

Populist Party

The Populist Party, a third political party that originated in America in the latter part of the nineteenth century, derived as a result of farmer discontent and economic distress. This was caused by the country's shift from an agricultural American life to one in which industrialists dominated the nation's development. The public felt as if they were being cheated by these "robber barons," a term given to those who took advantage of the middle and lower classes by "boldly stealing the fruits of their toils" (Morgan, 30). These corporate tycoons' conduct was legal, however ethically dubious it was. Cornelius Vanderbilt, a well-known railroad baron, reportedly once said, "Law! What do I care about the law? Hain't I got the power?" (Morgan, 30) The change from agrarian to industrial had a profound effect on everyone's life. Ignatius Donnelly, a leader in the Populist Party wrote, "We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench . . . A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized" (Tindall, 957).

As a result of this significant transformation, along with several different perspectives of peoples' mores, several reform movements were commenced, such as prohibition, socialism, and the Greenback Labor Party. Each of these movements was launched by different coalitions in hopes of making a difference either for themselves or for the good of the country. The farmers, specifically, were unhappy for four particular reasons: physical problems, social and intellectual concerns, economic difficulties, and political frustrations. The physical concerns the climate of the time period. Following 1885, there was a large drought on the American prairie, thus causing this land to become known as the "Dust Bowl."

Furthermore, there were extreme blizzards resulting in innumerable deaths of cattle and livestock. Also, farms were very isolated causing the women and children to lead a life of solitude and boredom. They demanded change. In fact, the women were the ones to start libraries and other meeting places for themselves and their children. This isolation made schooling for children quite difficult. Most kids who lived on the farm did not receive a proper education, or one of any kind for that matter. Farmers' economic problems are more intricate. Events baffled the farmer. They believed that deflation was the cause of their problem. The farmers produced more at a lower price due to improved fertilizers and new machinery, yet was making less than previously. In fact, in 1894, growers received less income from 23 million acres of cotton than from nine million in 1873.

The exorbitant prices of shipping their goods to markets worsened their situation. The railroads overcharged farmers so that they were able to grant large rebates to large industrialists to ensure the continuance of their business. These railroads united to form trusts that raised farmers' prices.

One Kansan said in 1891: "At the age of 52 years, after a long life of toil and self-denial, I find myself and family virtually paupers. With hundreds of hogs, scores of good horses, and a farm that rewarded the toil of our hands with 16,000 bushels of golden corn we are poorer by many dollars than we were years ago. What once seemed a neat little fortune and a house of refuge for our declining years, by a few turns of the monopolistic crank has been rendered valueless" (Morgan, 157). Lastly, farmers are outraged at their own victimization by businessmen who utilize their wealth and influence to secure unfair fiscal advantages. As politicians increasingly paid more attention to industrial interests, the agrarians' resentment intensified. They recognized that their influence was dwindling. The politicians were ignoring them and their pleas for help. The Populist Party was the result of a movement that begun with the Granger movement, which was, in

fact, a social movement. It organized various activities for women and children, established a mail-order program, and took an interest in education. The Grange united the farmers, who started to participate in politics through different independent third parties. As the Granger Movement fell apart, the Farmers' Alliance was established. This, unlike the Granger Movement, was a political movement. There were two branches of this alliance, a southern one and a northwestern one. The southern alliance, in contrast to the northwestern one, held back from plunging into politics. The members did not want to be deemed outcasts and traitors by their neighbors, who continued their support of the Democratic Party. As a result, they decided to meet in secret, along with the Colored Alliance, at which time they would agree upon a Democratic candidate that held views most similar to their own. These candidates, however, if elected, quickly abandoned their sympathies for the farmers. The northwestern alliance took a more radical approach; they were thinking about starting a third political party. These members supported inflation and Macune's "sub-treasury plan." The sub-treasury plan allows farmers to store their crops in government warehouses and receive government loans for up to 80% of their crops' value at one-percent interest. This does two things: gives them immediate credit and the opportunity to hold their crops until the market improves. Both the Grange and the Alliance endorsed social and educational programs, but the Alliance did two things differently; it was a political, rather than just a social movement, and it proposed an economic program, the sub-treasury plan. The Populist Party, although concentrating on a few issues, adopts several others to improve their chances of winning an election. They expected by endorsing these issues, they would receive support from the northeast. Their platform included: free and unlimited coinage of silver at the 16:1 ratio; inflation at a rate of \$50 per capita; transportation, telephone, and telegraph; implementation of the sub-treasury plan; wanted excess lands given to railroads; direct election of senators; child labor laws; mandatory education; eight-hour work day; one-year terms for president; and an income tax for the middle and upper class. Populists wanted the government to take over the railroads, telephones, and telegraphs and regulate these services. The industrialists who owned and ran these services were cheating the public and overcharging. Populists wanted to reduce "special privilege." Also, the farmers wanted the government to take back all the land the railroads were given that it doesn't need. These lands should then be given, or sold at very cheap prices, to farmers. The Populists ran James Weaver in 1892. Weaver polled over 1 million votes and received a total of 22 electoral votes. The Populists expected to do well in the 1894-midterm elections due to the devastating business panic under Cleveland's administration in 1893. However, the Populists were disappointed as they emerged from the elections in 1894 with six senators and seven representatives. They looked forward to the 1896 presidential election with great optimism. However, when the election came, the lines between Democrats and Republicans were clearly drawn. Republicans chose McKinley, who supported the gold standard. Democrats nominated Bryan, a silverite who made the famous "Cross of Gold" speech that ensured him the spot on the democratic ticket. The Populists, instead of splitting the silver ticket with the Democrats, decided to support Bryan. McKinley won, meanwhile crushing the hopes of the Populist Party. Populism continued on the edge of politics until the turn of the century, but it took a fatal blow from the election of 1896. It died out for several reasons. One, the voters preferred the soundness of the two major political parties. Voters identified the party with the violence caused by Coxey's Army, which was a protest group lead by Jacob Coxey that demanded the federal government provide jobs for the unemployed. And the: "Voters' repudiation of Cleveland's party

opened the way for new Democratic leadership that would neutralize or enfold Populist appeal . . . Cries for free coinage seemed dangerous to both property owners and wage workers. Populists' disinterest in tariff protection, which Republicans used brilliantly, also unnerved voters seeking prosperity. And the income tax, sub-treasury and other economic panaceas seemed illogical and dangerous amid depression" (Morgan, 169). The party also dies out because it does not win any elections. One noted historian declared, "A number of important Populist leaders . . . sought something that no American political party has achieved before or since: a political coalition of the poor whites and the poor blacks of the south" (Hart, 266). The Populists appealed to a low class in society, which made it nearly impossible to have a successful party. It is also hard to accomplish anything when a political party resembles that of a labor union and its formation arises because of economic despair. A prosperous period would immediately cause the party to split up, which was the case with the Populists. The Populist movement was the most dramatic reform movement of several late nineteenth century reform efforts, and although it did not last long, it had a profound effect on the country. Populism became so influential quite rapidly because the country was in a transitional phase, which included major industrialism and overproduction and a large influx of immigrants. The lower class was fighting for a cause they felt very passionately about, their lives and their well being. It is hard to imagine farmers, known as being very conservative, could endorse a platform so radical, but it was their "quick fix" solution to their problems. The Populists movement was quite successful, even though it did not prevail in a presidential election. It caused the "fissures" in the two major parties to widen, and in so doing, helped solidify the two major parties, and made their differences obvious. The other parties adopted many of their programs as well. The Populist Party signaled the passing of an agricultural American life, and it is often agreed that their ideas helped in the formation of the Progressive movement.

Word Count: 1648