a result of bribery and vote fraud, the Republicans carried Indiana by 2,300 votes and New York by 14,000 votes.
- b. No. The British minister, to the delight of the Republicans, said that Democrat Grover Cleveland’s election would be good for England. This offended Irish Democrats and weakened Cleveland’s campaign.
- c. No. Grover Cleveland is not known to have told ethnic jokes offensive to Irish Catholics.
- d. No. Grover Cleveland was against high tariffs, and even though he was convinced to temper his attacks against tariffs for political reasons, he never called for higher tariffs.
6. d. Correct. Although angered by tactics of lobbyists for the Grand Army of the Republic, congressmen still voted in favor of providing generous pensions for Union veterans and their widows. They did so, in large measure, because of pressure from this politically powerful interest group.
- a. No. The question of pensions to Civil War veterans and their widows concerned Union veterans only. Congress never considered pensions for Confederate veterans.
- b. No. The events leading to congressional action on pensions for Civil War veterans and their widows make it obvious that the memories of the war were still alive and affected the decisions of Congress.

- c. No. By providing generous pensions to Union veterans and their widows, Congress made one of the largest welfare commitments it has ever made.
7. b. Correct. The most common argument in the Senate against the extension of the right to vote to women was the contention that it would interfere with their family responsibilities and ruin female virtue.
- a. No. The contention that women will demand national disarmament was not the most common argument against giving women the right to vote.
- c. No. The contention that women were not well enough educated to vote was not the most common argument used by senators opposed to the extension of the vote to women.
- d. No. The contention that women were too emotional was not the most common argument used by senators opposed to the extension of the vote to women.
8. b. Correct. The operation of the crop-lien system forced many farmers into perpetual debt and into a state of helpless peonage.
- a. No. The crop-lien system did not make it possible for southern farmers to increase the prices of their agricultural products.
- c. No. The crop-lien system was at the heart of sharecropping and tenant farming and did not create the opportunity for more southern farmers to become landowners.
- d. No. The growing of traditional cash crops, especially cotton, was emphasized rather than agricultural diversification.
9. c. Correct. The subtreasury system would give farmers a place to store their crops while waiting for higher prices, and it would allow them to borrow subtreasury notes amounting to 80 percent of the value of their crops. Through this system, farmers hoped to solve their cash and credit problems.
- a. No. Although farmers complained about the cost of farm machinery, they did not see the subtreasury system as a way to lower those costs.
- b. No. The subtreasury system was not proposed as an agency that would make second mortgages available to farmers facing bankruptcy.
- d. No. The subtreasury system was not a means by which transportation costs could be lowered.
10. d. Correct. Farmers believed that railroads had been built on public land with public funds, and it angered them that railroads were operated for the private enrichment of a few individuals. Therefore, the Omaha platform called for government ownership of the railroad lines.
- a. No. Although the Omaha platform called for increased government regulation of trusts, it did not call for the nationalization of the oil and steel industries.
- b. No. Although Populists did call for a more active federal government in the Omaha platform, they did not advocate a welfare program for destitute farmers. They believed that a graduated income tax, the creation of a postal savings bank, and the free coinage of silver would solve farmers' monetary problems.
- c. No. The Populists clearly recognized the debt problems of farmers but did not call for a moratorium on debts in the Omaha platform. They believed that a graduated income tax, the creation of a postal savings bank, and the free coinage of silver would solve farmers' monetary problems.

11. a. Correct. The national economy had reached the point where business failures in one area had a ripple effect throughout the economic system, causing failures in other areas.
- b. No. In some measure, the depression of the 1890s was due to overspeculation in certain industries, but it was not due to overspeculation in the stock market.
- c. No. Although the Sherman Silver Purchase Act had a psychological impact that led to the dwindling of the nation's gold reserves, it was not the reason for the broad-based nature of the depression. In addition, repeal of the act did not halt the run on the Treasury.
- d. No. The impact of the depression of the 1890s on other countries and the subsequent withdrawal of foreign investments from the United States are indications of the broad-based nature of the depression. However, this withdrawal did not cause the depression to be broad-based.
12. b. Correct. Eugene Debs, president of the American Railway Union, was jailed in 1894 for defying a federal court injunction against the Pullman strike. While in jail, Debs became a socialist and, after his release, became the leading spokesperson for American socialism.
- a. No. Jacob Riis was a New York journalist and the author of *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890. The book exposed the horrors of life in the slums of New York. Although Riis was an active reformer, he was not a socialist.
- c. No. Ignatius Donnelly was a leading Minnesota Populist during the 1890s and was not the leading spokesperson for American socialism.
- d. No. Leonidas Polk was president of the Southern Alliance in 1891 and a leading North Carolina Populist.
13. d. Correct. Jacob Coxey advocated that the government purposefully cause inflation by pumping \$500 million of paper money into the economy through a federal jobs program.
- a. No. Although Jacob Coxey was a wealthy businessman from Ohio, his plan for dealing with the depression did not include government aid to business.
- b. No. The United States was already on the gold standard in 1894 when Coxey's "commonweal army" marched on the nation's capital. Coxey believed that the government's insistence on backing currency with gold was prolonging the depression.
- c. No. The nation did not have a federal income tax in 1894, and Jacob Coxey did not advocate tax cuts as a way to end the depression.
14. c. Correct. Out of fear that a biracial Populist coalition would jeopardize their power in the South, southern white Democrats disfranchised southern African Americans. The removal of African Americans from southern politics thus prevented the emergence of a coalition of southern whites and blacks. Furthermore, due to their racist attitudes, poor white farmers rejected attempts to end white-only membership in the Southern Alliance.
- a. No. The Socialist Party's ideology was attractive primarily to disaffected workers, not farmers.
- b. No. Although some southern leaders attempted to forge an alliance between poor southern whites and blacks, leaders of the Northern Alliance did not call for equality under the law for African Americans.
- d. No. Although some voters may have labeled members of the Farmers' Alliances as extremists, it was not because the Farmers' Alliances endorsed Coxey's demand for a public-works relief program.

15.
 - a. Correct. Free silver was attractive to many farmers of the West and South, but its promise of inflation was not attractive to city dwellers and factory workers. As a result, Bryan was never able to build an urban-rural coalition.
 - b. No. McKinley conducted a “front-porch” campaign that can hardly be called “spirited.”
 - c. No. When the Democrats nominated Bryan and endorsed many Populist ideas, the Populists decided to nominate Bryan for the presidency and Tom Watson of Georgia for the vice-presidency.
 - d. No. Bryan was not endorsed by the Socialist Party.