

The rise and fall of populism essay



The Rise and Fall of Populism The Farmer's Alliance In the 1880s, as drought hit the wheat-growing areas of the Great Plains and prices for Southern cotton sunk to new lows, many tenant farmers fell into deep debt. Lenders, grain-elevator owners, and others with whom farmers did business were angered.

Depression worsened in the early 1890s, and some industrial workers shared different views on labor, trust, and monopolies. If the various alliances between the North and South were able to unite, they would've created an astonishing mighty political force. Unfortunately, sectional differences and personality clashes quickly halted this idea. The Saint Louis meeting in 1889 formed a clear idea where certain alliances existed. Clearly, white southerners feared reprisals from landowners, and objected participation by blacks.

They also rejected proposals that would have ended secret whites-only activities. Northerners also feared domination by more experienced southern leaders. The Republican Party mostly consisted of Northern farmers who wanted protective tariffs to keep out foreign grain. Democrats, who were mostly white southerners, wanted low tariffs to hold down the costs of foreign manufactured goods. Despite these differences, both parties did favor the governmental regulation of transportation and communications, liberal credit policies, equitable taxation, prohibition of landownership, by foreign investigators, and currency reform. Due to this confidence, the alliances drew more deeply into politics.

Farmers had elected a number of officeholders in 1890. Alliance members controlled four governorships, eight state legislatures, forty-four seats in the U. S. House of Representatives, and three seats in the U. S.

Senate. The Populist movement arose as a revolt against the special privileges of industrialism and the American banking system. The Rise of Populists In the Midwest, Alliance candidates often ran on the independent third-party tickets and achieved some success in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. During the summer of 1890, the Kansas Alliance held a “ convention of the people” Formation of the People’s party eventually began to call themselves “ Populists” which derives from the Latin word *populus* meaning people.

This American movement primarily started to improve conditions for farmers and laborers. The Election of 1892 As the populists won over the state legislature of Kansas in 1890, William Peffer became the party’s first U. S. Senator. Due to Peffer’s humorous figure, Eastern journalists and politicians viewed the party as a joke. Despite their opinion, the party gained popularity and support.

By 1892, the party was ready for independent action. They summoned a People’s party convention in Omaha on July 4 to draft a platform and nominate a presidential candidate. The new party’s platform was one of the most comprehensive reform documents in American history. Corruption dominated the ballot box. More importantly, corruption fostered inequality that threatened to split American society.

The Omaha platform claimed “ wealth belongs to him that created it”, and addressed the three central sources of unrest: transportation, land, and money. Populists demanded government ownership of telegraph lines and railroads and urged the federal government to reclaim all land owned for speculative purposes by railroads and foreigners. Others advocated a graduated income tax, postal savings banks, direct election of the U. S. senators, and shorter hours for workers.

The party nominated an official founder through a merger of the Farmers’ Alliance and the Knights of Labor. James B. Weaver of Iowa was a former Union general and supporter of a liberally increased money supply. The Populist campaign roared of colorful speeches from “ Sockless Jerry” Simpson, an unschooled rural reformer, and of Mary Ellen Lease, who urged farmers to “ raise less corn and more hell” The South introduced Charles W. Macune of Texas, Thomas Watson of Georgia, and Leonidas Polk of North Carolina.

The vigorous language on the Omaha platform derived from Minnesota’s Ignatius Donnelly, pseudo-scientist and writer of apocalyptic novels. Finally, the campaign presented James Hogg, the three-hundred-pound governor of Texas, and one-eyed Senator, “ Pitchfork Ben” Tillman of South Carolina, who were not dedicated Populists, but rather used the campaigning for their own political needs. James B. Weaver and campaigned for the following:

- Unlimited cheap silver money (they wanted a rate of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold)
- Government ownership of all railroads and telephone companies
- A graduated income tax
- Direct election of U. S. senators
- Single-term limits for presidents
- Immigration restriction
- Shorter workdays

Although Weaver gathered over a million votes in the 1892 election, and majorities in four states and twenty-two electoral votes, he lost badly.

Rural dwellers still had emotional faith in the future. Even though Populists were flawed Democrats-they still wanted to fulfill their version of American ideals and stuck with their mistrust of blacks. Millions of people had begun to believe that a cooperative democracy could overcome corporate power.

Between 1892 and 1896, however, the party failed to make further gains, in part because of fraud, intimidation, and violence by Southern Democrats.

The Depression of 1893 An apparently minor but ominous event occurred shortly before Grover Cleveland took office for the second time in 1893: the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, one a profitable line, went bankrupt.

Due to the heavy borrowing to lay the track and build stations and bridges, ultimately put the company into an unpayable debt. Manufacturers experienced a similar dilemma. McCormick farm machinery factories bought more machines to get more work out of fewer laborers. This strategy, however, only enlarged the debt and increased unemployment.

The employers couldn't pay their creditors. The failure of the National Cordage Company in May 1893 accelerated a chain reaction of business and bank closings. By June, the number of failed banks reached 128. Between 1893 and 1897, the nation suffered the worst economic depression it has ever experienced. The severe depression made Grover Cleveland, from the Democratic Party wildly unpopular. Between 1892 and 1895, New York policeman estimated that twenty thousand homeless and jobless people roamed the city's streets.

As the depression grew, the currency conflict reached a breaking point. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 had committed the government to buy 4.5 million ounces of silver each month. Payment was to be in gold, at the ratio of one ounce of gold for every sixteen ounces of silver. The nation's gold reserve soon fell below \$100 million in early 1893. President Cleveland called a special session of Congress to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and was actually repealed in late 1893.

At about the time Cleveland called the session, doctors had discovered a malignant tumor on his plate that required immediate removal. He kept his illness a secret in fear of the public's attention. He eventually recovered, but those who knew of his surgery believed it had sapped his vitality. After improving slightly, in 1895, the economy plunged again. Farm income declines, factories closed, and banks that remained open restricted withdrawals. As in most hard times, the depression reached a limit.

New gold discoveries in Alaska, good harvests, and industrial growth brought relief. Railroads had been the primary mover of the American economy in the 1850s, which led to the opening of new markets. By 1890, many companies expanded too rapidly. People also under-estimated their debts driving five-hundred banks and sixteen thousand businesses into failure. Canadian and Russian wheat growers, Argentine cattle ranchers, Indian and Egyptian cotton producers, and Australian wool producers also complicated matters with American farmers.

When farmers fell into debt and lost purchasing power, the economic health of railroads, farm-implements, manufacturers, banks and other businesses

were affected. Over thirteen hundred strikes and riots took place in 1894, which led to the beginning of the era of protest in 1877. Throughout this time, societies began to establish a new socialist order of justice and inequality. It appealed to intellectuals because it promised an end to class conflict and crude materialism. Coxey's Army American socialism lacked strong leadership and therefore suffered greatly. In 1894, the American Railway Union elevated a new socialist leader, Eugene V.

Debs. Although he was never good at organizing, Debs captivated large audiences with his attacks on the free-enterprise system. Soon enough, however, Debs had to share his attention with a quiet businessman from Massillon, Ohio. Like Debs, Jacob S. Coxey believed the government should issue paper money unbacked by gold. Coxey started an army and gathered recruiters from industrial towns and rural villages.

His march on April 30th, expressed the frustration of people seeking relief from uncertainty. The troops main focus was more jobs and better living standards. This group eventually became the Socialist Party by the 1900s. Democratic leaders wanted to destroy the third-party threat.

Because of this, many Populists decided to maintain a middle ground between the two larger parties and not merge with either. Inside the People's Party, "mid-roaders" sought to schedule the national convention before those of the Republicans and Democrats. When they lost the fights, fusionists hoped that silver-Democrats would be victorious in the convention. When this happened—with the nomination of William Jennings Bryan on a free-silver platform—mid-roaders found themselves in a difficult spot.

The Populists were underfinanced and underorganized in late 1894. Republicans and Democrats took turns to destroy the Populist voting strength. To do so, southern white legislators took steps into preventing all blacks from voting. In 1876, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited states from denying the right to vote “ on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. ” Their second attempt was implying a poll tax eight months before voting, and to prove someone is literate, expecting many blacks to be incapable of such acts.

Bryan and the “ Cross of Gold” speech Democrats who were silver supporters went over to the Populists as the presidential elections of 1896 neared. The Democratic convention that year was witness to one of the most famous speeches in U. S. political history. Pleading with the convention not to “ crucify mankind on a cross of gold,” William Jennings Bryan, the young Nebraskan champion of silver, won the Democrats’ presidential nomination but it presented the Populist party with a serious problem. Should Populists join Democrats in support of Bryan, or should they nominate their own candidate? Many reasoned that supporting a different candidate would split the anti-McKinley vote and guarantee a Republican victory.

The Failure of Populism The results revealed that the political stand-off had finally ended. McKinley beat Bryan by over 600, 000 popular votes and won in the Electoral College by 271 to 176. McKinley appealed to a wide range of Americans. Conservative Americans feared cheap money and inflation so much that they flocked to McKinley and the Republican camp. Wealthy businessmen in the East dumped about \$6-12 million into McKinley’s campaign, making it the fattest campaign fund of any American candidate

ever. Some Democrats quite reasonably claimed that McKinley had purchased the White House.

McKinley ultimately killed the Populists' dream of free silver in 1900 when he signed the Gold Standard Act to peg the value of the dollar to an ounce of gold. He also signed the Dingley Tariff in 1897 to set overall tariff rates at about 45 percent. Although Populists and fusion candidates won a few state and congressional elections, the Bryan-Watson ticket of the Populist party polled only 222, 600 votes nationwide. Therefore, the Populist crusade collapsed in 1896. Historians regard the election of 1896 as one of the most important elections of the nineteenth century, and certainly the most significant election since the Civil War.

First, it represented a victory of urban middle-class Americans over agrarian interests in the West and South. Populism had never really spread into the cities, and Bryan's appeal for free silver and inflation had alienated even the poorest Americans in the cities who depended on a stable dollar for survival. The Bryan campaign thus marked the last attempt to win the presidency through appeals to rural voters. It also marked the death of the Populist movement, which lost steam when it supported the Bryan campaign, essentially merging with the Democratic Party.

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