

The Democrats and Republicans: Differences and Similarities

Political behavior is an important and complicated aspect of the American system of government. In the United States political behavior frequently stems from habit and traditions. Americans sometimes cross party lines to cast their vote, but usually they vote for the candidates of one party or another because that is the party that they and their parents have always supported.

The political behavior of American leaders is just as complex. People become politicians and seek public office for a number of reasons. Some do so out of genuine concern for the problems and issues that face our nation. Others seek power and prestige, or simply monetary gain. All too often, political activities and policies become more focused on political party interests than on the will of the American people. But, generally, the party that ignores the public will for too long will find itself out of power.

In the years between 1865 and 1897, the character and structure of the Democratic and Republican Parties reflected all of the above characteristics. Some candidates and officials sought public office out of real concern for the issues that faced the United States, others wanted to acquire power and influence. Some wanted to make monetary gains for themselves and their friends, and party concerns and interests were always a focus of political activity. Today, I would like to look at the similarities and differences in the two parties during the period from 1865 to 1897.

Common Features: The Democratic and Republican Parties shared many common features.

1. Habit voters—Each party looked to the support of voters whose fathers and even grandfathers had supported that party. Most Americans voted then, and now, out of a sense of tradition. They did not see themselves putting a man in office so much as a party.
2. Parties were critical of each other. Even when there were no particular issues espoused by either party. The Republicans criticized the Democrats and the Democrats were critical of the Republicans
3. Each party had conflicting regional and economic factions within its membership. The notion of a political party as a “big tent” isn’t new.
4. Each party contained within its membership political factions that differed, sometimes widely, on specific issues.

The Republicans: The Republican party was made up of a wide spectrum of American society. Often the only thing that they had in common was that they voted the Republican ticket.

1. Northern and western farmers had traditionally voted Republican, although, maybe “traditionally” is a bad word to describe a party that had only existed for a couple of decades. Northern and Western farmers wanted free homesteads and better markets

for their produce. They were often hostile to the railroad companies that charged high prices to carry their crops to eastern markets, but this was a love-hate relationship in the West because western farms could not have existed without the railroads. Farmers wanted “soft money” (inflated currency) and protection from mortgage foreclosures.

2. Northeastern industrialists and financial interests had become attracted to the Republicans during the Civil War. Many northern industrialists made their fortunes supplying the Union war effort. After the war, Republican Congresses subsidized rail and other kinds of development. The Republican party supported high protective tariffs. Industrialists and financiers wanted “hard currency” and government protection of their rights to foreclose on tardy debtors.
3. Union Civil War veterans were appreciative of the role of the Republican party in the Civil War. They also were the recipients of vast federal largesse under Republican Congresses in the form of Union war pensions. The GOP frequently used the political tactic of “waving the bloody shirt,” that is, reminding them of the War and appealing to patriotism, to encourage support of the Union war veterans.
4. The black vote was entirely Republican. Blacks who were able to vote in the United States perceived the Republican Party as the party of freedom. During Reconstruction the black vote was mainly a southern vote. Not all northern blacks were able to vote. Many northern states discriminated against black citizens.

Since the various factions often differed on issues such as currency, tariffs, and banking, and since the Republican Party needed all of their votes; Republican leaders tried to keep from alienating any of its membership. The best way to keep any faction from becoming upset was to refrain from taking a stand on any issue. Instead the Republican Party did a great deal of flag, and of course bloody shirt, waving. They reminded the voters that the Republican Party was the party of Lincoln, Union, and Liberty and that the Democrats were the party of Insurrection, secession, and slavery.

The Democrats: First and foremost, after Reconstruction (after 1876) the Democratic party was the party of the “Solid South.” The party knew that it could count on all of the states south of the Mason-Dixon Line. This was primarily an agricultural vote, but it crossed all economic boundaries. Southern voters saw the GOP as the party of Lincoln, Union and Reconstruction, as well, and that was enough to keep southerners in the Democratic Party. Other groups that supported the Democratic Party included:

1. The leadership of the Democratic Party was primarily made up of bankers and importers from the middle states. They favored lower tariffs and a southern economy.
2. Immigrants, a growing population in the cities of the East tended to support the Democratic Party. This was because the newcomers were supported by the big city Democratic political machines such as Tammany Hall in New York City. Local ward heelers would greet the incoming immigrants, help to find them housing and employment, attend their weddings and funerals with gifts, and make their lives easier. In return, when the immigrants obtained citizenship, they became supporters of the Democratic Party.

3. Usually, but not always, northern workers supported the Democratic Party. They reasoned that the Republicans supported big business. They felt that they would have a better chance of obtaining legislation for shorter hours and higher wages from Democratic candidates and legislatures. But this was not always the case. Simply put, sometimes the interests of the northern wage earner were the same as their bosses. Where this was true, as we'll see, laborers sided with business and industry and voted Republican.

Third Parties: Many Americans also became dissatisfied with the two major parties because neither of them were willing to take a clear cut stand on any important issues. These disaffected voters would not turn to a third party until the 1880s. Third parties are rarely successful in American politics. They faced the opposition of the well financed, well organized political machines in the two major parties. But, as we will see, occasionally third parties did make an impact on the American political scene. On occasion they were able to force the major parties to take a stand on political issues, or to even change their policies.

Presidential Politics (1876-1888)

Between 1876 and 1884 factional rivalry within the Republican Party were more important to many professional politicians than serious national issues, or competition between the two major parties.

The Election of 1876

The voting returns in 1876 produced the most disputed election in the nation's history.

Democrats: Democrats hoped that the issue in the election of 1876 would be political integrity. They intended to link the corruption and scandal of the Grant administrations to the Republicans. The Democrats nominated Samuel Tilden of New York. Tilden was a reformer who had won national fame as the prosecutor who had crushed the New York Tammany Hall Machine.

Republicans: Although Stalwart elements of the Republican Party first supported the idea of getting Grant to run for a third term, the demoralized president had no desire to do so. The Republicans began to look for a candidate who would also impress the voters with his honesty and integrity. They selected Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes was the governor of Ohio. He had a reputation for honesty, and, most important, he was completely unaffiliated with the Grant Administration.

The Campaign: Both had the reputations of being government reformers. As might have been expected, during the campaign Tilden focused on the corruption in the Grant Administration and Hayes and his supporters enthusiastically "waved the bloody shirt," reminding northern voters that the Republican Party had saved the Union.

The Outcome of the Election: Tilden won 4,300,000 popular votes to Hayes 4,036,000. Tilden carried states with a total of 184 electoral votes in the electoral college—one short of the necessary majority. Hayes received 165 votes. Both candidates claimed 20 electoral votes. In South Carolina and Louisiana it was

charged that 19 electoral votes were fraudulent. In Oregon, the Democratic governor declared that one Republican in the electoral college was ineligible to cast his vote.

Congress created a special election commission of 15 members (8 Republicans, 7 Democrats) to determine who would become president. The commission resolved the dispute in favor of Hayes (8 for and 7 against, along straight party lines). The Democrats literally threatened rebellion. The Republicans promised that Hayes' would be withdraw federal troops from the South. Thus, as we have seen in an earlier lecture, the election of 1876 marked the end of Reconstruction.

The Hayes Administration

Hayes' term in office was complicated by the growing power of Democrats in Congress and factionalism in the ranks of the Republican Party. Radical Republicans were angry that their party and Hayes had abandoned and betrayed southern blacks. Republicans who had gained wealth and power from Reconstruction were also bitter that it had ended. Hayes's fellow Half-Breeds were upset with Hayes because they felt he had not provided them with as much patronage as he should have.

Stalwarts and Half-Breeds: Within the Republican ranks bitter quarrels continued to break out between the Stalwart and Half-Breed factions. The Stalwarts had staunch supporters of the Grant Administration. They were led by Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York. The Half-Breeds were more disposed toward reform within the ranks of the Republican party. They were led by James G. Blaine of Maine. Half-Breeds supported the end of Reconstruction and civil service reform. Stalwarts supported Grant for a third term and enthusiastically supported patronage appointments against civil-service reform. The two factions were otherwise quite similar. Both supported big business and high tariffs.

An Opposition Congress: Hayes's relationship with Congress quickly deteriorated. By 1876 the Democrats had gained control of both the House and the Senate. In an attempt to embarrass Hayes and discredit the Republican Party, the Democratic majority in the House created a committee to investigate the disputed election of 1876. The combination of intraparty feuds and partisan bickering made Hayes's administration ineffective in terms of the passage of any sound legislation.

The Election of 1880

Hayes refused to seek reelection in 1880. This appeared to remove a major stumbling block in the way of the Stalwarts who wanted to take control of the Republican Party and gain the White House. The Stalwarts wanted to place Grant back in the White House.

Democrats: The Democrats had tried and failed to find an appropriate candidate for the American voter on several occasions. Two attempts to place reformers (Greeley in 1872 and Tilden in 1876) had been failures. So, in 1880, the Democratic National Convention nominated former Union General Winfield S. Hancock of Pennsylvania.

Hancock was a bona-fide hero. He was a Mexican War veteran and had held a key position on Cemetery Ridge in the Battle of Gettysburg. He was fresh from a successful command in the Indian Wars. He was a handsome and rather dashing fellow. He was also unfortunately quite uninspiring as a speaker and somewhat ignorant of politics in general. He was ridiculed during the campaign by his opponents because he was apparently ignorant of the meaning of the word "tariff."

Republicans: As might be expected, the Republican National Convention rapidly became a battleground between the Stalwart and Half-Breed factions. The Stalwarts supported Grant. The Half-Breeds supported James G. Blaine. On the 36th Ballot Grant's opponents cast their votes for a compromise candidate, Representative James A. Garfield of Ohio. Since Garfield was a Half-Breed, the convention chose Stalwart Chester Arthur of New York as the vice presidential candidate.

The Campaign: Early in the campaign Grant and Conkling agreed to support Garfield. The rhetoric of the campaign included Democratic accusations of Republican corruption, and Republican reminders that their party was the party of Lincoln and Liberty. In other words, the campaign was business as usual. Garfield won the election. He received only 9,000 more popular votes than Hancock. However, he had greater success in the electoral vote. He received 369 to Hancock's 155.

Garfield's time in office was pretty short. Within four months he was assassinated on July 2, 1881. He was shot by Charles J. Guiteau, a Stalwart who believed that Garfield had frustrated his efforts to secure a federal patronage position. Garfield lived until September 19, having served for six months and fifteen days. He was succeeded by vice president Arthur who believed that the only way to garner the nation's approval was to be independent of both Republican Stalwarts AND Half-Breeds. Supporting neither Stalwarts or Half-Breeds, Arthur was supported by neither. His greatest achievement was the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883, which overhauled and reformed the civil service. The act provided for a "classified civil service system" that made certain government positions obtainable only through competitive written examinations. The system protected employees against removal for political reasons, and went a long way toward making the civil service a merit system and beginning to reform the old "spoils system."

Politics from Cleveland To Cleveland

Return of Democrats to Power

In 1884 Democrats had the best chance to win a presidential election than they had since before the Civil War. The Republican Party was still factionalized and Democrats had been making great headway in congressional elections since 1876. Nevertheless, in order for the Democrats to Achieve the White House in the election, the party would have to win the support of all those independent voters who had offered limited support to the Democratic Party in the past. The Republican Party was still identified with the scandal of the Grant Era and Democrats hoped that this fact would help to bring reformers of all kinds to support their candidate.

The Conventions: The Democrats chose Governor Grover Cleveland of New York. He was widely known as a bold, reform-minded administrator. The Republicans refused to give support to Chester Arthur, the incumbent, even though he desired the nomination and had accomplished much during his time in office. On the 4th ballot, amid a frenzy of celebration, the GOP chose James G. Blaine. The vice presidential spot was given to Senator John Logan, a Stalwart.

The Campaign: Many of the Reform Republicans announced at the convention that they would leave the party and support a Democratic nominee if the Democrats put forward a candidate that they could support. Cleveland fit the bill, and a large number of Republicans switched their alliance to Cleveland. The Regular Republicans gave these "Bolters" the title Mugwump (from the Algonquin Indian word meaning "Big Chief").

Cleveland's Victory: The election was very close. Cleveland received only 60,000 more popular votes than Blaine. Besides the defection of the Mugwumps, a number of other factors helped to insure Cleveland's victory:

Blaine received little support from Stalwart Republicans. What little he did receive was lukewarm. Shortly before the election Blaine had come under suspicion of accepting money to secure a land grant for an Arkansas railroad.

To complicate matters and take a little pressure off of Blaine, Republicans reported that Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child when he was an attorney in Buffalo, N.Y. "Ma, Ma, where's my Pa?" rose as an unofficial campaign slogan for those who opposed him. When confronted with the emerging scandal, Cleveland's instructions to his campaign staff were: "Tell the truth." Cleveland admitted to paying child support in 1874 to Maria Crofts Halpin, the woman who claimed he fathered her child named Oscar Folsom Cleveland. Halpin was involved with several men at the time, including Cleveland's friend and law partner, Oscar Folsom, for whom the child was also named. Cleveland did not know which man was the father, and is believed to have assumed responsibility because he was the

only bachelor. Cleveland's prompt and honest confession actually turned the affair to his favor.

The Reverend Samuel Burchard gave a speech in support of Blaine in which he denounced the Democratic Party as the party of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." This remark angered and alienated a number of Irish Catholic voters in New York and helped swing the state to Cleveland. Democrats eagerly publicized the slur and urged Catholic voters to support Cleveland. Cleveland won the election by 219 to 182 electoral votes.

The First Cleveland Administration

Grover Cleveland is among the most able and conscientious presidents who ever held that office. He was honest and efficient, and sensible. He felt that public office was a public trust. That the president should reflect the ideas and goals of the American people. Cleveland was stronger than his party, because in many ways he represented the hopes of reformers regardless of party affiliation.

Cleveland's Administration: Cleveland was often frustrated by partisan pressure when he tried to deal with difficult, and often political issues, such as the tariff, and the civil service. Nevertheless, he had some notable successes.

1. *Extending the civil service:* Cleveland insisted on adding a large number of civil service jobs to the merit list. This angered Democrats who had not had the advantage of a national victory and the patronage that went with it in more than 28 years. Cleveland was successful in adding almost 12,000 civil service positions to the list, though.
2. *Repeal of the Tenure of Office Act:* When Cleveland dismissed a federal district attorney in Alabama, the Senate invoked the Tenure of Office Act and demanded that Cleveland submit papers to Congress to justify his actions. Cleveland refused their demands. He insisted that the president had a right to remove federal officers. The Senate reacted by censuring the president. However, in 1887, Congress repealed the Tenure of Office Act. The repeal of this act helped to strengthen the independence of the chief executive.
3. *The Pension Controversy:* Since 1897 Congress had been very generous in granting a large number of pensions to Union veterans of the Civil War. Congressmen used pension grants to gain supporters in elections. Lots of the pensioners on the rolls were placed there fraudulently. By 1885 the pension rolls contained some 350,000 names. Claimants whose names were not approved by the Bureau of Pension Claimants turned to Congress. Congressmen sponsored private pension bills in order to place their supporters on the rolls. Cleveland tried to investigate each private bill before he would sign it. He vetoed more than 200 of these bills.

Government Reorganization and Reform: Cleveland promoted a number of pieces of legislation that were meant to reform or streamline the workings of government.

1. *The Presidential Succession Act:* In 1886 Congress passed this act which provided for the succession of cabinet members into the presidency in case of the death or removal of the president and vice president. Cabinet members would succeed to the executive position in order of the founding of their posts.
2. *The Department of Agriculture:* In 1889 Congress enlarged the Department of Agriculture and made its head a cabinet member.

3. *The Tariff*: By 1887 the high tariff had generated such enormous revenues that the government had a large surplus. Cleveland felt that this surplus was wasteful and bred corruption. The surplus, which grew by about \$100 million per year was, to Cleveland, an embarrassment. In his third State of the Union Address (1887), Cleveland called for reductions in the tariff rates and accused the existing rates of promoting unfair business combinations and stifling the American consumer. In reaction to Cleveland's demands for tariff reaction, the Democratic House of Representatives passed the Mills Bill, which provided for drastic reductions in the tariff rates. The Republican Senate reacted with the passage of the Aldritch Bill which raised the rates. Thus, a stalemate was achieved in Congress, and no real reform of the tariff rates were passed.

Republican Revival and Cleveland's Return

In the election of 1888 both major parties tried to make concessions to wage earners and farmers who had become discontented with American politics. In this particular election Republicans were more successful in convincing the nation that their party was able to protect all of the various interests in the American system—business, industry, wage earners and farmers. But the race was a very close one.

The Election of 1888

The major issue of the election of 1888 was the tariff. This was because of Cleveland's demand for reduced rates, and the congressional deadlock over it.

The Democrats: The Democratic National Convention renominated Cleveland by acclamation.

The Republicans: The convention chose Benjamin Harrison of Indiana. Harrison was a corporate lawyer and a grandson of William Henry Harrison.

The Campaign: The issue of the tariff was to dwarf all other issues as the campaign progressed. Each party held firm to its own conviction on what was proper for a tariff. The Republicans supported high protective rates, while the Democrats supported drastic reductions in duties. The Republicans led an aggressive and very well-financed campaign. They accused the Democrats of supporting a policy of free trade. They stated that Cleveland wanted to remove all protective barriers to foreign trade. Republicans alleged that Cleveland's policies would hurt American industry, endangering the national economy and placing American jobs at risk. Republicans also appealed to the Union war veterans. Cleveland had been critical of private pension bills and had also ordered the return of Confederate battle flags, captured during the Civil War, to southern states. Republicans accused Cleveland of wanting to reduce or eliminate pensions. They used the battle flag issue to try to stir up Union patriotic sentiment. The Democrats were forced on the defensive by Republican accusations. Neither party really addressed the concerns of farmers or wage earners. Although Cleveland won the popular majority by about 100,000 votes, Harrison was victorious in the electoral college (233-168).

The Harrison Administration

Harrison had been a successful attorney and was widely supported and respected by his party. He was not, however, a strong chief executive. He had a rather peculiar

view of the presidency. He believed that the president's duty was to support the objectives of Congress. He believed, in the face of plenty of evidence to the contrary, that Congress naturally supported the goals of the American people. Rather than rely upon the advice of his cabinet (which was fairly competent), Harrison chose to rely very heavily on the advise of a few prominent Republicans.

The Tariff: As you may remember, a deadlock had developed over the question of the tariff rates during the Cleveland administration. The House of Representatives (Democratic) had sponsored a reduced tariff bill (the Mills Bill), while the Republican Senate had sponsored the Aldrich Bill, which increased the rates. This deadlock was broken during the Harrison Administration. In the 1888 election the Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress. William McKinley sponsored a bill in the House, that was based on the philosophy that prosperity flowed directly from protection. The McKinley Bill raised the average rate of imports to some 50 percent. Even agricultural products such as wheat, butter and eggs were placed on the tariff schedule. Raw sugar was kept on the free goods list in order to sooth consumers and to protect American investors who had put a great deal of capital into Hawaiian and Cuban sugar ventures. Domestic sugar producers were granted a bounty of 2 cents per pound to further encourage sugar production and enrich the domestic sugar industry. The bill also included a clause that enabled the president to raise rates to countries that discriminated against American exports.

No sooner than the McKinley Bill was signed into law in October 1890, the prices of protected commodities were raised by producers in anticipation of the new rate. The cost of living for American consumers began to increase rapidly. This factor would become a weapon for the Democrats to use to get support in the Congressional elections of 1890. In fact, the Democrats won a large number of seats in the 1890 election because of the anger of outraged consumers.

The Billion-Dollar Congress: As a result of the McKinley Tariff, the federal government accumulated an enormous surplus. The surplus had grown so large it threatened to send the American economy into a depression. Harrison implored Congress to spend it in order to reduce the surplus and place more money back into national circulation. During 1889-1891, Congress appropriated a total of \$1 billion. This was the largest quantity of money ever spent by Congress in peace time. The appropriates included a refund to the northern states for a tax levied during the Civil War, extensive river and harbor improvements, the implementation of a Civil War Pension Act and the building of additional steel naval vessels to upgrade and modernize the navy. Because of these expenditures, the 51st Congress became known as the "Billion Dollar Congress."

Cleveland Returns (the election of 1892)

The most important factor of the election of 1892 was the appearance of a third party, the Populists. The Populists would emerge as a strong minor party of protest on the American political scene. They primarily represented the interests of the American farmer, and to a lesser degree, the wage earner.

The Democrats: In an unusual example of party unity, Grover Cleveland won his party's nomination on the first ballot. Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois received the vice-presidential nod. The choice of Stevenson was a clear attempt by the Democrats to show that the party supported the agrarian voters of the Midwest.

The Republicans: The Republican Convention came down to a competition between James G. Blaine and incumbent Benjamin Harrison. Blaine had the support of the GOP leadership and was popular among the business interests in the party. Harrison was unpopular with the Republican leadership who found him unsympathetic to their goals. But, Harrison had firm support among the party rank and file. He won the nomination on the first ballot.

The Populists: This agrarian reform movement had shown some limited success in state and national legislative elections in recent elections, but the election of 1892 was the first national presidential election in which they were involved. The Populists nominated James B. Weaver, an ex-Greenback Labor Party Presidential candidate (1880) for president. Weaver was a strong supporter of agrarian reform. His running mate was James G. Field of Virginia. The Populist platform supported a number of reforms designed to help farmers and to gain the support of laborers. The Populists supported several political reforms (initiative, referendum, direct election of senators), as well as public ownership of railroads and telegraph systems. They also campaigned for inflationary economic policies. We will look at the Populist movement in greater detail in a later lecture.

The Campaign: Beyond differences over the tariff issue, the two major parties had strikingly similar platforms. That is to say, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans had much to say at all. The Republicans were weakened by several factors:

1. Reformers felt that Harrison had done very little to reform the Civil Service. He had added very few positions to the merit list.
2. Consumers resented the rise in the cost of living that had resulted from the McKinley Tariff. They blamed the Republican Party for their economic woes.
3. The Republican House tried to pass a bill that would have given the federal government almost complete control of southern elections. This angered southern and western voters.

The Results of the Election: Cleveland defeated both Republicans and Populists to win the White House for a second term. He is the only president to serve two nonconsecutive terms.

The Second Cleveland Administration

Cleveland returned to the White House a more conservative man than he had left it a scant four years earlier. Although his first term was successful, his second would be marred by a severe economic crisis that was not of his making.

The Panic of 1893: In March of 1893, very shortly after Cleveland came to office, the nation was plunged into a severe depression that lasted four years. A number of factors had contributed to the failure of the economic system.

1. *Federal Spending:* Between 1890 and 1893 the government had spent so much money on appropriations that the enormous surplus of the 1880s had become a deficit.
2. *Gold Hoarding:* Investors in both Europe and the United States began to sell their American commercial holdings (stocks, bonds, etc.) in order to obtain gold. Gold maintains its value better during a depression.
3. *Dwindling Reserves:* The American business community became uneasy when, in April 1893, federal gold reserves fell below \$100 million.

Business Failures: The panic itself seems to have begun with the failure of the National Cordage Company. Within six months thousands of American businesses had failed, many banks were forced to close, and several dozen small railroads were bankrupt. By the spring of 1894, unemployment had reached about 20 percent. Large numbers of unemployed men began to band together to seek government (state and federal) relief. A very large group of unemployed people followed Gen. Jacob S. Coxey to Washington, D.C., in April 1894. "Coxey's Army" presented Congress with a petition demanding inflation of currency and a federal public works program. The petition was ignored, and when Coxey and several of his aides were arrested for walking on the Capitol lawn, Coxey's Army rapidly dwindled out of existence.

The Wilson-Gorman Tariff: Early in 1894, the House of Representatives passed the Wilson Bill. This bill was meant to reduce the rates upon a number of imports. In addition to the rate changes, the Wilson Bill introduced a tax of 2 percent upon annual incomes over \$4,000 (a federal income tax). Protectionists in the Senate added 634 amendments to the Wilson Bill. When the amendments were passed, the rates had actually been increased by about 40 percent. The resulting Wilson-Gorman Bill was almost identical to the McKinley Tariff, except that it also had an income tax. After long and impassioned debate, the House accepted the bill. Cleveland refused to either veto or to sign the bill. It became law in 1894 without the executive signature. In 1895, the Supreme Court, in the case of *Pollock v. Farmers' Loan and Trust Co.*, declared the income tax provision of the Wilson-Gorman Act to be unconstitutional on the grounds that it was a direct tax. The Constitution required that all direct taxes be apportioned among the states relative to their populations. The new tariffs had the effect of prolonging the depression and increased the anger and frustration of American farmers and consumers.

Agrarian Revolt

By the 1890s American farmers and eastern wage earners had begun to experience serious economic problems. These problems were first experienced by farmers. Increased production had caused a gradual lowering in the prices farmers received for their produce. Rising costs coupled with smaller profits caused an economic phenomenon called the “Farmers’ Depression.” [explain in more detail if necessary] Caught up in an inextricable economic situation, farmers blamed their troubles on big business and an uncaring government. The anger and frustration of farmers contributed to a short-lived political revolution in the 1880s and 1890s. The Populist movement, would ultimately be defeated in the election of 1896, but the Populist revolt would have a profound impact on both parties, and on the direction that American liberalism would take in the late 19th and very early 20th centuries.

Farmers’ Grievances

The core of the farmers’ discontent was their belief that they were not receiving their share of prosperity relative to their contribution to American life. During the last third of the 19th Century most farmers lived either in the relative isolation of the western frontier or on small farmsteads in the South. Although the farmer was independent, his life was hard. The last two decades of the 19th Century were not good years for farmers. In the 1880s rains were abnormally heavy in the Great Plains states. In the mid-1890s a long drought appeared. The shortages of American produce drove the price of food up at the market, but farmers still received fairly low prices at market, frequently they had to pay very high freight rates to the railroads to get their produce to market. Farmers were constantly in need of loans between harvests. They had to purchase seed and clothing and needed to keep up their equipment. As the interest rates rose in the 1880s and 1890s, farmers were less and less able to repay their loans. In addition to this drain on the farmers’ income, land taxes, which were easier to assess and generally higher than other kinds of taxes, forced farmers to shoulder a relatively greater share of the tax burden than wage earners and even financiers. Farmers were also frustrated by economic discrimination created by the high tariffs. The farmer was forced to sell unprotected products and forced to buy protected products.

Increased Production: During this same period, agricultural production in the United States increased. There were three reasons for this.

1. The number of new farms increased. Thus more acreage was brought under production.
2. Improved agricultural technology led to a dramatic increase in the amount of produce from individual farms, while increasing the farmers’ overhead.
3. Farmers increased production in order to try to meet their debts.

Farm Ownership: As a result of the economic difficulties that farmers encountered, many farmers lost their farms. There was a dramatic increase in the number of

mortgage foreclosures on farms during the period from 1880-1900. As more small farms were lost and swallowed up by large agricultural concerns, the number of tenant farmers also increased. Farmers who worked the land as tenants rather than owners became more widespread in the West as it had already become in the South under the sharecropping system. The ideal of the independent farmer became harder and harder to maintain.

Agrarian Reaction

To try to achieve what farmers felt to be their share of the national income, farmers began to join a number of organizations that supported their political and social aims.

The Grange: The Patrons of Husbandry (popularly known as The Grange) was a society founded in 1867 by Oliver H. Kelly. Kelly was a postal clerk. He founded the Grange as an organization to promote social activities to liven up the normally boring and isolated routine of the life of the farm family. By 1880 membership in the organization had reached some 700,000. The Grange had become involved in a number of programs that had political and economic objectives. They organized cooperatives to reduce the price of supplies that they had to purchase and to sell their products without going through distributors. They developed factories that built plows and other farm tools. They also acquired meat packing plants, grain storage facilities and retail stores, all of which catered to their membership. Unfortunately most of these businesses were destroyed by poor management and by aggressive competition by private business interests that felt threatened by the Grange's operations.

Political Action: Grangers primarily tried to gain political influence at the local and state levels. Grange chapters supported candidates for state legislatures who were either members or were sympathetic to the needs of farmers. Grange political activism paid off. Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa legislatures passed laws that regulated the rates that railroads could charge to carry agricultural produce. Minnesota established a commission that regulated and supervised all public utilities, including railroads. Grangers in several western states sent Grange legislators to the U.S. House and Senate.

The Greenback Movement: Historically farmers are the most prosperous in an inflationary economy. Inflation means that the farmer will receive higher prices (more money) for his produce. Since the greatest burden of the farmer is bank debt and interest and since the payments do not change during a period of inflation, the farmer actually is able to save more money in times of inflation. To achieve this end, farmers have always supported inflationary practices. Farmers and wage earners joined together to support a movement to keep government-issued paper money (greenbacks) in circulation.

Redemption of Greenbacks: During the Civil War, the government had issued some \$430 million in paper money to help pay for the war. These "greenbacks" were not

supported by gold or silver but solely by the confidence of the American people. After the war was over, American business interests demanded that the government remove most greenbacks from circulation and make the rest redeemable for gold currency. Western farmers were opposed to the redemption scheme. If the greenbacks were taken out of circulation, they feared a recession might occur. Mostly farmers, who were in debt, wanted cheap money so that they could repay their debts more easily.

Ignoring the protests of the farmers, Congress passed the Resumption Act in 1875. The act provided that \$300 million greenbacks in circulation should remain so until January 1879. At that time, they would be redeemable in gold currency at face value. A reserve of \$100 million was set up for this purpose. Deflation occurred almost immediately after the act was passed. This was because there was a rush to obtain and hoard greenbacks in order to redeem them in 1879. The farmers became more active in getting their candidates into congress. In 1878 lobbyists and greenback supporters were able to get congress to modify the act so that redemption was halted.

The Populists

The political climax of all of this agrarian discontent of the 1870s and 1880s was the birth of the Populist party, which enrolled Grangers, Greenbackers, and Laborites, plus many who had been active in the inflationist ranks of the two major parties.

Forming the Party

During the 1880s there was a phenomenal growth in the western and southern states of numerous agrarian organizations under various titles. These groups were soon consolidated into two powerful associations--the Northwestern Alliance and the Southern Alliance. Such colorful leaders emerged as Jerry "Sockless Jerry" Simpson of Kansas, James B. Weaver of Iowa, Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, Benjamin R. "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman of South Carolina and Thomas Watson of Georgia. These organizations united to form a political party to compete with the two major parties. In February 1892, at St. Louis, Missouri, delegates formally organized the People's Party of the USA, known as the Populist Party. Populists held their first national nominating convention in July, 1892, at Omaha, Nebraska, to choose candidates for the '92 presidential election.

The Platform

The Populists adopted a platform that incorporated an amazing list of reforms and special pleading for the various interests involved. The party platform called for:

For Farmers

- ★ the free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the ratio of sixteen to one (in minting coins the government had considered sixteen ounces of silver to be equal in value to one ounce of gold).
- ★ an increase of the currency in circulation (then approximately twenty dollars per person) to fifty dollars per person.

- ★ the enactment of an income tax that was graduated (increasing in rate with increase in earnings).
- ★ the reduction of various kinds of federal and state taxes.
- ★ government ownership and operation of railroads, and telegraph and telephone lines.
- ★ appropriation by the government of all land held by corporations in excess of their actual needs.
- ★ establishment by the government of a postal savings system.
- ★ the use of government funds to facilitate marketing of farm products and to extend short-term rural loans.

As a sop to wage earners:

- ✓ restriction of “undesirable” immigration (to lessen competition for jobs).
- ✓ establishment of the eight-hour workday for government employees.
- ✓ abolition of the Pinkerton detective system.

As political reforms:

- ❖ a single term for the president and vice president.
- ❖ direct election of United States senators (then appointed by states legislatures).
- ❖ use of the secret ballot.
- ❖ adoption by the states of the initiative and the referendum.

The First Campaign

In 1892, the Populists nominated former Greenback representative James B. Weaver of Iowa for president and agrarian reformer James G. Field of Virginia for vice president. Weaver’s popular vote was just over 1 million, but he received the entire electoral vote of Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada.

Election of 1896

The battle for the presidency in 1896 was the most momentous since the election of 1860, on the eve of the Civil War.

Democrats: The delegates from the West and South, particularly those from rural areas, were in open revolt against the Cleveland administration. The convention was dominated by the supporters of silver coinage. In the Nebraska delegation was a young former representative who had become well known as a gifted crusader for inflation—William Jennings Bryan. At one point in the proceeding, Bryan made an impassioned plea for silver coinage, the last words of which achieved fame: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” Delegates were so impressed by the young Nebraskan that on the fifth ballot, he received the nomination.

The party platform repudiated the Cleveland administration. It demanded:

- the free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present ratio of sixteen to one.
- a demand that tariff schedules be imposed solely to provide federal revenue.
- criticism of the Supreme Court for declaring unconstitutional the income tax provision of the 1894 Wilson-Gorman Tariff.

- denunciation of the government's use of injunction in management-labor disputes.
- a demand for the enlargement of the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission in dealing with the railroads.

Republicans: The most influential leader at the Republican national convention was Mark Hanna, a Cleveland businessman who believed that there should be an intimate affiliation between the business community and the Republican Party. He was determined that the presidential nominee should be his close friend William McKinley, a seven-term representative from Ohio and governor of that state. With Hanna's support, McKinley won the GOP nomination. The GOP avoided an outright revolt from western delegates who wanted unlimited coinage of silver, and adopted a plank supporting the gold standard. In addition, the GOP platform favored a protective tariff, generous pensions for Union Civil War veterans, enlargement of the navy, and federal arbitration of management-labor disputes involving interstate commerce.

Populists

The Democratic party platform was an open invitation to the Populists, who joined the Democratic Party ranks. The alliance was opposed by some of the most devoted Populist leaders, but the general membership, eager for victory, nominated the Democratic Bryan for president. In twenty-six of the forty-five states the Populist and Democratic tickets were combined.

The Campaign

The Republican campaign controlled by Mark Hanna, appealed to the propertied classes and emphasized the "dangerous radicalism" of the Democrats. McKinley, gracious and dignified, received delegations of voters at his home in Canton, Ohio. In contrast to the Republican candidate's "front-porch" campaign. Bryan traveled approximately 15,000 miles, making more than 600 speeches in twenty-nine states, exhorting masses of debt-ridden farmers, poorly paid industrial workers, and small shopkeepers.

McKinley's Victory

McKinley won 7,111,000 popular votes to Bryan's 6,509,000 (227,000 of which were Populists). In the electoral college, McKinley captured 271 votes to Bryan's 176; he took every state east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River, as well as West Virginia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, Oregon and California. Most of the West and South went to Bryan.

All told, the decisive Republican victory for eastern interests against those of farmers in the West and South. It is likely that Eastern labor deserted the Populists in the election, supporting the GOP, because, they saw that their interests were tied to the business and industrial interests that supplied them with jobs and paychecks. Additionally, the message of the Populists in support of farmers had become confused by all of the wrangling over currency, and most likely, most Americans were not very excited about growing inflation to help the debtor farmers.

Finally, many of the Populists' least whacky ideas would, within the next couple of decades be sponsored by both the Democratic and Republican parties.