

The Election of 1896

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A nation on the edge of a new century, on the heels of a severe economic depression, and hovering precariously above the precipice of political divide as it was enraptured in an election noted for its intensity, divisiveness and originality. A young, charismatic reformer leading a populist insurgency—a Demosthenes on the stump who wowed the masses with his oratorical gifts as he trekked around large swathes of the country as no candidate had done before; the opponent, a folksy politician who never left his front porch, while his hulking campaign juggernaut brought the masses to his doorstep and churned out campaign literature and materials as never before seen. A nation cleaved into two rival camps, a house divided on the question of silver and how best to move America forward from perilous times. The 1896 Presidential election offered a decisive contest between the itinerant Democratic silver firebrand, William Jennings Bryan and the Republican gold sphinx on the front porch, William McKinley; the contest had tremendous reverberations on the American political spectrum.

More importantly, from a political communications perspective, the election of 1896 proved particularly pivotal. It marked a departure point for an American election strategy and political campaigning—closing the door on previous campaign models and strategies and heralding in the dawning of a new era of political campaigning. The election of 1896 served as both “Alpha and Omega” of American political campaigns, offering a clear dichotomy of divergent election strategies by contrasting campaigns. It also served as the precursor to the modern political campaign for its adept utilization of media publicity, its overall national strategy, its calculated employment of the hot issues, and distinct oratorical and rhetorical pursuits by the candidates.

The election of 1896 offers a remarkable case study in American politics and American political campaign communications and strategy; this paper seeks to examine the election of 1896 from a political communications perspective. It will analyze the use of political communications strategies and tactics used by the two campaigns in relation to the relevant political communication concepts and course theories. The author will evaluate the message, medium for message distribution and new campaign technology used by each campaign to further its respective quest for the White House. It also seeks to analyze the media environment of the 1896 election, and how each candidate was able to use his respective campaign strategy to harness this medium.

Background

The environment leading up to the to the 1896 election was tumultuous. The election came in the wake of economic depression and an atmosphere of anxiety that was gripping a nation in fiscal turmoil. As Professor Gilbert Fite noted in his historical survey of the 1896 election, “The presidential campaign and election took place in an atmosphere of national crisis. During the years preceding this important political contest, depression, political unrest, economic and class conflicts, and violence had fomented the country.¹” The nation was wracked by the fallout caused by the Panic of 1893, and saw a crisis of leadership in the White House as then-President Grover Cleveland offered feckless responses to the nation’s ails. Unemployment spiked and farm prices plummeted, all while railroads and banks collapsed. Unemployment figures ranged between one to three million people, as nearly one-quarter of the nation’s railroads claimed bankruptcy, along with six hundred banks and sixteen thousand businesses². Along with the economic malaise plaguing the country, a fundamental question loomed large in the 1896 election over the currency debate raging across the land. In one camp were those who supported

¹ Gilbert Fite, “Election of 1896,” p. 1787, in Schlesinger (ed), History of American Presidential Elections: Volume II 1848-1896.

² Gerald Leinwand, William Jennings Bryan: Uncertain Trumpet, p.61

“bimetallism” and the free coinage of silver at a rate of 16:1 to that of gold; in opposition were those who favored “sound money” and a strict adherence to the gold standard. Into the void stepped two candidates with vastly different pedigrees, paths to the candidacy and platforms to reform the nation’s ills.

The Advance Agent of Prosperity

Born in Niles, Ohio in 1843, William McKinley served with distinction in the Union Army during the Civil War and was appointed to the rank of major. Following the war, he returned to Ohio to study law and opened a practice in Canton. His law career proved an adept base to launch a political career, and his personality was well suited for the vocation. On McKinley’s personality, character and perception, Professor Gilbert Fite noted:

“McKinley had most of the attributes of a successful politician. He was friendly, congenial, and sympathetic to the needs and desires of others; he inspired trust and confidence, and had the strong loyalty of his associates. His personality was spotless. He was deeply patriotic, had a strong vein of sentimentality, and was deeply religious. An excellent public speaker, McKinley was especially successful in give and take situations. People saw him as an honest, stable citizen and a dependable and capable public servant...Above all McKinley gave the appearance of a man of assurance, strength, and stability³.”

McKinley successfully ran for the House of Representative in 1876. While serving in the House, McKinley became “well known as one of the nation’s most articulate spokesmen for the protective tariff.⁴” Despite his defeat for re-election to the House in 1890, the law passed the same year bore his name, “The McKinley Tariff.” Following his House defeat, McKinley returned to Ohio and was elected the state’s governor, serving two terms in Columbus.

As the 1896 election neared, William McKinley seemed to have the inside track to the Republican nomination: “He had nationwide political support, a good personal reputation, and he came from a key state...which gave him solid political backing. Moreover, by concentrating on the tariff issue and emphasizing a program of economic nationalism, McKinley had successfully

³ Fite, op cit., p.1799

⁴ ibid, p.1798

identified himself as the ‘advanced agent of prosperity.’⁵” Beyond name, reputation and political base, McKinley also possessed the most adept and able political campaign managers to ever to grace the political landscape: Mark Hanna. The Cleveland industrialist Marcus Alonzo “Mark” Hanna had made his fortune in coal, iron and shipping, before transitioning into politics in the 1880s. Hanna had previously managed candidacy nominations for Republican election bids, including working on behalf of Ohio Senator John Sherman’s unsuccessful pursuit for the candidacy in 1884 and 1888 Republican primaries⁶. During these efforts, Hanna and McKinley fashioned a relationship, and Hanna would later manage McKinley’s unsuccessful 1890 House defeat and successful political endeavors in the 1891 and 1893 Ohio governors race.

Together, McKinley and Hanna would adroitly secure the 1896 Republican nomination, with little real challenge from opposition Republican lawmakers. Hanna was able to bank on McKinley’s popularity among rank and file Republicans, and unify and organize this backing into large demonstrations of support for his candidate⁷. Historian Stanley L. Jones commented, “Newspaper reporters, at St. Louis to cover the convention noted that McKinley buttons, McKinley canes, and McKinley posters were everywhere. McKinley’s name appeared to be on every man’s lips.⁸” McKinley won handily on the first ballot. Meanwhile, the Republican Party platform adopted was wholly for “sound money” and opposed to the free silver movement, as silver Republicans posed no real challenge and support for the gold standard in the campaign platform was practically unanimous⁹. More importantly, McKinley and Hanna began to show the mechanisms of the campaign machine that they would use in the subsequent presidential campaign.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ C.A. Stern, Resurgent Republicanism: The Handiwork of Hanna, p.7

⁷ Fite, *op cit.*, p.1804

⁸ Stanley L. Jones, The Presidential Election of 1896, p.158, note: delegates from South Carolina even invented a drink called “the McKinley,” made with heavy parts bourbon whiskey.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 172

The Cross of Gold

Unlike the well-organized coronation for Republican nomination that McKinley enjoyed, William Jennings Bryan undertook a far more tortuous path to the Democratic nomination. Born in 1860, and hailing from the prairie town of Salem, Illinois, William Jennings Bryan began practicing law in his home state before moving to Lincoln, Nebraska in 1887. Like McKinley, he too gave up his law career and moved into politics. His character, personality and oratorical gifts were beginning to come to the fore and showed Bryan to be an adept politician. Fite noted on his personality:

“Bryan had many qualities and characteristics which nineteenth-century Americans sought in their leaders. He was deeply religious, a good family man and father- a person who inspired confidence and even affection among his associates...Perhaps his greatest asset as a political leader was his brilliant oratory. Few men in American history could match Bryan’s effectiveness on the platform. His magnificent voice, his manner, his obvious sincerity, and his ability to articulate the feelings and thoughts of his audience combined to make Bryan an extremely persuasive man.¹⁰”

Owing to his political prowess, Bryan won a congressional seat in a heavily Republican district in 1890, and held the seat in the following election. Although he was defeated in a Senate bid in 1894, by the time Bryan left Congress the following year, he had begun to acquire a national reputation for his eloquence for the free silver cause. He had also gained increased prominence as the editor of the Omaha *World-Herald*, a position he took on during his senatorial run.

Heading into the Democratic National Convention in July 1896, it had become clear that the silver wing of the Democratic Party was in ascendance, but there was no clear candidate to lead. It was on July 9, 1896 that the 36-year old dark-horse candidate rode the silver rails to the Democratic nomination, on the back of one of the most famous and dramatic political speeches in the nation’s history. Describing the scene, historian Donald Springen wrote: “It was almost midnight by the time Bryan gave the most important speech of his life on July 9, 1896. Six feet tall, slim, handsome, magnetic, and believing every word he said, Bryan thrilled his audience. He

¹⁰ Fite, op cit., 1807

meant to get the nomination for President. The late hour and the audience demanded something more than arguments.¹¹”

Cloaking himself in evangelistic lexis and draping himself in the banner of defiance, Bryan’s words of rebellion rang out like a cannon shot across the 20,000 person capacity-filled Chicago convention hall, captivating the crowd. Donning the mantle of his silver crusade, Bryan stated: “With a zeal approaching the zeal of Peter the Hermit, our silver Democrats went forth from victory unto victory until they are now assembled, not to discuss, not to debate, but to enter up the judgment rendered by the plain people of this country.”

To his fellow Westerners, tired of domination by the Eastern establishment, he exclaimed: “We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned; 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 petition no more. We defy them.”

To the cosmopolitan industrialists in favor of the gold standard, Bryan lashed out with the fury of a biblical prophet: “You tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down you 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 on the streets of every city in the country.”

Then in the fiery crescendo, delivered his final reply to the gold partisans, Bryan bellowed: “we will 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 on a cross of gold.’¹²” As Bryan delivered his dramatic conclusion, he coupled his climax with affected gestures of crucifixion to complete his passion play. Springen noted:

“The audience saw Christ himself as Bryan raised his hands to the sides of his head and, with fingers spread inward, moved them slowly down to his temples as he uttered, ‘crown of

¹¹ Donald Springen, *William Jennings Bryan: Orator of Small-Town America*, Greenwood Press: Ann Arbor 1991, p. 15

¹² Text of William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold Speech,” available at <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/>>

thorns.' When he reached 'cross of gold,' his arms formed the cross, and the symbol of his body, combined with the words transfixed 20,000 people for a moment of time. And then, one of the greatest ovations ever accorded a speaker erupted.¹³

The exuberant crowd carried off Bryan in triumph. The Cross of Gold speech was masterful because it worked on multiple levels. Springen continued, "The speech stands as a masterpiece of its type; a moral-inspirational-political address combining emotional content, Biblical phraseology, glittering imagery, and striking analogies with an almost perfect adaptation to a massive, divided audience."¹⁴ Newspapers along the pro-silver line gave effusive praise to the speech. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* termed Bryan's speech, "an eloquent, stirring, and manly appeal," that delivered the nomination to Bryan; the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stated that Bryan "just about immortalized himself."¹⁵ On the back of his speech and the silver insurgency it tapped into, Bryan received the Democratic nomination the following day.

Beyond Bryan's oratory radiance, he framed the "Cross of Gold" speech in conjunction with a number of clear political communications tactics. In his book about the communication theory related to the 1896 election, Prof. William Harpine noted, "Bryan used the *forms* of radical rhetoric, casting the issues into the framework of a contest between the have and the have-nots. Superficially, bimetallism may appear to be a mysterious economic issue. Bryan transformed this issue into a symbol of the struggle of the ordinary working American."¹⁶

Meanwhile, the fundamental nature of the speech was the concept that Bowers, Ochs and Jensen cite as a "polarization strategy."¹⁷ On the polarization strategy, Harpine stated, "A polarization strategy goads the audience to abandon the middle course and to put themselves on

¹³ Springen, op cit., p. 16

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 18

¹⁵ "Bryan," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 11, 1896, p.1; "Bryan for President," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 11, 1896, p.4 (CF Harpine, p.64)

¹⁶ Bryan would also receive the nomination for the Populist Party for the presidency, however the Populist Party would nominate a different candidate, Thomas Watson as Bryan's Vice-Presidential nominee. Bryan's Vice Presidential nominee from the Democratic Party was Arthur Sewall. It was never made clear how the dual vice-presidency would play out if Bryan had been elected.

¹⁶ Harpine, op cit., p.58

¹⁷ Jonathan Bowers, Donavan J. Ochs, and Richard Jensen, *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1993), p. 34-36 (CF Harpine, ibid)

one side or the other. Polarization is the obverse of unity and compromise.¹⁸ Moreover, within the polarization strategy Bryan employed the tactics of both “flag issue” and “flag individual.” The dual tactics of flag issue and flag individual focus on an issue or individual that serve as a target of attack for a deeper symbolic issue¹⁹. Bryan painted the gold standard as a flag issue, and McKinley as a flag individual, as Harpine noted, “In Bryan’s rhetoric, the gold standard became a symbol of the mighty eastern financiers’ assault on the American worker...Bryan made McKinley into a flag individual who represented the nation’s wealthy interests.²⁰”

Yet this polarization strategy and language of confrontation would come to later haunt Bryan, as he sewed divisiveness between East and West, between farmer and city dweller, between gold and silver supporters. Harpine noted, “With such rhetoric, Bryan accented the conflicts within the nation, not its unity.²¹” McKinley and Hanna would later deftly play on the polarization as they carried out a brilliant Front Porch campaign with national unity as its centerpiece; meanwhile, Bryan would undertake a journey of political significance, embarking on the first modern political campaign for the presidency.

The Great Commoner’s Long March

With the nomination wrapped up, Bryan set-off on what would shape the contours of modern political campaigning. A month following the Democratic Nomination Convention, Bryan kicked off his campaign march “from Nebraska to the sea,” culminating with an acceptance speech at Madison Square Garden in New York, and then back again²². Bryan’s previous divisive rhetoric, anti-establishment roots and populist backing had created an image of a wild-eyed fanatic to the eastern establishment and its more traditional mores. Historian LeRoy Ashby noted:

¹⁸ Harpine, *ibid*

¹⁹ Bowers et al, *op cit.*, p.34-35 (CF Harpine, *op cit.*, p.59)

²⁰ Harpine, p.59

²¹ *ibid*, p, 62

²² Ashby, *op cit.*, p.66

“Bryan himself—like the Populists—faced continuing ridicule from large newspapers, prominent members of the clergy, and corporate groups. One conservative Republican dubbed him ‘the blatant wild ass of the prairie’...; and a New York City minister described him as a ‘mouthing, slobbering demagogue.’ The *Nation* magazine dismissed his supporters as ‘Populist and Anarchist groups.’²³”

In an attempt to soothe doubts about his candidacy to eastern voters, Bryan traveled by railroad to New York to formally launch his campaign, all along the way stopping to give various rallies that would receive considerable coverage by an eager press. The journey from Nebraska to New York was punctuated by brief campaign stops, where Bryan would address burgeoning audiences.

The journey in itself, as well as the subsequent New York speech marked political communications developments for two reasons. First, major newspapers hitched a ride to cover the expedition marking the first instance of en route coverage. Harpine commented, “Leading newspapers, Democratic and Republican alike, covered Bryan’s speeches and incidents thoroughly. A group of more than thirty newspapers and wire reporters, armed with typewriters and teams of stenographers, accompanied Bryan on the train.²⁴” Meanwhile, Bryan’s subsequent Madison Square Garden address was tarnished by his deference to media audience over primary audience. Viewing the newspaper readership as his primary audience, and fearful of misquote if he spoke extemporaneously, at the Madison Square Garden event, the “Boy Orator of the Platte” delivered advanced copies to the press and stuck to his prepared text, delivering a stilted speech. Political communications theorist Kathleen Hall Jamieson noted: “Because Bryan viewed the newspaper readers as his primary audience, he chained himself to the text. The result was a hobbled speech, the oratorical low point of the campaign.²⁵” However, Bryan was to rally following the New York address, carrying out one of the most prolific campaign efforts ever put forward.

In the next ten weeks preceding the election, William Jennings Bryan would criss-cross the nation, carrying out a campaign as never before seen. What made Bryan’s campaign so

²³ *ibid*, p.64

²⁴ Harpine, *op cit.*, p.75

²⁵ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the President*, p.17

revolutionary was the way he employed the available transportation technology, the railroad, to a degree never previously used. While the railroad had been used to some degree in previous elections*, no candidate would employ the nations rails to such magnitude, traveling such distances and using to reach as many potential voters. Trent and Friedenbergr noted that it was only by 1896 that the railroad network was reliable enough to make such a campaign tour possible²⁶. This railroad endeavor would pioneer what would later be termed the “whistle-stop” campaign²⁷.

Bryan traversed the country, carrying out political rallies from state to state, town to town. In total, he would travel more than 18,000 miles, across 27 states and 250 cities²⁸. Owing to his nickname as “the Great Commoner,” he rejected a private Pullman car offered by a major railroad company, and traveled regular class^z. Meanwhile, he often carried his own luggage and walked from the railroad station to his destination²⁹.

Bryan campaigned eighteen hours a day, delivering as many as thirty speeches at campaign rallies and impromptu gatherings; he delivered nearly three thousand speeches ultimately addressing more than 5 million people³⁰. Fite noted:

“People were deeply attracted to this ‘political evangelist.’ Even in the middle of the night they lined the railroad tracks and crowded stations to catch a glimpse of their hero, or to hear him make a few informal remarks. No campaigner in American history had ever drawn such throngs of men and women. Crowds of twenty thousand to fifty thousand were common at his major addresses. People cried, prayed, hoped and worked for his election as he became the popular idols of millions.³¹”

□ 1840 marking the first time a political party would employ it for a national campaign to send speakers to all twenty-six states; 1860 marking the first time a presidential candidate traveled through the north to campaign for his own election. See Trent & Friedenbergr, p.79

²⁶ Judith Trent & Robert Friedenbergr, Political Campaign Communication, p.79

²⁷ Thomas Hollihan, Uncivil Wars, p.198

²⁸ Springen, op cit., p.19; Fite, op cit., p.1814; Leinwand, p.62;

□ Although later in the campaign, the Democratic National Committee would provide Bryan with his own railroad car

²⁹ Leinwand, op cit., p.62

³⁰ Leinwand, *ibid*; Springen, p.19

³¹ Fite, op cit., p. 1814

In regard to political communications theory, Bryan used these rallies to communicate his values, goals, and objectives; moreover, he was a master at creating and utilizing political imagery through emotional appeal and notions of “homophily.”³² Prof. Thomas Hollihan defines homophily as “the natural tendency of people to bond with others like themselves.”³³

By harnessing the political narrative that portrayed Bryan not only as of the common folk but as “the Great Commoner,” a leader of the same stock, rising up to protect the common man’s interests, Bryan was able to create a political narrative that bordered on almost messianic affection, and would sustain his efforts through a wave of popular sentiment for a campaign that generally lacked organization and support³⁴. In the realm of “identity and identification,” and in terms of identifying and mobilizing shared interests³⁵, Bryan was able to masterfully tie his candidacy to the hopes and dreams of his followers. Beyond his tremendous capacity to project his ideas to followers through his oratory gifts, what drew Bryan’s supporters closer was “his ability to identify himself with the mass sense of need. He appealed to the common man. The farmer, the laborer, the man in the street looked to him as a political messiah.”³⁶ Ashby further commented,

“By continually demonstrating his affection for the common people, Bryan worked a special kind of political magic at the grass-roots level. Novelist Willa Cather had recently watched ‘rugged, ragged men of the soil weep like children’ when Bryan addressed them in Red Cloud, Nebraska...after his speeches hundreds of ‘the poor, the weak the humble, the aged, the infirm’ pressed towards him, reaching out ‘hard and wrinkled hands with crooked fingers and cracked knuckles to the young great orator, as if he were in very truth their promised redeemer from bondage.’³⁷”

But just as Bryan was busy on his whirlwind tour, McKinley and Hanna were busy campaigning from the front porch.

³² Thomas Hollihan, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 9, 75-76, 85

³³ *ibid*, p.85

³⁴ For more on political narratives, see Drew Westin, *The Political Brain*, p.146-147

³⁵ Prof. Thomas Hollihan class lecture, January 26, 2008

³⁶ Myron Phillips, “William Jennings Bryan,” p. 900, in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, vol. II (New York: McGraw Hill, 1943)

³⁷ Ashby, *op cit.*, p.64

The Front Porch Campaign

McKinley and Hanna turned to beating Bryan in campaign organization, targeted messaging and its own political imagery of their candidate as a responsible, elder statesman. McKinley's campaign distilled the Republican message into two main themes: prosperity and patriotism. Historian Robert Cherney notes:

“‘Prosperity’ involved blaming Cleveland and the Democrats for the depression and arguing that the solution could only come through a protective tariff and ‘sound money,’ i.e. the gold standard. Bryan’s silver policy, McKinley argued would bring inflation and prove harmful to all... ‘Patriotism’ took the form of a nationalistic appeal for unity against Democratic efforts to divide the country by class and section.³⁸”

The Republicans, under Hanna's guidance, then turned to classic political practices of astute image manufacturing, polling and voter mobilization, but also added the new methods of political advertising. In addition, Hanna carried out the pre-cursor to polling by conducting detailed political assessments of key voting groups and demographics³⁹.

“This is a year for press and pen,” McKinley remarked, and the Republican Party responded with a flood of campaign materials targeted at every voting demographic. Cherney noted, “The Republican campaign relied heavily on distributing materials, especially pamphlets of every sort, aimed at almost every conceivable audience, from bicyclists to Germans. Materials left the Chicago campaign headquarters in boxcar lots. By the end of the campaign, 250 million items had gone out, equivalent to eighteen for every vote cast.⁴⁰” More than one million copies of William Allen White's derisive anti-Populist piece, *What's the Matter with Kansas* was distributed alone, while other forms of campaign literature poured out in a dozen of languages⁴¹.

³⁸ Robert Cherney, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, p. 64

³⁹ Stern, *op cit.*, p.25

⁴⁰ Cherney, *op cit.*, p.65

□ “Advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine,” Theodore Roosevelt disapprovingly stated of Hanna's tactics.

⁴¹ Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley*, p.87

The grass-roots fervor initially caught Republicans off-guard. Bryan was at first dismissed as a minor cause for concern—barely old enough to be eligible for the presidency, hailing from an unimportant state with followers drawn from rabble ranks⁴². Yet the groundswell of excitement awoke McKinley and Hanna from their torpor. With Bryan drawing crowds of support as he toured the country, Hanna recommended to McKinley that he too embark on his own campaign trip, something McKinley shot down, stating, “I might just as well put up a trapeze on my front lawn and compete with some professional athlete as go out speaking against Bryan.”⁴³

While the aforementioned front lawn would play a role in the campaign, instead McKinley and Hanna brought the masses to Canton. Hanna’s Republican National Committee organized bringing delegation after delegation to Canton, with the help of the agreeable railroads, which Leech noted, “Low excursion rates from all parts of the country made the trip to Canton, as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* disgustingly remarked, “cheaper than staying at home.”⁴⁴ ⁴⁵

Processions of delegations made their way to the Republican Mecca that was Canton to pay greetings to the Republican candidate. McKinley would address the visiting delegations in carefully prepared remarks, offering as many as 12 speeches a day on issues related to his

⁴² Fite, op cit., p.1815-6; Ashby, op cit., p.66

⁴³ CF Fite, ibid

⁴⁴ Leech, op cit., p.88

⁴⁵ Leech describes the scene in Canton in vivid detail: “For the eager Republican pilgrims, the journey combined of the excitement of a political demonstration with the pleasure of an outing. Decked in campaign badges, caps, and neckties, they tumbled off the trains into the welcoming arms of Canton. Committees of greeters were on hand at the depot, with the well-mounted and nattily uniformed squads of Canton troop which had been organized for escort duty. The parades formed around the bands and banners, and, guided by the clattering horsemen, wound through a town ablaze with red, white, and blue, and noisy with the cheers of citizens on the curbstones. At the foot of North Market Street, the delegations passed beneath the ornate plaster structure of the McKinley Arch, surmounted by the candidate’s portrait, and at last broke ranks to crowd onto the McKinley lawn.

There was a breathless moment when the handle of the door turned, and a blast of cheers when McKinley appeared on the front porch. The spokesman stepped forward to deliver an address in which expressions of allegiance to the candidate and to Republican principles were blended with complimentary allusions to the community or organization or industry represented by the group. McKinley listened with rapt attention. . . Then, mounting a chair, McKinley talked to the people. He bade them welcome to his home, and thanked them for the honor of their call. He said a few words on the campaign issues, adapting the discussion to suit the special interests of his audience.”

respective audience⁴⁶. In total, McKinley would deliver more than 300 speeches to nearly three-quarters of a million visitors from his front porch in Canton⁴⁷.

Realizing that he couldn't compete with Bryan's oratory, McKinley instead sought to play up on imagery and the trappings of statesmanship, as the front porch setting allowed McKinley to appear more stable and statesmanlike⁴⁸. Unlike the passionate rhetoric of Bryan, McKinley was calm and restrained. To this end, the Republican *Washington Evening Star* editorialized that McKinley "spoke to the whole country daily, always in words of soberness and truth."⁴⁹ Moreover, as Harpine noted, "The genius of McKinley's Front Porch campaign was that it did not look like a campaign. The impression could not be avoided that Bryan was stumping desperately for votes while McKinley waited at home for the people to endorse him."⁵⁰ Moreover, this campaign strategy was more inline with the traditional mores of 19th century political campaigns. Trent and Friedenbergl highlighted this campaign notion, stating, "[Candidates] were not expected to [solicit votes], because the prevailing attitude was that the office must seek the person; that is, the appearance of modest reluctance— of being above politics— had to be maintained."⁵¹

More importantly, McKinley adeptly utilized Kenneth Burke's notion of *identification* between voters and himself⁵². Harpine noted, "Out of the awesome mass of visitors, parades, and cheering, staged purely for purposes of the campaign, McKinley somehow created a feeling that he cared about each visitor, that he welcomed each one warmly to his home, that their interests were identified with one another's and with the Republican cause."⁵³ Moreover, in its push for the image of unity and diversity, the Front Porch campaign also played on homophilly. Bringing like-minded groups together to the American setting of Canton, to meet with the avuncular

⁴⁶ Trent and Friedenbergl, op cit., p. 102

⁴⁷ Lewis Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley*, p.11

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.12

⁴⁹ "The Victory- Elements and Meaning," November 4, 1896 (CF Harpine, op cit, p.181)

⁵⁰ Harpine, op cit., p.37

⁵¹ Trent and Friedenbergl, op cit., p.100

⁵² Halprine, op cit, p. 38 (CF Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 20-22)

⁵³ *ibid*

McKinley helped persuade voters that they and their compatriots were supporting a candidate similar to themselves, who understood their issues and needs. In *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Harpine further commented, “When McKinley spoke in public...he was able to convey to the audience with great immediacy that he knew the working people and understood them, that he cared about them and earnestly desired to be their friend. He expressed a strong identification between himself and his audience.⁵⁴”

Furthermore, in his rhetoric, McKinley focused on national unity as contrasting with Bryan’s more divided rhetoric. Unlike the regional and class division theme prevalent in Bryan’s speeches, McKinley “sought in his speeches to integrate the interests of the entire nation.⁵⁵”

Meanwhile, copies of McKinley’s front porch remarks were supplied to all major newspapers. Trent and Friedenbergr note, “Thus, while remaining at home, McKinley received daily nationwide press coverage— more in fact, than did his opponent.⁵⁶” In his rhetoric, McKinley would also treat respective delegations as symbols for larger groups that he would attempt to reach through newspaper coverage. The *Review of Reviews* highlighted this aspect of campaigning: “Mr. McKinley...thanks to the marvelous methods of the modern newspaper, has in speaking to the deputation of iron workers, for example, been able to address men of that class everywhere.⁵⁷”

Furthermore, Hanna flooded the daily and weekly newspapers with distribution inserts on McKinley, his family and his political positions, as nearly 5 million families received 13,000 newspapers containing material for the Republican and hostile to Bryan⁵⁸. In addition, Hanna simultaneously billed McKinley as “the Advance Agent of Prosperity” in cartoons, posters and lithographs, as he helped pillory Bryan as “an unrestrained Populist, anarchist, blasphemer, and

⁵⁴ William Harpine, “Playing to the Press in McKinley’s Front Porch Campaign,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol.3, No. 30 (Summer, 2000), p.84

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.87

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ “The Campaign at Canton,” *Review of Reviews* 14 (1896), p. 519 (CF Harpine, *op cit.*, p.10)

⁵⁸ Leech, *op cit.*, p.87; Paolo Colleta, William Jennings Bryan: (I) Political Evangelist 1860-1908, p.199

Anti-Christ.⁵⁹ McKinley and Hanna also unleashed an army of surrogates to further the cause, sending out 1,400 paid speakers to stump on McKinley's behalf⁶⁰.

In addition, McKinley and Hanna would tap into one more form of nascent communication technology: film. Gould noted, "McKinley was the first presidential aspirant to be filmed, and the Republicans used the crude movie in the campaign."⁶¹ In conjunction with the Front Porch campaign, the film entitled *McKinley at Home- Canton- O*, featured the presidential aspirant reading what appears to be telegrams of campaign progress reports; the film, released in New York, received considerable enthusiasm for the novelty of the medium⁶².

Finally, for what the Republican's could not accomplish in organization and candidacy promotion, they resorted to coercion. Fite noted:

"Whenever possible, party supporters exerted the severest kind of economic pressure. Employers threatened their workers with dismissal if they did not vote for McKinley; bankers told farmers that they would extend mortgages if McKinley were elected, but require immediate payment if Bryan won; businessmen inserted so-called 'Bryan clauses' in contracts which declared that they would buy certain goods at specified prices 'unless Bryan is elected.'⁶³"

McKinley and Hanna were able to burnish their impressive campaign organization with a tremendous campaign war chest to buoy their efforts. Hanna was able to play on fears among Eastern industrialists to burnish his campaign funds, collecting tremendous sums of money in campaign contributions. Donations came in unprecedented amounts, as Standard Oil and J.P. Morgan's combined contributions \$500,000, exceeded the entire operating budget of Bryan's meager campaign balance (\$300,000); Meanwhile, four large meatpacking firms each contributed \$100,000, while the railroad companies offered up \$174,000⁶⁴. The Republican campaign raised nearly \$3.5 million in campaign funds, an unparalleled sum of election campaign funds⁶⁵.

⁵⁹ Coletta, *ibid*

⁶⁰ Stern, *op cit.*, p.29

⁶¹ Gould, *op cit.*, p.11

⁶² Jonathan Auerbach, "McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 51, no. 4 (Dec. 1999), p.805-807

⁶³ Fite, *op cit.*, p.1817; Coletta, *op cit.*, p. 201; Stern, *op cit.*, p.27

⁶⁴ Fite, *ibid*; Cherney, *op cit.*, p.65

⁶⁵ Fite, *ibid*;

Conclusion

The election of 1896 stood as one of the most tightly contested elections, with voter turnout reaching 80 percent among eligible voters, and nearly 95 percent in the decisive Midwest states⁶⁶. In the end, McKinley defeated Bryan in both the Electoral College and popular vote. McKinley took twenty-three states and 271 electoral votes, while Bryan took twenty-two states and 171 electoral votes; in raw numbers, McKinley received just over 7 million votes, to nearly 6.5 million votes for Bryan. The statistics for the outcome subject to various interpretations: on one hand, Bryan received more votes than any previous Democratic presidential aspirant, including the 1892 Democratic victor Grover Cleveland; on the other hand, he was defeated by the largest margin of votes since the 1872 election⁶⁷.

The election was the most expensive campaign to date, as no previous presidential campaign had ever witnessed so much money poured into a political race⁶⁸. This aspect of the campaign was decidedly a one-sided Republican affair, as the GOP outspent its Democratic rivals nearly 12 to 1. Ultimately, the Republican campaign juggernaut was simply too great for the itinerant Bryan to defeat. Able to draw from a seemingly-bottomless campaign chest, the Republicans simply were able to use their superior organization to counter Bryan's charismatic crusade. Bryan also faced difficulty with the defection of the gold standard wing of the Democratic Party, which split off to form its own National Democratic party with presidential ticket of John Palmer and Simon Buckner. The splinter party would draw votes from key states that Bryan just barely lost⁶⁹.

McKinley won on a coalition of urban residents in the Northeast and East, prosperous farmers, industrial workers, and most ethnic groups save the Irish vote; Bryan took the Southern and Western states (save California and Oregon) and the agrarian vote. Dooming Bryan's

⁶⁶ LeRoy Ashby, William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy, p. 67; Leinwand, p.65

⁶⁷ Ashby, op cit., p.67; Gould, op cit., p.12

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ Louis Koenig, Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan, p.253

candidacy was that he lost the battle ground states in the Midwest and Southern border states (Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky and West Virginia)⁷⁰. In addition, the urban vote proved disastrous for Bryan, as he took only twelve of the eighty-five cities with populations great than forty-five thousand residents⁷¹.

Meanwhile, new political coalitions and party orientations arose as the election offered realignment for the American body politic, as the Democratic Party began its liberal shift, and the Republican Party began casting itself as the Northeastern, conservative, pro-business party⁷². Moreover, as Professors Jeffrey Stonecash and Everita Silina commented: “The election presumably produced a pronounced, abrupt, and enduring shift to the Republican Party. Urban areas with significant pockets of industrial workers and immigrants, troubled by a rural-based Democratic Party that did not accept industrialization, moved to support the Republican Party.”⁷³

Both Bryan and McKinley’s campaigns had tremendous impact on the future of political campaigning and the art of political communications. William Jennings Bryan’s campaign tour created a paradigm shift in election campaign strategy, as he brought the campaign directly to the people. As Jamieson noted, he also changed the vehicle of message delivery:

“William Jennings Bryan’s campaign of 1896 marked the beginning of torchlight parades and campaign songs. By campaigning vigorously for the presidency, by taking his eloquence that had enthralled the Chautauqua audiences onto the stump on behalf of political cause, Bryan overshadowed such surrogate message carriers as the banner and song.”⁷⁴

Meanwhile, in political communications terms, an important aspect in McKinley’s victory was his success in Fisher’s “test of stories,”⁷⁵ and his ability to cast himself as a rational, solid statesman in contrast to a radical Bryan. Given the immense resources the Republican campaign

⁷⁰ Gould, op cit., p.12-13

⁷¹ Ashby, op cit, p.70

⁷² William Harpine, *From the Front Porch to the Front Page*, p.5

⁷³ Professors Jeffrey Stonecash and Everita Sillina, “The 1896 Realignment: A Reassessment” *American Politics Research* 33, 3 (2005), p. 7

⁷⁴ Jamieson, op cit., p.17

⁷⁵ Walt Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (CF Prof. Thomas Hollihan class lecture, 2/2/09)

possessed, they were able to shape the debate to discredit Bryan and the free silver forces, while presenting McKinley as responsible and dependable. Fite commented:

“Republican propagandists appealed strongly to the conservative tradition in American society, and McKinley seemed to be the protector— indeed, the personification— of that tradition. A vote for Bryan was pictured as an attack upon property, law, and order, and as a step toward control of the country by riffraff and criminals. To be for McKinley, on the other hand, was to be on the side of American institutions and social stability.⁷⁶”

Furthermore, Harpine notes that McKinley’s Front Porch campaign emphasized, “what Kenneth Burke calls rhetoric of *identification*⁷⁷” In his successful framing of narratives, McKinley “identified the Republican cause with patriotism, law and order and the flag. He identified himself with the working people of the United States. He identified the tariff and sound monetary policy with the interests of the workers. He lumped together free silver and free trade as twin components of a conspiracy against the American worker.⁷⁸”

Moreover, with a clear understanding of the media battlefield, both candidates staged what Daniel Boorstein would term *pseudo-events*, planned campaign events and meetings with the media conceived as the real audience⁷⁹. As Harpine stated, “both candidates constantly produced events that enabled them to speak to the public through the media. Although both candidates were aware of the importance of reporters and newspapers, McKinley’s campaign speeches seemed to be more consistently adapted to newspaper readership.⁸⁰”

Finally, McKinley simply had an easier political task as the Republican Party had been in ascendance since the 1894 election, and the prevailing antipathy towards the Democratic Cleveland administration. Fite noted, “By 1896 there was already a strong Republican trend and for Bryan to win would have meant reversing the nation’s political direction. In other words, Bryan had to change voters’ minds; McKinley had only to play on their sympathies and

⁷⁶ Fite, op cit, p.1823

⁷⁷ Harpine, op cit., p.90

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ Daniel Boorstein, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, p. 11-12 (CF Harpine, op cit, p.6)

⁸⁰ Harpine, *ibid*

prejudices already present.⁸¹” As related to the political communications adage, it is easier to convince the voter something that they already believe rather than convince them of something new.

The election of 1896, and the vastly different campaign approaches and political communications techniques employed by the McKinley and Bryan campaigns helped lay the foundations for the future of modern American political campaigns. It offered a glimpse of future campaign organization strategy and tactics, as well as the logistical dimensions of the modern campaign. The election of 1896 reveals a fascinating glimpse and case study of the style and substance that would come to define modern political campaign and political communications theory.

⁸¹ Fite, *op cit.*, p.1822