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Nervous System: The First Modern Presidential Campaign

In this month's look at the history of cybersecurity, David Kalat examines the first presidential campaign to use information technology to its advantage: William McKinley in 1896.

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With the aggressive pace of technological change and the onslaught of news regarding data breaches, cyber-attacks, and technological threats to privacy and security, it is easy to assume these are fundamentally new threats. The pace of technological change is slower than it feels, and many seemingly new categories of threats have actually been with us longer than we remember. Nervous System is a monthly blog that approaches issues of data privacy and cybersecurity from the context of history—to look to the past for clues about how to interpret the present and prepare for the future.

When William McKinley won the nomination to be the Republican candidate for the 1896 presidential race, conventional wisdom had it that the former Ohio governor had effectively won the White House. That presumption soon crumbled. The Democrats selected fiery populist William Jennings Bryan as their choice. A magnetic speaker, Bryan promised that if the U.S. abandoned the gold standard, economic inequality and hard times would be a thing of the past. McKinley was a stark contrast—he was a modest man who tended to avoid the spotlight, and his insistence on "sound money" was difficult to express in anything other than dry and complicated terms.

McKinley was starting from a weaker position, even before his opponent undertook a dramatic tour of the country by railroad. Bryan made extensive whistle-stops across the nation, engaging with voters and making bold, compelling campaign pledges. McKinley's campaign manager, Mark Hanna, started printing bulletins and handouts to argue against Bryan's ideas, but in the days before mass media like radio or television, the cost of reaching enough voters through the printed word was intimidating.

But McKinley had a secret weapon, and it would win him the presidency. He had information technology, and he would run the first modern presidential campaign.

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US President William McKinley, circa 1900.

McKinley set up his operations in Canton, New York, in a home rented from his in-laws. He had wired the place for telegraph and telephone in 1895, resulting in an unsightly maze of wires across the property. On the night of the Republican Convention in St. Louis in 1895, McKinley had been at his Canton home, surrounded by supporters and the press. As various delegates took the convention floor 600 miles away to declare their votes, he

and Hanna tallied the score at McKinley's desk. When the time came for Ohio to make its declaration, the phone went silent. McKinley picked up the receiver, wondering if the connection had dropped. Instead, he found himself listening in real time to the Ohio delegation declaring his name to thunderous applause. McKinley had secured the nomination, and thanks to the telephone, he experienced it in person without being physically present.

McKinley and Hanna then installed a direct telephone connection linking the Canton house with the Canton office of McKinley's cousin, William McKinley Osborne, and the Chicago office of operative Charles Dawes. In this way, McKinley, Hanna, Osborne, and Dawes maintained close contact with one another to monitor Bryan's campaign and organize their own.

McKinley opted to stay rooted in Canton throughout what he called his "front porch campaign." Instead of trying to keep up with Bryan's travel schedule, McKinley made prepared speeches in front of special interest groups chosen by Hanna. Each speech was tailored to an important voting bloc and covered by the press to reach a wider population.

On election day, McKinley won a commanding victory in both the popular vote and Electoral College. Businessman and newspaper publisher H.H. Kohlsaat called from the offices of the *Chicago Times-Herald* to McKinley's home in Canton to tell the candidate he had won. Inside the house, McKinley and his extended family were gathered to hear the news. In the commotion of people shouting and congratulating McKinley, the only words Kohlsaat could make out were "Oh, God, keep him humble."

In the run-up to 1896 election, the Chicago Record had conducted a massive multistate mail-in poll. The poll correctly predicted McKinley's win, but incorrectly forecast a larger landslide, and misjudged which states would go for him and by what margins. The poll's errors likely influenced the campaigns themselves, giving the Republicans an inflated sense of their platform's appeal and giving Democrats an incorrect gauge of their prospects.

The problem with the poll was what it failed to count. Approximately 30 percent of the voters contacted, around 240,000 voters in all, returned surveys. As it turned out, the type of voters who replied to the survey were more likely to support McKinley. Democratic critics argued that many working people who were likely to vote for Bryan were too busy to reply, or lacked access to writing implements.

Whatever the reason, even the pollsters recognized the data was skewed. The issue was how to correct for it. The *Record* attempted to apply statistical weighting to balance the non-response bias, but the outcome of the election showed their mathematical adjustments had been a failure. Future generations of statisticians would study the poll to design better sampling methodologies.

Before 1896, none of the previous five presidents had won the popular vote, and two had lost the popular vote. McKinley's win, although not the landslide the *Chicago Record* poll predicted, brought a sense of consensus back to Washington. He had defeated a charismatic opponent who had campaigned on a popular and populist platform—in part by leveraging the tools of information technology newly available to him to collapse distance and compress time.

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