1896

William McKinley vs William Jennings Bryan

A 20-minute lesson on the 1896 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, 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

The 1893 Panic had ruined the country. Banks failed. Factories closed. Millions of Americans lost their jobs. Farmers could not pay their debts. Many Americans were angry and wanted big changes.

The big argument was about money. Some people said the U.S. should only use gold to back the dollar. This is called the "gold standard." Gold made the dollar strong but kept prices low - which hurt farmers who needed high prices to pay their debts. Other people said the U.S. should also use silver. Silver would make MORE money, raise prices, and help farmers.

The Democrats met in Chicago in July 1896. The party was split. President Grover Cleveland supported gold. But many Democrats - especially in the South and West - wanted silver. A 36-year-old congressman from Nebraska named William Jennings Bryan stood up to give a speech. He had practiced it many times. His voice could fill a hall without a microphone.

Bryan ended his speech with these words: "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 went wild. Within 24 hours, the Democrats picked Bryan as their candidate

for president. He was only 36 years old - the youngest major-party nominee in U.S. history.

The Republicans picked William McKinley, a senator and former governor of Ohio. McKinley supported the gold standard. He stayed home in Canton, Ohio, and gave speeches from his front porch. About 750,000 people came to visit him! It was called the "front-porch campaign."

Look at the picture. That is William McKinley.

Bryan did the opposite. He traveled 18,000 miles by train and gave 600 speeches in 27 states. He was the first presidential candidate to actively campaign across the whole country. But the Republicans had much more money. A businessman named Mark Hanna raised $3.5 million for McKinley - 10 times what Bryan raised. The Republicans bought millions of pamphlets attacking Bryan.

On Election Day, McKinley won 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176. McKinley won the popular vote by 601,316. McKinley became the 25th president.

The 1896 election ended the 1880s-1890s era of close elections. It started 36 years of Republican dominance. Republicans would



William McKinley, the 25th U.S. president. He won the 1896 election that started 36 years of Republican dominance in U.S. politics.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 25th U.S. president after the 1896 election?

2.

What was the main issue of the 1896 election?

3.

Why is the 1896 election historically important?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1896 a 36-year-old congressman from Nebraska gave the most famous speech in American political history. William Jennings Bryan said: "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!" After his speech, his party picked HIM as their candidate.

Answer key

1.

William McKinley. He won 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176 - a 95-EV margin. McKinley won the popular vote by 601,316 votes.

McKinley was the 25th U.S. president (1897-1901). He would be assassinated September 1901.

2.

The main issue was the money supply - specifically, whether the U.S. dollar should be backed only by gold (gold standard) or also by silver (free silver at 16:1). Republicans, eastern bankers, and Bourbon Democrats supported gold. Bryan and the Populists supported silver. The deeper issue: farmers needed higher prices to pay their debts; silver would have expanded the money supply and raised prices. The 1896 election was the only U.S. presidential election fought primarily on monetary policy.

The gold/silver issue was the dominant economic-policy disagreement of 1893-1900.

3.

The 1896 election is historically important for three big reasons: (1) It ended the 1880s-1890s era of close presidential elections (smallest popular-vote margins in U.S. history). (2) It started 36 years of Republican dominance - Republicans won 7 of the next 9 presidential elections (1896, 1900, 1904, 1908, 1920, 1924, 1928 - losing only 1912 to Wilson, 1916 to Wilson). The Republican dominance ended only with FDR's 1932 election. (3) It transformed the Democratic Party - Bryan replaced Cleveland's Bourbon Democratic philosophy with agrarian populist economic policy. (4) It was the first modern campaign - Bryan's 600-speech whistle-stop tour pioneered active candidate campaigning; Hanna's $3.5M fundraising pioneered modern campaign finance. Historians call 1896 a "realigning election" because it permanently changed which party was dominant.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural realignment.