

# The Election of 1896

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

As the end of the 19th century approached, the United States struggled with labor problems and economic depression. Unlike previous Gilded Age elections, the 1896 contest included a third-party challenge to the status quo: the Populist Party. The election was one of the most significant in American history, referred to by many historians as the first modern presidential election.

This tutorial examines the election of 1896 in three parts:

## 1. The Dilemma of Free Silver

As the 1896 presidential election approached, leaders of the Populist Party considered whether to remain an independent political party, one that nominated its own presidential candidate or to join one of the major parties. The debate over joining a major party—a process known as “fusion”—was particularly relevant because the Democratic Party needed to reinvent itself.

President Grover Cleveland, whose term included the Panic of 1893 and related economic crises of the early 1890s, was a Democrat. Party leaders knew that it would be difficult to reelect an incumbent President during economic turmoil. A number of them were also concerned about the gains that the Republican and Populist parties had made during the 1894 midterm elections.

For these reasons, some members of the Democratic and Populist parties believed that they should unite on a policy regarding silver: the U.S Treasury should resume the minting of silver coins, which President Cleveland had prohibited by overseeing a repeal of the **Sherman Silver Purchase Act** in 1893.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Sherman Silver Purchase Act**

Required the U.S. Treasury to mint over 4 million oz of silver into coins each month.

A number of Republican and Democratic politicians from Western states, where the mining of silver and other precious metals was important to the economy, supported the push to resume the minting of silver coins. Populist leaders and other politicians from agricultural areas did so too, believing that silver currency would promote inflation, raise the prices of farm goods, and relieve some of the hardships created by the depression.

As the Populists prepared for their convention in the summer of 1896, they observed the Republican and Democratic conventions with great interest.

The Republicans nominated **William McKinley**, a former Congressman and the current Governor of Ohio. The party platform included continued high tariffs and a defense of gold-backed currency (a.k.a., the “gold standard”) to promote business investments and prosperity.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### **William McKinley**

Republican Party candidate who won the election of 1896 on the strength of the continued political influence of the industry-rich Northeast and Midwest.





endorsed the “free and unlimited coinage” of silver and gold to revive the economy. As the excerpts from two convention speeches provided below indicate, Democrats were divided on the issue.

Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina supported currency backed by silver and gold. In his speech, he criticized President Cleveland for repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, and for his actions during the Pullman strike. Tillman suggested that party members from the South and West should unite against Eastern business interests:

#### **Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina, Convention Speech**

“As Grover Cleveland stands for (the gold standard), we have repudiated him. We are diametrically opposed to his policy, and why should we write ourselves down as asses and liars? They ask us to say that he is honest. Well, in reply I say he signed a contract for bonds in secret, with one of his partners as a witness. Nobody disputes his boldness or obstinacy. He had the courage to overthrow the Constitution of the United States when he overrode the rights of the citizens of Illinois and sent federal troops into this state. You ask us to endorse his fidelity. In reply, I say he has been faithful unto death—the death of the Democratic Party. We have denounced him in South Carolina as a tool of Wall Street, and what was prophecy then is history now....I tell you you dare not go before this country after endorsing the Cleveland administration. We of the South have burned our bridges behind us so far as the Eastern Democrats are concerned. We have turned our faces to the West and they have responded.”

In contrast, Senator David Bennett Hill of New York was reluctant to embrace currency backed by silver. In his speech, he expressed his skepticism by referring to the Eastern (and international) business interests that Senator Tillman had railed against:

#### **Senator David Bennett Hill of New York, Convention Speech**

“I therefore start out with this proposition, that the Democratic Party stands today in favor of gold and silver as the money of the country; that it stands in favor neither of a silver standard nor of a gold standard, but that we differ as to the means to bring about the result. Those whom I represent and for whom I speak...insist that we should not attempt the experiment of the free and unlimited coinage of silver without cooperation of other great nations. It is not a question of patriotism, it is not a question of courage, it is not a question of loyalty, as the majority platform speaks of it....It is a question of business. It is a question of finance. It is a question of economics....I know that [the idea of free and unlimited coinage of silver] appeals to the pride of the average American, but I beg to remind you that if that suggestion be carried out to its legitimate conclusion, you might as well do away with our international treaties.”



**THINK ABOUT IT**

1. Why is Senator Tillman opposed to the United States remaining on the gold standard?
2. Why does Senator Hill fear the adoption of currency based on silver as well as gold?

These speeches revealed that the Democratic Party was divided over the issue of silver currency. They also indicate whose interests the speakers represented. Senator Hill worried that investments and businesses

would lose value if they were backed by silver instead of gold (like other industrialized nations). Senator Tillman “denounced” President Cleveland as “a tool of Wall Street” for repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, and encouraged Democrats from the South and West to choose a candidate who supported their regional interests.

## 2. The Rise of William Jennings Bryan

Amidst the debate over silver at the Democratic Convention, 36-year-old **William Jennings Bryan** of Nebraska gave one of the most famous addresses in American political history on July 9, 1896: the “Cross of Gold” speech.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### **William Jennings Bryan**

Democratic candidate for president in the election of 1896 whose “Cross of Gold” speech articulated a vision for a Democratic party that protected the interests of rural and industrial producers across the nation.

Bryan reiterated his support for silver currency by articulating his vision of a Democratic Party that advanced the interests of rural and industrial producers, a group he referred to as “a broader class of businessmen”:

#### **William Jennings Bryan, The “Cross of Gold” Speech**

“When you come before us (in defense of the gold standard) and tell us that we shall disturb your business interests, we reply that you have disturbed our business interests by your action. We say to you that you have made too limited in its application the definition of a businessman. The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer....The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of this country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain. The miners who go 1,000 feet into the earth or climb 2,000 feet upon the cliffs and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured in the channels of trade are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who in a backroom corner the money of the world.”

Bryan concluded his speech as follows:

“Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands 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.”



### BRAINSTORM

How was Bryan’s vision for the Democratic Party different from (or similar to) that of Senators Tillman and Hill?

The next day, Bryan won the Democratic Party’s nomination for President, and the party agreed on a platform that included the free and unlimited coinage of silver.



Campaign poster for William Jennings Bryan and the Democratic platform during the 1896 election.

In the wake of Bryan's nomination, members of the Populist Party had an important decision to make: either nominate their own candidate (and risk losing voters to the Democrats), or "fuse" with the Democratic Party by endorsing Bryan (and risk losing their identity as an independent political party). The Populists chose to endorse Bryan in the hope that he would accept Tom Watson, a prominent Populist, as Vice President.

Bryan refused. As the 1896 election proceeded, the Populist Party ceased to exist as a viable political entity, even though many of its ideas would persist into the 20th century.

### 3. The Election of 1896

The race between McKinley and Bryan was hard-fought and included two elements that are associated with modern presidential campaigns: corporate money and active campaigning.

- *Corporate money in presidential politics:* On the surface, William McKinley ran a typical 19th-century "front porch" campaign. He met with visitors who called on him at his Ohio home, while other Republicans spoke publicly on his behalf. However, fearing that the Democrats' free silver platform would hurt the economy and future investments, McKinley's chief campaign strategist, **Mark Hanna**, solicited corporate campaign donations of \$3.5 million. The Republican Party used this money to hire speakers and to print campaign materials to discredit William Jennings Bryan.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Mark Hanna

William McKinley's campaign strategist in the election of 1896 who pioneered modern tactics of political campaigning such as soliciting substantial corporate donations.



#### MAKE THE CONNECTION

\$3.5 million was an enormous amount of money in the 1890s. The present-day equivalent is approximately \$50 million. This pales in comparison to the more than \$2 billion that the Democratic and Republican Parties raised—and spent—during the 2012 presidential election.

- *Active campaigning:* While McKinley remained on his front porch, Bryan appealed directly to the American people. Traditionally, active campaigning was looked down upon, but the crowds who attended Bryan's speeches during the 1896 campaign indicated that Americans wanted a new kind of presidential politics, one that differed from the Gilded Age status quo.

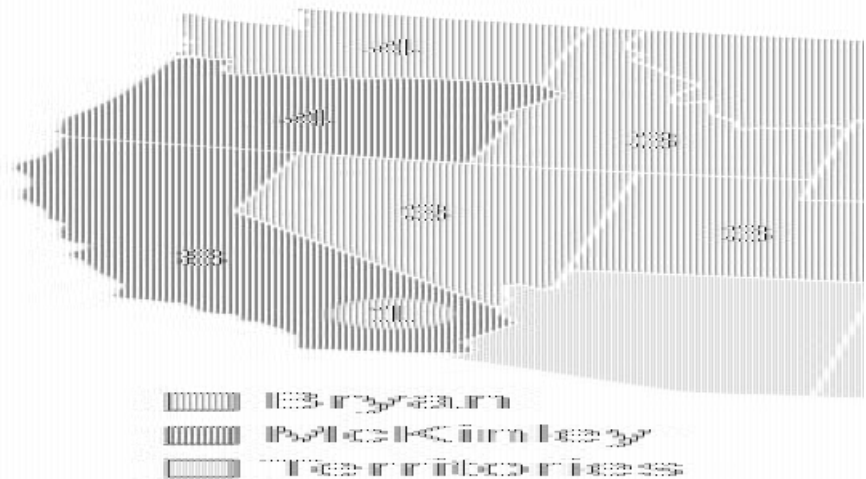


#### DID YOU KNOW

Bryan was on the campaign trail from early August until the day before the election in November. He traveled approximately 18,000 miles and gave over 600 speeches that were heard by approximately five million people.

The campaigns resulted in an energized electorate and a close election. Voter turnout was the largest in American history up to that date: almost 14 million voters, or almost 80% of all who were eligible to vote, cast their ballots. In the popular vote, McKinley defeated Bryan, 7.1 million to 6.5 million. He also won in the Electoral College, 271 to 176.

As the electoral map shows, Bryan's appeal to a "broader class of businessmen," and his support for silver currency, appealed to the silver mining region of the Rocky Mountains, and farmers across the Great Plains. Senator Tillman's home state of South Carolina and most of the other Southern states were also won by the Democratic candidate.



However, the electoral map also shows the political clout of the industry-rich, urbanized Northeast and Midwest, where McKinley's support of the gold standard, high tariffs, and economic prosperity earned him the most electoral votes. In addition to the electoral influence of businessmen, corporations, and machine politics, urban workers in these areas also contributed to McKinley's victory. They were not persuaded by Bryan's arguments in favor of free silver. Instead, they believed that currency manipulation and inflation would increase the prices they paid for goods. Ethnic and religious factors also played a role in Bryan's loss in these areas.



#### DID YOU KNOW

William Jennings Bryan was known for his evangelical zeal and advocacy of temperance (i.e., abstention from drinking alcohol). This led some Catholics and immigrants (including many who traditionally voted Democratic) to vote Republican in 1896.

One of the most important results of the election of 1896 was that it helped to redefine the agendas of the Republican and Democratic parties. Secure in its base within the industry- and population-rich Northeast and Midwest, McKinley, and the Republicans built closer ties with big business by raising tariffs to the highest

levels in history. With the passage of the Gold Standard Act in 1900, the debate over silver currency effectively ended. By supporting Bryan's campaign, many Populists associated themselves with the Democratic Party. In doing so, they kept the spirit and ideas of the Omaha Platform alive, in one form or another, into the early 20th century.



## SUMMARY

Amidst one of the most tumultuous periods of its history—the depression of the 1890s—the United States held one of its most significant presidential elections. The Populist Party anticipated that struggling Americans would support their movement for change. However, the fate of the Populist Party was ultimately controlled by the Democratic Party, which debated currency reform. In selecting William Jennings Bryan as their candidate, Democrats chose a politician who appealed to Populists. A number of them supported Bryan's campaign. The 1896 election was one of the first to include the modern elements of campaign finance and active campaigning. Although McKinley won the election and the future of the Populist Party was bleak, the forces that brought it into being persisted as the 19th century ended.

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## REFERENCES

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William Jennings Bryan, Cross of Gold speech, 1896 Retrieved from [historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/](https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/)



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