



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896: Some Views and Problems

Full Citation: Gilbert C Fite, "William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896: Some Views and Problems," *Nebraska History* 47 (1966): 247-264

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1966Bryan1896.pdf>

Date: 3/17/2016

Article Summary: Fite affirms that no Democrat could have been elected in 1896. He calls for an analysis of voting at the precinct level because the county votes used even by recent historians include too many different social and economic groups to be meaningful.

***Scroll down for complete article.***

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Jennings Bryan, William McKinley

Works Cited: Stanley L Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, 1964  
H Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, 1963  
J Rogers Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics, The Democracy of Cleveland and Bryan*, 1963  
Paul W Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, 1964  
---, *The Trumpet Soundeth, William Jennings Bryan and His Democracy, 1896-1912*, 1960  
Paolo E Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan, Political Evangelist, 1860-1908*, 1964  
Robert F Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896*, 1965

Keywords: William Jennings Bryan, William McKinley, free silver, gold-standard Democrats, tariffs, labor vote

Photographs / Images: Bryan at a whistle stop in 1896; pro-Bryan and free-silver emblems and campaign coins; anti-Bryan and free silver emblems and campaign coins; Bryan delivering a campaign speech in 1896

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN AND THE  
CAMPAIGN OF 1896:  
SOME VIEWS AND PROBLEMS

BY GILBERT C. FITE

THE election of 1896 has long been recognized as one of the most important political contests in American history. Even contemporaries sensed that it was of unusual significance in the political history of the nation. Those who fought the battles of 1896 did not agree on its meaning, but they were convinced that somehow the election was of special and far-reaching importance. This can be seen in the post-election statements of Bryan, McKinley, Populist leaders and others. But this interest went far beyond the participants. Contemporary writers and historians studied the candidates, evaluated the issues and analyzed the results. Historians of subsequent generations, and the early biographers of Bryan and McKinley, also devoted special attention to the election and its outcome.

Despite widespread interest in the presidential contest, no scholarly, book-length study was published dealing

*Professor Fite of the University of Oklahoma delivered this paper at the meeting of the Organization of American Historians at Cincinnati, Ohio on April 29, 1966.*

with the campaign until 1964 when *The Presidential Election of 1896* by Stanley L. Jones appeared.<sup>1</sup> The year before readers were greeted by H. Wayne Morgan's *William McKinley and His America*.<sup>2</sup> Morgan included two chapters on McKinley's efforts to win the presidency. Also in 1963 J. Rogers Hollingsworth's, *The Whirligig of Politics* made its appearance.<sup>3</sup> This was a study of the Democratic Party during the period from 1893 to 1904, and four chapters were devoted to matters directly relating to the background of the campaign and the election itself. The second book-length study which deals with the events and conditions leading up to McKinley's election was Paul W. Glad's, *McKinley, Bryan and the People* published in 1964.<sup>4</sup> Some of the same ideas can be found here that Glad first mentioned in his earlier work on Bryan entitled, *The Trumpet Soundeth*.<sup>5</sup> But this was not all. Also in 1964 the first volume of Paolo E. Coletta's long awaited biography of Bryan appeared under the title, *William Jennings Bryan, Political Evangelist, 1860-1908*.<sup>6</sup> The most recent book which throws some new light on the election of 1896 is Robert F. Durden's, *The Climax of Populism*.<sup>7</sup> There are many other recent books which deal in part with the campaign and election of 1896, but these works deal with it most comprehensively.

One of the outstanding things about the recent studies which consider the presidential election of 1896 and its main participants is the fact that they are based on extensive research in both primary and secondary sources. These are not hurriedly done, impressionistic accounts. The total

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley L. Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896* (Madison, Wis., 1964).

<sup>2</sup> H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse, New York, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> J. Rogers Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics, The Democracy of Cleveland and Bryan* (Chicago, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Paul W. Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People* (Philadelphia and New York, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Paul W. Glad, *The Trumpet Soundeth, William Jennings Bryan and His Democracy, 1896-1912* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan, Political Evangelist, 1860-1908* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896* (Lexington, Ky., 1965).

research in manuscript collections is very impressive and the general tone is calm, judicious, and unemotional. If the election of 1896 itself was highly emotional as everyone agrees, these historians have wisely avoided emotionalism and polemics which cannot be said for the historiography of Populism. Moreover, all of these scholars reach roughly the same conclusions about the candidates Bryan and McKinley, and generally agree on the main reasons for McKinley's victory. To be sure, there are differences of emphasis, but no major conflicts of interpretation seem to exist.

After looking at these recent studies, including Coletta's biography of Bryan, it appears that contemporary writers continue to be far too critical of the Great Commoner, both as a person and as a political leader. Perhaps they have been influenced by the bitter attacks leveled at Bryan during the campaign, his failure to weld the Democratic party into a winning organization, and by some of Bryan's naive concerns during his last years. But so far historians have not fully recognized the problems which confronted Bryan as a Democratic candidate. Rather than facing the fact that probably no Democrat could have won in 1896 given the conditions of the time, historians have tried to explain Democratic defeat on Bryan's personal weaknesses and shortcomings as a candidate. Bryan, however, has been blamed for things over which he really had no control. It was not a man or men who won or lost the election of 1896, but the events of the time and the particular political conditions of that year. This will sound like heresy to those who believe in the great man theory of history, but any realistic appraisal must conclude that neither Bryan nor McKinley were really great men.

Bryan has been pictured as an old-fashioned agrarian who was completely out of tune with the reality of his time. According to Coletta, he was "more a preacher and exhorter than a politician and statesman; he was a missionary who sought to change men, a political evangelist."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, p. 207.

Coletta has followed closely the judgment of Richard Hofstadter who wrote back in 1948, that Bryan was "a circuit-riding evangelist in politics."<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter said that Bryan was intellectually naive and criticized him for his simplistic approach to difficult economic and social problems. Other recent writers besides Coletta have tended to follow Hofstadter's general evaluation. Bryan has been pictured as a man who possessed neither depth nor understanding, and, as Morgan says, he was "essentially uneducated and narrowly read," and "rural and middle-class in outlook. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

So far as Bryan's political success was concerned, far too much emphasis has been placed upon his intellectual shortcomings, his fundamentalism, his agrarianism, his provincialism, his emotionalism, and his moralism. In themselves these qualities may have been good, bad, or indifferent. A description of them properly helps us to understand Bryan as a man. But none of the writers have satisfactorily explained what these characteristics had to do with his success or lack of success as a politician. The implication is that they had something to do with his failure in the political arena, but we are never told quite what that something was.

The facts are, of course, that McKinley was also a simple man. He had less education than Bryan and neither Morgan nor any other scholar has ever made him out to be a mental giant. Jones says of McKinley that his "intellectual interests were narrow and provincial," and adds: "He did not read books; he did not travel except when politics required it; he did not correspond with or make any special attempts to meet personally the intelligent or creative minds of his day. He was self consciously of the Middle West and did not like the East or its politicians."<sup>11</sup> In light of this situation, one might well ask how it was that lack of intellectual interests or capacities, religious

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), pp. 186-92.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, p. 106.

fundamentalism, or provincialism seemed to hurt Bryan, but not McKinley.

The answer is, of course, that Bryan's personal characteristics did not weaken his candidacy in 1896. Indeed, they strengthened him. Bryan's personality was actually his major asset as a politician. Jones confirms this when he writes that "Bryan possessed a quick and well disciplined intelligence," and had "a magnetism which readily inspired confidence and affection. He cultivated and mastered the art of personal politics." Jones concludes on this point that few men in American political history "had so many friends so passionately devoted to him. . . ." <sup>12</sup> Indeed, the early success of Bryan and the fear which he engendered among Republicans is proof of his popularity and effectiveness as a campaigner and political leader. Republican Senator Hale was right when he wrote after Bryan's selection to head the ticket that "we could have beaten an old-fashioned democratic nomination and ticket without half trying, but the new movement has stolen our thunder." <sup>13</sup> Glad asserts that Bryan was "a master politician." Bryan is given credit for being a good politician in obtaining the nomination, but once in the campaign most writers seem to discount his effectiveness.

If readers have not been shown how Bryan's general philosophy of life, his views on government, or his personality were responsible for his defeat in 1896, what about the charge that his program was too narrow. It has been repeatedly claimed that Bryan committed an irreparable error in confining his electioneering almost entirely to the single issue of free silver. Mark Hanna's familiar statement that "He's talking Silver all the time, and that's where we've got him," has been mentioned by almost every writer on the campaign. <sup>14</sup> Coletta, Jones and Glad all emphasize the idea that free silver was too narrow a base on which to build a broad appeal for support. Coletta writes:

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

"Bryan's understanding of the money question was imperfect, and in taking free silver as his paramount issue he campaigned on too narrow a front."<sup>15</sup> Glad says that Bryan has been criticized for placing too much emphasis upon the silver issue and seems to agree.<sup>16</sup> Jones declares that free silver turned the Democratic party to the past and failed to win the new urban voters.<sup>17</sup> Hollingsworth insists that the "Democrats suffered throughout the campaign because they had become completely wedded to the single issue of free silver."<sup>18</sup>

If Bryan's campaign was damaged by sticking largely to a single issue, the implication is that McKinley must have been helped by advocating a broader program. Actually, McKinley's program was narrow. He had hoped to campaign mainly on the tariff issue, but was finally forced also to defend sound money. So at most he had two significant issues, while it may be said that Bryan had only one. But the important question is not whether the candidates advocated a narrow or slightly broader program, but how the issue or issues affected the major sources of economic and therefore political power of the day. The vital thing then was not the number of issues discussed or promises made, but the essence, and meaning of the issue and what response it aroused among the voters. Moreover, to criticize Bryan for concentrating on the currency issue during the campaign without exploring his practical alternatives is to be grossly unfair to him.

To a considerable degree historians have failed to examine sufficiently the political alternatives which lay before Bryan after his nomination in July, 1896. Despite the fact that Bryan had high hopes of being elected, any realistic view of the national political situation made this most unlikely. And this was not because of Bryan, but because of political forces over which he had no or at least very little control.

---

<sup>15</sup> Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, pp. 181-82.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, p. 348.

<sup>18</sup> Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics*, p. 90.

What was the situation at the time of Bryan's nomination? The most obvious problem confronting him was the fact that he headed a deeply divided party. Since 1895 the Democratic party had been fighting like a kennel of snarling dogs. It was a far cry from the fairly united, viable organization which had won the presidency in 1892. The rise of the free silver issue and Cleveland's uncompromising loyalty to the gold standard had driven an unbridgeable division between the party's western and southern element and the Cleveland faction. It is true that Bryan had the support of a great majority of Democrats, and he had picked up a miscellany of Populist and Silver Republican backing. But Bryan's cause was greatly weakened by his loss of conservative, gold-standard Democrats. The main loss was not so much in the *number* of voters, although the Gold Democrats played an important role in the final outcome in a few states. The important thing was that by not having the support of the gold standard faction, Bryan and the majority were cut off from the sources of wealth which could finance an effective campaign.

Given the situation of a divided party, the ideal thing would have been for Bryan to work out some kind of a compromise or consensus. But under the conditions this was not possible. To forsake or to play down free silver would not only have required compromising his principles, but would have thrown away hundreds of thousands of votes, especially in the West. And nothing short of abandonment of silver would have won Bryan the support of conservative easterners. Thus Bryan was caught in a dilemma for which there was no good solution. With compromise or consensus out of the picture, Bryan made the best decision he could by concentrating on the silver issue which most scholars admit was the predominant political question by 1895 and 1896. None of the scholars in this field has properly recognized the problem Bryan faced in trying to build a winning ticket with normally uncongenial groups, leaders who had previously been jealous and crit-

ical of one another, and a party organization torn by internal dissensions.

A second practical aspect of the situation was the fact of Republican resurgence in 1894. In winning control of both houses of congress, the Republicans showed a remarkable recovery from their defeats in 1890 and 1892. Moreover, Republican successes in 1894 were partly due to Democratic divisions which were clearly evident this early. In other words, Republican strength was increasing at the very time when the Democrats were falling into intra-party feuds which were not solved until after 1896. Or to put it another way, Bryan was handicapped not only by a divided party, but faced a Republican party which was gaining strength and momentum, especially throughout much of the North and West. All of the recent writers on Bryan and the election of 1896 recognize these facts, but they have not faced up to what this meant for Bryan as a candidate. Bryan actually had to reverse a marked Republican trend if he hoped to win.

All of the authorities agree that one of the main reasons that Bryan lost the election was because he did not win enough of the labor vote. Jones believes that Bryan's free silver campaign did not appeal to "the urban working class." Defeat, he wrote, "came in the failure of labor to respond to the Democratic appeal."<sup>19</sup> Hollingsworth talks about labor precincts rejecting Bryan as they had Cleveland in 1892 because "they perceived in its [Democratic party] program few benefits and some dangers to their position."<sup>20</sup> Morgan calls Bryan's failure to win the urban vote "a telling blow"<sup>21</sup> and Glad concludes that "Bryan's program simply did not attract enough votes from urban labor."<sup>22</sup> Coletta treats this question more gingerly. He admits that many urban voters supported McKinley, as do other scholars, but thinks this was due to "the coercion of

---

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, p. 317.

<sup>20</sup> Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics*, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, p. 203.

productive labor" rather than because of McKinley's program or a lack of appeal by Bryan.<sup>23</sup>

Is it really true that one of the main reasons that Bryan lost the election was because he did not win enough labor votes? Surely this was one factor, but is it any more important than the fact that he did not get enough votes from business and professional men on the main streets of small towns between Omaha and Pittsburgh; or that he failed to gain the support of enough farmers who were in better financial circumstances? None of the historians has explained why the labor vote was so crucially important, or more so than the votes of other groups. The implication is, of course, that Bryan should have built a farm-labor coalition. This may have been politically desirable, but was it possible? Free silver, the issue in which so many farmers were interested, was not a matter which appealed to urban workers who were worried about possible rising prices and increased living costs. There was a basic conflict of interest between workers and farmers which has not been completely eliminated to this day. Undoubtedly, the Republicans exaggerated this conflict, but it was widely held in both the ranks of agriculture and labor that the two groups had little in common. Glad came closest to seeing the importance of this problem when he wrote: "The fact is that farmers and workers could not concur on objectives, and failing to unite on goals they failed to unite in support of Bryan or anyone else."<sup>24</sup> Bryan did not attempt to reconcile the specific economic differences between the groups by offering them much in the way of specific programs, but by appealing to the general anti-monopoly and anti-big business sentiment held by both farmers and workers.

Hollingsworth says that Bryan made a mistake by not making "promises to workers as workers, farmers as farmers, and businessmen as businessmen."<sup>25</sup> There is a certain

---

<sup>23</sup> Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, p. 201.

<sup>24</sup> Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics*, p. 92.

logic and plausibility to this position, and it surely makes sense from the viewpoint of mid-twentieth century, Great Society politics. But it is not clear in the context of 1896 just what Bryan could have done to increase his labor vote without alienating certain agricultural and business support. He was, as these authorities all point out, already suffering from the image of radicalism. To emphasize additional specific programs for workingmen would only have added to this image and intensified even more the efforts of those opposing him.

This brings me to a place where the writers on Bryan and the Campaign of 1896 leave readers in some confusion. Either their facts are wrong or their logic is weak. After arguing or at least strongly implying that Bryan should have developed a program which would have attracted the urban labor vote, they discuss the economic pressures exerted on workers to force them to support McKinley. Coletta emphasizes, for example, that "political blackmail was probably a more potent argument with workers than all the benefits gold men set forth for an 'honest' currency."<sup>26</sup> Even Morgan, who treats this question of economic coercion rather lightly, admits that "many workers did, in fact, vote for McKinley under threats."<sup>27</sup> If it is true that McKinley supporters gained votes for their candidate under duress, and this unquestionably happened in many cases, what possible difference could it have made if Bryan had developed a stronger pro-labor program. He could have promised workers virtually anything and yet could not likely have won their votes if employers threatened to fire them or close down the shop in case Bryan was victorious. If effective economic pressure existed on behalf of McKinley in the country's industrial centers let it be admitted, study the matter much more thoroughly, and quit blaming Bryan and the Democrats for failure in campaign tactics and strategy.

---

<sup>26</sup> Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, p. 247.

A better case can probably be made for the idea that Bryan's failure was greater in the country than in the cities. His program had little appeal to the better off and more satisfied farmers in the key states of Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. But here again Bryan was confronted with an unsurmountable problem. While these farmers were less subject to economic pressure and coercion, they were mostly Republican and had been so for a generation or more. Not only were they traditionally Republican which meant that Bryan would have had to convince them that they should change their party allegiance, but they were strong devotees of the protective tariff. From their viewpoint McKinley was an ideal candidate. Bryan was in the position of the cleric who appeals to sinners to change their ways, while McKinley was preaching to the converted.

If Bryan could have somehow overcome his purported handicaps—failure to fashion a broader program, his agrarian idealism, the charges of radicalism, and others—he still could not have won the election because of two important factors. These were money and organization. Bryan had neither of these essential ingredients for victory. McKinley, on the other hand, had them both in abundance. As Professor Glad so ably points out, the economic developments of the late nineteenth century, especially in the fields of technology, industry, and transportation, meant political power. In no campaign in the history of the United States did stark economic power ever play a greater role in the outcome than in 1896. This political power in the form of money, organization and publicity came to the full support of McKinley. As mentioned earlier, the alienation of gold standard Democrats from Bryan was important not so much because of their numbers but because these were the Democrats who could have helped to finance a campaign.

All of the recent writers on Bryan, McKinley and the campaign of 1896 place great emphasis upon these factors. The fact that McKinley's campaign was skillfully organized

and liberally financed was recognized at the time, but recent scholarship has documented the situation much more fully than ever before. After having spent several millions of dollars and distributed millions of pieces of literature, the tide shifted strongly in favor of McKinley. According to Glad, "the activities of the McKinley organization made the efforts of the Democratic National Committee look like a peanut operation."<sup>28</sup> The Bryan campaign was largely a one-man operation without proper organization or financial backing. When the Democrats appealed for small contributions in their fight against the forces of monopoly and concentrated wealth, the response was terribly disappointing. Glad mentions that people sent Bryan rabbits' feet for good luck, but luck was no match for the money and organization of Mark Hanna and William McKinley.

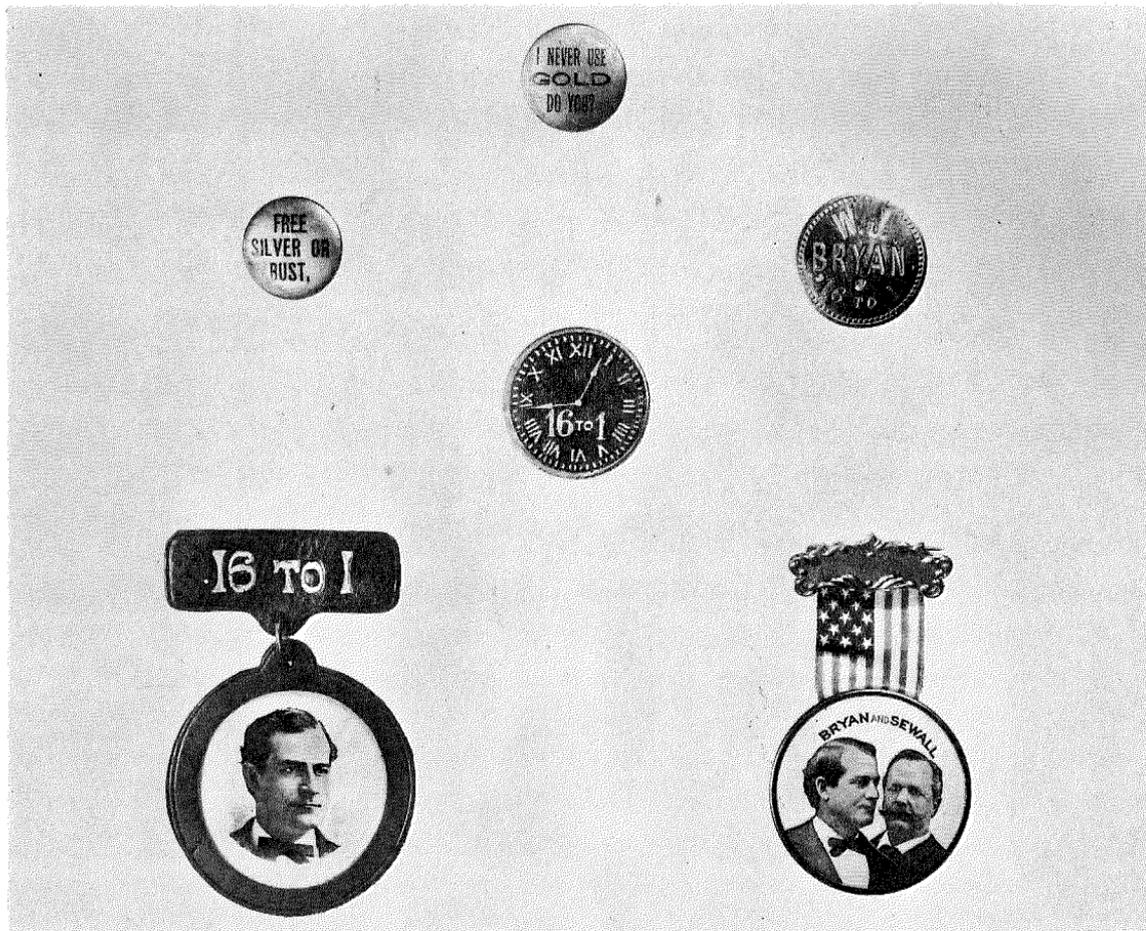
An unanswered question is whether Republican money bought enough votes to give McKinley the election. Many contemporary Democrats thought this was the case, but historians do not agree. Morgan does not deny that the McKinley machine may have purchased votes in some localities, but he argues that it was not important in the final result. Coletta does not claim that Republicans beat Bryan by spending money in this manner, and Jones does not say much about vote-buying as a factor in the McKinley victory. Historians seem to be in general agreement that corruption in the form of purchasing votes was of only minor importance. But at the same time they all emphasize that the use of money which provided speakers, publicity, and overall organizations were crucial in the election's outcome. The more one examines all of the factors in 1896 the more important money becomes. Most historians have tended to group the factors which were responsible for Bryan's defeat without trying to assess a relative weight to each question. A very good case could be made for placing money at the top of the list of reasons which explain McKinley's success.

---

<sup>28</sup> Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, p. 170.



W. J. Bryan at a whistle stop in 1896.



Pro-Bryan and free-silver emblems and campaign coins from the Nebraska State Historical Society collections.



Anti-Bryan and free silver emblems and campaign coins from the Nebraska State Historical Society collections.



W. J. Bryan delivering a campaign speech in 1896.

Despite all of the books and articles which have dealt with the campaign or some phase of it, there are still a number of important aspects of the contest which historians do not know much about. However good the recent books are, they have not advanced historical understanding in several significant areas.

The main thing which is lacking for a proper understanding of the election of 1896 is to know just how people voted. Until it can be determined how ballots were cast below the county level, we will be unable to answer some of the most important unsolved questions. An examination and evaluation of precinct votes is not only the most pressing need to better understand this significant election, but to learn more about all presidential elections. Until recently historians, for the most part, have been using county votes for their analysis. But these include too many different social and economic groups to be very meaningful.

For example, writers refer to the rural vote and the urban labor vote. But so long as they rely on county returns such designations are inaccurate, misleading and even meaningless. What was the rural vote? Was it the vote of farmers, people in small villages, those in larger rural towns, or a combination of them all? On the basis of data used by historians thus far everyone in a county designated rural made up a part of the rural vote. It is well known, however, that actual farmers often voted differently than people in the country towns. Moreover, as it has been used by most writers, the term urban labor vote takes in a great many people who could not be classified as industrial workers. There is probably no presidential election where the examination of precinct voting would be more rewarding and meaningful than in the canvass of 1896. Even this kind of detailed research will not answer all of the questions, but it would greatly increase our knowledge of how votes were cast.

Current writers have relied too long on the excellent article by William Diamond written twenty-five years ago

on "Urban and Rural Voting in 1896."<sup>29</sup> They have also cited this writer's article on "Republican Strategy and the Farm Vote in the Presidential Campaign of 1896" in which it was emphasized that Bryan failed to carry many important rural counties. But frankly, it is not really known whether Bryan failed to carry crucial rural counties because actual farmers voted against him or because the mainstreet power structure in the small towns carried the day for McKinley. In Kossuth County, Iowa, located in a rich farming area of northern Iowa, Bryan carried only eight of thirty-three precincts, but all of those which he won were strictly farm precincts. In Algona, the county seat, McKinley carried every precinct by large majorities.<sup>30</sup> This kind of information is needed from a broad sampling of counties. Perhaps with new statistical and computer techniques we will eventually be able to really know how people voted at the precinct level. Until we do, the conclusions about how voters actually cast their ballots will be mostly educated guesses.

Once data are obtained on precinct voting this information must be correlated with data from the census of population. All of the writers mention that certain German and Scandinavian voters in the Upper Midwest tended to vote Republican. Jones also mentions that McKinley won the support of national groups from eastern and southern Europe who had settled in the cities of the East and Middle West.<sup>31</sup> But here again we have mostly generalizations rather than statistical evidence. Hollingsworth has dealt with this problem in a limited way and by using the school census, the federal census and general voting records, he has been able to tell how certain ethnic groups voted in Chicago. It would also be enlightening to correlate the information on nationality and total vote with data from records on religion.<sup>32</sup> Obviously, this requires a depth of research in voting which no one writing a general his-

---

<sup>29</sup> *American Historical Review*, XLVI (January, 1941).

<sup>30</sup> *The Upper Des Moines* (Algona), November 4, 1896.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, p. 346.

<sup>32</sup> Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics*, p. 99.

tory of the campaign of 1896 or a biography of Bryan or McKinley could be expected to do. Nonetheless, it must be done before it can be fully explained why Bryan lost and McKinley won. Specialists in this field are at least partly responsible for seeing that this type of research is encouraged. To reduce voting results to the precinct level over any broad area, even on a sampling basis, will require tremendous resources for research, recording, and analysis. This is a project worthy of the attention and support of one of the major private foundations or the National Humanities Foundation.

The tariff is another important matter which needs and deserves special study in connection with this campaign. McKinley recognized it as a much more significant issue than the historians who have written about the campaign. I believe that McKinley was nearer right than subsequent scholars. Writers, of course, have by no means entirely neglected this issue, but most of them have given it only minimum attention. McKinley demonstrated his superiority to Bryan as a politician who could sense crucial issues when he sagely wrote in August that, "thousands of men who are somewhat tinctured with Free Silver ideas keep within the Republican party and will support the Republican nominee because of the fact that they are protectionists."<sup>33</sup> This was a wise observation.

So far no one has attempted to evaluate the tariff and its relation to McKinley's victory. We need to know much more about what specific voters responded to tariff arguments, and why. We know that McKinley skillfully tied the tariff and prosperity issues together, but that is about all. The entire matter needs to be properly related to the effective work done by Republicans to sell protectionism to midwestern farmers as far back as the 1880's. Also a study of labor and the tariff should be highly revealing.

Additional matters which need attention include the role of the newspapers and the churches. A considerable

---

<sup>33</sup> Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, p. 287.

amount of research has been done in the urban press but relatively little in the small county newspapers. All writers point out that Bryan was viciously attacked by elements of the clergy after the money issue had been put on a moral basis. But it seems to me that much more needs to be done to explain why Bryan, a conservative Protestant, came in for such bitter and unreasoned attacks. Also the questions of party loyalty and voting habits have not been sufficiently explored. There is a world of insight on why the election came out as it did in the statement of a man who had traveled fifty miles to hear Bryan speak. "I would ride a hundred miles to hear you make a speech. And, by gum, if I wasn't a Republican I'd vote for you."<sup>34</sup> And to what extent was the Democratic Party held in disrepute by "respectable" people? This writer can still hear a godfearing old lady in South Dakota telling his father, "Clyde, how can you be a Christian and a Democrat."

Finally, the matter of farm prices in the months just prior to the election has never been completely examined nor evaluated in relation to the campaign's outcome. In 1947 James A. Barnes wrote an article entitled "The Myths of the Bryan Campaign."<sup>35</sup> One of the myths, Barnes declared, was that farm prices rose before the election and therefore helped McKinley. In this author's article on "Republican Strategy and the Farm Vote in the Presidential Election of 1896,"<sup>36</sup> he maintained that the speculative flurry in October which resulted in some farm price increases did not really help farmers, but led them to *think* that prosperity was about to return with McKinley's election. Recent writers have followed these interpretations. However, all writers have been playing around the edge of this issue and have not really come to grips with it. There is a great need for research in scores of local farm markets. It is of little value to study terminal market prices.

---

<sup>34</sup> Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, p. 205.

<sup>35</sup> *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXIV (December, 1947).

<sup>36</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, "Republican Farm Strategy and the Farm Vote in the Presidential Campaign of 1896," *American Historical Review*, LXV (July, 1960).

It may be that there were price increases in many communities based largely on local conditions which gave farmers the impression that times were improving. Moreover, if there were changes in agricultural prices in 1896, it is important to know just when and where they occurred. I have examined local market prices of nine farm products at Algona, Iowa, as of January 10, June 12, October 2, and October 30, 1896. Wheat rose from 42 to 50 cents a bushel between January 10 and October 30. This was the actual price a farmer could expect if he delivered wheat to the elevator. But in most discussions of agricultural prices far too much emphasis has been placed upon the price of wheat. Many farmers in the key states between Omaha and Pittsburgh raised very little, if any, wheat. Wheat prices might have been a symbol of agricultural conditions, but nothing more. It may be that farmers were more interested in, and affected by, the price of eggs and butter which many of them marketed weekly. At Algona, for instance, butter was one cent a pound less in October than in the previous January. But, and this is important, it was four cents higher than in June. Thus a 25 percent increase in farm butter prices between June and October undoubtedly seemed like a return of prosperity to farmers and farm wives who depended heavily on butter for their living. The same trend is noticeable in egg prices. Eggs brought 16 cents a dozen in January, 1896, partly due to a drop in winter production, but they sold for only eight cents a dozen in June. By October 30 egg prices had recovered to 14 cents, an increase of 75 percent.<sup>37</sup> One should not draw any general conclusions from the study of one local market, but it is entirely possible that more grass roots research would reveal that changing farm prices were much more important in Bryan's defeat than has been previously thought.

Finally, the question should be raised as to whether Bryan was not fighting the power of a growing consensus in American political and economic life. This is not to im-

---

<sup>37</sup> Algona *Courier*, January 10, June 12, October 2, and October 30, 1896.

ply that there were not a great many people who advocated fundamental changes. But, overall, was there not a basic acceptance that American life and society were good, and that radical or even seemingly radical change was undesirable. Writing on "What Does the Election Mean," the editor of *The Commercial and Financial Chronicle* declared that "as our States grow in wealth we have proof here that they are becoming more homogeneous and through our general elections they are ripening into matured and assimilated communities." Then he continues: "In connection with this thought the large vote Mr. McKinley has received in almost every city of the land, even in States which failed to give him their vote, is a very interesting feature. The villages and the agricultural sections of a State cannot long withstand the influence of opinion in its own cities. They are centers of ideas which in the end will permeate the less thickly populated districts."<sup>38</sup> As Glad emphasizes, both Bryan and McKinley were essentially conservative. It may have been, however, that the majority voted wittingly or unwittingly for the candidate who they thought personified and believed in basic American principles as people of that time interpreted them. This may be contradictory with the idea that money and organization largely determined the election's outcome, but it is worth additional study. In any event, given the political conditions of 1896, no Democrat could have been elected.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Commercial and Financial Chronicle*, LXIII (November 7, 1896), 817.