

## Black and White Together

In the late 1800s, a social and political movement made up largely of farmers arose in the South and West. Known as Populists, the biggest obstacle this group faced, especially in the South, was antagonism between blacks and whites. Populist leader Tom Watson tried to persuade the groups to work together.

“The white tenant lives adjoining the colored tenant. . . . They are equally burdened with heavy taxes. They pay the same high rent. . . . They pay the same enormous prices for farm supplies. . . . Now the People’s Party says to these two men, ‘You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. . . . You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.’”

—Thomas Watson, “The Negro Question in the South,” 1892

▲ Farmers gather at a Populist rally. The inset photo shows the cover of a Farmers’ Alliance songbook.

# Farmers and Populism

## Objectives

- Analyze the problems farmers faced and the groups they formed to address them.
- Assess the goals of the Populists, and explain why the Populist Party did not last.

## Terms and People

Oliver H. Kelley  
Grange  
Populist Party

William Jennings Bryan  
William McKinley

## NoteTaking

### Reading Skill: Identify Causes and Effects

As you read, list the reasons that farmers in the South and West felt the need to organize and the effects of their effort.

Causes	Event	Effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Falling Prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farmers Organize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>

**Why It Matters** Following the Civil War, millions of men and women migrated west in search of the American dream. However, in the late 1880s and early 1890s, their dream began to turn into a nightmare, which, in turn, sparked a social and political revolt known as populism. This movement displayed the dissatisfaction of millions of ordinary Americans—poor farmers, small landholders, and urban workers—and produced one of the largest third-party movements in American history. **Section Focus Question:** What led to the rise of the Populist movement, and what effect did it have?

## Farmers Face Many Problems

The farmers of the West and the South were willing to accept the difficulties of farm life. Yet, farmers discovered that other enormous obstacles stood in the way of realizing their dreams. They received low prices for their crops, yet they had to pay high costs for transportation. Debts mounted while their influence on the political system declined.

**Falling Prices and Rising Debt** Between 1870 and 1895, farm prices plummeted. Cotton, which sold for about 15 cents a pound in the early 1870s, sold for only about 6 cents a pound in the mid-1890s. Corn and wheat prices declined nearly as rapidly. One study estimated

A farmer plows through hard soil. ▶



Banks considered mortgage loans a good investment. However, between 1889 and 1893, thousands of farms failed and banks foreclosed on mortgages. ▼

In the 1890s, farmers faced drought, poor harvests, debt, and a drop in the price of wheat, barley, and other crops. Oliver H. Kelley, who would eventually found the Grange organization, hoped to encourage farmers to feel their labor was “honorable” and “farming [was] the highest calling on earth.” It was an ambitious goal, since farmers were a discontented group during the late 1800s. Furthermore, as the cartoon at the right shows, the government support that farmers sought was slow in coming. Farm reform was not a primary concern for most lawmakers.



Planting crops on tough prairie soil was hard work for this couple on their farm in Nebraska. ▼



### Critical Thinking

- 1. Synthesize Information** Why might farmers have readily joined forces with urban workers?
- 2. Identify Point of View** Do you think most farmers felt that their work was “the highest calling on earth”? Explain.

that by the early 1890s, it was costing farmers more to produce corn than they could get by selling it, so they burned it and used it as fuel. Planting more crops did not help. On the contrary, the more crops farmers produced, the more prices declined.

During the same time period, the cost of doing business rose. To pay for new machinery, seed, livestock, and other needs, farmers went into debt. An increasing number of farmers mortgaged their farms to raise funds to survive and became tenant farmers—meaning they no longer owned the farm where they worked.

**Big Business Practices Also Hurt** Farmers blamed big business, especially the railroads and the banks, for their difficulties. They protested that railroads, as monopolies, charged whatever rates they wanted. Likewise, they complained that banks set interest rates at ridiculously high levels. Southern farmers, especially black sharecroppers, faced the added problem of having to deal with dishonest merchants and landlords who paid less for crops and charged more for supplies than promised.

In addition, farmers grew angry because they felt the nation had turned its back on them. The United States had a long tradition of electing leaders from farm states with agricultural backgrounds, like Thomas Jefferson. Yet, it now appeared that most of the nation's leaders came from urban industrial states. Moreover, farmers felt that they performed honest labor and produced necessary goods, while bankers and businessmen were the ones who got rich. One editor for a farmers' newspaper explained:

#### Primary Source

“There are three great crops raised in Nebraska. One is the crop of corn, one a crop of freight rates, and one a crop of interest. One is produced by farmers who sweat and toil to farm the land. The other two are produced by men who sit in their offices and behind their bank counters and farm the farmers.”

—*Farmers' Alliance*, 1890

Farmers, however, refused to accept these circumstances. They took action.



**Checkpoint** What were the farmers' major grievances, or complaints?

## Farmers Organize and Seek Change

Farmers created a network of organizations, first in the Midwest and then in the South and West, to address their problems. The Granger movement, also known as the “Patrons of Husbandry,” was the first.

**The Grange Tries Several Strategies** Organized in 1867 by **Oliver H. Kelley**—a Minnesota farmer, businessman, journalist, and government clerk—the organization popularly known as the **Grange** attracted about a million members. The goals of the Grange included providing education on new farming techniques and calling for the regulation of railroad and grain elevator rates.

In the mid-1870s, the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota enacted laws that set maximum rates for shipping freight and for grain storage. The railroad companies challenged these “Grange Laws” in the courts, but the Supreme Court, in general, upheld them. The Grangers also prompted the federal government to establish the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to oversee interstate transportation.


**Farmers' Alliances Lead the Protest** Although the Grange declined in the late 1870s, farm protest remained strong. Farmers' Alliances, such as the Southern Farmers' Alliance, became important reform organizations. These alliances formed cooperatives to collectively sell their crops, and they called on the federal

#### Vocabulary Builder

network—(NEHT werk) *n.* group of people, organizations, etc., that work together

government to establish “sub-treasuries,” or postal banks, to provide farmers with low-interest loans. They hoped the cooperatives would push the costs of doing business down and the prices for crops up. Some of the cooperative efforts succeeded. The Georgia Alliance led a boycott against manufacturers who raised the price of the special cord that farmers used to wrap bundles of cotton.

The Southern Farmers’ Alliance organized white farmers. However, there was an Alliance network for African American farmers. R. M. Humphrey, a white Baptist minister, headed the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, which had been organized by African American and white farmers. Nearly one million African American farmers joined the group by 1891. The Colored Farmers’ Alliance recognized that both white and African American farmers shared the same difficulties, but racial tensions prevented any effective cooperation between the groups.

 **Checkpoint** What reforms did the farmers’ organizations introduce?

## The Populist Party Demands Reforms


The spread of the Farmers’ Alliances culminated with the formation of the **Populist Party**, or People’s Party, in 1892. These Populists sought to build a new political party from the grass roots up. They ran entire slates of candidates for local, state, and national positions. Like a prairie fire, the Populist Party spread rapidly, putting pressure on the two major political parties to consider their demands.

**Populists State Their Goals** The Populist Party spelled out their views in their platform, which they adopted in Omaha, Nebraska, in July 1892. The platform warned about the dangers of political corruption, an inadequate monetary supply, and an unresponsive government. The Populist Party proposed specific remedies to these problems. To fight low prices, they called for the coinage of silver, or “free silver.” To combat high costs, they demanded government ownership of the railroads. Mary Elizabeth Lease, a fiery Populist Party spokesperson, also advanced the cause of women’s suffrage.

The Populist Party nominated James B. Weaver of Iowa as their presidential candidate and James Field of Virginia as his running mate. Both had risen to the rank of general in the United States and Confederate armies, respectively, and their nominations represented the party’s attempt to overcome the regional divisions that had kept farmers apart since the end of the Civil War. (Southern whites had supported the Democrats; northerners, the Republicans.) The Populist Party also sought to reach out to urban workers, to convince them that they faced the same enemy: the industrial elite.

**Populists Achieve Some Successes** For a new political party, the Populists did quite well in 1892. Weaver won more than one million votes for the presidency, and the Populists elected three governors, five senators, and ten congressmen. In 1894, the Populist Party continued to expand its base, gaining seats in the state legislatures and prompting the major political parties to consider endorsing its ideas.

In the South, the Populist Party had to unite blacks and whites if it hoped to succeed politically. As noted above, Tom Watson, Georgia’s most famous Populist Party leader, made a strong case for casting aside racial prejudice in favor of a political alliance between the races. However, the Democratic Party successfully used racist tactics, such as warning that a Populist victory would lead to “Negro supremacy,” to diminish the appeal of the Populist Party.

 **Checkpoint** What were the goals of the Populist Party?



# The Populist Party, 1890–1900



## The Omaha Platform

Distressed farmers did not feel that either the Republican or Democratic parties addressed their problems. As a result, in 1892, farmers attended a convention in Omaha, Nebraska, to set forth their own party platform. Their demands, detailed in The Omaha Platform, are listed below.

- Unlimited coinage of silver
- Graduated income tax
- Government ownership of railroad and telegraph companies
- Bank regulations

**Map Skills** By the election of 1892, the Populist Party began to draw national attention.

- 1. Region** Why did Populists fail to win support in northeastern states?
- 2. Draw Conclusions** Based on the map, why might the Democratic and Republican parties have been concerned about the Populist Party in the elections after 1892?



Populist Party supporters wore silver badges to show their stand on free silver.

## Economic Crisis and Populism's Decline

In 1893, a four-year-long depression began that not only worsened conditions for already-suffering farmers but for other Americans as well. Labor unrest and violence engulfed the nation. The major parties failed to satisfactorily respond to the nation's distress.

In the midst of national discontent, the Populist Party's dream of forging a broad coalition with urban workers grew. The Populists' relative success at the polls in 1892 and 1894 raised their hopes further. The decision of the Democratic Party to nominate **William Jennings Bryan** as their presidential candidate put the election for the Populists on an entirely different plane, leading some to believe they could win the White House that year.

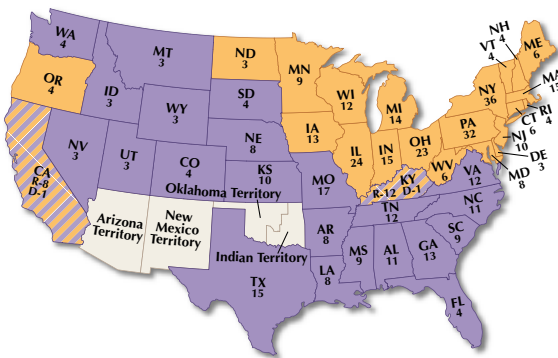
**Bryan and the Election of 1896** Born in Salem, Illinois, William Jennings Bryan moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he set up a law practice in 1887. He earned the nickname the "boy orator," in part by displaying his strong debating skills during his successful run for the United States Congress in 1890. In 1896, Bryan addressed the national Democratic convention on the subject of the gold standard, attacking Grover Cleveland and others in the party who opposed coining silver. The audience listened and cheered as Bryan spoke for "the plain people of this country," for "our farms" and declared "we beg no longer." The speech became known as the "Cross of Gold" speech because it ended with the following line: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

The speech so moved the Democratic delegates that they nominated Bryan as their party's presidential candidate. He was just 36 years old and had not been a contender for the nomination until then. Bryan's advocacy of "free silver," or the coinage of silver as well as gold, and his support of a number of other Populist Party proposals, placed the Populists in a difficult situation. Holding their convention after the Democrats, the Populists had to decide whether to nominate their own presidential candidate and continue to focus on building a broad-based movement from the bottom up or to endorse Bryan with the hope that they could capture the White House in 1896. They chose the latter course.

Bryan's campaign was like none other before. For the first time, a presidential candidate toured the nation, speaking directly to the people. In contrast, **William McKinley**, the Republican candidate, accumulated approximately \$15 million, 30 times the amount Bryan had, and allowed party regulars to do the campaigning for him. Marcus Hanna, the political powerhouse who orchestrated McKinley's run, cast Bryan and his Populist Party supporters as a potential dictator and a threat to the Republic. For instance, one cartoon published in the

**Geography Interactive**  
For: Interactive map skills  
Web Code: ncp-1606

### The Presidential Election of 1896



Candidate (Party)	Electoral Vote	Popular Vote	% Electoral Vote	% Popular Vote
William McKinley (Republican)	271	7,104,779	60.6	51.0
William Jennings Bryan (Democratic)	176	6,502,925	39.4	46.7
Other	—	314,226	—	2.3

**Map Skills** The election of 1896 changed the shape of national politics.

- 1. Location** Which two states were split between Bryan and McKinley?
- 2. Synthesize Information** Why could the election results be considered a victory of industry over agriculture?

pro-Republican *Los Angeles Times* depicted the Democratic-Populist coalition as a collection of evil witches, who fed the fires of sectionalism, discontent, and prejudice in order to win the election.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did the nomination of William Jennings Bryan affect the Populist Party?

## Populism's Legacy

McKinley won the election of 1896 and went on to win reelection, again over Bryan, in 1900. Bryan's emphasis on monetary reform, especially free silver, did not appeal to urban workers, and the Populist Party failed to win a state outside of the South and West. Moreover, the decision to endorse Bryan weakened the Populists at the local and state levels, and the party never recovered from its defeat in 1896. The Populist Party lingered for nearly a decade. By the early 1900s, it had disappeared as a feasible alternative to the two major political parties. Most of the voters who supported the Populist Party returned to the Democratic Party in 1896.

Even though the Populist Party fell apart, many of the specific reforms that it advocated became a reality in the early decades of the twentieth century. As we shall see, the Progressives supported a graduated income tax, regulation of the railroads, and a more flexible monetary system. Moreover, populism had a lasting effect on the style of politics in the United States. For a brief time, there was even a coalition of whites and blacks in Texas. They were able to find a common political ground. Increasingly, candidates campaigned directly to the people, and, like Bryan, they emphasized their association with ordinary Americans.

✓ **Checkpoint** What happened to the Populist Party?

## HISTORY MAKERS

### William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925)

William Jennings Bryan practiced law before entering politics. Soon after moving to Nebraska, he was elected to the House of Representatives, where he served two terms. A gifted speaker, Bryan was called "the Great Commoner" because he favored the poor farmers over large corporations. Bryan also backed many Progressive causes, such as the direct election of senators, the adoption of an income tax, Prohibition, and women's suffrage. In 1913, President Woodrow Wilson named him Secretary of State. Committed to keeping peace, Bryan persuaded 31 countries to accept his idea of arbitrating international disputes instead of resorting to war. His hopes for peace were dashed, however, when World War I broke out.



## SECTION

# 3 Assessment

### Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice

Web Code: nca-1607

### Comprehension

- Terms and People** Explain the significance of these terms and people in establishing support for farmers.
  - Oliver H. Kelley
  - Grange
  - Populist Party
  - William Jennings Bryan

### 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:

**Identify Causes and Effects** Use your cause-and-effect chart to answer the Section Focus Question: What led to the rise of the Populist movement, and what effect did it have?

### Writing About History

#### 3. Quick Write: Support Your Ideas

Write a paragraph in response to the following: Explain how the election of 1896 ended the political stalemate that began in 1877. Keep in mind that each sentence should support your main idea.

### Critical Thinking

- Determine Relevance** How did the deflation, or decrease, in the money supply in the late 1800s affect farmers?
- Synthesize Information** How did the Farmers' Alliances begin a crusade against big business?
- Make Comparisons** In what ways did McKinley represent the old way of politics? In what ways did Bryan represent the new way?