

6.13 Politics in the Gilded Age

Theme: Politics and Power

Learning Objective 6.K: Explain the similarities and differences between the political parties during the Gilded Age.

Political Issues of the Gilded Age

KC-6.3.II.A The major political parties appealed to lingering divisions from the Civil War and contended over tariffs and currency issues, even as reformers argued that economic greed and self-interest had corrupted all levels of government.

- Lingering Divisions
 - Republicans continue to “_____”
 - Support from northern states, _____, reformers
 - Democrats continue to hold “_____”
 - Democratic _____ mobilizing in cities
 - Support from Catholics, Jews
- Tariffs
 - Republicans still wanted high protective Tariffs - _____, Dingley Tariff 1897
 - Protected factory owners
 - Prompted retaliatory tariffs
 - Democrats wanted lower - _____
 - Made imports cheaper for consumers
- Currency
 - _____, Drain on Gold convinced workers and farmers _____ was a problem
 - “Coxey’s Army” march to Washington, asks for government spending
 - Split Democratic Party (“_____”)
 - “_____” wanted a 16:1 exchange to gold
- Corruption
 - Political Party Machines operated on _____
 - Reason for high voter turnout, mobilized immigrants in cities
 - Practice of _____ in city government
 - “Honest Graft” - George Washington Plunkitt
 - Discontented job seeker, _____, assassinated Pres. Garfield
 - _____ introduced meritocracy to bureaucracy

Populist Party

KC-6.1.III.C: Economic instability inspired agrarian activists to create the People's (Populist) Party, which called for a stronger governmental role in regulating the American economic system.

- New Populist Party consolidated views of previous Farmers' Alliance
 - _____ listed beliefs
 - Unlimited _____, graduated _____
 - Government ownership of railroads and telegraphs, action to stabilize crop prices, 8 hour work day
 - _____, use of initiatives and referendums
- 1892 - First presidential campaign, _____
 - Wins 5 states, 8.5% of popular vote
- 1896 - _____, Democratic candidate adopts silver platform - "_____ " Speech
- Populists also nominate Bryan, loses to (R) William McKinley
 - Loss will lead to a decline of Populists as a party
 - Parts of its platform will be adopted by _____ in 20th c.

Political Machines

KC-6.2.I.D In an urban atmosphere where the access to power was unequally distributed, political machines thrived, in part by providing immigrants and the poor with social services.

- Parties relied on patronage
 - Helped immigrants settle, hoping they will be future voters
 - Party bosses could gain personal gain through graft
 - _____ arrested and convicted for graft in 1872, Political Cartoons by _____
 - George Washington Plunkitt's defense of "_____ "
 - Diminished with Civil Service Reform

Recap

- The parties in the late 19th century were still structured and supported similar stances as mid 19th century
- New issues of currency and corruption addressed, issue of tariff continues
- The Populist Party gains popularity in 1890's, proposes progressive economic and political platform
- Political Party Machines worked on patronage, lose prominence with Civil Service Reform

Part II

Short Answer Questions

Answer the following in AT LEAST three sentences.

1. Explain the similarities and differences between the political parties during the Gilded Age.

Grover Cleveland's Veto of the Texas Seed Bill, 1887

It is represented that a long-continued and extensive drought has existed in certain portions of the State of Texas, resulting in a failure of crops and consequent distress and destitution.

Though there has been some difference in statements concerning the extent of the people's needs in the localities thus affected, there seems to be no doubt that there has existed a condition calling for relief; and I am willing to believe that, notwithstanding the aid already furnished, a donation of seed grain to the farmers located in this region, to enable them to put in new crops, would serve to avert a continuance or return of an unfortunate blight.

And yet I feel obliged to withhold my approval of the plan, as proposed by this bill, to indulge a benevolent and charitable sentiment through the appropriation of public funds for that purpose.

I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution, and I do not believe that the power and duty of the General Government ought to be extended to the relief of individual suffering which is in no manner properly related to the public service or benefit. A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadfastly resisted, to the end that the lesson should be constantly enforced that though the people support the Government the Government should not support the people.

The friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied upon to relieve their fellow-citizens in misfortune. This has been repeatedly and quite lately demonstrated. Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character, while it prevents the indulgence among our people of that kindly sentiment and conduct which strengthens the bonds of a common brotherhood.

- 1. Provide an Attribution for the document:**
- 2. Use the document to support the thesis: "The differences in the political views during the Gilded Age were vast and based on the government's involvement in the economy."**
- 3. Choose one of the analysis topics from HAPP and provide a 2 sentence analysis of the document.**
- 4. Give an A-C-E response on a piece of outside evidence that is relevant to the document and topic of the thesis**

The “Omaha Platform” of the People’s Party, 1892

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.

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.

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.

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.

RESOLVED, That we oppose any subsidy or national aid to any private corporation for any purpose.

5. Provide an Attribution for the document:

6. Use the document to support the thesis: “The differences in the political views during the Gilded Age were vast and based on the government’s involvement in the economy.”

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8. Give an A-C-E response on a piece of outside evidence that is relevant to the document and topic of the thesis

“Cross of Gold Speech,” William Jennings Bryan, 1896

There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, that their 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 and through every class that rests upon it.

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.

If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

9. Provide an Attribution for the document:

10. Use the document to support the thesis: “The differences in the political views during the Gilded Age were vast and based on the government’s involvement in the economy.”

11. Choose one of the analysis topics from HAPP and provide a 2 sentence analysis of the document.

12. Give an A-C-E response on a piece of outside evidence that is relevant to the document and topic of the thesis

Secondary Source Document Analysis

Read the essay and fill in the chart below. Identify one claim for each subsection of the essay and provide a piece of evidence that corresponds to the claim.

Title:	
Author:	
Historical Period and Topic:	
Thesis:	
Claims	Evidence
Identify an alternative viewpoint to the author's thesis.	
Does the author address this viewpoint by refuting or conceding to it?	

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Populism and Agrarian Discontent

Retrieved from: <http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essays/populism-and-agrarian-discontent?period=6>

Today, the Gilded Age evokes thoughts of “robber baron” industrialists, immigrants toiling long hours in factories for little pay, massive strikes that were often put down by force, and political corruption in both big cities and the halls of Congress. But there were also serious problems in rural America, where most of the population lived. And many small farmers turned to social movements and politics to remedy those ills.

For example, during the 1880s, the population of Nebraska doubled to one million, a faster rate of growth than that of any other state in the Union. Taking advantage of cheap land offered by the railroads, Civil War veterans and European immigrants rushed in to start farms or launch small businesses to supply all the new residents, whether they lived on the land or in cities like Lincoln and Omaha.

Then, near the end of the decade, a nasty mix of calamities put an end to the boom. A massive blizzard in 1888 killed stock animals across the northern plains, ruining Nebraskans who had invested nearly everything they had in pigs and cattle. Then in 1889, a bumper harvest of corn—Nebraska’s largest crop—resulted in the lowest prices in memory. Some farmers resorted to burning their corn for fuel instead of selling it to buy coal. City newspapers blamed the crisis on too many ears chasing too few buyers; they blandly predicted the market would readjust itself in time. But a hundred weekly papers from the rural counties told a more dramatic story, and skilled lecturers from the Farmers Alliance helped drive it home. A year later the worst drought since the Civil War destroyed millions of acres of corn, wheat, and oats. The health of Nebraska’s urban economy depended upon the bounty of its farms. Bankrupt businesses and unfinished buildings scarred the streets of Lincoln and Omaha.^[1]

A growing number of Nebraskans had already begun to rail at a human scourge as deadly as the elements. They called it by a variety of names—“monopoly,” “the money power,” “Wall Street,” or “organized wealth.” But their indictment was simple enough: A powerful conspiracy was robbing small farmers of the fruits of their labors. They accused the railroads of imposing sharp and unfair hikes in freight rates, bankers of committing a legal form of usury, and the political establishment of serving the rich and the cities at the expense of productive families in the countryside. Men and women who had broken the prairie sod, expecting it to yield them an independent life, if not always a comfortable one, were forced to mortgage their farms and sometimes even their plows and animals to stay in business.^[2]

Children who sensed their parents’ anger began to sing:

When brokers are freed from all their harm
And lobbyists are dead
The banker’ll bow unto the farm
And come to us for bread.^[3]

Since 1880, a state branch of the Farmers Alliance had been attempting to mobilize these discontents. Like its counterparts in states to the north and south, the Nebraska Alliance did not begin as a political insurgency. Organizers launched cooperative stores and sold hail insurance and life insurance at rates lower than commercial firms were offering. For most of the decade, good crop prices and the rush of optimistic newcomers kept its membership in the low thousands, but by 1890, the Farmers Alliance boasted over two million members nationwide.

Similar events and a similar kind of outrage were present in farming states all across the South and Great Plains. Foreign competition and commodity speculators at home were driving down prices for cotton, wheat, and corn. Neither major party, wedded to a doctrine of laissez-faire, was willing to do anything much about it. And many wage earners had their own reasons to protest: railroad companies, mine operators, and big manufacturers routinely fired men for trying to organize unions, making it difficult to win either job security or a living wage. The nation’s largest union group, the Knights of Labor, sympathized with the agrarian rebellion.

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Thus, in 1892, farmers and labor insurgents came together in Omaha to organize a new People's Party, also known as the Populists. "We believe," proclaimed Ignatius Donnelly, a 61-year-old former congressman from Minnesota who also dabbled in science fiction, "that the powers of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded . . . 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." Most of the party's rank-and-file belonged to the Farmers Alliance, whose huge network of local papers and lecturers who stumped through rural America gave it a base that no other third party in US history could match.

But the Populists also knew they would never transform the nation from the agrarian hinterland alone. Their Omaha Platform proposed a number of ways to restrain and regulate corporate America so that "the plain people" would once again feel the government was standing up for their interests: a graduated income tax, a "flexible" currency based on silver as well as gold, the nationalization of the railroads and the telegraph, the initiative and referendum which allowed voters to place their own measures on the ballot or vote down a bill already passed by the state legislature, and a ban on aliens owning land targeting wealthy European investors. The Omaha Platform also preached that "the interests of rural and civil labor are the same; their enemies are identical" and backed it up with demands for an eight-hour day for public workers and abolition of the Pinkerton Agency, a notorious strikebreaking firm.

With such proposals, Populists won the votes of large numbers of miners in the Rocky Mountains and urban craftsmen in the cities of the Mississippi Valley and the Far West—as well as from small farmers in the South and West. From 1892 to 1896, as an economic depression wracked the nation, the new party elected forty-five congressmen and six senators, as well as governors and a majority of state legislators in Colorado and Kansas, and a mayor of San Francisco. Populist candidates were competitive nearly everywhere outside the industrial Northeast. In 1892, the Populist James Weaver ran a courageous campaign for president, braving rocks and rotten eggs in the Democratic South and a blackout of coverage by Republican papers in the Midwest. Despite such animus, he gained over a million ballots—almost 9 percent of the total—and twenty-two electoral votes.

The involvement of women in the movement put the older parties to shame. Female Populists organized camp meetings on the prairies and the fields, spoke widely at rallies, and wrote for the movement press. The veteran reformer Mary Elizabeth Lease became famous for allegedly telling Kansans in 1890 to "raise less corn and more hell." When Populists took charge of Colorado's government in 1892, one of their first acts was to place a referendum on woman suffrage before the voters. It passed easily, with big majorities coming from the same counties that had recently delivered the state to the insurgent party.^[4]

The Populists also moved, in halting steps, from their white core to the black periphery. They first welcomed the formation of a separate Colored Farmers Alliance—only to shun it in 1891 when thousands of black cotton-pickers staged a strike at harvest time against employers who included members of the white Alliance. Still, African Americans joined the People's Party in states from North Carolina to Kansas, and the party's ability to persuade black men to switch from the Republican Party was crucial to electing scores of third-party candidates, all of them white, in the former Confederacy. During the 1892 campaign in Georgia, two thousand white supporters rushed to stop the lynching of the Reverend Henry S. Doyle, a black Populist leader. "We propose to wipe the Mason and Dixon line out of geography," stated Ignatius Donnelly, "to wipe the color-line out of politics." For a few exhilarating years, it did not seem impossible.^[5]

Most Populists wrapped their aspirations in the Social Gospel, a theology that held that Christians should apply their faith to such worldly problems as poverty, war, and the exploitation of labor. Given the size and range of the movement, quite different versions of the worldly faith commingled within it. Southerners of both races, reared in Biblical literalism, tended to believe that "God has promised to hear the cry of the oppressed," and insisted that "No man in this nation can live a consistent Christian life" unless he threw himself into the agrarian insurgency. Black Populists were usually faithful church members, and ordained ministers became the most trusted and eloquent leaders of the "colored" insurgency. But no one attempted to bar believers in evolution, spiritualism, or freethinking from taking part in the smaller Populist parties that

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sprouted in the urban West and Northeast. For Populists, the virtue of one's motivation eclipsed the details of one's theology. Such an ecumenical attitude was notable at a time when the Supreme Court was unanimously hailing the United States as "a Christian nation" that respected the Sabbath and financed "Christian missions in every quarter of the globe."^[6]

But the heyday of the People's Party was brief. Its first presidential campaign in 1892 was its last as a serious contender. Part of the reason is that the Populists drew fear and hostility from economic elites and well-placed conservatives. "The present assault upon capital is but the beginning," warned Supreme Court Justice David Field in 1894. "It will be but the stepping stone to others, larger and more sweeping, till our political conditions will become a war of the poor against the rich; a war growing in intensity and bitterness."^[7] Field was opposed to such Populist ideas as a guaranteed income tax. But he was also alarmed by inflammatory remarks made by such figures as Davis Waite, the Populist governor of Colorado. In 1893, Waite had declared, "It is better, infinitely better that blood should flow to the horses' bridles rather than our national liberties should be destroyed." No wonder the prospect of the third party gaining power, alone or in fusion with a faction of a major party, horrified the custodians of social order.

In 1896, the People's Party split apart over the question of whether to endorse William Jennings Bryan for president. The young, charismatic Bryan was already the Democratic nominee for president, and he was sympathetic to many of their ideas and had campaigned for James Weaver four years earlier. But if the Populists fused with the Democrats, they would no longer pose a radical alternative to the two-party system. In the end, a majority of delegates to the Populist convention supported Bryan, in the hope that his election would be the first step toward liberating the nation from the rule of big business.

But Bryan was a reform-minded Democrat, not a Populist. He wanted to cleanse the system of the corrupting influence of big money, not destroy it and build a new one. Still, his presidential campaign, one of the most dramatic in US history, provoked the business establishment and most big-city newspapers to warn that victory for the "Popocrats" would lead to "anarchy" and bankrupt the nation. Bryan's loss to Republican nominee William McKinley doomed the third party to a slow but certain demise.

The Democrat from Nebraska did achieve one lasting success: he effectively remade his party into a strong supporter of union rights and the strict regulation of corporations. On Labor Day, 1896, Bryan offered a crowd of fifteen thousand workers and their families a metaphor for what would become the progressive approach to business from his campaign. Bryan recalled that, during his youth in southern Illinois, he had been in charge of tethering the family swine so they would not tear up the land. "And then it occurred to me that one of the most important duties of government is to put rings in the noses of hogs."^[8]

So the eclipse of the People's Party opened the way for a different kind of triumph. The powerful critiques of "monopoly" and "the money power" voiced by the populist insurgency helped persuade major-party presidential nominees from Bryan to Theodore Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson—and the thousands of candidates who followed their lead—to put an end to the freebooting capitalism of the nineteenth century. Some did so because they feared a failure to act could lead to a revolution. Others sympathized with discontented Americans and believed, as had the Populists, that a strong national government would be the best protector of the welfare of small farmers and wage earners. The policies they enacted included crop subsidies, the protection of union organizers, and the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which provides for an income tax. Thus was born an enduring truism of twentieth-century American politics: the disruptive potential and moral critique of radical movements helped powerful progressives to transform the nation.

Michael Kazin is a professor of history at Georgetown University and co-editor of Dissent magazine. He is the author of American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation (2011); A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan (2006); The Populist Persuasion: An American History (1995); Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era (1987), co-author of America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s (fourth edition, 2012), and editor-in-chief of The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History (2010).