

Name: _____ Class Period: _____

Election of 1896

Reviewing the significance of 1896 election....

Directions: Read and **highlight major cues** and answer the questions that follow.

Everything seemed to be falling into place for the Populists. James Weaver made an impressive showing in 1892, and now Populist ideas were being discussed across the nation. The Panic of 1893 was the worst financial crisis to date in American history. As the soup lines grew larger, so did voters' anger at the present system.

When **JACOB S. COXEY** of Ohio marched his 200 supporters into the nation's capital to demand reforms in the spring of 1894, many thought a revolution was brewing. The climate seemed to ache for change. All that the Populists needed was a winning Presidential candidate in 1896.

Ironically, the person who defended the Populist platform that year came from the Democratic Party. **WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN** was the unlikely candidate. An attorney from Lincoln, Nebraska, Bryan's speaking skills were among the best of his generation. Known as the "**GREAT COMMONER**," Bryan quickly developed a reputation as defender of the farmer.

When Populist ideas began to spread, Democratic voters of the South and West gave enthusiastic endorsement. At the Chicago Democratic convention in 1896, Bryan delivered a speech that made his career. Demanding the free coinage of silver, Bryan shouted, "**You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!**" Some scoffed at the Biblical reference as over the top, but thousands of Democratic delegates roared their approval, and at the age of thirty-six, the "**BOY ORATOR**" received the Democratic nomination.

William McKinley stayed out of the public eye in 1896, leaving the campaigning to party hacks and fancy posters like this one. The Republican competitor was **WILLIAM MCKINLEY**, the governor of Ohio. He had the support of the moneyed eastern establishment. Behind the scenes, a wealthy Cleveland industrialist named **MARC HANNA** was determined to see McKinley elected. He, like many of his class, believed that the free coinage of silver would bring financial ruin to America. Using his vast wealth and power, Hanna directed a campaign based on fear of a Bryan victory. McKinley campaigned from his home, leaving the politicking for the party hacks. Bryan revolutionized campaign politics by launching a nationwide **WHISTLE-STOP** effort, making twenty to thirty speeches per day.



When the results were finally tallied, McKinley had beaten Bryan by an electoral vote margin of 271 to 176. Many factors led to Bryan's defeat. He was unable to win a single state in the populous Northeast. Laborers feared the free silver idea as much as their bosses. While inflation would help the debt-ridden, mortgage-paying farmers, it could hurt the wage-earning, rent-paying factory workers. In a sense, the election came down to city versus country. By 1896, the urban forces won. Bryan's campaign marked the last time a major party attempted to win the White House by exclusively courting the rural vote.

The economy of 1896 was also on the upswing. Had the election occurred in the heart of the Panic of 1893, the results may have differed. Farm prices were rising in 1896, albeit slowly. The Populist Party fell apart with Bryan's loss. Although they continued to nominate candidates, most of their membership had reverted to the major parties.

The ideas, however, did endure. Although the free silver issue died, the graduated income tax, direct election of senators, initiative, referendum, recall, and the secret ballot were all later enacted. These issues were kept alive by the next standard bearers of reform — the **PROGRESSIVES** (SOURCE: USHISTORY.ORG)

Despite having the Progressives in their corner, the Democrats lost the election of 1896. Why did this happen?

In what ways did the election of 1896 illustrate the power of American business and cities?

In what ways did this election change American politics?

