



Election of 1896: The Populist Movement TEACHER GUIDE

Lesson Overview

This lesson uses primary source analysis and exploration to examine the election of 1896 as a way to understand the issues that led to the rise of the populist movement and the impact of the People's Party on the American political system. It is designed for students currently studying U.S. history or government in the classroom and scaled to the 11th grade TEKS. Lessons can also be used with younger students with some modifications.

The lesson is designed to be completed in a single 45- to 60-minute class period.



Essential Question

What were the political and economic issues that led to the beginnings of Populism, and how did the emergence of the Populist Party impact U.S. society?

Objectives

- Students will engage with primary sources to understand the impact of third-party movements like Populism.
- Students will use multimodal engagement strategies to develop their historical thinking skills.
- Students will analyze, organize, and use information from a variety of primary sources and communicate that analysis through writing and discussion.

Key Vocabulary

Students will need to have an understanding of the following terms to effectively complete the lesson:

- Agrarian
- Gold standard
- Bimetallism



TEKS

113.41.3.A–C; 113.41.5.C

Lesson Procedure

Warm-Up

There are two possible components for the lesson warm-up: an election snapshot and a primary source document for the class to analyze together. Depending on your classroom needs, you may choose to complete one or both components. The content for both the snapshot and the warm-up document analysis are available as PDF documents and a teacher slide deck.

1. Using the election snapshot, briefly review the main ideas, issues, and players of the election of 1896.
 - a. Be sure to remind students that while the election was important for many reasons, the main thing that you'll be focusing on today is how the election can be seen as a way to understand the issues that led to the rise of the Populist Movement in the United States.
2. Using the sample primary source, review with your students how to thoroughly analyze and explore primary sources.
 - a. This lesson uses a simplified version of the [National Archives and Records Administration's Document Analysis](#) strategies.
 - b. As a group, use the warm-up exercise to review "Populist Party Platform." Remind students that it is important to use close reading skills and apply historical context that they have already learned.
 - c. After analyzing the source as a whole, answer the "Checking for Understanding" questions to ensure student comprehension.

Exploring Primary Sources

The purpose of this section is to have students explore primary sources that describe the extent to which the election of 1896 exemplifies the political issues that led to the emergence of the Populist movement and demonstrates the impact of the Populist Party on American society.

There are many ways that you can choose to engage with the primary sources with your students. Depending on interest, student level, and classroom goals, you may choose to engage with any or all of the provided primary sources.

Three possible engagement models are suggested here:

Write

Using the worksheets provided, have your students work individually to read and examine the documents and then write their answers to the comprehension questions.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining WHO is writing/speaking and WHAT each primary source is about.

Speak

Divide students into groups and provide one primary source to each group. After reading the source on their own, students should consider the author of the source and their perspective.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining HOW the author is communicating and WHY they are saying what they are saying.

Draw

Have students, working individually or in pairs, design a creative, visual representation of the main argument of one primary source. They may choose to create a Venn diagram, a flow chart, or an identity map.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining WHO is writing/speaking and HOW they are getting their point across.

Discussing Primary Sources

In this section, students will discuss their observations, analysis, and conclusions gleaned from analyzing primary sources about the central issues of the election of 1896.

Lead a discussion of the issues at hand. Students will use the key ideas learned during the warm-up and their analyses of primary sources to answer questions.

1. What problems did farmers face at the end of the nineteenth century? What ongoing impacts of the 1893 economic crisis were still being felt?
2. What major issues did the political parties agree and disagree on in the election of 1896?
3. Why did the Populist Party decide to fuse with the Democratic Party and nominate William Jennings Bryan?
4. Why might Bryan have been unable to expand the appeal of his candidacy in 1896 to areas beyond the agricultural regions of the United States? Why did this failure lead to a Republican Party victory in 1896?
5. What strengths did William McKinley possess that appealed to voters?
6. Why might an American in 1896 have backed the Populist platform? Why might they have opposed it?

Closure

If desired, use the final few minutes of the lesson to write or discuss, or assign as homework, the following prompt, which encourages students to compare the issues in the election of 1896 to contemporary election cycles:

What role do you think third-party movements continue to play in American society and government today?



Election of 1896: The Populist Movement Election Snapshot

Essential Question

What were the political and economic issues that led to the beginnings of Populism, and how did the emergence of the Populist Party impact U.S. society?

Key Ideas

- The election of 1896 revealed significant sectional differences as the agricultural regions of the United States clashed with the industrial Northeast for power. Industry and agriculture were in direct competition for land use, creating tensions on both sides.
- Called the first “modern” presidential campaign by some historians, the election of 1896 saw the first broad use of nationwide campaigning by candidates and supporters.
- An agrarian-focused party, the Populist Party was a short-lived but significant third party. Their support of unlimited silver coinage, a progressive income tax, and greater workers’ rights were all designed to increase the power of farmers and bring them economic parity with business and industry. Some Populist ideas were later championed by Progressive Era reformers.
- The Democratic Party co-opted a number of Populist ideas and even nominated the same candidate.
- The Republican Party won the support of the heavily populated, industrial Northeast through their support of the gold standard and enforcing immigration laws, and with that support came to dominate the American political system for the next three decades.

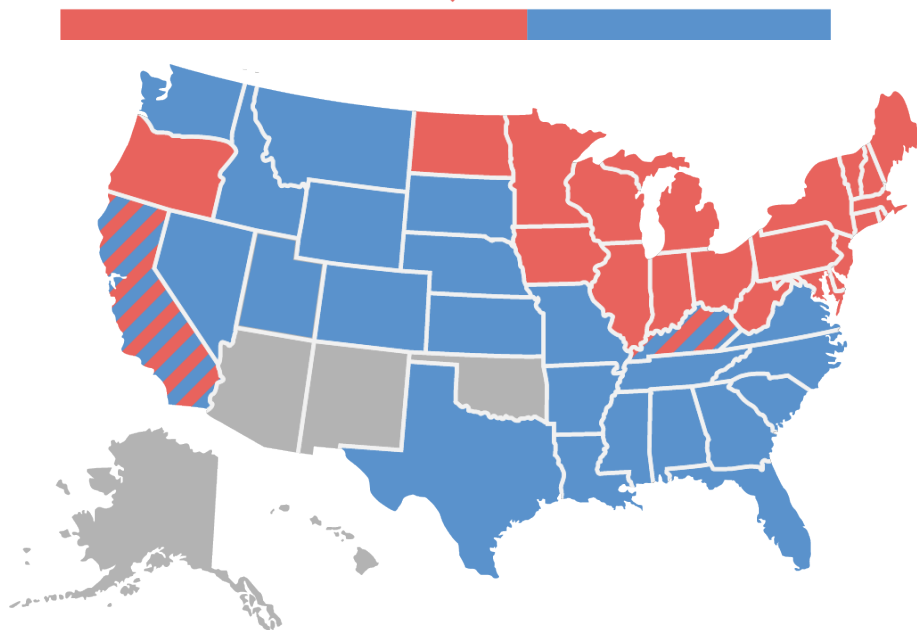
Candidates and Outcome

William Jennings Bryan
(Democrat and Populist)

William McKinley
(Republican)

McKinley 271

Bryan 176





Election of 1896: The Populist Movement Primary Sources and Questions

Warm-Up

Populist Party Platform [excerpts], 1896
Populist party

[Digital History](#)

Primary Sources

Agricultural Prices in Dollars per Unit, 1865–1900, 1975

U.S. Bureau of the Census

The economy was a major platform point for both candidates, as the ongoing effects of the financial panic of 1893 continued to impact much of the country.

[U.S. Bureau of the Census](#)

Republican Party Platform [excerpt], 1896

Republican Party

The United States faced a significant economic depression coming into the election of 1896, and the Republican platform focused heavily on economic policies.

[The American Presidency Project](#)

“Cross of Gold” [excerpt] [audio source], 1896

William Jennings Bryan

William Jennings Bryan was young and relatively unknown when he made this speech that electrified the Democratic convention and won him the nomination for the presidency.

[History Matters](#)

“A Soliloquy” [visual source], 1896

Rocky Mountain News

The debate between supporters of the gold standard and those of “bimetallism” was a major point of contention during the campaign of 1896.

[Vassar College](#)

Crowds Visit McKinley, 1896

Butte Daily Post

Unlike in contemporary campaign cycles, it was customary during this period for candidates not to campaign directly for themselves. McKinley stayed home, with crowds coming to him.

[Crowds Visit McKinley](#)



Warm-Up: Excerpt from the Populist Party Platform Populist Party 1896

. . . We realize that, while we have political independence, our financial and industrial independence is yet to be attained by restoring to our country the Constitutional control and exercise of the functions necessary to a people's government, which functions have been basely surrendered by our public servants to corporate monopolies. . . . Executive power and patronage have been used to corrupt our legislatures and defeat the will of the people, and plutocracy has thereby been enthroned upon the ruins of democracy. To restore the Government intended by the fathers, and for the welfare and prosperity of this and future generations, we demand the establishment of an economic and financial system which shall make us masters of our own affairs and independent of European control, by the adoption of the following:

The Finances

FIRST. We demand a National money, safe and sound, issued by the General Government only, without the intervention of banks of issue, to be a full legal tender for all debts, public and private; a just, equitable, and efficient means of distribution, direct to the people, and through the lawful disbursements of the Government.

SECOND. We demand the free and unrestricted coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16 to 1, without waiting for the consent of foreign nations. . . .

SEVENTH. We demand a graduated income tax, to the end that aggregated wealth shall bear its just proportion of taxation, and we regard the recent decision of the Supreme Court relative to the income-tax as a misinterpretation of the Constitution and an invasion of the rightful powers of Congress over the subject of taxation. . . .

Railroads and Telegraphs

FIRST. Transportation being a means of exchange and a public necessity, the Government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of the people and on a non-partisan basis, to the end that all may be accorded the same treatment in transportation, and that the tyranny and political power now exercised by the great railroad corporations . . . may be destroyed. . . .

The Public Lands

FIRST. True policy demands that the National and State legislation shall be such as will ultimately enable every prudent and industrious citizen to secure a home, and therefore the land should not be monopolized for speculative purposes. . . .

The Referendum

We favor a system of direct legislation through the initiative and referendum, under proper Constitutional safeguards.

Direct Election of President and Senators by the People

FIRST. We demand the election of President, Vice-President, and United States Senators by a direct vote of the people. . . .

A Fair Ballot

Believing that the elective franchise and an untrammelled ballot are essential to a government of, for, and by the people, the People's party condemns the wholesale system of disfranchisement adopted in some States as unrepugnant and undemocratic, and we declare it to be the duty of the several State legislatures to take such actions as will secure a full, free and fair ballot and an honest count.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Warm-Up Exercise: Understanding Perspective Excerpt from the Populist Party Platform

Analyzing a Source: Use the chart below (which is based on the National Archives and Records Administration analysis model) to examine the primary source. Remember that every document is created by a person with a specific point of view that is based on their background, beliefs, and experiences. These questions help you to understand that point of view, or perspective.

Meet the source. What type of source is it? What do you notice first? How would you describe it to someone who hasn't read it?	
Observe its parts. Who created it? Who is the intended audience? When was it created? Where was it created?	
Try to make sense of it. What is it talking about? Why did the maker create it? What was happening at the time in history when this source was created?	
Use it as historical evidence. What did you find out that you might not learn anywhere else? What evidence does the creator present that you should "fact check"? What questions do you have that this source doesn't answer?	

Checking for Understanding: After reviewing the source using the chart above, answer these questions as a class.

- According to the Populist Party, who controls the functions of government?
- What group of people from the country's past does the Populist Party refer to in order to validate their claims regarding the need for reform?
- The Populists had many demands centered on financial concerns. Identify and rank what you think were their most important positions concerning monetary and/or financial issues.
- The Populist Platform includes several planks regarding elections and balloting. Which two planks do you think are most important? Why?



Agricultural Prices in Dollars per Unit, 1865–1900
U.S. Bureau of the Census
Compiled 1970

Context: The economy was a major platform point for both candidates, as the ongoing effects of the financial panic of 1893 continued to impact much of the country.



Year	Wheat		Cotton		Corn	
	Price per bushel	Bushels produced (in millions)	Price per pound	Bales produced (in 1,000 of bales)	Price per bushel	Bushels produced (in millions)
1865	NA	NA	NA	2,094	NA	NA
1870	1.04	254	NA	4,352	.52	1,125
1875	1.01	314	NA	4,631	.42	1,450
1880	.95	502	9.83	6,606	.39	1,707
1885	.77	400	8.39	6,576	.32	2,058
1890	.84	449	8.59	8,653	.50	1,650
1895	.51	542	7.62	7,162	.25	2,535
1900	.62	599	9.15	10,124	.35	2,662

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for Agricultural Prices in Dollars per Unit, 1865–1900

1. According to the chart, what happened to the amounts of wheat, cotton, and corn produced in the United States between 1865 and 1900? What are some possible reasons for this change in the amounts of agricultural commodities produced during this period of time?
2. During the period shown in the chart, what was happening to the price per unit of wheat, cotton, and corn?
3. Which of the three commodities experienced the greatest change in price per unit?
4. For an individual farmer whose livelihood depended on growing these agricultural commodities, what would have been the result of this price change?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Agricultural Prices in Dollars per Unit, 1865–1900

1. According to the chart, what happened to the amounts of wheat, cotton, and corn produced in the United States between 1865 and 1900? What are some possible reasons for this change in the amounts of agricultural commodities produced during this period of time?

All amounts increased. Possible reasons: population growth, expansion of the frontier, western settlement, improved agricultural techniques

2. During the period shown in the chart, what was happening to the price per unit of wheat, cotton, and corn?

With one exception (the year 1890), every year the price per unit decreased until 1895 and then increased slightly in 1900.

3. Which of the three commodities experienced the greatest change in the price per unit?

Wheat had the biggest percent change.

4. For an individual farmer whose livelihood depended on growing these agricultural commodities, what would have been the result of this price change?

Farmers would have made less money for the same amount of work and same amount of produced goods.



**Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform
Republican National Convention
June 18, 1896**

Context: The United States faced a significant economic depression coming into the election of 1896, and the Republican platform focused heavily on economic policies.



...

Protection and Reciprocity are twin measures of American policy and go hand in hand. Democratic rule has recklessly struck down both, and both must be re-established. ...Protection builds up domestic industry and trade and secures our own market for ourselves; reciprocity builds up foreign trade and finds an outlet for our surplus. . . .

The Republican party is unreservedly for sound money. . . . We are unalterably opposed to every measure calculated to debase our currency or impair the credit of our country. We are therefore opposed to the free coinage of silver, except by international agreement with the leading commercial nations of the earth. . . . All of our silver and paper currency must be maintained at parity with gold, and we favor all measures designated to maintain inviolable the obligations of the United States, of all our money, whether coin or paper, at the present standard, the standard of most enlightened nations of the earth.

...

Our foreign policy should be at all times firm, vigorous and dignified, and all our interests in the western hemisphere should be carefully watched and guarded.

...

We reassert the Monroe Doctrine in its full extent, and we reaffirm the rights of the United States to give the Doctrine effect by responding to the appeal of any American State for friendly intervention in ease of European encroachment.

...

For the protection of the equality of our American citizenship and of the wages of our workingmen, against the fatal competition of low priced labor, we demand that the immigration laws be thoroughly enforced, and so extended as to exclude from entrance to the United States those who can neither read nor write.

...

We demand that every citizen of the United States shall be allowed to cast one free and unrestricted ballot, and that such ballot shall be counted and returned as cast.

We proclaim our unqualified condemnation of the uncivilized and preposterous [barbarous] practice well known as lynching, and the killing of human beings suspected or charged with crime without process of law.

...

We believe in an immediate return to the free homestead policy of the Republican party, and urge the passage by Congress of a satisfactory free homestead measure which has already passed the House, and is now pending in the senate.

. . .

. . . The Republican party is mindful of the rights and interests of women, and believes that they should be accorded equal opportunities, equal pay for equal work, and protection to the home. We favor the admission of women to wider spheres of usefulness and welcome their co-operation in rescuing the country from Democratic and Populist mismanagement and misrule.

Student Name:
Class Period:
Date:

Questions for Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform

1. What was the Republican Party's plan for stimulating the economy and encouraging trade?
2. According to the Republican Party platform, what action would debase U.S. currency?
3. What was the Republican Party's foreign policy?
4. Give three examples of the Republican Party's stance on human/civil rights.

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform

1. What was the Republican Party's plan for stimulating the economy and encouraging trade?

The Republican Party's plan involved protection of domestic goods and reciprocity to promote foreign trade.

2. According to the Republican Party platform, what action would debase U.S. currency?

The free coinage of silver would debase U.S. currency.

3. What was the Republican Party's foreign policy?

The Republican Party believed the nation should be active in guarding its interests and supported the Monroe Doctrine in intervening if those interests were challenged.

4. Give three examples of the Republican Party's stance on human/civil rights.

Answers should include three of the following: one person, one vote; anti-lynching; free homesteads; women's equality



Excerpt from “Cross of Gold”
William Jennings Bryan
July 8, 1896

Context: William Jennings Bryan was young and relatively unknown when he made this speech that electrified the Democratic convention and won him the nomination for the presidency.



...

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these 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.

My friends, we declare that this nation is able to legislate for its own people on every question, without waiting for the aid or consent of any other nation on earth, and upon that issue we expect to carry every single state in the Union.

I shall not slander the fair state of Massachusetts nor the state of New York by saying that, when citizens are confronted with the proposition, “Is this nation able to attend to its own business?”—I will not slander either one by saying that the people of those states will declare our helpless impotency as a nation to attend to our own business. It is the issue of 1776 over again. Our ancestors, when but 3 million, had the courage to declare their political independence of every other nation upon earth. Shall we, their descendants, when we have grown to 70 million, declare that we are less independent than our forefathers? No, my friends, it will never be the judgment of this people. Therefore, we care not upon what lines the battle is fought. If they say bimetallism is good, but we cannot have it till some nation helps us, we reply that, instead of having a gold standard because England has, we shall restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States have.

If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and 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.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for "Cross of Gold"

1. According to Bryan, were farms or cities more important to United States society? How did he describe their relationship?
2. According to Bryan, the United States faced an economic choice between which two monetary systems? Which plan did Bryan support? Which system did Europe support?
3. What much earlier event in U.S. history did Bryan refer to in his speech? Why do you think he made this reference?
4. Bryan also referenced religious imagery in his speech, including the "cross of gold" phrase that gives his speech its name. Why do you think he chose to use this type of imagery, given his audience?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for “Cross of Gold”

1. According to Bryan, were farms or cities more important to United States society? How did he describe their relationship?

Farms were more important than cities. Cities could not exist without farms supporting them.

2. According to Bryan, the United States faced an economic choice between which two monetary systems? Which plan did Bryan support? Which system did Europe support?

The United States faced a choice between “bimetallism” and the gold standard. Bryan supported bimetallism. Europe supported the gold standard.

3. What much earlier event in U.S. history did Bryan refer to in his speech? Why do you think he made this reference?

Bryan referred to the American Revolution, specifically the initial events of 1776.

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence from the text. Answers should point toward Bryan’s desire to rally the crowd around the idea of independence, specifically independence from all other nations and their policies.

4. Bryan also referenced religious imagery in his speech, including the “cross of gold” phrase that gives his speech its name. Why do you think he chose to use this type of imagery given his audience?

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence. Answers could point toward: Bryan’s own strong religious faith; Bryan’s appeal to mostly rural, agrarian populations who were more likely to be involved in the religious revivals sweeping the nation at that time; the overall campaign’s portrayal of free silver as a moral issue rather than just an economic one.

“A Soliloquy”
Rocky Mountain News
July 16, 1896

Context: The debate between supporters of the gold standard and those of “bimetallism” was a major point of contention during the campaign of 1896.



A SOLILOQUY.

Miss Democracy with a sigh of relief “There’s a good day’s work and the path is clear for decent people.”

Student Name:
Class Period:
Date:

Questions for "A Soliloquy"

1. What does the woman in this picture represent?
2. Who did she sweep off the path leading to the White House?
3. What inference can be drawn from the cartoon concerning who the "decent people" were?
4. Based on what you know about the election of 1896, which political party would most likely support the views expressed in this cartoon?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for “A Soliloquy”

1. What does the woman in this picture represent?

The woman in the picture represents democracy.

2. Who did she sweep off the path leading to the White House?

She swept people supporting Wall Street and the gold standard off the path leading to the White House.

3. What inference can be drawn from the cartoon concerning who the “decent people” were?

The “decent people” were supporters of “bimetallism,” or free silver, who depicted themselves as morally righteous and decent during their campaign.

4. Based on what you know about the election of 1896, which political party would most likely support the views expressed in this cartoon?

Populists would most likely support the views expressed in this cartoon.



“Crowds Visit McKinley”
Associated Press Wire, *Butte Daily Post*
September 12, 1896

Context: Unlike in contemporary campaign cycles, it was customary during this period for candidates not to campaign directly for themselves. McKinley stayed home, with crowds coming to him.



Canton, Sept. 12—Two trainloads of the Commercial Democratic McKinley Club of Chicago reached Canton this morning. They were met at the station by the Canton Commercial Travelers' escort and the Canton Troop. The party numbers between 900 and 1000. They were escorted to the hotels for breakfast, and prepared to call on McKinley at 11 o'clock. As they paraded past Mother Nancy Allison McKinley's home they cheered, the venerable woman bowing her acknowledgement.

A thousand people joined the Democratic Chicagoans at the McKinley home at 11 o'clock. The meeting waxed enthusiastic as Maj. McKinley appeared on the doorstep. Chief Marshal Frank Higbee introduced President Hoffstadt, who said, in part:

"Maj. McKinley: In behalf of the Commercial Democratic McKinley Club of Chicago, comprising only men who have always voted the Democratic ticket, and representing every branch of the mercantile interests of our city, I extend to you our most cordial greeting, and pledge to you our earnest and hearty support. Those principles which we advocated, though still dear to many of us, sink into insignificance when our country is threatened by the alleged Democratic party. Its platform and candidates nominated at Chicago, advocating repudiation and dishonor, would if successful, we believe create widespread disaster and ruin to the business interests of our country."

Following closely upon the call of the Chicago commercial men, came the first Pennsylvania delegation of steel workers of the Carnegie mills at Homestead. They came in a special train of 33 coaches. They marched four abreast and as the last were falling in line at the depot the first were almost at the McKinley residence, over half a mile away. Cheering mingled with music of a dozen bands and noise all over the business section of Canton was simply deafening. The jam around the McKinley residence is beyond description. J. Molanthy, a workman at the Carnegie mills is the spokesman. While he is speaking trains at the depot are pouring out a steady stream and it will be several hours before the last arrives. The railroad company's estimate that ten thousand Pennsylvanians will be here is likely to be too small.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for “Crowds Visit McKinley”

1. Who came to visit McKinley in Canton, Ohio? What economic interest did this group represent?
2. What had been the group’s previous political affiliation?
3. What reasons were given by the group for changing their support to Republican candidate McKinley over his Democratic opponent Bryan?
4. How did McKinley’s style of campaigning in 1896 differ from that seen in modern-day presidential campaigns?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for “Crowds Visit McKinley”

1. Who came to visit McKinley in Canton, Ohio? What economic interest did this group represent?

The Commercial Democrats of Chicago, representing the mercantile industry, visited McKinley.

2. What had been the group’s previous political affiliation?

The group had previously exclusively supported the Democratic party.

3. What reasons were given by the group for changing their support to Republican candidate McKinley over his Democratic opponent Bryan?

They noted that policies of the current Democratic ticket would “create widespread disaster and ruin to the business interests of our country.”

4. How did McKinley’s style of campaigning in 1896 differ from that seen in modern-day presidential campaigns?

McKinley did not travel himself to campaign but rather welcomed groups to visit him at home where he gave speeches from his front porch.