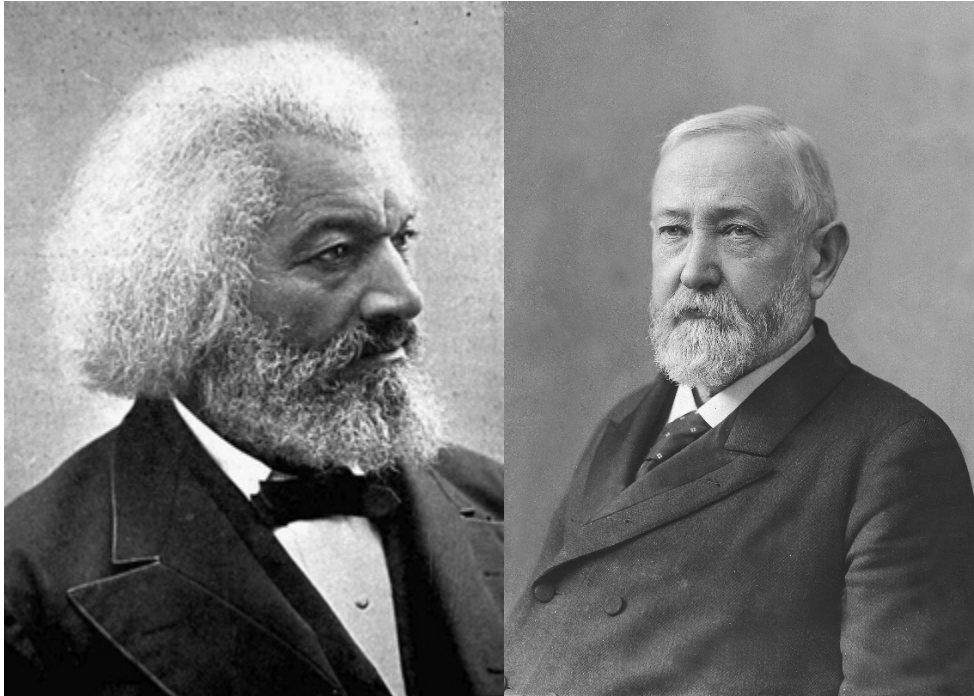


**Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Harrison, and  
Accepting the Outcome of the Election of 1892**

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In 2024, numerous political commentators observed a series of uncanny resemblance between the then current election and that of 1892. The situation of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in the 2024 election seemed remarkably similar to that faced by Benjamin Harrison in the 1892 contest. The incumbent administration was confronted by a former president, Donald Trump in 2024 and Grover Cleveland in 1892, who, after losing four years earlier, was campaigning vigorously to regain the White House. After hard-fought and ultimately close elections, both former presidents proved victorious. Supporters of the losing candidates worried about what the return of the opposition to the White House meant for the government policies that had long defined their party. One of the most loyal Harrison backers who found himself in this situation after the 1892 election was Frederick Douglass and this essay will examine his response to that political reverse.

A runaway Maryland slave, Douglass joined the abolitionists and quickly became an international celebrity thanks to his oratorical skills and moving autobiography. In the political sphere, Douglass was first a supporter of the non-voting wing led by William Lloyd Garrison, and in the 1850s, a tentative advocate of the Liberty Party and then the new Republican Party. Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 cemented Douglass's allegiance to the Republicans. During Reconstruction, Douglass aligned himself with those Republicans most staunchly committed to protecting the rights that African Americans had

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gained from the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Foremost among those was U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant who resisted but eventually failed to prevent the former slaveholding class from regaining political control of southern states.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of worsening conditions for African Americans in the South, Douglass loyally supported Grant for a third term in 1876 and 1880, making him a member of the Republican Party faction remembered as “Stalwarts.”<sup>2</sup> In his last autobiography, *Life and Times*, Douglass dismissed the two Republican presidents nominated and then elected in Grant’s place, Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield, as temporizers in defending African Americans from the transgressions of Southern Democrats. Worse yet was Chester A. Arthur, who succeeded to the presidency after Garfield’s assassination, whom Douglass condemned for “his self-indulgence, indifference and neglect of opportunity . . .”<sup>3</sup> But, to Douglass, the worst of all non-Stalwart Republicans was Maine Senator James G. Blaine, the Republican candidate in the 1884 election who lost the White House to Democrat Grover Cleveland. Douglass angrily recalled Blaine’s opposition in 1875, while Speaker of the House, to Stalwart efforts to pass a new “force bill” to use federal power to defend Black southerners’ right to vote. Douglass contended that the consequent loss of the South’s electoral votes to the Democrats was the principal reason Blaine lost the presidency nine years later. To Douglass:

The defeat of the Republican party in 1884, was due rather to its own folly than to the wisdom of the Democratic party. It despised and rejected the hand that had raised it to power and it paid the penalty of its own folly. The life of the Republican party lay in its devotion to justice, liberty and humanity. When it abandoned or slighted these great moral ideas and devoted itself to materialistic measures, it no longer appealed to the heart of the nation, but to its pocket.<sup>4</sup>

Douglass created considerable public controversy earlier in 1884 when, two years after the death of his first wife Anna, he married Helen Pitts, a White woman twenty years his junior and a former secretary at the Recorder of Deeds office. To Douglass’s pleasant surprise, the new Democratic president Grover Cleveland not only kept him in his lucrative federal post but invited the mixed-race couple to all formal receptions at the White House, winning Douglass’s respect for standing up to what he described as “fierce and bitter reproaches from members of his own party in the South.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, after a year and a half, Cleveland requested Douglass’s resignation in order to replace him with a Democrat. Free of public office after almost a decade of service, Douglass toured Europe and the Near East with his new wife. Abroad from September 1886 to August 1887, the couple returned to Washington as the nation was gearing up for the next presidential contest.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have written elsewhere about Douglass’s earlier political activities: John R. McKivigan, “Stalwart Douglass: *Life and Times* as Political Manifesto,” *Journal of African-American History*, 99:46–49 (Winter-Spring 2014) and John R. McKivigan, “Frederick Douglass and the African American Response to the Election of 1860” in *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered*, edited by James Fuller (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 141–64.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert J. Clancy, *The Presidential Election of 1880* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola University Press, 1958), 47–48, 82–83, 98–101, 109–11; Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), 67–71.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself, His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Compete History to the Present Time* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske & co., 1893) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:393.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 3:407. Also see “We Are Confronted by a New Administration” (16 April 1885) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:183–84.

<sup>5</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 3:392.

<sup>6</sup> David W. Blight: *Frederick Douglass; Prophet of Liberty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 649–54, 665–75.

In his first term, Cleveland made progress in his promise to install civil service reforms in the federal patronage system but failed to deliver the tariff reductions his party desired. Cleveland's unwavering opposition to expanding the coinage of silver helped plant the seeds that would, in a few years, grow into the Populist movement. While he occasionally condemned violence against southern Blacks, Cleveland did nothing to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment protecting African American voting rights. Facing a Republican dominated Congress after the 1886 election, Cleveland's first presidential term was best remembered for his high number of vetoes rather than legislative accomplishments. Republicans increasingly viewed Cleveland as vulnerable if he sought reelection.<sup>7</sup>

In the contest for the 1888 Republican presidential nomination, Douglass favored Senator John Sherman because of the Ohioan's long record of supporting the protection of African American rights. Douglass wrote Sherman in April, relating "there is no man living with any chance of being president of the U. States whom I would rather see in that quality than yourself."<sup>8</sup> Douglass attended the party's national convention in Chicago that year and, in an address to delegates on its first day, he implored them to remember "your black friends . . . now stripped of their constitutional right to vote . . ." He further exhorted delegates: "Be not deterred from duty by the cry of 'bloody shirt' . . . Let that shirt wave so long as blood shall be found upon it."<sup>9</sup>

The 1888 Republican National Convention witnessed a protracted battle between candidates for the presidency. Blaine had not put his name forward to run again. Douglass's choice, Sherman, led on the first sixth ballots with strong support from Southern delegations.<sup>10</sup> Previous supporters of Blaine, however, threw their support behind Benjamin Harrison, the former U.S. senator from Indiana with a good Civil War military record and popularity among veterans. Harrison passed Sherman on the seventh ballot and won the nomination on the eighth.<sup>11</sup>

Harrison had announced his candidacy that spring for the Republican presidential nomination, declaring himself a "living and rejuvenated Republican." The words "Rejuvenated Republicanism" became the slogan of his presidential campaign. Eager to defeat Cleveland, Republican leaders hoped Harrison could restore his home state that Cleveland had flipped in 1884 to their column and win in a closely contested election.<sup>12</sup>

What exactly was "Rejuvenated Republicanism"? Harrison had defined his views in a series of speeches earlier in 1888 on the past history and future role of the Republican Party. Harrison declared: "What unfinished work remains to be done? It seems to me that the work that is unfinished is to make that constitutional grant of citizenship, the franchise to the colored men of the South, a practical and living reality." He described the ways that Southern Democrats had

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<sup>7</sup> Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1932), 269, 273, 277–79, 326–28; Richard E. Welch Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 65–66; Henry F. Graff, *Grover Cleveland* (New York: Times Books, 2002), 73–85.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Douglass to John Sherman, 25 April 1888, Frederick Douglass Papers, LOC. Also see Charles W. Calhoun, *Minority Victory: Gilded Age Politics and the Front Porch Campaign of 1888* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 436–37; Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 109.

<sup>10</sup> In another of his "firsts," Douglass had received one vote from a Kentucky delegate on the fourth ballot. Blight, *Prophet of Liberty*, 682–83.

<sup>11</sup> Stan M. Haynes, *President-Making in the Gilded Age: The Nominating Conventions of 1876–1900* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., Inc., Publishers, 2016), 148–56.

<sup>12</sup> Calhoun, *Harrison*, 57–59.

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suppressed the votes of American Americans in order to sweep those states into their Electoral College column:

No bloody shirt—though that cry never had any terrors for me. I believe we greatly underestimate the importance of bringing the issue to the front, and with that oft-time Republican courage and outspoken fidelity to truth denouncing it the land over. If we cannot do anything else we can either make these people ashamed of this outrage against the ballot or make the world ashamed of them.<sup>13</sup>

In another spring speech, Harrison promised “legislative remedies” to punish “crimes against the ballot”:

Whatever they are, we will seek them out and put them into force—not in a spirit of enmity against the men who fought against us—forgetting the war, but only insisting that now, nearly a quarter of a century after it is over, a free ballot shall not be denied to Republicans in these States where rebels have been rehabilitated with a full citizenship. [Applause.] Every question waits the settlement of this. The tariff question would be settled already if the 1,000,000 of black laborers in the South had their due representation in the House of Representatives.<sup>14</sup>

Harrison’s “Rejuvenated Republicanism” greatly pleased Douglass and he accepted an invitation from the party’s national committee to take the field for their 1888 ticket. He and Charles Morris, a young Black man who later would marry one of Douglass’s granddaughters, traveled through five Northern states, speaking, as Douglass later recalled “indoors and out of doors, in skating rinks and public halls, day and night . . .”<sup>15</sup> The Republican Party platform had stressed the need for a higher tariff, but Douglass left most of the discussion of that issue to Morris. Douglass instead spoke of the need to protect Black civil and voting rights, arguing “the soul of the nation was in this question and that the gain of all the gold in the world would not compensate for the loss of the Nation’s soul.”<sup>16</sup> Comparing the past records of Cleveland and Harrison all the way back to the crisis of the Civil War, Douglass enthusiastically endorsed the Hoosier’s election.<sup>17</sup> In that year’s very close election, Harrison flipped back two states Blaine had lost to Cleveland, New York and Indiana, and triumphed in the electoral college.

The newly elected president was immediately deluged by a flood of requests for appointments to federal office, large and small. Harrison’s brusque handling of many of those requests offended some of the party’s most influential bosses, which would cause significant political problems for him later. Amongst the swell of office seekers was Douglass who requested as a reward for his campaign services being returned to the lucrative post of Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia that he had held under the James A. Garfield administration. Perhaps seeking to make a high profile African American appointment, Harrison chose Douglass as the U.S. minister plenipotentiary to the Caribbean republic of Haiti. Douglass probably was not pleased at having to report on his diplomatic activities to Harrison’s choice for secretary of state, James G. Blaine.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Harrison, “Chicago, 20 March 1888” in Charles Hedges, ed., *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison, Twenty-third President of the United States* (New York: United States Book Company, 1892), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, “Detroit, 22 February 1888” in Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 15–16.

<sup>15</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times in Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:238.

<sup>16</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times in Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:438.

<sup>17</sup> “Parties Are to Be Judged by Their Fruits” (25 October 1888) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:390–98.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Harrison, 7 March 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frame 285–86, FD Papers, LOC; Blight, *Prophet of Liberty*, 691–93; Calhoun, *Harrison*, 60–61, 68–72.

In advancing its domestic agenda, with narrow majorities in Congress, the new Harrison administration immediately ran into serious intra-party disputes over legislative priorities. A compromise bill initiated by Sherman to stimulate the rural economy through an increase in the amount of silver currency passed both houses along party lines. Ohio congressman William McKinley prepared a bill to significantly raise tariffs that passed the House one-hundred sixty-four to one-hundred forty-two votes, also along largely partisan lines, but stalled in the Senate.<sup>19</sup>

Simultaneously working its way through Congress were two measures aimed to assist African Americans. One was a bill introduced by Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire, a friend of Douglass, to finance education in the South with federal funds. First introduced in 1881 by Blair, the bill passed the Senate in 1884, 1886, and 1888. While in the Senate, Harrison amended the measure to guarantee that common schools would be provided to all children, regardless of race. Each time, the “Blair Education Bill” was blocked in the House. In 1890, however, the bill failed in the Senate, as some Republicans preferred to rally Republican strength behind passage of an even more important civil rights measure.<sup>20</sup>

That other piece of legislation was the Federal Elections Bill, a measure that would empower federal oversight of elections for U.S. Representatives. Since the “Redemption” of the former slave states in the 1870s, White southern Democrats passed laws restricting voter registration and instituting electoral requirements to prevent most African American males, enfranchised by the Fifteenth Amendment, from voting. The Elections bill was drafted by Representative Henry Cabot Lodge and sponsored in the Senate by George Frisbie Hoar, both from Massachusetts, with the strong endorsement of President Harrison. The bill would empower the federal circuit courts to supervise elections and use deputy U.S. marshals to protect voting rights in states adjudged violating the Fifteenth Amendment. The bill passed the House along strict party lines by just six votes.<sup>21</sup>

In the Senate, the Democrats adopted the tactic of prolonging debate over the McKinley tariff bill indefinitely to prevent discussion of the Elections measure. After efforts to change Senate rules to end debate over the McKinley bill failed, champions of higher tariffs among Republicans, such as Pennsylvania Senator Matthew Quay—already angered by perceived snubs from Harrison over patronage—persuaded colleagues to postpone consideration of the Elections bill to the next session following the 1890 congressional elections in order to pass the protectionist legislation. After the vote on the Elections bill was so postponed, Douglass wrote Hoar: “What if we gain the tariff and many other good things if in doing it the soul of the party and nation is lost?”<sup>22</sup>

The Republican Party then performed disastrously in the fall 1890 congressional elections, losing eighty-six House and four Senate seats and falling to gain a minority in the former body. This loss distressed Douglass and tested his faith in the Republicans. In an article

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<sup>19</sup> Calhoun, *Harrison*, 84–100.

<sup>20</sup> Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869–1900* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2006), 198–200; Calhoun, *Harrison*, 92; Jeffery A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, “The Blair Education Bill: A Lost Opportunity in American Public Education,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 35:1–25 (August 2020); Allen J. Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44:267–90 (September 1957); Daniel W. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” *Journal of Southern History*, 37:41–65 (February 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 129–30; Elisa Hink, “The Federal Elections Bill and the End of Reconstruction in 1890,” [Digitalscholarship.unlv.edu](http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu).

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglass to George F. Hoar, 2 September 1890, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 130–34.

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solicited by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Paper*, he analyzed various popular theories explaining the election outcome and argued that the Republican loss was due to the party's failure to defend African American rights, asserting “The success of the Republican party does not depend mainly upon its economical theories, its strength lies in another direction. Its appeal is to the conscience of the nation, and its success is to be sought and found in firm adhesion and fidelity to the humane and progressive ideas of liberty and humanity which called it into being.”<sup>23</sup>

The loss of control of Congress fueled dissension in the Republican Party about both its agenda and leader in the next presidential election. Harrison doubled down on his support for fair elections in the South by calling upon the returning lame duck Congress, where his party retained control, to fulfill its promise and pass the Lodge bill. In his State of the Union message, Harrison reminded Congress: “The path of the elector to the ballot box must be free from the ambush of fear and the enticements of fraud; the count so true and open that none shall gainsay it.”<sup>24</sup> Democrats launched a filibuster to prevent a vote on the bill. Democrats counted on Western state “silver Republicans” to break ranks and aid them in defeating the bill. After more maneuvering, six Republicans bolted and efforts to resume debate on the Lodge bill failed.<sup>25</sup> When the new Congress took over in March 1891, all hope was lost.

Most of these legislative maneuvers occurred while Douglass was serving the country as its lead diplomat in Haiti. The issues concerning Douglass and the failed effort to obtain a lease for a naval coaling station at the Môle Ste. Nicholas in northwest Haiti are too complicated to discuss here. After Douglass resigned that diplomatic post in July 1891, he wrote a lengthy article for the *North American Review* that placed most of the blame for the effort's failure on others, but especially on Secretary of State Blaine rather than Harrison.<sup>26</sup>

Quarrels over patronage distribution and a popular reaction against the administration's activist legislative agenda left Harrison vulnerable in 1892 and moved other Republicans to challenge him for the party's presidential nomination. Hoping to defeat any such challenge, in an article in the *New York Independent* in April 1892, Douglass gave a full-hearted endorsement to a second term for President Harrison, praising him for his support of both the Blair Education bill and the Federal Elections bill. He blamed those measures' failures in Congress on the behavior of “just enough of half-hearted men, wearing the livery of Republicanism, to serve the purpose of Democracy and to defeat the honest purpose of an honest President.”<sup>27</sup> Douglass praised Harrison's unwavering support for African American rights:

He has never thought to compassionate the murderers of the Negro by whining about the so-called difficult race problem with which they have to struggle. His trumpet was never given an uncertain sound; he has simply insisted upon justice, fair play and obedience to constitutional obligations as the solution of the race question.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “The Cause of the Republican Defeat” (1890) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:463–64. See also Calhoun, *Harrison*, 108–09; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 5, 5:496.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Calhoun, *Harrison*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Calhoun, *Harrison*, 110–16; Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 134–35.

<sup>26</sup> “Haiti and the United States: Inside History of the Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas. Part I,” *North American Review*, 153:33–45 (September 1891) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:472–73. Douglass also stated similar opinions in “President Harrison and “Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:538–39.

<sup>27</sup> “President Harrison and Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:538. Giving a speech on Haiti in Wilmington, Delaware, on 1 January 1892, Douglass said that he approved of Harrison's message and that Harrison was his candidate. “Colored People's Jubilee,” *Delaware Gazette and State Journal*, 7 January 1892.

<sup>28</sup> “President Harrison and Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:537.

Douglass accompanied Harrison to the former's old hometown of Rochester, New York, where both men participated in Decoration Day activities in what was regarded as a key swing state in the upcoming election.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly before the 1892 Republican National Convention, Douglass gave a newspaper interview that was widely circulated in the press. He assured the reporter that he planned to attend the upcoming convention to lobby for Harrison's renomination. He declared: "To my mind we never had a greater President." He listed multiple reasons but gave greatest emphasis to Harrison's backing of the Federal Elections Bill: "To the President the credit is due for creating the bill in the first place, and then pushing it through the House and almost through the Senate. His moral influence, as well as his official endorsement and assistance were behind the measure."<sup>30</sup> Douglass also singled out Blaine, Harrison's potential rival for the party's nomination, as the individual most responsible for the failure of the effort in Congress in 1875 as well as the most recent attempt to pass legislation to give federal protection to African American voting rights.<sup>31</sup>

As was his regular habit, Douglass travelled to Minneapolis in early June 1892 to attend the Republican National Convention.<sup>32</sup> There was considerable discontent within the party with the prospect of renominating Harrison in the face of the Democratic resurgence. Sherman and McKinley considered, and then rejected, a battle with Harrison for the nomination. Blaine allowed his name to be put forward by his supporters in the weeks leading up to the convention, prompting him to resign from the cabinet. Even Harrison himself considered declining to run again in what was shaping up to be a difficult rematch against former president Cleveland.<sup>33</sup>

Douglass actively lobbied for Harrison at the convention, giving press interviews and making speeches before wavering state delegations. He was reported carrying a large picture of Harrison projecting from his coat pocket.<sup>34</sup> Douglass gave a widely-published interview at the convention to the *New York Tribune*, praising Harrison and condemning Blaine as the candidate whom the Democrats most wanted to see nominated and declared: "I for one do not care to accept advice from this quarter."<sup>35</sup> After considerable behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Harrison won renomination on the first ballot. Vice President Morton did not seek a second term and was replaced by Whitelaw Reid, former editor of the *New York Tribune* and Harrison's ambassador to France.<sup>36</sup> Pleased with the convention's outcome, Douglass told a reporter: "Harrison has made a great President, true to all the pledges of the party, true where others were false, and brave when

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<sup>29</sup> "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:486; *Brooklyn Eagle*, 30 May 1892; Burlington (Vt.) *Free Press*, 2 June 1892. While he made no speeches in Rochester, Douglass gave an interview to the *Indianapolis Journal* in which he expressed his reasons for supporting Harrison and his confidence that African Americans would fully back his re-nomination and re-election. "Colored Men Want Harrison," *Indianapolis Journal*, 1 June 1892.

<sup>30</sup> "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:487. Also see Calhoun, *Harrison*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:488.

<sup>32</sup> Douglass declined having the party pay for his transportation there. Frederick Douglass to Lewis T. Michener, 21 June 1892, Louis T. Michener Papers, LOC.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Fred L. Israel, eds., *History of American Presidential Elections*, 3 vols (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), 2:1706–08

<sup>34</sup> "Fred Douglass not at Sea," Maysville (Ky.) *Evening Bulletin*, 7 June 1892; "After the Colored Delegates," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, 7 June 1892.

<sup>35</sup> "Expressions of Opinion," *New York Tribune*, 8 June 1892.

<sup>36</sup> Morton had plans to instead run for the governorship of New York. Robert Sobel, *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Executive Branch, 1777–1989* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1971), 260–61.

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others were cowardly . . . The ticket is a remarkably strong one, and will steadily grow in strength until November when it will sweep the country.”<sup>37</sup>

To Douglass’s disappointment, the tariff issue became foremost in the campaign debate. Harrison defended the protectionist McKinley Tariff passed during his term. For his part, Cleveland assured voters that while he opposed absolute free trade, he supported a significant reduction in the tariff. At the campaign’s start, Cleveland warned against the “dangerous and reckless experiment of free, unlimited coinage of silver at our mints.”<sup>38</sup> This was also the year of the pro “Free-Silver” Populist insurgency and Southern Democratic leaders were fearful that defecting White farmers might allow African American voters to bring Republicans back into power in their states.<sup>39</sup> The Democrats therefore made state control of elections a central part of their platform in 1892. Their campaign rhetoric complained that Republicans, through the Lodge bill, had attempted to restore the franchise to unqualified Black voters who sought control of the government to avoid hard work.<sup>40</sup>

Increasing age reduced the number of speeches Douglass delivered in the 1892 campaign. He reunited with his 1888 campaign partner Charles Morris for a Brooklyn rally for African American voters where he stressed the need to remain loyal to the Republican Party.<sup>41</sup> In a speech in Concord, New Hampshire, in September, Douglass indicated some worry about the direction of the Republican campaign, calling it “a great mistake for that party to dwarf and belittle the moral side of their character, by presenting us on all occasions, only the one theme, tariff, tariff, tariff.” Instead, Douglass argued: “The soul of a nation is its honor, and you bound yourselves when you pledged yourselves that you gave the negro his liberty, when you gave him the right to vote, you pledged yourselves that you would see to it that that right would be protected.”<sup>42</sup> In mid-October, Douglass voiced optimism: “This country will elect Harrison . . . The President is the friend of the working people and they know it. We could easily carry the county if we had a fair count in the South.”<sup>43</sup> Mentioning the problems Southern Blacks faced voting might be a hint that Douglass was actually worried about the election’s outcome.

Douglass ultimately provided his strongest support to Harrison’s 1892 campaign not in speeches, but in articles and public letters. In August 1892, Douglass wrote a letter to the *New York Herald*, agreeing with Black journalist T. Thomas Fortune’s complaints about the decline in African American rights in the Southern states since their “Redemption” by Democrats. Douglass made clear that he did not blame Harrison for the Republicans’ failure to intervene effectively. Instead, Douglass attacked Blaine as “the marplot of his party. In his studied attention to economic questions he had succeeded in diverting from us the natural flow of Republican aid and comfort.” Rather than follow that course again and risk losing the election, as in 1884, Douglass promised his role in the campaign “will be founded not on hard money, the tariff, the

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<sup>37</sup> “Frederick Douglass Gratified,” *New York Tribune*, 12 June 1892. Also see “Colored Delegates,” *Daily Inter-Ocean*, 15 June 1892.

<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger and Israel, *History of American Presidential Elections*, 2:1710–11.

<sup>39</sup> Calhoun, *Harrison*, 210, 213.

<sup>40</sup> Sig Synnestvedt, *The White Response to Black Emancipation: Second-class Citizenship in the United States Since Reconstruction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 41; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War Northern 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 202–14.

<sup>41</sup> “Foraker Will Be There,” Brooklyn (N.Y.) *Daily Times*, 10 October 1892; “Afro-Americans Meet,” Brooklyn (N.Y.) *Daily Times*, 11 October 1892; “The Colored Men,” *New York Tribune*, 15 October 1892.

<sup>42</sup> “The Courage and Manliness of John P. Hale” (3 August 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:496.

<sup>43</sup> Douglass also claimed that he would be making five speeches in Indiana for Harrison. “Will Work for Harrison,” *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 19 October 1892.

McKinley bill, nor any other kind of bill. I don't see anything for us to do but to make sentiment favorable to the race, and let us make it aggressively."<sup>44</sup>

Bishop Levi J. Coppin solicited an article from Douglass for his denomination's *AME Church Review*, advising African Americans on how to vote. In his piece, Douglass first criticized the small minority of African American leaders whom he branded as "tricksters" or "disappointed office-seekers" for advocating either voting for Cleveland or for an independent race and color party: "They tell us that Mr. Cleveland is a good man. What if he is? He is harnessed to a wicked party and must go where his party drives him." Douglass called on all African Americans to rally behind Harrison:

[T]he triumph of the Democratic party in the approaching election would be hailed as a national approval of the whole brood of infernal crimes by which the South has been kept solidly Democratic during the last dozen years; and yet I, a colored man, and one who has tasted the bitter cup of slavery, am asked to vote the Democratic ticket. I cannot do it.<sup>45</sup>

The *AME Church Review* article won Douglass widespread praise and requests to write similar articles for other African American periodicals.<sup>46</sup>

As many including Douglass had feared, former president Cleveland won election to a second term on 8 November 1892 over Harrison. With as many as a million African Americans intimidated away from the ballot box, Cleveland won forty-six percent of the popular vote while Harrison received forty-three percent. In the Electoral College, Cleveland was awarded two hundred seventy-seven electors, almost twice the number won by Harrison. In the Senate, Democrats emerged with a slight forty-three to forty majority, with five seats going to third-party candidates. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats gained a decisive majority, two-hundred twenty to one-hundred twenty-one, over the Republicans, with thirteen seats going to minor party candidates. This marked the first time since 1858 that the Democrats controlled the White House and both houses of Congress.<sup>47</sup>

Douglass's response to Harrison's defeat and the return of Cleveland to power was sought out immediately by Charles Dana, the editor of the Democratically inclined *New York Sun*. Douglass's public letter composed the day after the election was surprising and might have some lessons for people worried about the outcome of 2024 election. After campaigning so hard on the threat Democrats posed to African American rights, Douglass surprisingly declared: "My opinion is that those who have apprehended a violent change for the worse, both in the general condition of the country and in that of the colored people North and South, will find themselves agreeably surprised by the little difference which this change of administration will make."<sup>48</sup> He predicted that the Democrats would discover making significant changes in the nation's tariff and currency

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<sup>44</sup> "Protection Demanded" (August 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:555–56.

<sup>45</sup> Levi J. Coppin to Frederick Douglass, 18 August 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frame 616L, *Douglass Papers*, LOC; "The Negro in the Present Campaign," *A.M.E. Church Review*, 9:114–26 (October 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:561–62, 571.

<sup>46</sup> Douglass received praise from S. H. Blocks, who requested a similar essay for his Georgia newspaper. George Washington Turner also asked Douglass to write for the *New York Recorder* on the election. Cortlandt Parker to Douglass, 20 August 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 621–22, FD Papers, LOC; George W. Turner to Douglass, 15 September 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frame 676L, FD Papers, LOC; S. H. Blocks to Douglass, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 705–07L, FD Papers, LOC.

<sup>47</sup> Third-party candidates, including Populist James B. Weaver, won eleven percent of the vote cast. Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 752–56.

<sup>48</sup> FD to Editor of the *Sun* (Charles Dana), 10 November 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 12, frame 494, FD Papers, LOC; also *New York Sun*, 8 January 1893; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:575.

“Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Harrison, and  
Accepting the Outcome of the Election of 1892”

policies would prove harder to pass Congress. He went on to declare that he couldn't predict the election's impact upon African Americans in the South. The campaign's heavy focus on economics, Douglass reasoned, ironically meant that the Democrats

will learn that the victory was not a national approval of the outrages committed by them on the negro. They will learn that lynch law and murder were not endorsed by this election. They will learn that their victory was not won as against any policy of the Republican party in favor of the rights of the negro . . . The Southern question so-called has nothing to do with this defeat or victory. Had the negro been an element in this campaign the result might have been different. But he was not.<sup>49</sup>

Douglass complained that most Republicans had done nothing to answer Democratic accusations that the Blair and Lodge bills aimed at “negro ascendancy.” The person Douglass blamed for this failed strategy should be no surprise:

The advice of the Hon. James G. Blaine was scrupulously followed during all the canvass, and to him the thanks of the Southern Democracy are once more due for effective service. In his plan of campaign all thought of humanity was eliminated. There was not in it a single moral idea to touch the conscience, not a humane sentiment to touch the heart of the nation. All was as cold and selfish as dollars and dimes could make it . . . The Democratic boast of having achieved a moral victory is the veriest absurdity, since morals had nothing whatever to do with the contest.<sup>50</sup>

Even in defeat, Douglass had not abandoned hope for his Republicans. His recipe for their recovery was:

No party could have behind it a grander record. It has only to resume its old time character of being the bold and earnest defender of the rights of man, and be known in this vocation, not less than in its concern for the rights of corporations and associated wealth to be again strong with the workingmen of the country. Let it again place on its banner, ‘One country, one citizenship, one liberty, one law, for all people without regard to race, color or previous condition,’ and its power will soon become as great as in its palmyest days.<sup>51</sup>

So, Douglass's advice to Democrats of today is essentially to rededicate their party to its fundamental principles of equal rights for all Americans and quit catering to wealthy corporate donors. Follow that prescription in the next four years and the party can reassemble its prior voter base, win back control of the federal government, and become the guiding political force for the twenty-first century. The history of the second Grover Cleveland administration might be evidence for such an optimistic forecast. Cleveland's ideological rigidity helped lead the nation into an economic depression and made the opposition Republicans into the majority party for decades to come. On the other hand, when back in power under William B. McKinley, the Republican Party abandoned its historic commitment to safeguard African American rights to pursue the pro-business economic agenda that had disillusioned Douglass. Lessons from 1892, even from Frederick Douglass, therefore, might not be reliable guides for modern-day political quandaries.

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<sup>49</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:577.

<sup>50</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 577, 579.

<sup>51</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:579.