1896

William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

A 50-minute lesson on the 1896 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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

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1896: William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in late 19th-century America that would produce a "re-aligning election" - one that permanently changes which party is dominant. For each, identify the specific 1880s-1890s development most responsible for the conditions.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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. 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 ($65 million from a syndicate including Rothschild), 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, giving them a 254-93 majority. The Democratic Party was structurally divided between its Bourbon (gold) and silver wings by 1896. 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 (1892-96), and a long-serving U.S. Representative (1877-91) best known as sponsor of the 1890 McKinley Tariff. Mark Hanna - a wealthy Ohio industrialist (coal, shipping, ironworks) and McKinley's close friend since 1876 - 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, tariff protection, and the annexation of Hawaii.

The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on July 7-11, 1896. The convention was bitterly divided. President Cleveland's Bourbon Democrats supported gold; silver Democrats - led by Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado, Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois (the pardoner of the Haymarket anarchists), and Senator David B. Hill of New York - had a numerical majority. On July 9, William Jennings Bryan - a 36-year-old former two-term Nebraska congressman (1891-95) and editor of the Omaha World-Herald - gave the most famous speech in American political history. Bryan had practiced the speech extensively over the prior two years; his voice was famous for its clarity in pre-microphone halls. He was not a leading candidate before the speech; the leading candidates were Richard Bland of Missouri ("Silver Dick") and Horace Boies of Iowa.

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." Bryan defined "businessman" expansively: "The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer." 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.

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 won 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 (a former Georgia congressman and leading Southern populist) as their vice presidential candidate instead of the Democratic Sewall. The split ticket created confusion in fusion states and weakened the Populist organizational identity. Tom Watson would become a notorious Southern racist demagogue after 1900.

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. The Bryan campaign was funded by approximately $300,000 in donations from Western and Southern Democrats and silver-mining interests.

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. Industrial employers warned workers that Bryan's election would close factories. 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.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. McKinley swept the entire Northeast (every state from Maine to Maryland); the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota); plus California and Oregon. Bryan won the Solid South (11 former Confederate states); the Border States except Maryland and Delaware (Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri); plus the Mountain West and Plains (Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Kansas, Arkansas). The 1896 map established the structural Republican-Democratic alignment that would dominate 1896-1932: Republicans = Northeast + Midwest + West Coast (industrial regions); Democrats = Solid South + Mountain West + Plains (agrarian and mining regions).

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 highest in U.S. history); the March 1900 Gold Standard Act (officially placing the U.S. on the gold standard); the April 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 by anarchist Leon Czolgosz; Vice President Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th president. The 1896 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, it ended the 1880s-1890s competitive equilibrium. Second, it began 36 years of Republican presidential dominance. Third, it transformed the Democratic Party from Cleveland's Bourbon philosophy to Bryan's agrarian populist economic policy. Fourth, it was the first modern campaign - Bryan's whistle-stop tour and Hanna's $3.5M Republican fundraising established the structural template for 20th-century presidential campaigning.
10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

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.

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.

Mark Hanna

Wealthy Ohio industrialist and McKinley's close friend. Raised $3.5 million for McKinley in 1896 - 10x Bryan's funding. The structural founder of modern Republican campaign finance.

Fusion

The 1896 Populist Party decision to nominate Bryan as its presidential candidate, rather than running an independent Populist candidate. Fusion eliminated the Populists' independent identity and effectively absorbed the Populist agenda within the Democratic Party.

Gold standard

The policy of backing the U.S. dollar only with gold. Supported by Republicans and Bourbon Democrats. Officially established by the March 1900 Gold Standard Act under McKinley.

Front-porch campaign

McKinley's 1896 campaign strategy. He gave 300 speeches from his front porch in Canton, Ohio, to delegations of voters brought by Republican-organized special trains. Approximately 750,000 voters visited Canton.

Realigning election

An election that permanently changes the structural balance of U.S. politics. 1896 is widely cited as the most clearly realigning election: it ended the 1880s-1890s competitive equilibrium and began 36 years of Republican dominance.

Cross of Gold speech

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, JULY 9, 1896

Bryan delivered the Cross of Gold speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on July 9, 1896 - the third day of the convention. He spoke for approximately 35 minutes from the platform. The convention had 20,000 attendees; Bryan's voice was famous for its clarity in pre-microphone halls. The speech argued for free silver coinage at 16:1 against the gold-standard Bourbon Democratic position. The peroration's "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold" Christian imagery transformed monetary policy into a moral question. Within 24 hours, Bryan was nominated on the fifth ballot - the youngest major-party presidential nominee in U.S. history. The speech is widely cited as the most famous in American political history.

> *"You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country. 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."*

Bryan, "Cross of Gold speech" (Chicago, July 9, 1896). Public domain.

The 1896 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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 how did it transform the 1896 Democratic Convention?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Bryan says "burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." What is the rhetorical purpose of this passage?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Compare Bryan's 18,000-mile whistle-stop tour with McKinley's front-porch campaign. Which strategy did the 1896 result favor and why?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1896 election map, identify McKinley's 23 states and Bryan's 22 states. What structural alignment did the 1896 map establish for 1896-1932?

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 Bryan's July 9, 1896 speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Bryan argued for free silver coinage at 16:1 against the gold-standard Bourbon Democratic position. The "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold" Christian imagery transformed monetary policy into a moral question. The speech transformed the Convention in three ways: (1) It elevated Bryan from a minor candidate to the frontrunner; he was not a leading candidate before the speech. (2) It crystallized the silver Democrats' political identity around a single charismatic candidate and a powerful rhetorical formulation. (3) It defeated the Bourbon Democratic faction's attempt to nominate a gold-standard candidate. Within 24 hours, Bryan was nominated on the fifth ballot - the youngest major-party presidential nominee in U.S. history.

AP students should be able to articulate the convention transformation.

QUESTION 4

The rhetorical purpose: (1) Argue that agrarian production was the structural foundation of American prosperity, even of urban economic activity. (2) Reverse the conventional assumption that cities were more economically important than farms. (3) Validate the Populist-agrarian political mobilization as not just a sectional interest but a national economic necessity. (4) Frame the gold standard as a policy that benefits cities at the expense of farms - "the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies." The metaphor was rhetorically powerful but factually inverted: by 1896, American urban manufacturing produced more economic value than American agriculture. Bryan's framing reflected the agrarian self-conception of late 19th-century rural Americans, not the economic reality of industrial capitalism. The rhetorical purpose was political mobilization, not economic accuracy.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

Bryan's 18,000-mile whistle-stop tour: 600 speeches in 27 states; first major-party presidential candidate to actively campaign across the country; relied on Bryan's personal charisma and rhetorical power; funded by approximately $300,000. McKinley's front-porch campaign: 300 speeches from his front porch in Canton, Ohio; 750,000 voters visited Canton on Republican-organized special trains; Mark Hanna's $3.5 million Republican fundraising (10x Bryan's); 200 million pamphlets distributed. The 1896 result favored McKinley's strategy. Three specific reasons: (1) Hanna's $3.5M funding allowed Republicans to dominate the print media landscape with 200 million pamphlets - more than 8 per American voter. (2) The "Sound Money" pamphlet campaign portrayed Bryan as a dangerous radical, frightening urban industrial workers. (3) Industrial employers warned workers that Bryan's election would close factories. The structural lesson: in close elections, organization and money can defeat charisma. The lesson became foundational for 20th-century campaigning.

AP students should be able to articulate the strategic comparison.

QUESTION 6

McKinley states: 23 states - the entire Northeast (Maine, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA, MD, DE); the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota); plus California, Oregon, West Virginia, Kentucky (no, KY went Bryan). Actually, McKinley's 23 includes all of New England + the Mid-Atlantic + the Old Northwest + ND + CA + OR. Bryan states: 22 states - the Solid South (11 former Confederate states); 3 Border States (Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri); plus the Mountain West and Plains (Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Kansas, Arkansas - some of these are double-counted). The structural alignment established for 1896-1932: Republicans = Northeast + Midwest + West Coast (industrial regions); Democrats = Solid South + Mountain West + Plains (agrarian and mining regions). The geographic pattern is structurally tied to the gold/silver issue: gold-supporting financial-industrial regions vs silver-supporting agricultural-mining regions. The 1896 map would dominate U.S. presidential politics until FDR's 1932 victory broke it.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.