CHAPTER 21

Politics: Local, State, and National

ANTICIPATION/REACTION

Directions: Before you begin reading this chapter, in the column entitled “Anticipation” place a check mark beside any of the following seven statements with which you now agree. When you have completed your study of this chapter, come back to this section and in the column entitled “Reaction” place a check mark beside any of the statements with which you then agree. Note any variation in the placement of check marks from anticipation to reaction and explain why you changed your mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. _____ Because they sought to appeal to as many voters as possible, both major political parties took clear-cut positions on major political and economic issues in the late nineteenth century.</td>
<td>_____ 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. _____ The boss-controlled political “machines” in American cities in the late nineteenth century were notorious because they organized immigrant voters to vote for their candidates without giving the immigrants anything in return.</td>
<td>_____ 2.</td>
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<td>3. _____ Because most late-nineteenth-century national elections were close, candidates stuck to the issues and avoided personal attacks during their campaigns.</td>
<td>_____ 3.</td>
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<td>4. _____ William McKinley was the only late-nineteenth-century president to serve two full terms in office.</td>
<td>_____ 4.</td>
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<td>5. _____ The Populist party called for political cooperation among farmers and labor, blacks and whites, and all ethnic groups to bring reform to the country’s economy.</td>
<td>_____ 5.</td>
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<td>6. _____ In the late nineteenth century, the Democratic party supported higher tariffs, civil service reform, and the gold standard.</td>
<td>_____ 6.</td>
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<td>7. _____ The 1896 presidential election divided voters along class lines.</td>
<td>_____ 7.</td>
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 21 you should be able to:

1. Explain the lack of political activism by the two major political parties and their national candidates at the turn of the century.
2. Compare and contrast how political allegiance to the Republican and Democratic parties cut across sectional, religious, ethnic, and economic lines in the late nineteenth century.
3. Describe the key characteristics of city governments in the late nineteenth century. Assess how well they faced and solved their most troubling problems.
4. Evaluate the presidencies of Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison as to values, style, policy positions, and effectiveness.
5. Explain how farm discontent led to the formation of the Alliance and Populist movements. Assess the program they offered and the reason(s) for their failure.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Political Strategy and Tactics

The Democratic and Republican parties, seeking to appeal to as wide a segment of voters as possible, have frequently avoided clear-cut stands on controversial questions. Such equivocations reached abnormal proportions in the late nineteenth century because of the nearly equal balance of power between the two major parties.

The rapid pace of social and economic changes that accompanied industrialization militated against political decisiveness. No one had yet devised solutions to current problems such as the currency supply, the spoils system, and alternatives to laissez-faire. So, sometimes politicians avoided the issues out of respect for their own ignorance.

Voting Along Ethnic and Religious Lines

The major parties were essentially separate state organizations dealing with local people and local issues. They struggled to control a maze of diverse and competing interests. In order to establish winning electoral coalitions, the parties had to take into consideration the voters’ ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliation, residence in cities or on farms, how they felt about the Civil War, and other aspects of their lives that had no relationship to national political issues.

Generally, southerners, Catholics, and German and Irish Americans voted Democratic; northerners, Protestants, and persons of Scandinavian and British descent voted Republican. Often, such local and state issues as public education and prohibition interacted with religious, partisan, and ethnic factors to determine how an individual would vote in any given election.

City Bosses

The movement of the middle class to the suburbs left a leadership vacuum in large cities, which was filled by political “bosses,” with their informal but powerful “machines.” Immigrants who flocked to the cities were largely of peasant stock and unacquainted with principles of representative democracy. The mobility of urban workers and the difficulties of slum life also lessened the ability of urban newcomers to develop independent political influence. These factors made it easier for ward bosses to gain the political support of “the masses” for whom they found
jobs, distributed food, and gave assistance when jailed for minor offenses. The bosses helped to
educate the immigrants so that they could make the transition from the near medieval society of
their origins to a modern industrial America.

The most notorious boss, William Marcy Tweed, looted New York City taxpayers in a multiplicity
of ways between 1869 and 1871. A corrupt manipulator, Richard Croker, ran New York’s
Tammany Hall Democratic organization from the mid-1880s to the end of the century. Although
they provided useful social services, bosses were essentially thieves who grew wealthy on
kickbacks and bribes. But the boss system developed and survived because middle-class city
dwellers were indifferent to the plight of the poor. Some leading citizens shared in the urban
corruption, particularly tenement owners and utility executives who traded favors with corrupt
politicians. Middle-class urban reformers resented the boss system mainly because it gave power
to “proletarian mobs” of “illiterate peasants” rather than themselves.

**Party Politics: Sidestepping the Issues**

Since Democrats controlled the “Solid South,” and New England and the West were Republican,
the outcomes of presidential elections were determined by such states as New York, Ohio,
Indiana, and Illinois. Partisan loyalty in these states was closely divided. All but three of 18
presidential candidates nominated between 1868 and 1900 came from those four states, and each
of these three lost the election.

Partisanship was intense in these states and campaigns were conducted in a carnival atmosphere.
Lying, character assassination, and bribery undermined the body politic of the day. Drifters were
paid in cash or a few drinks to vote the party ticket. Sometimes the dead rose from the grave to
cast ballots.

**Lackluster Leaders**

The leading statesmen of the late nineteenth century showed little interest in important issues of
the period. Rutherford Hayes’ Civil War record helped him to gain the governorship of Ohio in
1868. In 1876, the Republicans nominated him for president because of his reputation for honesty
and moderation. Hayes played down the tariff issue, endorsed civil service reform, and vetoed
bills to expand the currency supply. In most matters, Hayes was content to merely “let the record
show that he had made the request” of Congress to act on key issues.

Hayes’ successor, James A. Garfield, was assassinated after four months in office. Like Hayes,
Garfield was an Ohioan and a Union veteran. He had oratorical and managerial skills, but was
indecisive. Garfield’s assassination resulted when two rival Republican factions, the “Stalwarts”
and the “Half-Breeds,” quarreled over patronage. Garfield infuriated the Stalwarts—led by
Roscoe Conkling—when he authorized an investigation of a post office scandal and appointed a
Half-Breed collector of the Port of New York. In July 1881, an unbalanced Stalwart lawyer,
Charles Guiteau, shot Garfield in the Washington rail station.

Garfield’s vice-president, Chester A. Arthur, a Stalwart who had been the New York customs
collector, succeeded to the presidency. Personally honest and an excellent administrator, Arthur
signed into law the Pendleton Act, which made about 10 percent of government jobs available by
competitive examination, and created a bipartisan Civil Service Commission to administer it. The act also made it illegal to compel officeholders to make political contributions. A good administrator, Arthur, like his predecessors, made little effort to push his program through Congress.

New York’s Democratic governor, Grover Cleveland, won the 1884 election by defeating the Republican former House Speaker James G. Blaine of Maine. Cleveland’s business-like attitude toward public administration endeared him to civil service reformers, and his conservatism pleased business. Blaine’s reputation had been soiled by publication of the “Mulligan letters,” which connected him to the corrupt granting of congressional favors to a railroad in Arkansas. It was revealed during the campaign that Cleveland, a bachelor at the time of his election, had fathered a child out of wedlock. Nevertheless, Cleveland prevailed in a close election thanks to the support of disgruntled eastern Republicans known as “mugwumps,” who opposed government corruption and inefficiency. Cleveland also held a narrow view of his power as president, but, unlike his predecessors, in 1887 he was bold enough to call for a lower tariff.

When seeking reelection in 1888, Cleveland led in popular votes, but the electoral majority went to the Indiana corporation lawyer, Benjamin Harrison. Described as a “human iceberg,” Harrison was too reserved to make a good politician. He supported protective tariffs, conservative economic policies, and liberal veterans’ pensions, but had an unimpressive civil service reform record. Under Harrison, Congress spent for the first time in a period of peace more than $1 billion in a single session. Without influence from Harrison, it also raised the tariff to a new high and passed the Sherman Antitrust Act. The Republicans lost control of Congress in the elections of 1890, and two years later Cleveland was swept back into office, defeating Harrison by a comfortable margin.

The most outstanding congressional leader was perhaps James Blaine, who served in both the House and Senate from Maine. Blaine favored sound money but was open to suggestions for increasing the volume of currency. A moderate Republican during Reconstruction, he was tolerant toward the South. Almost alone among politicians of his era, Blaine was interested in foreign affairs. Congressman William McKinley of Ohio was a man of simple honesty and a politician to the core. John Sherman of Ohio, brother of the Civil War general, mastered financial matters but left little mark on the history of the century. Thomas Reed of Maine was sharp-tongued, vindictive, and ultraconservative.

**Crops and Complaints**

The travail of Midwestern farmers was the force that finally brought American politics face to face with the problems of the industrial age. These farmers prospered in the immediate post-Civil War decades; then, in the 1890s wheat prices dropped sharply. In the South, cotton prices continued in the downward spiral that had begun during Reconstruction. Farmers claimed that the tariff, the shortage of credit, international competition, and the domestic marketing system that enabled middlemen to gobble up a large share of agriculture profits aggravated their predicament. The downward trend in the business cycle in the early 1890s completed the devastation, and thousands of farmers lost their farms and returned eastward.
The Populist Movement

The agricultural depression triggered the formation of the Southern Alliance in 1877. Alliance co-ops bought fertilizer and other supplies in bulk, sold them to members, and sought to market their crops cooperatively but could not raise capital from banks. Other Alliance movements sprang up in the Midwest, but there was no national organization due to regional and partisan divisions of the Plains and southern farmers. They disagreed over tariff and federal land policy, railroad regulation and financial reform, and whether or not to form a third party after Alliance-supported candidates fared well in various elections in the South and Midwest in 1890.

Encouraged by these successes, farm leaders met in St. Louis in 1892 to organize the People’s, or Populist, party. They attributed their problems to conspiracies organized by selfish interests. At the national convention in Omaha, the Populists nominated General James B. Weaver of Iowa and drafted a platform calling for a graduated income tax, national ownership of railroads, telephone and telegraph, and a “subtreasury” plan to permit farmers to store nonperishable crops in government warehouses and receive government loans until market prices improved. The platform also called for the unlimited coinage of silver, democratic political reforms, the eight-hour working day, and immigration restriction.

The Populists were not revolutionaries but viewed themselves as a majority oppressed by the “establishment.” Among colorful Populists were Congressman Tom Watson of Georgia, “Sockless Jerry” Simpson of Kansas, and Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, whose Caesar’s Column pictured a future America where a few plutocrats tyrannized helpless workers and peasants. In the South, the Populists were unable to unite white and black farmers, as politicians played on racial fears to keep the region loyal to the Democratic party. Urban workers failed to support the party. Though defeated, James B. Weaver polled over a million popular votes and 22 electoral votes.

Showdown on Silver

The 1892 election seemed to indicate a strong voter interest in the coinage of silver, though the real issue was what, if anything, could be done to check deflation—declining prices. People on fixed incomes benefited from declining prices, but few others did. Though the nation had previously adopted a policy of bimetallism, silver ceased to be used as a basis for currency in the so-called “Crime of [18]73.” Silver mine owners, seeking a market for their surplus production and joined by other inflationists, demanded that the metal again be coined, and the Bland-Allison Act (1878) and Sherman Silver Purchase Act (1890) required the government to buy silver. But as supplies increased, the price of silver continued to plunge.

The Depression of 1893

President Cleveland believed that the silver issue, by shaking business confidence, caused the Panic of 1893. Consequently, he reverted to the gold standard by obtaining repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and thereby split the Democratic party. As the nation’s economic fortunes continued into a severe depression in 1894, several “armies” of the unemployed, one led by Jacob Coxey of Ohio, marched on Washington to demand relief. Coxey proposed that the government authorize $500 million in federal public works to put men to work. Instead, club-wielding policemen dispersed Coxey’s Army. This callous treatment convinced many that the government had little interest in the suffering of the people.
Meanwhile, the Supreme Court sided with business in several key cases. It refused to use the Sherman Antitrust Act to break up the Sugar Trust, invalidated a federal income tax, and denied the writ of habeas corpus to Eugene Debs for his role in the Pullman strike. Cleveland’s presidency underwent a grave financial test in 1895 when the nation’s gold supply dropped to $41 million. Amidst a public outcry, the president permitted a group of bankers led by J. P. Morgan to underwrite a $62 million bond issue to revive the gold supply.

The gold standard and “free” silver met their final test in the 1896 election. Armed with an intense rhetorical weapon, his “Cross of Gold” speech, William Jennings Bryan defeated the “goldbugs” at the Democratic convention. Bryan then waged a spirited “free silver” campaign against the Republicans nominee, Ohio Governor William McKinley, and the gold standard. The Populists, whose vote had increased 42 percent in the 1894 midterm elections, fused with the Democrats and endorsed Bryan in 1896, and thereby undermined their credibility as a third party.

The Election of 1896

Few presidential campaigns prior to 1896 raised such intense emotions. Republicans from the silver-mining states backed Democrat Bryan; Gold Democrats defected to Republican McKinley. Most newspapers, even those of Democratic inclination, endorsed McKinley. Viewed in the East as a dangerous radical, Bryan was declared “insane” by the New York Times. Bryan, a remarkable orator, was the first presidential candidate to take to the stump, traveling 18,000 miles and making more than 600 speeches.

Ohio businessman and political “kingmaker,” Marcus Alonzo Hanna, managed McKinley’s campaign and raised $3.5 million from businessmen, often by intimidation. He sent speakers into doubtful districts and blanketed the nation with campaign literature. McKinley, who could not compete with Bryan’s oratory, conducted a carefully staged “front porch” campaign from his home in Canton, Ohio. That system conserved his energies and enabled him to avoid the appearance of seeking the presidency too openly, which was considered bad form at the time. Without leaving his doorstep, McKinley met thousands of people from throughout the nation. On election day, though the popular vote was close, McKinley won the electoral college vote, 271 to 176.

The Meaning of the Election

During the campaign some Republicans vowed to flee the country if Bryan were elected. But with workers voting with capitalists and with the farm vote split, the election did not divide the nation along class lines. As McKinley emerged triumphant, the silver issue paled in significance. Moreover, gold discoveries in Alaska and South Africa and improved methods of extracting gold from low-grade ores led to a natural expansion of the money supply. And, for all his innate conservatism, President McKinley proved able to deal pragmatically with current problems.
PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS

*Define the following concepts:*

- political boss _____________________________________________________________

- civil service reform ______________________________________________________

- “subtreasury plan” _________________________________________________________

- “free silver” ______________________________________________________________

- patronage _______________________________________________________________

*Describe the following:*

- Tammany Hall ____________________________________________________________

- Half-Breeds ______________________________________________________________

- Pendleton Act ____________________________________________________________

- Farmers Alliance _________________________________________________________

*Identify the following:*

- William Marcy Tweed ______________________________________________________
Rutherford Hayes

James Garfield

Charles J. Guiteau

James G. Blaine

Benjamin Harrison

Roscoe Conkling

James B. Weaver

William Jennings Bryan

Marcus Alonzo Hanna

SELF-TEST

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The unwillingness of politicians to fully address the major political issues in the late nineteenth century can, in part, be explained by
   A. middle-class complacency.
   B. the diversion of foreign threats.
   C. the strength of postwar intersectional harmony.
   D. the lack of any significant problems facing the country.
2. Political indecision was a feature of late-nineteenth-century politics because of all the following EXCEPT
   A. both parties wanted to appeal to as wide a segment of the electorate as possible.
   B. given the pace of change, no one had devised any effective solutions for the unique problems presented by industrialization.
   C. the strength of the two major political parties was so out of balance.
   D. rational and consistent governmental actions were not well defined.

3. To which party late-nineteenth-century voters were loyal was LEAST affected by their
   A. views on national issues.
   B. religious affiliation.
   C. place of residence.
   D. ethnic background.

4. In the late nineteenth century, which one of the following would most likely vote Republican?
   A. a southerner
   B. an Irish American
   C. a Catholic
   D. an immigrant of Scandinavian descent

5. Which one of the following is LEAST descriptive of late-nineteenth-century immigrants to the United States?
   A. they moved frequently
   B. they had little experience with representative government
   C. they moved from cities
   D. they moved to cities

6. Key states in winning the presidency in the last two decades of the nineteenth century included all of the following EXCEPT
   A. Michigan.
   B. Indiana.
   C. Ohio.
   D. New York.

7. Which one of these presidents was assassinated while in office?
   A. Rutherford B. Hayes
   B. Chester A. Arthur
   C. James A. Garfield
   D. Grover Cleveland

8. The Pendleton Act established
   A. the first legal restrictions on immigration.
   B. the highest tariff rate in U. S. history.
   C. federal civil service and corrupt practice laws.
   D. public works projects during the Panic of 1893.
9. The main reason for the factional rivalry between the Stalwarts and the Half-Breeds was their
A. competition for patronage.
B. differences over the proper level of tariff rates.
C. disagreement over government regulation.
D. conflicting views about the wisdom of expanding the currency.

10. Most late-nineteenth-century presidents had a narrow conception of presidential power, but in 1887, President Cleveland tried to provide constructive leadership on
A. the deflationary problem.
B. the currency issue.
C. veterans’ pensions.
D. the tariff question.

11. One of the few congressional leaders in the late nineteenth century who was interested in foreign policy was
A. Roscoe Conkling.
B. James Blaine.
C. John Sherman.
D. Thomas Reed.

12. Jacob Coxey
A. was the Populist party’s presidential nominee in 1896.
B. was William McKinley’s 1896 campaign manager.
C. assassinated President Arthur.
D. led a march of the unemployed on Washington in 1894.

13. In the late nineteenth century, farmers blamed their problems on all the following EXCEPT
A. a conspiracy of special interests.
B. middlemen.
C. organized labor.
D. a shortage of credit.

14. On which one of these issues did northern and southern farmers disagree?
A. Prices for wheat and cotton were too low.
B. Railroad freight charges were too high.
C. Political action by farmers in their own interests was needed.
D. Protective tariffs were too high.

15. Populists called for all of the following EXCEPT the
A. graduated income tax.
B. protective tariff.
C. “subtreasury” plan.
D. increasing the money supply.
16. The Populist party’s Omaha Platform included all the following EXCEPT
   A. government ownership of the railroads.
   B. election of senators by popular vote.
   C. immigration restriction.
   D. a national sales tax.

17. “. . . You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not
   crucify mankind upon a cross of gold,” warned
   A. William Jennings Bryan.
   B. James Weaver.
   C. William McKinley.
   D. Grover Cleveland.

18. In the 1890s, farmers wanted all of these EXCEPT
   A. federally funded crop storage and loans.
   B. a federally funded program of public works for the unemployed.
   C. Bryan for president.
   D. a return to bimetallism.

19. Mark Hanna realized that campaign procedures had been irrevocably changed by the 1890s
   because of the
   A. “free” silver issue.
   B. development of third parties, such as the Populists.
   C. success of Bryan’s stump-speaking campaign.
   D. Pendleton Act.

20. From among these regions, in the 1896 presidential election the Populists got most of their
    votes from
    A. New England.
    B. the South.
    C. states bordering the Great Lakes.
    D. the Pacific Coast states.

Essay Questions

1. In light of sectional, partisan, ethnic, and economic differences among voters, explain why
   political leaders in the late nineteenth century avoided taking unequivocal stands on public
   issues.

2. Define the conditions that enabled political “bosses” and “machines” to organize city voters.
   Identify some of the “bosses” and explain their reactions to reform movements.

3. Evaluate the administrations of Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, and Harrison
   in reference to their conceptions of the office and the use of executive power. What were a
   few accomplishments of each president?

4. Show how farm discontent led to the formation of the Populist party. List some of the goals
   of the Populists and identify the leading Populist figures.
5. Explain the outcome of the election of 1896 in reference to candidates, parties, issues, political strategies and tactics, and the emotional climate. Explain its lasting significance as the election that “marked the coming of age of modern America.”

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE

Label each of the following statements concerning politics in the late nineteenth century as “T” for true statement, “O” for an opinion, or “F” for a false statement.

___1. McKinley’s victory in 1896 was possible because the Republicans were still the majority party, and McKinley obtained support from substantial Democratic defectors.

___2. The Bryan-McKinley race is considered a “watershed” election because it settled the question of the gold standard and ushered in a long era of Republican domination of the presidency.

___3. The public held Congress in high esteem a century ago even though some members exhibited unstatesmanlike conduct.

___4. Cleveland’s handling of the gold reserve reflected his inability to deal with crises.

___5. Populists played a leading role in Benjamin Harrison’s election as president.

___6. Abraham Lincoln, in the early 1860s, considered James Blaine “one of the coming men of the country.”

___7. Blaine’s moderate views toward the South contributed to the support he received in the region in 1884.

___8. Bryan’s defeat was fortunate because his program would have jeopardized the financial security of the nation.

___9. Thomas Reed’s political courage would have been useful in the White House during an era when presidents tended to be cautious caretakers.

___10. McKinley’s front-porch campaign proved superior to Bryan’s stump speeches.