

The Populist Struggle

The Populist Movement

The Populist challenge reached a climax in the 1896 presidential election. When the Democrats absorbed most of their proposals and nominated William Jennings Bryan to take on the Republican William McKinley, the Populists fused with the Democrats. When McKinley and corporate America won, the Populists were dead as a political party. But their legacy remained. They had identified fundamental issues and proposed political intervention to deal with them. The issues would not die, and many of their proposed solutions would be implemented in the twentieth century.

The People's Party

By the 1890s, agrarian reformers had focused their efforts on organizing the People's Party, commonly known as the Populist Party. Although the party achieved some success at the regional level, its impact nationally was relatively small. This video looks at its overall influence as it analyzes the rise and fall of the Populist Party and the issues involved.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- What were the main planks in the Populist Party (Omaha) Platform of 1892? How did these proposals challenge the political and economic establishment?
- How and why did the Populists reach out to the working classes of the city and across racial lines? What political success did they have in 1892?
- Why was the Populist coalition with African Americans a threat to the southern political order? How did the Populists' opponents in the South react?
- How did the economic depression of 1893–1894 affect national politics? What was important about Coxey's "army"?
- How and why did the Democrats create a dilemma for the Populists in 1896? Why was fusion with the Democrats a difficult decision for the Populists? What does this illustrate about third parties in American politics?
- Explain the presidential election of 1896 in terms of candidates, issues, campaign, and results. Why did "free silver" take on such importance? What was at stake in this election? Why did McKinley win? What did his victory mean?

Video script:

Music introduction

Actor, Mary E. Lease: We need to raise less corn and more hell!

Narrator: Less than five months after St. Louis, the people's party had organized sufficiently to hold a national convention. Meeting in Omaha, Nebraska in July of 1892, the first order of business was to formally adopt a platform.

H.W. Brands: The Omaha platform, the Populist Party platform of 1892, was striking in that it was the most radical statement of principles of any more or less major American political party. It called for the nationalization of the railroads. They recommended the same thing regarding telephones and telegraph. These were emerging institutions, but they thought that the major networks of transportation and communication, because they were so vital especially to farmers, shouldn't be in the control of private interests, but should be in the control of all the people. The populists at Omaha also called for a graduated income tax, this at a time when there was no federal income tax.

Omar Ali: They were calling for direct election of u.s. senators. They were calling for the sub-treasury loan program, which was basically a farmer's subsidization program. And they were also asking for an expansion of currency.

Michael Kazin: As long as the money supply was constricted by how much gold was in the treasury that was going to be a problem for the populists. So they wanted to have the currency based on silver as well as on gold, which would force inflation of the money supply and would make it easier to pay back debts.

And also, there were several planks in the Omaha platform which were appeals to urban workers, who clearly were not going to like the idea of inflation on the food that they had to buy and the clothing they had to buy, for example. There were demands to support labor union organizing, to lift injunctions on unions. They also supported the 8-hour day.

Narrator: Populists recognized that to avoid being marginalized as a regional party, they needed to find allies in the northeast.

H.W. Brands: It was a difficult reach because their heart wasn't in with the working classes of

the cities. They had always thought that the cities were somehow corrupt, they were morally inferior to the heartland. So when the populists reached out, as they did in their political platforms, to the industrial working classes, they were doing their best but they never could quite make it work. They had a little bit greater success, at least initially, reaching out across racial lines.

Steven Hahn: The populists basically say to African-Americans, “look, we’re in the same boat. We’re all suffering because of what’s happening to agriculture in the south and elsewhere.” And that, if we succeed, then everybody is going to benefit, so vote for us.

Omar Ali: African-Americans, in some ways, saw an opportunity in the people’s party. They didn’t need to have white folks say that they weren’t racist. They were less concerned about people’s purity, what they thought, what their intentions were, but what they did. And the thing that they were willing to do was go out and build a third party with black people.

Actor, John Rayner: By telling the truth I have converted to our political ideas every colored man and woman in jasper and newton counties. I have converted at least fifty percent of my white auditors.

Steven Hahn: This was the great nightmare. If you think about southern politics in the 19th century, a lot of it is built around the ability of big landowners to get the support of small landowners. What happens in the 1890s is that this alliance begins to fracture and they’re very frightened, not only because it’s a biracial coalition, but because the kind of demands that they’re raising challenge the economic framework and relationships that white landowners and merchants depend upon.

H.W. Brands: And it didn’t take long for the populists’ opponents in the south to play the race card against the populists, appealing to white farmers on grounds of racial solidarity.

Actor, Reading from *the Shreveport Evening Judge*: It is the religious duty of Democrats to rob populists and republicans of their votes whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself; and any failure to do so will be a violation of true Louisiana democratic teachings!

Omar Ali: The way that they attacked was vicious. And they came after them by literally assassinating leaders, by roughing people up, intimidating them, passing new laws.

Narrator: In Spite of these tactics, in 1892 the populists elected a number of candidates across

the south and Midwest. In 1893, the nation plunged into a major economic depression.

Actor, Kansas Farm Woman: I take my pen in hand to let you know that we are starving to death.

H.W. Brands: The economic depression of the 1890s was a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. Before countries industrialize, they don't have depressions. So the depression of the 1890s caused everybody to step back and reconsider what the country was getting itself into. This capitalist revolution was new enough that a lot of people still wondered whether it was a good idea and they felt, we're not so far into it that we can't go in a different direction.

Narrator: In 1894, the People's Party picked up still more seats at the state and national level. In the face of political upheaval, the Democratic Party took a surprising turn at the 1896 national convention, when it nominated William Jennings Bryan for president on a platform supporting the populist call for the free coinage of silver.

Actor, William Jennings Bryan at DNC, 1896: Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand 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 upon a cross of gold."

Michael Kazin: It was a real dilemma for the populists in 1896 because they didn't expect the democrats to have nominated someone who was as much in agreement with their platform. So they faced this classic dilemma of third parties in American history. Do you support the party and the candidate which supports some of the ideas that you support? Or do you hold out for your own independent identity and try to become a major political party of your own? The populists were quite divided about this question.

Sarah Stage: Populists tended to work with the party that was out of power. So in the Midwest and the North that was the Democratic Party, but in the south that was the Republican Party. The southerners had been fighting the democrats in some vicious elections, which probably were stolen from them and to now fuse with the Democratic Party and support a democratic candidate was very difficult.

Narrator: The fusionists finally persuaded the party that Bryan represented their best hope. But the more radical populists perceived that to surrender their identity was political suicide.

Actor, Tom Watson: Their idea of fusion is that we play Jonah, while they play whale.

Narrator: Meanwhile the Republican candidate, William McKinley – in the expert hands of masterful political strategist Mark Hanna – sat on his front porch in canton, Ohio, as the big business money rolled in. Hanna paid 18,000 speakers to go out on the stump for McKinley, while Bryan embarked on an exhausting solo effort to speak to the whole country. The entire campaign seemed to boil down to one thing.

Actor, *London Daily Mail* Correspondent: Night and day, in every newspaper, in every café, in every street car, it is the dollar and the dollar alone, whose fate is discussed.

H.W. Brands: The Democrats and Bryan embraced free silver in part because it did address fundamental economic issues. But another reason is that it was a slogan – this two-word phrase that summed up an approach to politics, at a time when the Democrats had to come up with something that distinguished them. But another thing that made it appealing was that there was this sort of mystification value of it. That's always good in a political race. No one can pin you down because no one knows quite what you're talking about.

Actor, Reformer Henry George: In form, the struggle is on the currency question. But these are only symbols, and behind them are gathered the world-opposing forces of aristocratic privilege and democratic freedom.

H.W. Brands: The 1896 election was about the future direction of the American economy. Bryan felt that democracy ought to take precedence over capitalism. McKinley wouldn't have denied that exactly, but his policies were such as to suggest that in his view, capitalism took precedence over democracy. And the fact is that McKinley won. Now what do we make of something like this?

Actor, Ignatius Donnelly: Alas and alack! It seems useless to contend against the money power. Every election marks another step downward into the abyss. The people are too shallow and too corrupt to conduct a republic.

End of video.

"Cross of Gold" Speech

The inspirational "Cross of Gold" speech delivered by William Jennings Bryan at the Democratic National Convention undoubtedly helped him win the party's nomination for president in 1896.

"If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world...we shall 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 upon a cross of gold."

Unfortunately, the speech may also have helped seal Bryan's fate. By emphasizing the silver issue, Bryan closely identified himself with the rural, Populist interests of the South and West and alienated eastern industrialist states in the election.

Bryan's defeat at the polls marked a major defeat of the Populist Party, which had fused with the Democrats in hopes of promoting their agenda at a national level. But all was not lost. Populist ideas, although often considered radical and even threatening at that time, would resurface and bear fruit in twentieth century reform movements.

Sources of discontent in the agrarian and labor sectors of America eventually led to the development of the Populist Party. These same issues drove many of the social and economic reforms that occur later in the Progressive and New Deal Eras.

The Populist Legacy

The legacy of the Populist Party and the meaning of "Populism" are explored in this video. In summary, what factors explain the emergence of the Populist movement? Why and how did the Populists challenge the political establishment of the late nineteenth century? What is the legacy of the Populists and of Populism?

Video script:

Music Introduction

Steven Hahn: I think the legacy of populism is to recognize that there are inequalities in American society, that there are grievances on the part of ordinary Americans against concentrations of wealth and power. And that democracy always faces a problem with great inequalities of wealth.

Michael Kazin: The populists faced the worst of all possible worlds. They no longer had their really strong independent identity, which they'd had before 1896 and they'd given it up for a failed campaign. So from 1896, the people's party doesn't fall apart, but they're never again a major factor in American political history.

H.W. Brands: Despite the fact that the populists faded away there still was enough support for reform of one sort or another that by the beginning of the 20th century, you could find reformers in both political parties.

Omar Ali: So the things that were called for in the late 19th century, whether it was the eight-hour work day or the government regulation of railroads or the sub-treasury loan would be enacted within a generation.

Michael Kazin: Bryan really helps to remake the Democratic Party to being what we now think of as the liberal party, a party which believes that the federal government should be used to provide economic opportunity, to help small farmers, to help wage earners. So in some ways the Democratic Party got populized, you might say.

H.W. Brands: Populism is one of those terms that everyone likes to embrace because it signifies an appeal to, an affinity for, ordinary people. It's convenient because you're usually not tied down to defining, "well, which ordinary people are we talking about?" The problem is, of course, that ordinary people have all sorts of different interests. But if you use it in that sense, its just...it's the honest folks of America. And they don't have to delve too closely in the fact that when the term emerged in the 1880s and the 1890s, these folks were real radicals.

End of video.

Activity: Check Your Understanding

This quiz reviews the legacy of the Populist Party and "Populism" in the late 1800s. Less than five months after their initial meeting in St. Louis, the Populist convention in Omaha called for a

graduated income tax, direct election of U.S. senators, and the nationalization of the railroads. In hopes of enhancing the value of money during the depression, the Populists wanted to increase the money supply by backing it with silver as well as gold. They argued that a larger currency supply would allow them to sell their crops for more, perhaps forgetting that such a move would also drive up the prices of goods they had to buy. The Populists attempted to create a bi-racial coalition of black and white farmers, something unseen in American politics to that point. Populists in the tumultuous election of 1896 made the difficult decision to join with the Democrats and nominate William Jennings Bryan as their presidential candidate. Some Populists feared, correctly as it turned out, that their party would ultimately lose its identity by nominating the same candidate as the Democrats. In 1896 the Republicans nominated William McKinley as their presidential candidate. McKinley was a highly respected Ohioan who had served 14 years in the U.S. House of Representatives and two terms as governor of Ohio. The central issue discussed in the 1896 campaign was the role of silver and gold in the economy. Despite the fact that learned economists disagreed on the merits of inflating the currency with silver-backed dollars, so-called “free silver” became an astonishingly widespread topic of popular discussion in the 1890s. Despite the fact that the Populist Party faded after 1896, it established much of the reform agenda for the next generation. Consequently, many things the Populists had called for, such as the eight-hour workday and government regulation of railroads, were enacted in the next generation.

The Populist Agenda

What were the issues that led to the formation of a third party in the late 1800s? Test your knowledge in this activity as you role play a nineteenth century Populist sympathizer voting on issues addressed in the Populist agenda.

Interactive Activity: The Populist Agenda

This activity reviews the issues affecting the Populist agenda that led to the formation of a third party in the late 1800s. Populists were against raising tariffs to increase the price of imported goods. High tariffs do not help farmers who have to sell their crops at low prices on a world market while buying goods at high prices. The groups who benefit from high tariffs are industrialists, labor, and western producers of raw materials. Government initially subsidized

railroad construction, a very expensive project that greatly benefited America. But subsidies continued after start up due to high operating costs and inefficient management practices. Populists believed the railroads should find more efficient ways of operating rather than continuing to depend on subsidies. Populists believed a graduated income tax would more fairly divide the tax burden since people with more income would pay a higher percentage of it in taxes. Populists supported government ownership of railroads and the telegraph system, believing government ownership would help end discriminatory rate practices. Populists were in favor of expanding the money supply with silver dollars which would benefit farmers by enabling them to pay down large debts with inflated money. Continuing to adhere to the gold standard would further benefit eastern bankers and financiers. Populists supported the Sherman Antitrust Act. They believed more government intervention and more competition among businesses would help limit the powers of wealthy industrialists. This is one of the major goals of the populist movement. Populists fully supported the right of urban workmen to organize for self-protection against cheap immigrant labor that competed for their jobs. Populists were in favor of cooperation between the Southern Alliance and the Colored Farmer's Alliance. The two organizations have many common causes. One is to eliminate the crop lien system that traps both black and white farmers in an endless cycle of debt, often leading to loss of land. Populists supported land reform which would require the government to buy back land sold for speculation and open more land for settlement by farmers. The populists were very supportive of urban workers, sympathizing with many of their concerns over wages and working conditions, and advocated an eight-hour work day.

Lesson Study Questions

To evaluate your understanding of the lesson topics and prepare for tests, consider how you would answer these questions:

1. Why and how did the Farmers' Alliance become more political in the 1880s and early 1890s?
 - What had happened to their economic initiatives?
 - How did the major parties respond to their issues?
 - What steps were taken to form a third party? What did it stand for?

2. Why did the Populist Party reach out to black voters in the 1890s? What were the results of their efforts?
 - Consider the common interests of white and black farmers.
 - Why would black politicians and voters be attracted to a third party?
 - What success did they have? How did their opponents react?
3. Why is the presidential election of 1896 important in American political history?
 - What was at stake in this election?
 - How did the election affect politics and parties?
 - What did the results indicate?
4. Explain the emergence of the Populist movement in the late nineteenth century. Why and how did the Populist Party challenge the political establishment? What is the legacy of the Populists and of Populism?
 - Consider the economic problems faced by farmers.
 - How did the Farmers' Alliance address issues? What success did it have?
 - Why was the Populist Party formed? What reforms did it advocate?
 - Why was the political and economic establishment threatened by the Populists?
 - How did the Populists influence later reforms and reformers?
 - Why does "Populism" take on a meaning of its own? What does it mean?

Additional Resources

Websites

[1896 Presidential Election](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1896.html)

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1896.html>

Compiled by the Library of Congress, this resource guide links to digital materials related to the presidential election of 1896 that are available throughout the Library of Congress Web site. In addition, it provides links to external Web sites focusing on the 1896 election and a selected bibliography.