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# The Election of 1896: The Fall of the People's Party

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**Title:** The Election of 1896: The Fall of the People's Party

**Author:** Olivia Lee-Benton

**Grade Levels:** 10th Grade American History

**Time:** 60 minutes

**Focus Statement:** The People's Party (also known as the Populist Party) was a short-lived political party that was a result of agrarian unrest. The party was formed on the consolidation of multiple organizations, most notably, Farmer's Alliance and the Knights of Labor. Formally established in 1892 with the creation of the Omaha Platform, the People's Party called for numerous resolutions, the free coinage of silver in particular. This would have made it so that both silver and gold would be used as a currency with a ratio of 16:1 (bimetallism), causing more money to be in circulation. In this lesson, we will be focusing on the Presidential election of 1896 as the debate over the gold standard and bimetallism was at its center and divided the nation. More importantly, this election marks the *fall of the People's Party as it found itself aligning with the major Democratic Party* due this very issue. In 1896, William Jennings Bryan took the Democratic nomination after he moved the crowd at the Democratic National Convention with his famous "Cross of Gold" speech. Two weeks later, the People's Party accepted Bryan as their candidate, but chose their own vice president, Thomas E. Watson. His opponent, William McKinley received the Republican nomination quite effortlessly with the help of Marcus Hanna. Both men ran contrasting campaigns and ultimately McKinley won. His electoral votes surpassed Bryan's, but the popular vote came quite close. An energetic campaign failed to sway the electorate, except in the farm belt. The Republicans were returned to power and the *Populists were badly split between those who wished to remain with the Democrats and those who wanted to reclaim their identity*. This lesson will consist of brief lecture, discussion, and the analyzation of primary documents to promote better understanding.

**History Habit of Mind:** Perceive events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness. This will be done through the analyzation of the primary documents.

**MN Standard:** MN Standard 9/12/4.20 As the United States shifted from its agrarian roots into an industrial and global power, the rise of big business, urbanization and immigration led to institutionalized racism, ethnic and class conflict and new efforts at reform. (Development of an industrial United States 1870-1920).

**Benchmark:** Evaluate the effectiveness of political responses to the problems of industrialism, monopoly, capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption

**Learning Objective(s):**

- Students will be able to identify the opposing candidates of the Election of 1896 and their responses to the demands of the People's Party
- Students will be able to analyze the rhetoric of a political speech and its impact on this particular election
- Students will be able to analyze political cartoons of this election by interpreting their message and identifying their audience
- Students will be able to explain the significance of this election not only when it comes to American politics, but to the fall of the People's Party

**Resources:**

- Laptop w/ Power point Presentation
- Copies of "Cross of Gold" speech
- Highlighters

- Copies of political cartoons on slides
- Copies of political cartoon worksheets
- Copies of Omaha Platform Excerpt

## **Methods/Procedures**

### **Beginning (10 minutes):**

- Brief overview on the formation and platform of the People's Party
  - Slide 3's central questions: Who formed the People's Party? and What were the goals that made up the populist foundation?
- Hand out copy of Omaha Platform reading and go over the demands of the Omaha Platform as a class

### **Middle: Instructional Strategies / Learning Activities (45 minutes):**

- Lecture on the Election of 1896
  - Mckinley (5 minutes)
    - Slide 5 crumbles to reveal "The Election of 1896"
    - Slides 6-8 focus on William Mckinley: The details of his nomination, his platform, and his campaign strategy
  - Bryan (10 minutes)
    - Slide 9 is a basic introduction to Bryan
    - Slide 10 introduces "Cross of Gold" discussion
      - Hand out copies of "Cross of Gold" handout and highlighter to every student. Give them 5-7 minutes to read.
      - Discuss questions on slide 11 as class
    - Slides 12-13: cover details of nomination (if haven't already done so in COG discussion, cover platform, and campaign strategy)
  - Political Cartoon Activity (20 minutes)
    - Hand out political cartoons and worksheets to each student. Give them about 10 minutes to fill out worksheet and use the next 10 minutes to go over the cartoons as a class (slides 15 -22). This may be a group assignment. This will be turned in at end of class.

### **End / Summary (5 minutes):**

- Slide 23 shows election results. Discuss what this meant for the Populist Party
- Slide 24: Ask the class if they think any of these issues have been resolved despite the parties failure. If there is time, ask them if they notice any similar demands within today's society.

## **Afterwards**

### **Self-Reflection**

- Ask for volunteers while reading the Omaha Platform as some students get anxiety while reading aloud and on the spot. This, or give them a days notice that they will be asked to read.
- Make sure there is time at the end to make meaningful conclusions and draw comparisons to modern day politics

**The Omaha Platform of 1892**  
(With the exception of the preamble)

...

**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 unperverted 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.

The Omaha Platform (1892). (2008). In R. Adkins (Ed.), *The evolution of political parties, campaigns, and elections: Landmark documents, 1787–2007*. (pp. 130-136). Accessed October 10, 2015

# Excerpts from “Cross of Gold”

...

But we stand here representing people who are the equals before the law of the largest cities in the state of Massachusetts. When you come before us and tell us that we shall disturb your business interests, we reply that you have disturbed our business interests by your action. We say to you that you have made too limited in its application the definition of a businessman. The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer. The attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis. The merchant at the crossroads store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of this country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain. The miners who go 1,000 feet into the earth or climb 2,000 feet upon the cliffs and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured in the channels of trade are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who in a backroom corner the money of the world.

We come to speak for this broader class of businessmen. Ah, my friends, we say not one word against those who live upon the Atlantic Coast; but those hardy pioneers who braved all the dangers of the wilderness, who have made the desert to blossom as the rose—those pioneers away out there, rearing their children near to nature’s heart, where they can mingle their voices with the voices of the birds—out there where they have erected schoolhouses for the education of their children and churches where they praise their Creator, and the cemeteries where sleep the ashes of their dead—are as deserving of the consideration of this party as any people in this country.

It is for these that we speak. We do not come as aggressors. Our war is not a war of conquest. We are fighting in the defense of our homes, our families, and posterity. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged, and they have mocked when our calamity came.

We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them!

...

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 this country

...

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.

Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention Held in Chicago, Illinois, July 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, 1896, (Logansport, Indiana, 1896), 226–234. Reprinted in *The Annals of America*, Vol. 12, 1895–1904: Populism, Imperialism, and Reform (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1968), 100–105.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Analyzing a Political Cartoon

What is the cartoon's title? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the author? \_\_\_\_\_

When and where was it published? \_\_\_\_\_

What is familiar to you in this cartoon?

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Circle what tools the cartoonist uses to get their point across?

Humor	Labels
Caricature	Analogy to other historical events
Symbols	References to popular culture
Stereotypes	Fear
Speech balloons	

List the important people and objects shown in the cartoon:

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Briefly explain the message of the cartoon:

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What groups would agree/disagree with the cartoon's message?

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What questions do you have about this cartoon?

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