

TEACHER GUIDE

1896 DOC. #2: McKinley Front Porch Visitors Photograph

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The emergence of a transcontinental rail system allowed candidates to meet voters in unprecedented numbers. The 1896 campaign thus was the beginning of the nationwide sweep for votes that continues today as candidates might often visit several states in a single day using chartered or personal jets. William Jennings Bryan took to the rails in the first major “whistle-stop” campaign trip. He visited hundreds of communities during 18,000 miles of railroad campaigning over a period of 100 days. His 600 speeches in 27 states made the headlines but left him exhausted.

McKinley stayed home, following the long-standing view that “stumping for votes” was not dignified. Instead McKinley developed the Front Porch Campaign, which used the rail lines to bring supporters to his home in Canton, Ohio. These visits were highly organized and targeted special interest groups. The railroad companies gave special rates and free passes to many of the 750,000 “front porch visitors” during the campaign.

McKinley’s campaign manager, millionaire industrialist Mark Hanna, raised more than 6 million dollars from wealthy Eastern industrialists who were terrified of a Bryan presidency. This was 20 times more than the Democrats were able to raise. McKinley’s well-oiled campaign produced colorful campaign posters, pamphlets, buttons, and novelties. They trained 1,400 campaigners who were dispatched to speak for McKinley throughout the country. The Republican National Committee produced over 100 million pieces of literature, an average of more than 7 documents per eligible voter. The 1896 McKinley campaign thus began a new era of the mass marketing of politics.

> **Project** the document.

In this photograph, an Italian Republican Brass Band from Buffalo, New York, poses for a campaign photo with McKinley in front of his large porch. McKinley is the tall man with the large top hat sixth from the left in the front row.

QUESTION **What messages about McKinley are being communicated in this photograph? Give evidence.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is friendly to the common man and welcoming.

EVIDENCE he has invited these working people to his home

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is dignified and an important person.

EVIDENCE he appears in a top hat and dress coat; he’s at the front of the group

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PowerPoint Slide

QUESTION **Who might the McKinley campaign be targeting through this “photo-op?”**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The campaign is targeting Italian American voters and other Catholic or immigrant groups.

QUESTION **Why might the railroads have given free passes and special rates to McKinley visitors? What is your evidence?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER They wanted to support McKinley’s election because they felt that McKinley would be more likely to support their interests than Bryan with his Populist leanings.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of contemporary photo-ops where candidates have targeted recent immigrant groups?

Some people criticized McKinley for receiving special treatment from the railroad owners. Is it a problem for one candidate to receive special considerations from a wealthy individual or corporation? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL INFO

Today we are accustomed to seeing photographs of presidential candidates on a daily basis. In the late 1800s, photography was still a relatively new medium. The technology of photography was first developed in the late 1820s. By the time of the Civil War, photographs had become essential documents of historical events and people. In 1888 George Eastman’s roll-film Kodak camera allowed the public to become picture takers. By 1896 photographs became a regular component of campaign management. Events like McKinley’s front porch gatherings were photographed for use in advertisements and news reports. But it was not until the election of 1900 that new technology allowed photographs to be easily reproduced in major newspapers.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Media Bias

Reaching Voters (photo op)

Target Audience (immigrants)