

Populism and the Election of 1896

Central Historical Question:
How did Populist leaders appeal to the people?

Materials:

- Rise of the Populist Party PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A and B
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction. Use the Rise of the Populist Party PowerPoint to introduce farmers' issues in the late 19th century and the rise of the Populist Party.

Slide 2: Farmers' Problems. *Farmers in the rural Midwest and South faced a variety of problems in the late 19th century. First, prices for crops fell steadily over time, which left farmers in debt as they were unable to pay back the high-interest loans they took out to plant their crops at the start of the season. On top of this, the farmers relied on the railroads to transport their crops to market, and the railroad companies charged high rates because they knew that farmers had no choice but to pay them if they wanted to sell their crops. Discontented farmers began to blame the railroads and banks for their woes.*

Slide 3: Farmers' Organizations. *Farmers began to organize to address these problems in the late 1860s. The Grange (also known as the Patrons of Husbandry) was a network of local organizations founded in 1867 to address farmers' issues. In the 1870s, the Grange was successful in promoting state laws to regulate railroad rates (though these laws were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1880s).*

The popularity of the Grange waned in the 1880s, but new organizations known as the Farmers' Alliance arose to promote farmers' interests. By the late 1880s, Alliances in the Midwest and South had become politically powerful, successfully electing candidates that supported their positions—including four Southern governors, 44 congressmen, and several senators.

Slide 4: Populist Party. *The successes of the Alliances inspired the rise of a new political party in 1891—the People's Party, better known as the Populists.*

Slide 5: 1892 Election. *The new political party held a national convention in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1892 and drew up a platform that promoted farmers' interests, including:*

- *Expanding the supply of money by coining silver as well as gold, which would help indebted farmers by reducing the value of the money they owed;*

- *Government ownership of railroads to control shipping rates;*
- *The implementation of an income tax, with wealthier individuals paying higher rates.*

The platform also attempted to reach out to urban workers by promoting labor issues, like the eight-hour workday.

For a third party, the Populists had remarkable success in 1892. Their presidential nominee, James B. Weaver, won 8.5% of the popular vote. The party had even greater success at the state and local level, with roughly 1,500 Populist candidates elected to state legislatures.

Slide 6: 1896 Election. *In 1896, the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan for the presidency. Bryan had won the nomination by promoting the free coinage of silver, a major issue of the Populists. When the Populists held their convention two weeks later, they faced a dilemma: should they nominate their own candidate who represented all of their interests or throw their support behind Bryan who promoted some of their interests and had a better chance of winning office? They opted for the latter, nominating Bryan as their candidate as well.*

Slide 7: 1896 Presidential Election. *Bryan faced off against Republican William McKinley, who appealed to the interests of big businesses and banks more than farmers. He opposed coining money from silver, and instead wanted to maintain the “gold standard,” in which currency was only backed by gold. Bryan carried most of the South and West, but McKinley carried the more heavily populated areas in the Northeast and ultimately won the Presidency. The influence of the Populist Party declined after the election of 1896, but many of its issues were taken up by Progressives in the coming decades.*

Slide 8: Central Historical Question. *Today we’re going to look at two speeches from influential populist leaders and explore how leaders from this successful third-party movement appealed to voters. More specifically, we’ll answer the question: How did Populist leaders appeal to the people?*

2. Guided Practice on Close Reading: Document A

Hand out Document A to students and project it so students can see you mark up the document in real time. Model your thinking about the document aloud as students follow along, taking notes in the margins of the document as you go.

Notes for modeling Document A:

Source the Document: Model how you source the document before reading the text. Note that the document is the transcript of a speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease, an influential populist leader and famous orator. Also note that this speech was given in 1890, so it was just before the Populist Party emerged from the Alliance movement. Also note that the speech was delivered to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, a powerful organization that pushed for prohibition of alcohol.

Paragraph 1: Note the religious references. Lease seems to take for granted that the audience will be familiar with these biblical references and perhaps assumes that they would be receptive to religious appeals. Wonder aloud what this suggests about the audience. Lease was speaking to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, a religious temperance organization, so this audience may have been more receptive to biblical allusions than other audiences. Reason generally about what kinds of conclusions we can (and can’t) draw about an audience from a transcript of a speech.

Paragraph 2: Point out that Lease portrays those who migrated West as heroes and says that the land was “infested by savage beasts and still more savage men,” an insult to Native Americans who lived there. Ask students what this might suggest about the attitudes of her audience and the limitations of what we can conclude about her audience based on her speech.

Paragraph 3: Note that Lease blames the government for promoting policies that mainly benefit Wall Street interests and reason aloud about what this might suggest about the audience’s views about their government.

Paragraph 4: Highlight the religious allusions (again), hostility toward the wealthy, and a desire for political action.

Overall, Lease seemed to appeal to the crowd’s religious beliefs. She also seemed to play on their hostility toward the wealthy in the Northeast and their belief that the government was corrupt. Wonder aloud if these themes were used by other leaders to mobilize support.

3. Independent Practice: Have students read William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech (Document B) and answer the Guiding Questions in small groups. Then have students share out answers. Check for understanding and highlight issues that students may have missed.

4. Final discussion:

- Based on these two documents, how did Populist leaders appeal to people in the 1890s?
- What are the strengths and limitations of using these speeches to draw conclusions about people’s beliefs?
- What other kinds of evidence might you look for to learn about people’s attitudes in the 1890s? (Note that this is before public polling was widespread.)
- Would the themes of these speeches resonate with audiences today? Which parts of these speeches could we expect to hear from today’s politicians? To whom in our society might they appeal the most? Which parts seem outdated?

Sources

Document A

Mary Elizabeth Lease, "Speech to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union," in Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press and McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 154–160.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5303/>

Document B

William Jennings Bryan, speech at the Democratic National Convention, July 1896.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/93500896/>