1896

William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1896: William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1896 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1896 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in late 19th-century America that would produce a "realigning 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 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 by 1896. The Republican National Convention met in St. Louis on June 16-18, 1896 and 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 the sponsor of the 1890 McKinley Tariff. Mark Hanna - a wealthy Ohio industrialist - had spent 1894-96 organizing McKinley's nomination and Republican fundraising. 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 con-

vention was bitterly divided between Bourbon (gold) Democrats led by Cleveland and silver Democrats led by Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado, Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois, and Senator David B. Hill of New York. The silver Democrats had a numerical majority. On July 9, William Jennings Bryan - a 36-year-old former two-term Nebraska congressman and editor of the Omaha World-Herald - gave the most famous speech in American political history.

Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech argued that gold-standard advocates were "the people who put the corporation above the people." 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 was the Democratic vice presidential candidate. The Democratic platform endorsed free silver coinage at 16:1, tariff reduction, and an income tax. Cleveland and the Bourbon Democrats split off to form the National Democratic Party ("Gold Democrats") with John M. Palmer of Illinois as their presidential candidate.

The Populist (People's Party) National Convention met in St. Louis on July 22-25, 1896. The convention chose fusion - nominating Bryan as the Populist presidential candidate but Tom Watson of Georgia as the vice presidential candidate instead of the Democratic Sewall. The split ticket created confusion and weakened Populist organizational identity.

The 1896 campaign was the first modern presidential campaign. Bryan pioneered active candidate campaigning - 18,000 miles by train, 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.

McKinley pursued the "front-porch campaign." 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). Mark Hanna's Republican fundraising was unprecedented: $3.5 million - 10x 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.

The campaign's closing argument was economic anxiety. Republicans portrayed Bryan as a dangerous radical whose free-silver policy would destroy property values. 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 Bryan had hoped to attract. Industrial employers warned workers that Bryan's election would close factories.

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 134,635 (1.0%); Levering 125,072 (0.9%); Matchett 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); 3 Border States (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.

McKinley was inaugurated March 4, 1897. He governed as a high-tariff, gold-standard Republican: July 1897 Dingley Tariff (raising rates to 57% average - highest in U.S. history); March 1900 Gold Standard Act (officially placing the U.S. on the gold standard); April 1898 declaration of war on Spain; July 1898 annexation of Hawaii; 1899 Treaty of Paris (Spanish-American War settlement). McKinley would be re-elected in 1900 in another Bryan rematch - 292-155 EV. 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 - broken only by Wilson in 1912 (when the Republicans split between Taft and Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Progressive Party) and Wilson's 1916 narrow re-election. 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.

The 1896 alignment's structural significance for the early 20th century: Republicans dominated the Northeast (industrial-financial center), the Midwest (manufacturing), and the West Coast. Democrats held the Solid South (post-Reconstruction racial reaction) and the Mountain West/Plains (agrarian and mining). The Republican coalition was structurally tied to industrial and financial capital; the Democratic coalition was structurally tied to agricultural and extractive interests. The 1932 New Deal coalition (FDR's realignment) would break this alignment by moving industrial workers, Catholic immigrants, and African Americans into the Democratic Party -

		completing the next realignment. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1896 election tells you about the Progressive Era that the textbook didn't?"

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.

Free silver

The policy of also using silver to back the U.S. dollar at a 16:1 silver-to-gold ratio. 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. Eliminated the Populists' independent identity.

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. Approximately 750,000 voters visited Canton on Republican-organized special trains.

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).

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.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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 at his nomination in 1896?

( ) 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." What is the rhetorical purpose, and is the claim factually accurate?

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain why historians widely cite the 1896 election as the most clearly "realigning" in U.S. history.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

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. The leading candidates had been Richard Bland of Missouri ("Silver Dick") and Horace Boies of Iowa. (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 1896 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 claim was factually inverted by 1896. American urban manufacturing had surpassed American agriculture in economic output by approximately 1880; by 1896, U.S. industrial production was roughly 2x agricultural output. If American farms had disappeared in 1896, urban manufacturing could have purchased food from Canada, Argentina, or Europe. If American cities had disappeared, the rural economy would have lost its primary market for farm products. 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. The factual inversion is part of why Bryan lost: industrial workers in McKinley's coalition could see that their factories' survival depended on industrial customers, not agrarian production.

AP students should be able to articulate both the rhetorical strategy and the factual analysis.

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 Bryan had hoped to attract. (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 - subsequent campaigns combined Bryan's whistle-stop active campaigning with Hanna's fundraising-and-organization model.

AP students should be able to articulate the strategic synthesis.

QUESTION 6

Historians widely cite the 1896 election as the most clearly "realigning" because it produced four specific structural changes: (1) It ended the 1880s-1890s competitive equilibrium between Republicans and Democrats. From 1876 to 1892, popular-vote margins were tiny (often under 1%); from 1896 to 1928, Republican popular-vote margins averaged 5-10% in most elections. (2) It began 36 years of Republican presidential dominance. Republicans won 7 of the next 9 presidential elections (1896, 1900, 1904, 1908, 1920, 1924, 1928); the two exceptions were Wilson's 1912 victory (when the Republicans split between Taft and Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Progressive Party) and Wilson's 1916 narrow re-election. (3) It transformed the Democratic Party from Cleveland's Bourbon philosophy (fiscally conservative, hard-money, low-tariff, civil-service-reform) to Bryan's agrarian populist economic policy (free silver, federal regulation, income tax). (4) It transformed the structural geographic alignment: Republicans = Northeast + Midwest + West Coast; Democrats = Solid South + Mountain West + Plains. The 1896 alignment held until FDR's 1932 victory broke it.

AP students should be able to articulate the realignment criteria.

QUESTION 7

McKinley states (23): 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, and West Virginia. Bryan states (22): the Solid South (11 former Confederate states); 3 Border States (Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri); plus Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Kansas, Arkansas. The structural alignment established for 1896-1932: Republicans = Northeast + Midwest + West Coast (industrial-financial regions); Democrats = Solid South + Mountain West + Plains (agrarian-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. The structural continuity: between 1896 and 1932, Republicans held the modern industrial economy; Democrats held the agrarian and extractive periphery.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.

Discussion prompts

1. The 1896 election is widely cited as the most clearly "realigning" election in U.S. history. Identify two specific structural changes that the 1896 result produced and explain whether the realignment was structurally inevitable given 1893-1896 conditions or contingent on Bryan/McKinley personalities.

2. The 1896 campaign was the first modern presidential campaign. Identify three specific 1896 campaign innovations that subsequent campaigns adopted and assess whether each innovation was structurally necessary or contingent on the specific 1896 candidates and conditions.