

Section Summary

ISSUES OF THE GILDED AGE

The period during the late nineteenth century is often referred to as the **Gilded Age**, implying that under the glittery, or gilded, surface of prosperity lurked troubling issues. One issue that troubled the nation was the persistence of racial inequality. The southern states passed laws that separated blacks and whites. These laws were known as **Jim Crow laws**. During this same period, Mexican Americans struggled to keep their lands in the Southwest. Asian immigrants, especially the Chinese, faced discrimination, too. Women experienced both gains and setbacks during the Gilded Age. The fight to gain a women's suffrage amendment stalled, but educational opportunities for women grew.

Corruption plagued government during this period. **Graft**, or bribery and corruption, touched many aspects of public life. After a federal employee assassinated President James Garfield, the **Pendleton Act** was passed. This law created a civil service system for the federal government. Individuals who wanted to work for the government were required to take an exam and were then given a job based on their performance on the exam. Both Republicans and Democrats favored a monetary policy called the **gold standard**.

Farmers faced complex problems. The prices paid for crops declined significantly. At the same time, farmers built up debts that they found difficult to repay. Government monetary policies contributed to both of these trends. Farmers formed various political organizations to address their problems. Farmers from the South and the West formed the People's Party, or the **Populist Party**.

William Jennings Bryan was the Democratic and Populist candidate for the presidency in 1896. In one of the hardest fought campaigns in American history, he fought for the American farmer and denounced Republican monetary policies, namely the gold standard. Bryan failed to win a state outside of the South and the West. As a result, William McKinley, the Republican candidate, won the presidency. Yet, the Populist movement had an impact on the political system. A number of Populist proposals, such as the graduated income tax and the direct election of senators, later became law.

Review Questions

- Describe what women's lives were like during the Gilded Age.

- What specific Populist proposals later became law?

READING CHECK

What law established a civil service system for the federal government?

VOCABULARY STRATEGY

What does the word *trends* mean in the underlined sentence? To what two events in the preceding sentences does the word *both* refer? Use these context clues to help learn what *trends* means.

READING SKILL

Recognize Multiple Causes
What were some of the reasons that the Populist Party was created?
