3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

# 1896

## *William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan*

A 35-minute lesson on the 1896 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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| ERA<br>Progressive Era | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>447 total |
| WINNER<br>William McKinley (Republican) · 271 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>William Jennings Bryan (Democratic) · 176 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>Gold standard vs. free silver; tariff protection vs. agrarian relief | TURNOUT<br>79.6% |

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

# 1896: William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

## Timing

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| 5 min | Warm-up | A "realigning election" is one that permanently changes which party is dominant in U.S. politics. What conditions would have to be true for an election to produce that kind of change? |
| 15 min | Reading | The 1896 election was the 28th U.S. presidential election. It produced William McKinley's 271-176 electoral-vote victory over William Jennings Bryan - ending the 1880s-1890s era of close presidential elections and beginning 36 years of Republican dominance (Republicans won 7 of the next 9 presidential elections through 1928). The election was a "realigning election" - one that permanently changed the structural balance of U.S. politics.<br><br>The political conditions had been transformed by the Panic of 1893. The depression had been the worst in U.S. history up to that point: 642 banks failed in 1893, industrial unemployment reached 18-19% by 1894, and the depression lasted until approximately 1897. President Cleveland's Bourbon Democratic responses - the November 1893 repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the defense of the gold standard, the February 1895 J.P. Morgan gold loan, and the 1894 use of federal troops to break the Pullman Strike - had alienated the silver, agrarian, populist, and labor wings of the Democratic Party. The November 1894 midterm had produced the largest Republican House gain in U.S. history (until 2022) - Republicans gained 130 seats. The Democratic Party was structurally divided between its Bourbon (gold) and silver wings by 1896.<br><br>The Republican National Convention met in St. Louis on June 16-18, 1896. The convention nominated Governor William McKinley of Ohio on the first ballot. McKinley was 53, a Union Civil War veteran (the last Civil War-era president), a former governor of Ohio, and a long-serving U.S. Representative best known as sponsor of the 1890 McKinley Tariff. Mark Hanna - a wealthy Ohio industrialist and McKinley's close friend - had spent the prior two years organizing McKinley's nomination, building a national delegate operation, and raising campaign funds. Garret A. Hobart of New Jersey was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican platform endorsed the gold standard ("we are unalterably opposed to every measure calculated to debase our currency or impair the credit of our country"), tariff protection, and the annexation of Hawaii.<br><br>The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on July 7-11, 1896. The convention was bitterly divided between the Bourbon (gold) Democrats led by President |

Cleveland and the silver Democrats led by Senator John P. Altgeld of Illinois and other Western Democrats. The silver Democrats had a numerical majority. On July 9, William Jennings Bryan - a 36-year-old former two-term Nebraska congressman who had not been a leading candidate - gave the most famous speech in American political history. Bryan had practiced the speech extensively; his voice was famous for its clarity in pre-microphone halls.

Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech argued that gold-standard advocates were "the people who put the corporation above the people; we say that the corporation is the man's servant, but they would have us make the corporation the master of the man." The peroration: "Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." The convention erupted. Within 24 hours, Bryan was nominated on the fifth ballot - the youngest major-party presidential nominee in U.S. history (age 36 at nomination; age 36 at the election).

Arthur Sewall of Maine - a shipbuilder and silver Democrat - was the Democratic vice presidential candidate. The Democratic platform endorsed free silver coinage at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio, tariff reduction, and an income tax. Cleveland and the Bourbon Democrats split off to form the National Democratic Party (or "Gold Democrats") with John M. Palmer of Illinois as their presidential candidate; Palmer would win 1.0% of the popular vote.

The Populist (People's Party) National Convention met in St. Louis on July 22-25, 1896. The convention faced a structural decision: nominate an independent Populist candidate (which would split the silver vote and ensure McKinley's victory) or "fuse" with the Democrats by nominating Bryan. The convention chose fusion - nominating Bryan as the Populist presidential candidate. But the Populists nominated Tom Watson of Georgia as their vice presidential candidate instead of the Democratic Sewall. The split ticket created confusion in fusion states and weakened the Populist organizational identity.

The 1896 campaign was the first modern presidential campaign. Bryan pioneered active candidate campaigning - he traveled 18,000 miles by train and gave 600 speeches in 27 states. He was the first major-party presidential candidate to actively campaign across the country (Garfield 1880 and Cleveland 1888 had given limited speeches; Bryan transformed the practice). The Bryan campaign was funded by approximately $300,000 in donations from Western and Southern Democrats.

McKinley pursued the opposite strategy: the "front-porch campaign." He stayed home in Canton, Ohio, and gave 300 speeches from his front porch to delegations of voters brought to Canton by Republican-organized special trains. Approximately 750,000 voters visited Canton during the campaign. The Republican organization

paid for many of the trips and selected the delegations. Mark Hanna's Republican fundraising was unprecedented: $3.5 million - roughly $130 million in 2024 dollars, and ten times Bryan's funding. Hanna assessed corporate contributions based on industry size; Standard Oil reportedly contributed $250,000. The Republican campaign distributed approximately 200 million pamphlets in 1896 - more than 8 pamphlets for every American voter.

The campaign's closing argument was economic anxiety. Republicans portrayed Bryan as a dangerous radical whose free-silver policy would destroy property values and the U.S. economy. Newspaper cartoons depicted Bryan as Lucifer, a snake, and an anarchist. The "Sound Money" campaign turned Bryan into a frightening figure for urban Northern voters - including industrial workers whom Bryan had hoped to attract on labor grounds. The cumulative effect was decisive.

McKinley won 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176. McKinley carried 23 states; Bryan carried 22 states. The popular vote: McKinley 7,108,480 (51.0%); Bryan 6,511,495 (46.7%); Palmer (Gold Democrat) 134,635 (1.0%); Levering (Prohibition) 125,072 (0.9%); Matchett (Socialist Labor) 36,359 (0.3%). McKinley-Bryan popular-vote margin: 601,316 - one of the larger margins in U.S. history at that point. McKinley swept the Northeast and Midwest; Bryan won the Solid South plus all of the Mountain West and Plains states.

McKinley was inaugurated March 4, 1897. He governed as a high-tariff, gold-standard Republican: he signed the July 1897 Dingley Tariff (raising rates to 57% average); the March 1900 Gold Standard Act (officially placing the U.S. on the gold standard); the 1898 declaration of war on Spain (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam acquired); the July 1898 annexation of Hawaii; the 1899 Treaty of Paris (Spanish-American War settlement). McKinley would be re-elected in 1900 in another Bryan rematch - winning 292-155 EV with 7,219,193 popular votes (51.6%) to Bryan's 6,357,698 (45.5%). McKinley was assassinated September 6, 1901 in Buffalo, New York; Vice President Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th president.

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| **10 min** | **Worksheet** | Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers. |
| **5 min** | **Closure** | One sentence: what surprised you about this election? |

# The 1896 Election

The 1896 election was the 28th U.S. presidential election. It produced William McKinley's 271-176 electoral-vote victory over William Jennings Bryan - ending the 1880s-1890s era of close presidential elections and beginning 36 years of Republican dominance (Republicans won 7 of the next 9 presidential elections through 1928). The election was a "realigning election" - one that permanently changed the structural balance of U.S. politics.

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## Key words

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| **Cross of Gold speech** | William Jennings Bryan's July 9, 1896 speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Won him the Democratic nomination on the fifth ballot at age 36 - the youngest major-party presidential nominee in U.S. history. |
| **Gold standard** | The policy of backing the U.S. dollar only with gold. Supported by Republicans, eastern bankers, and Bourbon Democrats. The dominant 1896 Republican position. |

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| **Free silver** | The policy of also using silver to back the U.S. dollar (at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio). Would have expanded the money supply, raised commodity prices, devalued debt. The main 1896 Democratic-Populist position. |
| **Front-porch campaign** | McKinley's 1896 campaign strategy. He stayed home in Canton, Ohio, and gave 300 speeches from his front porch to delegations of voters brought to Canton by Republican-organized special trains. Approximately 750,000 voters visited Canton during the campaign. |
| **Mark Hanna** | Wealthy Ohio industrialist and McKinley's close friend. Spent 1894-96 organizing McKinley's nomination and Republican fundraising. Raised $3.5 million for McKinley in 1896 - 10x Bryan's funding. The structural founder of modern Republican campaign finance. |
| **Realigning election** | An election that permanently changes the structural balance of U.S. politics. 1896 is widely cited as the most clearly realigning election in U.S. history: it ended the 1880s-1890s competitive equilibrium and began 36 years of Republican dominance (1896-1932). |

# Four questions

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did William McKinley win in 1896?

( ) A. 247
( ) B. 271
( ) C. 291
( ) D. 305

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How old was William Jennings Bryan when he delivered the "Cross of Gold" speech?

( ) A. 28
( ) B. 36
( ) C. 42
( ) D. 51

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was the "Cross of Gold" speech and why was it significant?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Compare Bryan's campaign strategy with McKinley's campaign strategy in 1896.

# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

271. McKinley 271; Bryan 176. McKinley's 95-EV margin was decisive.

McKinley's 1896 victory was the most decisive Republican margin since 1872.

**QUESTION 2**

36. Bryan was 36 years old at his nomination - the youngest major-party presidential nominee in U.S. history.

AP students should know Bryan's age at nomination.

**QUESTION 3**

The "Cross of Gold" speech was William Jennings Bryan's July 9, 1896 speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Bryan argued for free silver coinage at 16:1 and against the gold standard. The peroration: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." The speech was significant for four reasons: (1) It won Bryan the Democratic presidential nomination on the fifth ballot - he had not been a leading candidate before the speech. (2) Bryan was 36 years old - the youngest major-party nominee in U.S. history. (3) The speech transformed the Democratic Party from Cleveland's Bourbon (gold/conservative) philosophy to Bryan's agrarian populist philosophy. (4) The speech's rhetorical power - "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold" Christian imagery applied to monetary policy - established a model for political-religious rhetoric that influenced 20th-century campaigns. The speech is widely cited as the most famous in American political history.

AP students should be able to articulate the Cross of Gold significance.

## QUESTION 4

Bryan's strategy was active candidate campaigning. He traveled 18,000 miles by train and gave 600 speeches in 27 states - the first major-party presidential candidate to actively campaign across the country. The Bryan campaign was funded by approximately $300,000. McKinley's strategy was the "front-porch campaign." He stayed home in Canton, Ohio, and gave 300 speeches from his front porch to delegations of voters brought to Canton by Republican-organized special trains. Approximately 750,000 voters visited Canton during the campaign. Mark Hanna's Republican fundraising was unprecedented: $3.5 million - 10 times Bryan's funding. Hanna assessed corporate contributions based on industry size; Standard Oil reportedly contributed $250,000. The Republican campaign distributed approximately 200 million pamphlets - more than 8 per American voter. The structural difference: Bryan's campaign relied on charisma and personal contact; McKinley's campaign relied on organization and money. The 1896 result confirmed that money + organization could defeat charisma. The lesson became foundational for 20th-century campaigning.

AP students should be able to articulate both strategies.