

How Historians View Populism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The meteoric rise of the Populist Party, which proposed a number of reforms in the early 1890s, led some to believe that it could reshape the political status quo of the Gilded Age. However, the Party's decision to fuse with the Democratic Party, and to support William Jennings Bryan during the 1896 presidential election, led it to disappear as quickly as it had arrived. The Populists—and Populism—have remained a subject of interest to a number of historians, many of whom have attempted to answer this question: What is Populism?

This tutorial examines historical investigation of the People's Party, as well as the influence of populism in American political history, in four parts:

1. What is Historiography? A Refresher

Recall that **historiography** is the study of historical writing: the history of history.



TERM TO KNOW

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writing.

Historians' interpretations of past events—including historical interpretations of the People's Party (also known as the **Populist Party**)—change over time. Historians are obliged to approach history objectively and to make their interpretations without bias.



TERM TO KNOW

Populist Party

A third-party movement in the 1890s that sought to represent the interests of American farmers and workers in local, state, and federal elections.

Historians agree that the ideals and goals of the Populist Party, which they refer to as Populism, are embedded in the **Omaha Platform** of 1892, which proposed reforms for the economy, transportation, and the democratic process.



TERM TO KNOW

Omaha Platform

Political agenda of the Populist Party, adopted in 1892 at the Party's founding convention.

Beyond this area of agreement, historians have differed on the significance of the Populist Party. Some have focused on the Party itself—what historian Michael Kazin refers to as Populism “with a capital *P*” (Kazin, p. 5)—and the context in which it emerged. Others have examined instances in which politicians and coalitions have used populist rhetoric to promote liberal or conservative political agendas.

Although historical evaluation of the Populist Party—and Populism—is ongoing, for the purposes of this tutorial it can be divided into two lines of inquiry:

- Populism as a political movement with its own ideology, which organized as the Populist Party
- Populism as a *political style* that any group can use to express grievances or advance an agenda

2. Populism as a Political Movement

To argue that the Populist Party represented a distinct political movement in American history, historians need evidence that the People's Party was organized in response to specific economic and social challenges. They must also offer proof that the Party developed a distinct political ideology and unique solutions to these challenges.

Lawrence Goodwyn, whose *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment* was published in 1976, was a notable historian who argued that the Populist Party was a distinct political movement in the late 19th century. He claimed that the movement was “the largest democratic mass movement in American history,” and that, for a brief time, it offered a democratic alternative to “the corporate state.” Goodwyn defined the corporate state as the political-economic order of the Gilded Age, which advanced the interests of big business and investment at the expense of farmers and workers. (Goodwyn, p.vii, xxi)

In addition, Goodwyn argued that Populism was a coherent political ideology based on three key elements: public participation, cooperation, and monetary reform. To support his argument, Goodwyn pointed to groups like the **Farmers' Alliance**, which, during the late 1880s, encouraged organization and cooperation between farmers: what Goodwyn referred to as a “movement culture.”



TERM TO KNOW

Farmers' Alliance

A national organization of regional farmers' alliances formed in 1890 to advance farmers' concerns politically.

American farmers struggled with marginalization during the late 19th century. In the South, many endured a harsh life under the crop-lien system and sharecropping. In the Great Plains region, farmers were forced to deal with railroad and grain-elevator monopolies that dictated shipping rates and crop prices. Yet, through the words of speakers like Charles W. Macune, and organizations like the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance, farmers from both areas found common cause and organized to address the problems they faced. Goodwyn wrote the following about their participation in the Farmers' Alliance:

Lawrence Goodwyn, Historian

“The farmers of the Alliance had spent much of their lives in humiliating circumstances....They were ridiculed for their poverty, and they knew it...(T)hey had also known for decades that they could do nothing about their plight because they were locked into the fabric of the (crop) lien system and

crushed by the mountain of interest they had been forced to pay. But now, in their Alliance, they had found something new. That something may be described as individual self-respect and collective self-confidence....All were useful if imprecise terms to describe a growing political sensibility, one free of deference and ridicule. Such an intuition shared by enough people is, of course, a potentially powerful force.” (Goodwyn, p. 33)



THINK ABOUT IT

According to Goodwyn, why would farmers want to participate in Farmers’ Alliance meetings? Organizations like the Farmers’ Alliance and (later) the People’s Party, provided farmers with opportunities to unite with their neighbors in a common cause. The subsequent development of a platform based on the **Subtreasury Plan** and other reforms gave the Populist movement a distinct ideology



TERM TO KNOW

Subtreasury Plan

A plan to store crops in government warehouses for a brief period of time, during which the federal government would loan farmers 80% of current crop prices; crops would be released for sale when prices rose.

The Populist ideology encouraged cooperation between farmers and called on the federal government to regulate the economy for the benefit of farmers and other workers. As Goodwyn argued, “The People’s Party was to wage a frantic campaign to wrest effective operating control of the American monetary system from the nation’s commercial bankers and restore it, ‘in the name of the whole people,’ to the United States Treasury.”

3. Populism as a Political Style

After fusing with the Democratic Party during the 1896 election, the Populist Party vanished from the national political scene. Among its most important legacies was the labeling of subsequent mass democratic movements as *populist*. This phenomenon led historian Michael Kazin to define *populism* as a distinct *political style* in American politics.

Michael Kazin, Historian

In his 1995 book *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Kazin defines populism as: “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.” (Kazin, p. 1)

Kazin argues that populism is “a flexible mode of persuasion,” one in which leaders of the People’s Party, as well as major figures in later political movements “used traditional kinds of expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince large numbers of Americans to join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues.” (Kazin, p.3)

To understand populism in this way, Kazin focuses on the language used by political leaders. He takes this approach to analyze the Populist Party of the 1890s. The language used by the Populist Party included the labeling of banks and monopolies as a “money power” that ignored the people’s interests and corrupted

government. Kazin also uncovers elements of Christian morality and redemption in the Party's rhetoric. He notes that the Populist Party defined "the people" broadly, to encompass industrial workers and reformers, as well as farmers.

Michael Kazin, Historian (Continued)

Kazin summarizes the People's Party as follows:

"On the one hand, it spoke out in pride and anger for the lost commonwealth of agrarians and artisans, the moral center of a society that had spun away from its once noble orbit.... On the other hand, the Populists were forerunners of a more pragmatic style of expressing discontent. Blending the many hues of reform and radicalism into a single national organization, however short-lived, and maneuvering, however fatally, to take advantage of an opening at the political top demonstrated the zeal of missionaries armed with a sensible method." (Kazin, p. 46)



THINK ABOUT IT

How might Lawrence Goodwyn have responded to Michael Kazin's claim that the Populists introduced "a more pragmatic style of expressing discontent"?

In his book, Kazin identifies the ways in which Populism as a political style influenced American politics throughout the 20th century. He refers to a number of conservative political movements in the second half of the 20th century, including the presidential campaigns of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, which incorporated elements of populism as a political style to great effect. Both candidates portrayed themselves and their constituencies as outsiders with respect to the political system. This shows that, in modern politics, populist rhetoric has been used to campaign on behalf of "the people" for liberal or conservative ends.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think back to recent political campaigns. Did any of the candidates use populism as a political style, as described by Kazin? Does the use of populism as a political style contradict the platform of the Populist Party, which encouraged greater cooperation, expansion of the democratic process, and increased federal involvement on behalf of common people? If so, how?

4. The Omaha Platform (1892)

This examination of the historiography of the Populist Party, and populism in American politics, shows that the meaning of Populism is complex and open to debate.

Let's examine a primary source on this subject: the Omaha Platform of 1892. While reading the following excerpt, keep the interpretations of Lawrence Goodwyn and Michael Kazin in mind. Do you see evidence of the Populist Party as a *political movement* with a distinct ideology? Is there evidence of populism as a *political style*?

The Omaha Platform of 1892

PREAMBLE

“(W)e 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....The people are demoralized.... The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists.... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires....

Assembled on the anniversary of the birthday of the nation, and filled with the spirit of the grand general and chief who established our independence, we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with which class it originated.... We pledge ourselves that if given power we will labor to correct these evils by wise and reasonable legislation, in accordance with the terms of our platform....

PLATFORM

We declare, therefore—

....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 employees.

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 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....

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....”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What evidence from the Omaha Platform would Lawrence Goodwyn use to defend his assertion that Populism is a movement with a distinct political ideology?
2. Is the platform’s claim that American society was divided between “tramps and millionaires” evidence of Populism as a distinct political movement, a political style, or both?
3. Why does the Platform mention that the Party convened “on the anniversary of the birthday of the

nation”?

The Omaha Platform uses language that Michael Kazin associated with populism as a *political style*. Most of it is used in the Preamble, which criticizes the political and economic system, and concludes that American society had been divided into “two great classes—tramps and millionaires.” The document lists several proposals to return the American government and economy to “the plain people.” These include the Subtreasury Plan and transportation reform, which reinforce Lawrence Goodwyn’s interpretation of the Populist Party as a distinct political movement in response to the economic and social challenges of the late 19th century.



SUMMARY

Some historians define “Populism” narrowly, as referring to the Populist Party of the 1890s. Others define it as a political style that has been periodically adopted by liberal and conservative groups. The Omaha Platform provides evidence that supports both interpretations. As a result, Populism is difficult to define. However, when a political candidate is identified as a “populist,” or uses language associated with Populism, historians will investigate the validity of their claims.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Historiography

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Political agenda of the Populist Party, adopted in 1892 at the Party’s founding convention.

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Subtreasury Plan

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