

Populism¹

Populism emerged among farmers in both the Great Plains and the South in the 1880s. Although it built on earlier forms of agrarian discontent, most notably the Grangers, Populism addressed the needs of farmers as a combination of increased global production and dependence on industrial agriculture and credit drove them deeper into debt. Originally a self-help cooperative movement, Populists turned to political action to recapture a sense of lost freedom.

I. Agrarian Discontent on the Great Plains

In the early 1870s, farmers on the Great Plains and Midwest experienced natural and human hardships and began to organize to ease their desperate conditions.

A. Problems:

1. Natural: grasshoppers, drought, and disease all led to crop failures
2. Human: overproduction, debt from overexpansion during profitable years

B. The Grange, or Patrons of Husbandry, was founded in 1867.

1. Membership grew to 1.5 million by 1875
2. Self-help: farm advice, social support, economic advice (cooperative stores, grain elevators. Economic aim: restore farmers' economic independence that had been diminished by bankers and merchants.
3. Political action: Grangers forced legislatures in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa to regulate shipping rates. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled "Granger Laws" constitutional in *Munn v. Illinois* in 1877. Congress created the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate railroad transportation across state lines.
4. Decline: Corporate-backed legislatures repealed the Granger Laws. Farm prices increased by 1880s, causing many farmers to abandon the organization.

II. Agrarian Discontent in the South

In the late 1870s, farmers in the South began to organize to address some of the same problems as farmers in the Great Plains.

¹ Adapted from Paul Boyer, et al., *The Enduring Vision*, 6th edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 605-608, 610-611, 612-616.

A. Problems: Overproduction of cotton reduced prices, farmers borrowed using crops as collateral (the crop lien system). Large numbers of independent farmers lost their land and became sharecroppers. Democratic politicians used racism to frighten voters away from economic issues.

B. The Farmers' Alliance

1. Organization: Farmers in Texas organized local alliances to discuss their problems, promoted by Charles W. Macune after 1887. Macune created umbrella organization to link local alliances: The National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union. In Arkansas, African Americans formed the National Colored Farmers' Alliance.

2. Activities: The Alliance formed cooperatives for purchasing equipment and marketing crops. By 1890, 3 million members; plus 1.2 million members in NCFAs. Political mobilization through speakers, newspapers, rallies.

C. Spread to the Plains

In the early 1880s, the Alliance spread to the Great Plains, especially in Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Falling prices for wheat and natural disasters brought new members.

D. Leading Figures

1. Tom Watson: Georgia politician, urged white and black farmers to cooperate
2. Jerry Simpson: Kansas rancher and organizer, known as "sockless" Jerry Simpson because of his denunciation of "silk-stocking" conservative politicians and bankers
3. Mary Lease: Kansas lawyer, urged farmers to "raise less corn and more hell."

III. The People's Party formally united Alliances into a political movement and tested the waters in the 1890 congressional elections.

A. 1890

The National Alliance endorsed candidates who supported policies beneficial to farmers, including tariff reduction, graduated income tax, public ownership of railroads, a ban on absentee landownership, and the free coinage of silver. Alliance-backed Democrats won four governorships and control of eight legislatures in the South. Also gained control of

Nebraska legislature with strong presence in Kansas, South Dakota and Minnesota. Alliance support also elected three U.S. senators and fifty representatives.

B. 1892

After the success of 1890, Alliance members from the Plains pushed for a formal third party. Southern Alliance members, fearful that a third party might threaten white supremacy in their states, reluctantly agreed. In February, Alliance leaders formed the People's Party, generally known as Populist. The Party held its first convention in Omaha and nominated James Weaver of Iowa for president. The Omaha platform called for traditional Alliance goals and also called for the direct election of U.S. senators and other electoral reforms. The platform also proposed a sub-treasury plan, which would allow farmers to store commodities in government warehouses; the government would loan money to farmers using the crops as collateral and selling them when prices rose. In November, Weaver received over one million votes (8.5%), doing best in Kansas, Texas, Georgia, and Alabama. Populists also elected ten congressmen and three governors. Populist legislatures elected five U.S. Senators

C. 1896

The money issue—whether the United States should remain on the tight-money gold standard or begin inflationary coining of silver dollars—divided Democrats. When Nebraska politician and free-silver advocate William Jennings Bryan gained the Democratic nomination, Populists faced a difficult choice: should they back a national figure who shared one of their core reforms, or risk losing again with a lesser-known candidate who supported the entire Populist agenda? Reluctantly, Populists also nominated Bryan, who nonetheless lost to Republican William McKinley, carrying the South, most of the Plains states, and the Rocky Mountain west.

D. Legacy

Some of the Populist demands, such as the direct election of U.S. Senators, were embraced by Progressive Era reformers. Increasing farm prices muted the appeal of Populists, and it was not until the Federal Reserve system (1913) and the New Deal programs (1933-39) that the government addressed the problem of money supply and agricultural problems.

National People's Party Platform

Assembled upon the 116th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the People's Party of America, in their first national convention, invoking upon their action the blessing of Almighty God, put forth in the name and on behalf of the people of this country, the following preamble and declaration of principles:

Preamble

The conditions which surround us best justify our co-operation; 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. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection, imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down, and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions. The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires.

The national power to create money is appropriated to enrich bondholders; a vast public debt payable in legal tender currency has been funded into gold-bearing bonds, thereby adding millions to the burdens of the people.

Silver, which has been accepted as coin since the dawn of history, has been demonetized to add to the purchasing power of gold by decreasing the value of all forms of property as well as human labor, and the supply of currency is purposely abridged to fatten usurers, bankrupt enterprise, and enslave industry. A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism.

We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people. We charge that the controlling influences dominating both these parties have permitted the existing dreadful conditions to develop without serious effort to prevent or restrain them. Neither do they now promise us any substantial reform. They have agreed together to ignore, in the coming campaign, every issue but one. They propose to drown the outcries of a plundered people with the uproar of a sham battle over the tariff, so that capitalists, corporations, national banks, rings, trusts, watered stock, the demonetization of silver and the oppressions of the usurers may all be lost sight of. They propose to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the altar of mammon; to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the millionaires.

Assembled on the anniversary of the birthday of the nation, and filled with the spirit of the grand general and chief who established our independence, we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of "the plain people," with which class it originated. We assert our purposes to be identical with the purposes of the National Constitution; to form a more perfect union and establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.

We declare that this Republic can only endure as a free government while built upon the love of the whole people for each other and for the nation; that it cannot be pinned together by bayonets; that the civil war is over, and that every passion and resentment which grew out of it must die with it, and that we must be in fact, as we are in name, one united brotherhood of free men.

Our country finds itself confronted by conditions for which there is no precedent in the history of the world; our annual agricultural productions amount to billions of dollars in value, which must, within a few weeks or months, be

exchanged for billions of dollars' worth of commodities consumed in their production; the existing currency supply is wholly inadequate to make this exchange; the results are falling prices, the formation of combines and rings, the impoverishment of the producing class. We pledge ourselves that if given power we will labor to correct these evils by wise and reasonable legislation, in accordance with the terms of our platform.

We believe that the power of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded (as in the case of the postal service) as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land.

While our sympathies as a party of reform are naturally upon the side of every proposition which will tend to make men intelligent, virtuous, and temperate, we nevertheless regard these questions, important as they are, as secondary to the great issues now pressing for solution, and upon which not only our individual prosperity but the very existence of free institutions depend; and we ask all men to first help us to determine whether we are to have a republic to administer before we differ as to the conditions upon which it is to be administered, believing that the forces of reform this day organized will never cease to move forward until every wrong is remedied and equal rights and equal privileges securely established for all the men and women of this country.

Platform

We declare, therefore—

First.—That the union of the labor forces of the United States this day consummated shall be permanent and perpetual; may its spirit enter into all hearts for the salvation of the Republic and the uplifting of mankind.

Second.—Wealth belongs to him who creates it, and every dollar taken from industry without an equivalent is robbery. "If any will not work, neither shall he eat." The interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical.

Third.—We believe that the time has come when the railroad corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads, and should the government enter upon the work of owning and managing all railroads, we should favor an amendment to the Constitution by which all persons engaged in the government service shall be placed under a civil-service regulation of the most rigid character, so as to prevent the increase of the power of the national administration by the use of such additional government employes.

FINANCE.—We demand a national currency, safe, sound, and flexible, issued by the general government only, a full legal tender for all debts, public and private, and that without the use of banking corporations, a just, equitable, and efficient means of distribution direct to the people, at a tax not to exceed 2 per cent. per annum, to be provided as set forth in the sub-treasury plan of the Farmers' Alliance, or a better system; also by payments in discharge of its obligations for public improvements.

1. We demand free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16 to 1.
2. We demand that the amount of circulating medium be speedily increased to not less than \$50 per capita.
3. We demand a graduated income tax.
4. We believe that the money of the country should be kept as much as possible in the hands of the people, and hence we demand that all State and national revenues shall be limited to the necessary expenses of the government, economically and honestly administered.
5. We demand that postal savings banks be established by the government for the safe deposit of the earnings of the people and to facilitate exchange.

TRANSPORTATION—Transportation being a means of exchange and a public necessity, the government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of the people. The telegraph, telephone, like the post-office system, being a necessity for the transmission of news, should be owned and operated by the government in the interest of the people.

LAND.—The land, including all the natural sources of wealth, is the heritage of the people, and should not be monopolized for speculative purposes, and alien ownership of land should be prohibited. All land now held by railroads and other corporations in excess of their actual needs, and all lands now owned by aliens should be reclaimed by the government and held for actual settlers only.

Expression of Sentiments

Your Committee on Platform and Resolutions beg leave unanimously to report the following:

Whereas, Other questions have been presented for our consideration, we hereby submit the following, not as a part of the Platform of the People's Party, but as resolutions expressive of the sentiment of this Convention.

1. RESOLVED, That we demand a free ballot and a fair count in all elections and pledge ourselves to secure it to every legal voter without Federal Intervention, through the adoption by the States of the unperturbed Australian or secret ballot system.
2. RESOLVED, That the revenue derived from a graduated income tax should be applied to the reduction of the burden of taxation now levied upon the domestic industries of this country.
3. RESOLVED, That we pledge our support to fair and liberal pensions to ex-Union soldiers and sailors.
4. RESOLVED, That we condemn the fallacy of protecting American labor under the present system, which opens our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out our wage-earners; and we denounce the present ineffective laws against contract labor, and demand the further restriction of undesirable emigration.
5. RESOLVED, That we cordially sympathize with the efforts of organized workingmen to shorten the hours of labor, and demand a rigid enforcement of the existing eight-hour law on Government work, and ask that a penalty clause be added to the said law.
6. RESOLVED, That we regard the maintenance of a large standing army of mercenaries, known as the Pinkerton system, as a menace to our liberties, and we demand its abolition. . . .
7. RESOLVED, That we commend to the favorable consideration of the people and the reform press the legislative system known as the initiative and referendum.
8. RESOLVED, That we favor a constitutional provision limiting the office of President and Vice-President to one term, and providing for the election of Senators of the United States by a direct vote of the people.
9. RESOLVED, That we oppose any subsidy or national aid to any private corporation for any purpose.
10. RESOLVED, That this convention sympathizes with the Knights of Labor and their righteous contest with the tyrannical combine of clothing manufacturers of Rochester, and declare it to be a duty of all who hate tyranny and oppression to refuse to purchase the goods made by the said manufacturers, or to patronize any merchants who sell such goods.

Source: *The World Almanac*, 1893 (New York: 1893), 83–85. Reprinted in George Brown Tindall, ed., *A Populist Reader, Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 90–96.

What's the Matter with Kansas?

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Today the Kansas Department of Agriculture sent out a statement which indicates that Kansas has gained less than two thousand people in the past year. There are about two hundred and twenty-five thousand families in the state, and there were about ten thousand babies born in Kansas, and yet so many people have left the state that the natural increase is cut down to less than two thousand net.

This has been going on for eight years.

If there had been a high brick wall around the state eight years ago, and not a soul had been admitted or permitted to leave, Kansas would be a half million souls better off than she is today. And yet the nation has increased in population. In five years ten million people have been added to the national population, yet instead of gaining a share of this -- say, half a million -- Kansas has apparently been a plague spot and, in the very garden of the world, has lost population by ten-thousands every year.

Not only has she lost population, but she has lost money. Every moneyed man in the state who could get out without loss has gone. Every month in every community sees someone who has a little money pack up and leave the state. This has been going on for eight years. Money has been drained out all the time. In towns where ten years ago there were three or four or half a dozen money-lending concerns, stimulating industry by furnishing capital, there is now none, or one or two that are looking after the interests and principal already outstanding.

No one brings any money into Kansas any more. What community knows over one or two men who have moved in with more than \$5,000 in the past three years? And what community cannot count half a score of men in that time who have left, taking all the money they could scrape together?

Yet the nation has grown rich; other states have increased in population and wealth -- other neighboring states. Missouri has gained over two million, while Kansas has been losing half a million. Nebraska has gained in wealth and population while Kansas has gone downhill. Colorado has gained every way, while Kansas has lost every way since 1888.

What's the matter with Kansas?

There is no substantial city in the state. Every big town save one has lost in population. Yet Kansas City, Omaha, Lincoln, St. Louis, Denver, Colorado Springs, Sedalia, the cities of the Dakotas, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Des Moines -- all cities and towns in the West -- have steadily grown.

Take up the Government Blue Book and you will see Kansas is virtually off the map. Two or three little scrubby consular places in yellow-fever-stricken communities that do not aggregate ten thousand dollars a year is all the recognition that Kansas has. Nebraska draws about one hundred thousand dollars; little old North Dakota draws about fifty thousand dollars; Oklahoma doubles Kansas; Missouri leaves her a thousand miles behind; Colorado is almost seven times greater than Kansas -- the whole west is ahead of Kansas.

Take it by any standard you please, Kansas is not in it.

Go east and you hear them laugh at Kansas; go west and they sneer at her; go south and they "cuss" her; go north and they have forgotten her. Go into any crowd of intelligent people gathered anywhere on the globe, and you will find the Kansas man on the defensive. The newspaper columns and magazines once devoted to praise of her, to facts and startling figures concerning her resources, are now filled with cartoons, jibes and Pefferian speeches. Kansas just naturally isn't in it. She has traded with Arkansas and Timbuctoo.

What's the matter with Kansas?

We all know; yet here we are at it again. We have an old mossback Jacksonian who snorts and howls because there is a bathtub in the state house; we are running that old jay for Governor. We have another shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatic who has said openly in a dozen speeches that “the rights of the user are paramount to the rights of the owner”; we are running him for Chief Justice, so that capital will come tumbling over itself to get into the state. We have raked the old ash heap of failure in the state and found an old human hoop-skirt who has failed as a businessman, who has failed as an editor, who has failed as a preacher, and we are going to run him for Congressman-at-Large. He will help the looks of the Kansas delegation at Washington. Then we have discovered a kid without a law practice and have decided to run him for Attorney General. Then, for fear some hint that the state had become respectable might percolate through the civilized portions of the nation, we have decided to send three or four harpies out lecturing, telling the people that Kansas is raising hell and letting the corn go to weeds.

Oh, this is a state to be proud of! We are a people who can hold up our heads! What we need is not more money, but less capital, fewer white shirts and brains, fewer men with business judgment, and more of those fellows who boast that they are “just ordinary clodhoppers but they know more in a minute about finance than John Sherman”; we need more men who are “posted,” who can bellow about the crime of ‘73, who hate prosperity and who think, because a man believes in national honor, he is a tool of Wall Street. We have had a few of them, some hundred fifty thousand -- but we need more.

We need several thousand gibbering idiots to scream about the “Great Red Dragon” of Lombard Street. We don’t need population, we don’t need wealth, we don’t need well-dressed men on the streets, we don’t need standing in the nation, we don’t need cities on the fertile prairies; you bet we don’t! What we are after is the money power. Because we have become poorer and ornerier all and meaner than a spavined, distempered mule, we, the people of Kansas, propose to kick; we don’t care to build up, we wish to tear down.

“There are two ideas of government,” said our noble Bryan at Chicago. “There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, this prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them.”

That’s the stuff! Give the prosperous man the dickens! Legislate the thriftless man into ease, whack the stuffings out of the creditors and tell debtors who borrowed the money five years ago when money “per capita” was greater than it is now, that the contraction of currency gives him a right to repudiate.

Whoop it up for the ragged trousers; put the lazy, greasy fizzle, who can’t pay his debts, on an altar, and bow down and worship him. Let the state ideal be high. What we need is not the respect of our fellow men, but the chance to get something for nothing.

Oh, yes, Kansas is a great state. Here are people fleeing from it by the score every day, capital going out of the state by the hundreds of dollars; and every industry but farming paralyzed, and that crippled, because its products have to go across the ocean before they can find a laboring man at work who can afford to buy them. Let’s don’t stop this year. Let’s drive all the decent, self-respecting men out of the state. Let’s keep the old clodhoppers who know it all. Let’s encourage the man who is “posted.” He can talk, and what we need is not mill hands to eat our meat, nor factory hands to eat our wheat, nor cities to oppress the farmer by consuming his butter and eggs and chickens and produce. What Kansas needs is men who can talk, who have large leisure to argue the currency question while their wives wait at home for that nickel’s worth of bluing.

What’s the matter with Kansas?

Nothing under the shining sun. She is losing wealth, population and standing. She has got her statesmen, and the money power is afraid of her. Kansas is all right. She has started in to raise hell, as Mrs. Lease advised, and she seems to have an over-production. But that doesn’t matter. Kansas never did believe in diversified crops. Kansas is all right. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Kansas. “Every prospect pleases and only man is vile.”

Source: <http://www.journalism.ku.edu/school/waw/writings/waw/newspaper/editorials/whatsthematter.html>

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