

The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters

Karl Rove

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From *New York Times* bestselling author and political mastermind Karl Rove comes a fresh look at President William McKinley, whose 1896 campaign ended a bitter period of political gridlock and reformed and modernized his party, thereby creating a governing majority that dominated American politics for the next thirty-six years.

The 1896 political environment resembles that of today: A rapidly changing electorate affected by a growing immigrant population, an uncertain economy disrupted by new technologies, growing income inequality, and contentious issues the two parties could not resolve. McKinley found ways to address these challenges and win, which is why his campaign is so relevant to our politics now.

McKinley, a Civil War hero who preferred "The Major" above any other title he was given, changed the arc of American history by running the first truly modern presidential campaign. Knowing his party could only win if it grew beyond its base, he reached out to diverse ethnic groups, including openly seeking the endorsement of Catholic leaders and advocating for black voting rights. Running on the slogan "The People Against the Bosses," McKinley also took on the machine men who dominated his own party. He deployed campaign tactics still used today, including targeting voters with the best available technology. Above all, he offered bold, controversial answers to the nation's most pressing challenge—how to make a new, more global economy work for every American—and although this split his own party, he won the White House by sticking to his principles, defeating a charismatic champion of economic populism, William Jennings Bryan.

The 1896 election is a compelling drama in its own right, but McKinley's strategies offer important lessons for both political parties today.



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