

Origins of american populism: the rise, fall and legacy of the people's party



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American Studies Dissertation ProposalAgenda:

This resourceful and contemporary dissertation will explore the origins of American Populism, which can be attributed to the rise of the People's Party, which was formed following two decades of suffering among farmers who were tormented by the economic consequences of the American Civil War. Challenged with the dominance of a two-party political system, I want to acknowledge the impact of the People's Party upon late nineteenth century American politics and reveal the magnitude and importance of their radical populist ideals, which have had momentous ramifications for the legacy of populism throughout the history of American politics.

Historical Context:

The end of the American Civil War caused economic chaos across the nation and arguably hit the agricultural industry the hardest, as farmers in the South endured particularly tough times as they were thwarted with high-interest rates, increased debts and declining prices for their goods. The farmers were equally hampered by bad crops, which only fueled the uncertainty surrounding the international market, which caused further discontent for the farmers as they became increasingly frustrated by the government's refusal to intervene as the United States became progressively more urbanized and industrialized. In response to this, the farmers began to organize themselves into regional groups and merged together in joint venture agreements in an attempt to minimize the effects of the recession. This was soon followed by political engagement as the farmers collectively

promoted policies that endorsed low-interest loans and the regulation of railroad shipping prices, as they targeted the banks and businesses which provided the credit and transportation which enabled the agricultural industry to exist. This led to the formation of the first official farmers association, The Patrons of Husbandry, who were formed with the intention to promote the social and economic needs of the farmers in the United States. The association, that is more commonly known as the Grange movement, inspired the establishment of the regional Farmers' Alliances which aimed to represent the people and put pressure on the already existing political parties to enact agrarian reform. The Farmers' Alliances recognized that they were being ignored and seized the opportunity to involve themselves in local level politics and subsequently pushed forward their own politicians to represent their agrarian interests and the people, and remarkably achieved some notable successes. This success motivated the agrarian reformers to collaborate together and to construct the Omaha Platform which detailed the reformers populist intentions as it called for the secret ballot, the direct election of Senators, the eight-hour day, the graduated income tax and the government control of all railroads. The Omaha Platform was essentially the first populist political manifesto which lead to the leaders of the Farmers Alliance to meet in St. Louis and officially form the People's Party, as the farmers had successfully organized and mobilized themselves from merely being labelled as an agrarian revolt, to committing to political action through the form of a populist left-wing agrarian third party, that threatened the dominant two-party American democratic system.

Dissertation Abstract:

Within my dissertation, I intend to directly address my research question of “*How significant was the formation of the People’s Party to the legacy of American Populism?*” My topic has received an adequate amount of attention by historians and social commentators who have examined the motivations and successes of the People’s Party, which has created a valuable discussion for my project as there is a general theoretical divide between the views of these historians who generally fall into either the reactionary, progressive, liberal or revisionist way of thinking, which I discussed in my literature review. Despite this, my specific question allows me to add a new perspective to the literary work of the American Populist narrative as I will provide a thorough analysis of not only the rise, but the fall and legacy of the People’s Party and its significant influence on American populist politics, which has been neglected by the current historiography who have limited their evaluation of the People’s Party to its commencement and ambitions rather than acknowledging the party’s wider implications for the history of American populism. I will utilize the current literature on the People’s Party and use this to understand the party’s political desires, which in turn will help explain the origins of American populism, as I will use these ideas to comprehend the influence of the People’s Party on later populist sentiments that arose within American politics.

Through assessing the personal accounts and papers of the leaders of the People’s Party I will grasp an insight into the motivations and desires of those who ran the party and recognize how the People’s Party came to fruition and challenged the two-party system. In relation to this, I will

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continue to read the secondary literature extensively as I will depict the multiple approaches that already exist regarding the People's Party and discern my own judgement on the interests and objectives of the agrarian reformers. Yet I will not end my study here as I will develop these ideas that have been studied separately and reveal why the People's Party failed on a national scale but illustrate how, despite their failure, their populist approach was pursued by other American politicians successfully later on in history. The first section of my research will offer a new synthesized perspective on already existing material which I will apply to the second part of my research which has received little attention as I will examine the populist approach of the People's Party to help explain the prominence of populism within American politics.

Research Objectives:

- To determine the extent to which an evaluation of the significance of the creation of the People's Party, and their ideals, might aid our understanding of the origins of American Populism;
- To assess the impact of the Populist Movement on the late nineteenth century American politics and society;
- To explain how the significance of the People's Party shaped the future of populism within America;
- To provide an adequate addition to the historiography of American Populism and The People's Party.

Chapter Outlines:

Introduction-

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Within the introduction, I will begin by providing the varying interpretations of populism and continue with Cas Mudde's contemporary definition, who stated that populism is a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous, and antagonistic groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite." [1] As this definition is best suited to the People's Party and more broadly American Populism as this depiction accounts for the versatility of populism, which is crucial to the American Populist narrative. In alignment with this, I will continue by providing background information concerning the People's Party, and highlight my argument of its significance to the legacy of American Populism, which will put my research into context, as I will clarify the focus of my study and outline the intentions, methodology, and value of my dissertation and reiterate the objectives and aspirations of my research.

Chapter One- ' The Rise of the People's Party and Origins of American Populism '

Within the first chapter, I intend to describe the beginnings of American populism, which can be partly attributed to the Farmer's Alliance, and prove the significance of this organization to the founding of the People's Party. I will then proceed by detailing the conditions that led to the creation of the Omaha Platform [2] and comprehend the significance of the manifesto to the birth of American Populism. In connection with this, I will also analyze a variety of sources such as letters and speeches concerning the key members of the movement, such as Mary Lease [3] and Ignatius Donnelly [4], who were critical to the founding of the People's Party and American populism. I will then end the chapter with an insight into the Presidential election of 1892, <https://assignbuster.com/origins-of-american-populism-the-rise-fall-and-legacy-of-the-peoples-party/>

which was arguably the pinnacle of the People's Party success according to John Hicks[5], as this provided the party with the necessary national exposure to expand and efficiently prepare for the next election.

Chapter Two- ' The Fall of the People's Party '

The second chapter will analyze the downfall of the People's Party, and explain in detail, why the party failed to remain a permanent fixture in American politics. This was largely down to the party pursuing a policy of fusion politics with the Democratic Party, as Helen Edmonds suggests that this proved detrimental to the longevity of the People's Party.[6]I will then discuss the failures of the 1896 Presidential election and stipulate the errors of the campaign, as William Jennings Bryan proved to be the wrong candidate for the populists and democrats as he lost convincingly to the Republican nominee William McKinley which lead to Robert Durden labelling this as " the climax of populism." [7]I will finally conclude the chapter by evaluating the disintegration of the People's Party, as their influence began to dwindle intensively, as many of its members joined the Democratic Party, which essentially foreshadowed the end of the organization.

Chapter Three- ' The Legacy of the People's Party '

The third chapter of my dissertation will examine the significant contributions of the People's Party to the birth of American Populism and consider the wider implications of the party's populist memorandum. In relation to this idea, I will then determine the influence of the People's Party on subsequent populist American political movements, and compare and contrast their populist ideals to the multitude of populist politicians that have <https://assignbuster.com/origins-of-american-populism-the-rise-fall-and-legacy-of-the-peoples-party/>

since engaged in American politics. The first example of this can be seen with the impact of the populists upon the progressive movement of the 1920s as Roosevelt and the New Deal[8] were heavily influenced by the populists as progressive historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner[9] and Charles Beard[10] credit the People's Party with creating the foundations for which progressivism could thrive. I will then continue in a similar fashion with an analysis of other political movements in the 20th and 21st centuries which have been influenced by the People's Party as I believe the significance of their populist ideals are still present in contemporary politics.

Conclusion-

Within my conclusion, I will reiterate my research objectives and provide a coherent summary of my findings and the resulting outcomes of my research. At this point, the body of my dissertation will have convinced the marker of the value of my argument and the significance of the formation of the People's Party to the origins of American Populism, and the influence of their populist ideals to populism later on in American politics. It is, therefore, necessary for me to proceed by recommending suggestions that would benefit future research into the topic which will be established following the completion of my dissertation. The final part of my conclusion will include the limitations of my research and a self-reflection section, as I will ensure that I tell the reader that I have met my research objectives and exhibit that I have made a serious contribution to the historiography of the People's Party and American Populism.

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