AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1896

William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

A 105-minute lesson on the 1896 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

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.
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." 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 produced the largest Republican House gain in U.S. history (until 2022) - Republicans gained 130 seats. The Republican National Convention met in St. Louis on June 16-18, 1896 and nominated Governor William McKinley of Ohio on the first ballot. Mark Hanna had spent 1894-96 organizing McKinley's nomination. Garret A. Hobart of New Jersey was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican platform endorsed the gold standard, tariff protection, and annexation of Hawaii. The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on July 7-11, 1896. The silver Democrats had a numerical majority. On July 9, William Jennings Bryan - a 36-year-old former two-term Nebraska congressman - delivered the Cross of Gold speech. 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 vice presidential candidate. Cleveland and the Bourbon Democrats split off to form the National Democratic Party 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.

The 1896 campaign was the first modern presidential campaign. Bryan pioneered active candidate campaigning - 18,000 miles by train, 600 speeches in 27 states. McKinley pursued the front-porch campaign - 300 speeches from his front porch in Canton, Ohio, to 750,000 voters brought by Republican-organized special trains. Mark Hanna raised $3.5 million for McKinley - 10x Bryan's funding. The Republican campaign distributed approximately 200 million pamphlets.

McKinley won 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176. The popular vote: McKinley 7,108,480 (51.0%); Bryan 6,511,495 (46.7%); Palmer 134,635 (1.0%). McKinley swept the entire Northeast, the Midwest, and the West Coast. Bryan won the Solid South, 3 Border States, and the Mountain West/Plains.

McKinley was inaugurated March 4, 1897. He signed the July 1897 Dingley Tariff (raising rates to 57% - highest in U.S. history); the March 1900 Gold Standard Act; the April 1898 declaration of war on Spain; the July 1898 annexation of Hawaii; the 1899 Treaty of Paris. McKinley was 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's 1912 victory (Republican 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 established the first modern campaign template.

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.

The 1896 election's long-term consequences extended beyond presidential politics. The Republican-dominant 1896-1932 era produced: (1) The Progressive Era reforms of 1900-1916 (Square Deal, antitrust enforcement, federal regulation, 16th-17th-18th-19th Amendments). (2) The Spanish-American War (1898) and U.S. emergence as a global colonial power. (3) The Federal Reserve Act (1913) under

		Wilson but consistent with the Republican-era financial framework. (4) The 1920s prosperity and the 1929 stock market crash. (5) The 1932 New Deal realignment that broke the 1896 alignment. The Populist movement's structural legacy was the institutionalization of its specific demands within the major-party system. By 1938, most Omaha Platform demands had been enacted: secret ballot (by 1900); 16th Amendment income tax (1913); 17th Amendment direct election of senators (1913); 8-hour workday (Adamson Act 1916, FLSA 1938); federal regulation of railroads (Hepburn Act 1906); postal-savings system (1910); banking regulation (Federal Reserve Act 1913). The Populist Party itself dissolved after 1900 (Tom Watson's 1908 candidacy won 0.6%), but its policy agenda shaped 20th-century American politics. The structural lesson: successful third-party movements typically achieve their policy demands and dissolve.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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.

Dingley Tariff
The July 1897 federal law raising average tariff rates to 57% - the highest in U.S. history. Sponsored by Rep. Nelson Dingley of Maine. Signed by McKinley three months after his inauguration. Operationalized the 1896 Republican high-tariff commitment.

Dingley-McKinley-Hanna alignment
The structural Republican coalition of the 1896-1932 era. Industrial-financial capital (Hanna fundraising) + high-tariff protection (Dingley Tariff) + gold-standard monetary policy (McKinley/Gold Standard Act) + Northern/Midwestern/West-Coast geographic base.

Gold standard
The policy of backing the U.S. dollar only with gold. 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.

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.

Gold Standard Act
The March 14, 1900 federal law officially placing the U.S. dollar on the gold standard. Operationalized McKinley's 1896 gold-standard commitment. Repealed by FDR in 1933-34 during the Great Depression.

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. He spoke for approximately 35 minutes. The "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold" Christian imagery transformed monetary policy into a moral question.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Cross of Gold speech

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, JULY 9, 1896

"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.

SOURCE B

First Inaugural Address

WILLIAM MCKINLEY, MARCH 4, 1897

"It has been our uniform practice to retire, not increase our outstanding obligations, and this policy must again be resumed and vigorously enforced. Our revenues should always be large enough to meet with ease and promptness not only our current needs and the principal and interest of the public debt, but to make proper and liberal provision for that most deserving body of public creditors, the soldiers and sailors and the widows and orphans who are the pensioners of the United States. The Government should not be permitted to run behind or increase its debt in times like the present. Suitably to provide against this is the mandate of duty - the certain and easy remedy for most of our financial difficulties. A deficiency is inevitable so long as the expenditures of the Government exceed its receipts. It can only be met by loans or an increased revenue. While a large annual surplus of revenue may invite waste and extravagance, inadequate revenue creates distrust and undermines public and private credit. Neither should be encouraged."

McKinley, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1897). Public domain.

The 1896 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Bryan's Cross of Gold speech) framing the gold standard as a moral wrong. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (McKinley's Inaugural) committing to fiscal conservatism. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address monetary policy but from opposite positions. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Bryan's Cross of Gold framed monetary policy as a moral question. Was the framing rhetorically effective? Did it convert voters?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

McKinley's gold-standard inaugural was operationalized within three months by the Dingley Tariff and within three years by the Gold Standard Act. What does this rapid operationalization reveal about the 1896 Republican coalition?

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was the average tariff rate of the July 1897 Dingley Tariff?

( ) A. 38%
( ) B. 49.5%
( ) C. 57%
( ) D. 63%

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How much money did Mark Hanna raise for McKinley's 1896 campaign?

( ) A. $1.5 million
( ) B. $2.8 million
( ) C. $3.5 million
( ) D. $5.2 million

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1896 election about monetary policy, realignment, or campaign modernization? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Bryan's 1896 Cross of Gold speech (Source A) articulated the agrarian populist case for free silver coinage as a moral question - "you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." McKinley's 1897 Inaugural (Source B) committed to the gold standard and fiscal conservatism, operationalized by the 1897 Dingley Tariff and 1900 Gold Standard Act. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1893-1932 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1896 election's structural significance was (a) the demonstration that monetary policy was the dominant economic-policy disagreement of the 1890s, (b) the establishment of the 1896-1932 Republican-dominant alignment that would only break with FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition, or (c) the inauguration of the modern presidential campaign template combining Bryan's charisma-driven whistle-stop tour with Hanna's $3.5M corporate fundraising. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the monetary-vs-realignment-vs-campaign-modernization axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Panic of 1893, Cleveland's gold defense, the 1894 Republican landslide, the Omaha Platform, the Dingley Tariff, the Gold Standard Act, the 1900 Bryan rematch, the 1932 New Deal realignment. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "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 people who put the corporation above the people". The "cross of gold" phrase is the most rhetorically distinctive.

Bryan's framing transformed monetary policy into a moral question.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "Our revenues should always be large enough to meet with ease and promptness... our current needs and the principal and interest of the public debt", "It has been our uniform practice to retire, not increase our outstanding obligations", "While a large annual surplus of revenue may invite waste and extravagance, inadequate revenue creates distrust and undermines public and private credit". The "retire, not increase our outstanding obligations" phrase is the cleanest commitment to fiscal conservatism.

McKinley's framing committed to balanced budgets and debt reduction.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Bryan's convention speech - articulated as a Democratic delegate to win the nomination by mobilizing silver Democrats and Populists. The function is to crystallize the silver-agrarian-populist political identity around a single charismatic candidate and a powerful moral framework. Source B is McKinley's inaugural address - articulated as the incoming President to commit his administration to the gold-standard high-tariff Republican economic-policy framework. The function is to operationalize the Republican 1896 victory into concrete policy. Together, the sources reveal the structural disagreement between agrarian populist and industrial-financial coalitions that defined the 1890s. The 1896 election's structural significance was the resolution of this disagreement in favor of the industrial-financial coalition - resolution that would hold until FDR's 1932 New Deal realignment.

AP students should be able to articulate the philosophical opposition.

QUESTION 4

Bryan's moral framing was rhetorically powerful but ultimately ineffective at converting voters. The framing succeeded at: (1) winning Bryan the Democratic nomination on the fifth ballot; (2) energizing silver Democrats, agrarian populists, and labor voters who had supported the Omaha Platform; (3) producing the highest popular-vote total for a Democratic presidential nominee since 1856. The framing failed at: (1) converting urban industrial workers - who had been Bryan's structural target. Industrial workers feared that free-silver inflation would erode their wages; they also feared their employers' warnings that Bryan's election would close factories. (2) Converting urban professionals - who had been mobilized by Hanna's "Sound Money" pamphlet campaign portraying Bryan as a dangerous radical. (3) Converting Northeast voters - who were structurally tied to the gold-standard financial system. The structural lesson: moral framing of economic policy can mobilize existing supporters but rarely converts skeptical voters whose economic interests cut against the framing. The 1896 result confirmed this: Bryan's Cross of Gold mobilized agrarian and silver-mining states but did not break the Republican Northeast-Midwest-West-Coast coalition.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical-vs-electoral distinction.

QUESTION 5

The rapid operationalization reveals four specific features of the 1896 Republican coalition: (1) High policy coherence - the coalition had a clear policy program (gold standard, high tariff, fiscal conservatism, financial-industrial protection) and was prepared to execute on it. (2) Strong institutional capacity - the Republican-controlled Congress was prepared to pass major legislation rapidly. (3) Industrial-financial coalition unity - corporate donors who had contributed $3.5M to Hanna expected and received policy outcomes consistent with their interests. (4) Structural ideological alignment - the gold standard, high tariff, and fiscal conservatism were mutually reinforcing pillars of a coherent economic-policy framework. The lesson: a unified party with strong donor support, clear ideology, and institutional control can rapidly translate electoral victory into structural policy change. The 1896-1900 sequence (election ’ Dingley Tariff ’ Gold Standard Act) is one of the clearest examples in U.S. history.

AP students should be able to articulate the coalition-operationalization mechanism.

QUESTION 6

57%. The July 1897 Dingley Tariff raised average tariff rates to 57% - the highest in U.S. history. Sponsored by Rep. Nelson Dingley of Maine. Signed by McKinley three months after his inauguration. Operationalized the 1896 Republican high-tariff commitment.

AP students should know the 57% Dingley Tariff rate.

QUESTION 7

$3.5 million. Hanna raised $3.5 million for McKinley in 1896 - 10x Bryan's $300,000 funding. Roughly $130 million in 2024 dollars. Hanna assessed corporate contributions based on industry size; Standard Oil reportedly contributed $250,000.

AP students should know the $3.5M Hanna fundraising figure.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the monetary-vs-re-alignment-vs-campaign-modernization axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.