



▲ Members of the Populist Party, 1890

"Gold Bug" from the 1896 McKinley-Bryan presidential campaign ►



WITNESS HISTORY

The Populist Platform

By the 1890s, numerous Americans felt that the United States lay on the verge of ruin. In reaction, they joined various political movements, such as the Populist, or People's, Party. Made up largely of farmers, the Populists met in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1892, to draft a party platform. The preamble of this platform reflected the angry mood that had set in across much of the nation:

“The conditions which surround us best justify our cooperation; we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine [weasels] of the bench. The people are demoralized. . . .”

—The Preamble of the Platform of the Populist Party, 1892

Issues of the Gilded Age

Objectives

- Understand the segregation and social tensions that troubled the nation during the late 1800s.
- Identify the political and economic challenges that existed during the Gilded Age.
- Analyze the effects of the Populists' programs and activities.

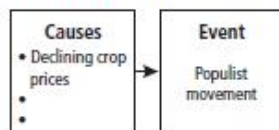
Terms and People

Gilded Age	gold standard
Jim Crow laws	Populist Party
graft	William Jennings Bryan
Pendleton Act	

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Recognize Multiple Causes

Create a chart in which you record key events and developments that led to the Populist movement.



Why It Matters The pace of industrialization and westward expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century suggested that the United States had reached a new golden age. Yet the nation still faced many troubles, including the distance between people's dreams of wealth and the reality of their sometimes difficult lives. This 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, including poverty, unemployment, and corruption. **Section Focus Question:** What challenges arose for the nation during the Gilded Age?

Segregation and Social Tensions

One issue that troubled the nation was the persistence of racial inequality. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, African Americans, other minorities, and women found themselves fighting a losing battle to gain equality.

Separate but Equal During the decades after Reconstruction, southern states passed laws that separated blacks and whites. These laws were known as **Jim Crow laws**. In the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court upheld segregation as long as states maintained "separate but equal" facilities for both races. Yet facilities for blacks almost always were inferior. During the same time period, southern states enacted laws such as poll taxes and literacy tests that stripped blacks of the vote. As W.E.B. Du Bois, a leading

Corruption Plagues Government As cities grew, politicians gained power by providing jobs or patronage and services in exchange for political support. **Graft**, or bribery and corruption, touched nearly all aspects of public life. Some politicians, such as George Washington Plunkitt of New York City's Tammany Hall political club, even defended their actions.

Tariffs, Civil Service, and Monetary Policy On the national level, few issues divided the major political parties as much as the tariff, with the Republicans supporting high protective tariffs and the Democrats favoring lower duties, or taxes, on imported goods. Following the assassination of President James Garfield by a disgruntled former federal employee, the Democrats supported the **Pendleton Act**, which created a civil service system for the federal government. This meant that individuals who wanted to work for the government were required to take an exam. They were then given a job based on their performance on the exam, instead of on who they knew. Both Republican and Democratic Presidents also favored a hard monetary policy, the **gold standard**, much to the chagrin of many farmers who felt that this hurt them by keeping prices low.

✓ **Checkpoint** What issues plagued the government during the Gilded Age?



Farmers' Alliance Seeks Lower Storage Rates

Farmers waiting to unload wheat at a grain elevator, 1879

Farmers and Populism

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, a massive political insurgency developed called populism. It grew out of the frustration that many Americans felt toward the federal government. Farmers in particular displayed their anger.

Farmers Face Complex Problems Farmers migrated to the West knowing that they would have to toil long hours in difficult conditions. But they expected that their circumstances would improve and that their children would be better off. Instead, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, many farmers felt that they were losing ground.

Several interrelated problems beset American farmers during this era. The prices paid for the main crops—corn, wheat, and cotton—declined significantly between the end of the Civil War and the early 1890s. At the same time, farmers accumulated growing debts that they found harder and harder to repay. Government monetary policies contributed to both of these trends.

Farmers Organize and Demand Reforms Immediately following the Civil War, farmers came together to address their problems. First, farmers in the Midwest banded together in the Grange movement. Their counterparts in the South and the Plains states established the Farmers' Alliance. These organizations sought to lower shipping and storage rates, either through government regulation of the railroads or use of grain elevators, or both.

Members of the Farmers' Alliance, in both the South and the West, soon formed the People's Party, or the **Populist Party**, and met in Omaha, Nebraska, to spell out its views. They endorsed General James Weaver for the presidency in 1892, as well as slates of candidates for state and local offices. They did well in several

Vocabulary Builder

trend—(trehnd) *n.* general course of events



▲ William J. Bryan, during a speech made in the 1896 presidential campaign

Plains states, leading some to believe that they could challenge the two major political parties on the national level.

The Populists favored reforms that addressed their main problems. To lower the cost of transportation, they sought regulation or ownership of the railroads. In order to make it easier for farmers to borrow money and pay off their debts, they called for the creation of subtreasury banks and the coinage of silver or “free silver.” **William Jennings Bryan**, the Democratic and Populist candidate for the presidency in 1896, made the call for free silver the centerpiece of his campaign. The Populists also sought political and economic reforms, such as the secret ballot, the direct election of senators, and a graduated income tax.

Economic Crisis and Populism’s Decline During the election of 1896, the Populists hoped to gain the support of many industrial workers whose situations had taken a turn for the worse because of an economic depression. In one of the hardest fought campaigns in American history, Bryan crisscrossed the country, championing the cause of the American farmer and denouncing the monetary policies of the Republicans, namely the gold standard.

Primary Source

“If they [the Republicans] dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we will fight them to the uttermost. Having behind us the producing masses of this nation . . . we will answer their demand 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.”

—William J. Bryan, “Cross of Gold” Speech, 1896

In part because he failed to convince industrial workers that the policy of free silver would benefit them, Bryan failed to win a state outside of the South and the West. As a result, William McKinley, the Republican candidate, won the presidency. The Populist Party never recovered from its defeat in 1896. Yet, even in defeat, the Populist movement had an impact upon the political system. Bryan’s style of appealing directly to the people became the norm rather than the exception. In addition, a number of the Populist’s specific proposals, such as the graduated income tax, became law during the Progressive Era.

✓ **Checkpoint** What factors led to the rise of the Populists?

SECTION 4 Assessment

Progress Monitoring *Online*

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
www.pearsonschool.com/ushist

Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** For each term below, write a sentence explaining its significance.
 - Gilded Age
 - Pendleton Act
 - gold standard
 - Populist Party
- 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill: Recognize Multiple Causes** Use your completed chart to answer the Section Focus Question: What challenges arose for the nation during the Gilded Age?

Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Use Numbered Note Cards** It is helpful to use numbered note cards to organize the main points for an oral presentation. On note cards, write the main ideas about the rise of populism. Determine the order in which you will likely deliver your speech on this topic, and number each card accordingly.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Identify Main Ideas** Describe several factors that caused the public to feel demoralized during the late 1800s.
- 5. Predict Consequences** What additional actions might the government have taken to address the political corruption of the Gilded Age?
- 6. Determine Relevance** What impact did the Populists have on society?