

# *The Rise (and Fall) of the Populist Party*

The Populist Party was the popular name of the People's Party. The rise of the Populist Party was the culmination of two decades of suffering among farmers of the South and West. The Populists supported policies to relieve the hardships of farmers and had an important impact on the politics of the 1890s.

After the Civil War, farmers all over the United States were hit with hard times. Although the growing industrial economy improved transportation, created new goods, increased farm production, and opened new markets to farmers, farmers were increasingly plagued by declining prices for their goods, high interest rates, economic depressions, land speculation, bad crop years, chronic debt, and increased unpredictability of national and international markets for farm products. All of these factors contributed to make farming less profitable.

Farmers responded in three ways to their predicament. First, they criticized banks and railroads, the businesses that they depended on for credit and transportation to markets. Second, they banded together in alliances and formed cooperative ventures for storing and marketing their crops. Third, they organized for political action and advocated policies designed to ease their debt, including regulation of railroad shipping prices, low-interest federal loans, and inflation of the money supply.

In response to these problems, farmers began to organize themselves. First came the Patrons of Husbandry, commonly known as the Grange, started in Minnesota. The Grange started cooperatives that allowed farmers to pool their money to get better prices on machinery and supplies. It also pushed for regulation of railroads and grain elevators.

After 1880, the Grange gave way to regional farmers' alliances. The Colored Farmers Alliance organized black farmers, and a few white farmers, in the South. Other regional alliances organized white farmers in the South and farmers in other parts of the country. The farmers' alliances represented the people, not the moneyed interests. They were neither Democrats nor Republicans—they were populists.

In 1890, politicians representing the farmers' alliances won control of many state legislatures and some governorships in the South and West. The various farmers' alliances met in Ocala, Florida in 1890 and backed candidates in the 1890 elections. They elected five U.S. senators, six governors, and 46 congressional representatives.

With that success, the alliances decided to work together. Meeting in Omaha in 1892, they agreed on six demands: A permanent union of all working classes; wealth for the workers; government ownership of railroads; government ownership of all communications systems; more flexible and fair distribution of the national currency; and no more ownership of land by those who do not actually use it.

In 1892, farmer organizations and their leaders met in St. Louis and formed the People's Party. In that year's presidential election, the party ran James B. Weaver of Iowa as its candidate on an impressive platform that called for government ownership of railroads, a graduated income tax, and unlimited coinage of silver to increase the money supply. Weaver received more than 1 million popular votes and captured the electoral votes of four states, indicating to the major political parties that these issues were important to the public and therefore could not be ignored.

As if to justify the arguments of the Populists, a financial panic hit the nation in 1893, sparking the worst economic depression the United States had experienced up to that time. Crop prices dropped, banks collapsed, and unemployment increased for the nation as a whole; for farmers, already in unsafe financial situations, the depression caused serious economic problems. Many Americans began to embrace the idea of increasing the money supply by coining silver to ease the nation's financial hardship—a measure that the Populists had widely supported in their political campaigns.



The "money question" became a burning issue in the Presidential election of 1896, and the Populists, the major supporters of free silver (as the policy came to be called), joined forces with the Democratic Party in an attempt to wrest the presidency from the Republicans. In the period from 1860 to 1896, the Republican Party dominated American politics, especially at the presidential level, where the only Democratic president during this period was Grover Cleveland. The election of 1896 offered the Democrats the possibility of garnering working-class votes in northeastern urban areas and agrarian votes in southern and western areas to win the election. Unfortunately for the Democrats, there was a great deal of suspicion between those groups. Moreover, northern workingmen found that their interests were closely tied to the interests of their industrialist bosses.



W.J. Bryan

The Democrats decided to nominate Nebraska politician William Jennings Bryan for president. To gain the Democratic nomination at the party convention, Bryan supported the silver standard and delivered a speech entitled "Cross of Gold," which ended with a promise to the moneyed interest in the country: *"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!"* At the age of 36, he became the youngest-ever presidential candidate of a major party.

The Populist Party agreed to nominate him as well, over the objections of African-American delegates. The African-American Populists pointed out that the Democratic Party completely failed to support their rights, cheating and betraying African Americans in the South. The white Populists, hoping that an alliance with the Democrats would bring victory, ignored their appeal.

Despite his talent as a speechmaker, Bryan lost the hard-fought election to Republican William McKinley, who campaigned on the slogan of "sound money" (adherence to the gold standard, no coinage of silver) and warned of the danger of Populist radicalism (in other word, craziness). McKinley was elected to office with 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176. The winner received 7 million popular votes to Bryan's 6.5 million. With his victory, Republicans advanced their control of national politics. McKinley would register an even more impressive win over Bryan in the election of 1900.

Populism gave rise to such colorful characters as "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman of South Carolina, "Sockless" Jerry Simpson of Kansas, and stump-orators like Mary Lease of Kansas, who argued that farmers needed "to raise less corn and more hell!" Some even argued that white and black farmers in the South were both "in the same ditch" and should unite to better their conditions. African-American farmers organized "colored" alliances and in some cases held important positions in Populist organizations.

The Populist movement lost any significant political power following the election of 1896. Shortly after McKinley won the presidency, gold was discovered in South Africa, Colorado, and Alaska, and the resulting increase in the gold supply ended the depression and brought renewed prosperity to many farmers.

Though the party ultimately failed to achieve its aims, the Populist movement illustrated the impact of industrial expansion on farming and demonstrated how ordinary farmers could form their own unions to better their conditions. Many Populist ideas survived the demise of the movement and were enacted into law over the span of the next 20 years. The graduated income tax, the direct election of senators, the secret ballot, and government subsidies to farmers all had Populist origins. The party would also serves as one of the origins of the Progressive movement, which pushed for major reforms during the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



The presidential election of 1896 is often identified as one of the critical, or realigning, elections in American history. It did not result in a change in the dominant political party (the Republicans) so much as it further promoted the power of the already dominant party. Republican control of the government did not end until the Great Depression and the election of Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932.