

The election of 1896

essay



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A watershed Election is one that changes history. The candidate has a campaign that decides the course of politics for decades; one that is especially memorable, or that proves to be a dividing line between historical periods. The election of 1896 was just that. The depression of the 1890s, and President Cleveland's unwillingness to use federal resources to assist the unemployed, alienated irate farmers and workers from the Democratic Party. During the 1892 and 1894 elections, Democrats suffered large Congressional seat losses while Republicans and Populists each achieved significant gains. As the presidential election of 1896 drew closer and political leaders worked to define party platforms, currency standards became the hottest issue. While Republicans endorsed the gold standard to win east coast industrialist votes, Populists continued to support unlimited silver coinage to increase the money supply. Democrats, meanwhile, were split as they struggled to find a common direction for their party and overcome the unpopular actions and policies of the Cleveland administration.

At the Democratic convention in Chicago, the commanding presence of William Jennings Bryan captured the attention of the delegates as he spoke in favor of using the ratio of 16 ounces of silver to 1 ounce of gold to create coins. Bryan's support of silver over gold angered those who favored only gold, commonly called Goldbugs. But through a series of speeches, primarily in the south and west where farmers and silver miners lived, support for Bryan's plan grew rapidly. Many considered the 36-year-old, two-term congressman from Nebraska one of the best speakers of the day.

Bryan rose to national prominence when he fought for the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which required the treasury to purchase 4.5 million ounces of silver each month. The agreement, he claimed, would have a harmful inflationary impact on the economy. Bryan used his exceptional oratory skills to call for the implementation of silver coinage and an end to the big business-backed gold standard. "We have petitioned and our petitions have been scorned," Bryan told the audience. "We have entreated and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged and they have mocked when our calamity came.

We beg no longer. We entreat no more. We petition no more. We defy them." Bryan concluded his speech with a phrase that appeared in newspapers across the country and set the tone for the Democratic campaign. "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns," he warned, describing the usage of unlimited coinage of silver and gold as a "holy cause." "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!" He then dramatically extended his arms as if he were on a crucifix. Bryan's spectacular "Cross of Gold" speech invoked a resounding response from the delegates.

The convention promptly adopted a platform calling for unlimited coinage of silver and gold at a ratio of 16 to 1, and then nominated the energetic Bryan for president. However, not everyone agreed with the nomination. Pro-gold Democrats refused to support Bryan and instead nominated their own candidate, Senator John M. Palmer of Illinois. The move was an obvious attempt to hinder Bryan's quest to follow through on his silver coinage strategy. "I will not consider it any great fault if you decide to cast your vote

for William McKinley," Palmer exclaimed, referring to the Republican presidential nominee.

The Democrats' decision to nominate Bryan created a predicament for the Populist Party. If they selected their own candidate, they risked splitting the pro-silver vote, which would give McKinley and the gold-supporting Republicans the White House. However, if they also nominated Bryan, they would lose their party identity. The Populists eventually nominated Bryan, but to separate themselves from the Democrats, they replaced vice-presidential candidate Arthur Sewall with Tom Watson, a former leader of the Farmer's Alliance. Republicans looked to capitalize on their popularity in the upper Midwest and the Northeast.

McKinley, governor of Ohio and a strong proponent of high tariffs, generated substantial support from wealthy industrialists. Ohio businessman Marcus Alonzo Hanna raised more than three million dollars to promote McKinley's candidacy. Hanna understood the power of brochures and newspapers as promotional tools and blanketed cities with 250 million pieces of campaign literature in English and the native languages of immigrants, including German, Swedish, Polish, and Italian. He also sent 1, 500 speakers across the nation to preach about the qualities, abilities, and ideals of the Republican nominee.

During the 1800s, politicians rarely played large roles in their own campaigns because it was considered improper to deliberately pursue the presidency. While Bryan shunned tradition and traveled thousands of miles to take advantage of his considerable public speaking skills, Hanna advised

McKinley to conduct a front-porch campaign. Thousands of people from across the country converged on McKinley's front lawn in Canton, Ohio, to hear him deliver brief speeches. Railroad owners who supported McKinley offered discounted fares so people from every state could afford to hear the Republican speak.

Assistants carefully coordinated the arrival and departure of different groups so McKinley could tailor his speeches to the interests of his audience. With his mother and wife at his side, the candidate then hosted small receptions and shook hands with individual delegates. The candidates spent weeks vying for the support of voters, but Bryan's focus on the silver issue eventually hurt him. The Democrat discussed how the influx of silver would help indebted farmers, but he failed to appeal to the people in urban areas who cared about jobs, wages, and enhanced working conditions.

Both McKinley and Hanna had solid relationships with labor groups and company owners. However, some industrialists turned to threats to guarantee a Republican win. "You may vote any way you wish," some plant owners allegedly told their workers, "but if Bryan is elected on Tuesday, the whistle will not blow on Wednesday." When authorities tallied election results, Bryan carried all of the states of the former Confederacy and many of the states in the Plains and the mountain west, but it was not enough.

McKinley collected 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176. The battle between silver and gold, as it turned out, had little impact on the future of America's currency. In the years following the election, new gold discoveries in Colorado, Alaska, Australia, and South Africa led to an expansion of the

money supply. And inflation from the new supply of gold was greater than what many anticipated would be the result of free silver. The economic recovery catapulted Republicans to the front of the political stage and established them as the party of prosperity.

The strong Republican performance left Democrats with only sectional followers, primarily poor southern farmers who supported aging policies and failed to recognize industrial advances. The Populist Party lost many of its members and faded from the American political landscape. McKinley won re-election in 1900, again defeating Bryan and the aging Democratic platform. Much like the previous election, McKinley campaigned from the comfort of his home and Bryan toured the country speaking to anyone who would listen.

However, this time the Republicans presented their own roving politician when vice-presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt traveled from state to state. His brash and charismatic personality stole the limelight from the smooth-talking Bryan and helped McKinley post an even larger win than he experienced in 1896. The election of 1900 was perhaps the most significant election after the victories of Abraham Lincoln because it marked a change in American politics. No longer would presidential candidates make concerted efforts to court the agrarian vote.

Rather, big business and large urban centers would greatly influence the outcome of elections as opposed to votes being widely dispersed throughout the United States. Republicans remained in office for 16 consecutive years after the election of 1900 and shaped America to reflect their values. As Republican concerns became increasingly aligned with the concerns of

prosperous, white collar, corporate-minded Americans, the face of the Republican Party shifted. African Americans and less affluent Americans, who at one time formed the core of the party, left in search of a political organization that would represent their interests.