



Politics in the Gilded Age

PRIMARY SOURCE READING

A Call for Reform

In February 1892, representatives from the Farmers' Alliance and the National Colored Farmers' Alliance, among others, met in St. Louis to establish solidarity between farmers and laborers. After much deliberation, the delegates adopted a platform for the new People's Party, calling for: the direct election of senators; an eight-hour workday; government ownership of the banks, railroads, and telegraph lines; a graduated income tax; immigration restriction; and the prohibition of large landholding companies. The party platform was written by Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, a novelist, politician, and well-known radical of his day. Its preamble appears below. Many of the reforms urged by the Populists in 1892 have become national policy supported by both Republicans and Democrats.

Populist Party Platform

The conditions which surround us best justify our co-operation; 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 of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the states have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery. 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 urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection, imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down, and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions. 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 these 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. . . .

We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people. We charge that the controlling influences dominating both these parties have permitted the existing dreadful conditions to develop without serious effort to prevent or restrain them. Neither do they now promise us any substantial reform. They have agreed together to ignore in the coming campaign every issue but one. They propose to drown the outcries of a plundered people with the uproar of a sham battle over the tariff so that capitalists, corporations, national banks, rings, trusts, watered stock, the demonetization of silver, and the oppressions of the usurers may all be lost sight of. They propose to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the altar of mammon; to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the 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 assert our purposes to be identical with the purposes of the national Constitution; “to form a more perfect union and establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.”

From *Voices from America's Past*, vol. 2, *Backwoods Democracy to World Power*, edited by Richard B. Morris and James Woodress. E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1963.

■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Why does Donnelly say that cooperation is now essential?

2. What are some examples of material, moral, and political ruin that he cites?

3. Why are the two primary political parties unable to provide for the needs of the American people?

4. What one issue do the political parties focus on rather than attending to the needs of the many?

5. What was the main goal of the Populists?

6. Why do you think the Populists did not remain an important third political party?

ACTIVITY

Work with a small group to write the party platform of the Populists. The platform should summarize the issues of the 1892 election, explain the party's stand on each issue, and demonstrate the reasons for which the Populist candidates, James B. Weaver of Iowa and James Field of Virginia, are the best people to fill the offices of president and vice president.

ACTIVITY

Students' responses will vary, but should reflect an understanding of the selection.

BIOGRAPHY

1. He educated himself through personal studies and traveling throughout Europe studying park design and administration.
2. He designed a number of great city parks, park systems, and public grounds with a focus on beautiful landscaping.
3. He believed that public parks should be places where people could be restored by nature.
4. Possible answer: He might suggest that the inner cities could be made more attractive by creating beautiful parks and green space.

ACTIVITY

Students' park sketches and descriptions will vary.

CHAPTER 17

LITERATURE

1. He wrote that corruption comes from the fact that there is no one left over in a middle-class organization of business to watch the politician.
2. Possible answer: The nickname makes him sound unimportant and insubstantial.
3. He thought members of the electorate were tough, base, and coarse. He might find it difficult to put their interests first.
4. They have no ideas, but they do have votes. They are capable of violence.
5. He is a straight man, seemingly likable and trustworthy. He follows his own ideas of right and wrong. He is kind to his people.
6. He helps them when they are in trouble. He finds jobs for them and serves as an intermediary for them in the social structure. He protects wives and children. All of these helpful actions may be seen as political corruption because he does these things in return for their votes.

ACTIVITY

Advertisements will vary, but should stress the importance of eliminating corruption in the political arena.

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. The nation is on the verge of moral, political, and economic ruin.
2. There is corruption in government and law, voters are bribed or intimidated, public opinion is silenced, business is affected, and the land is concentrated in the hands of the capitalists.
3. They are too involved in their battle for power to take into account the needs of the people.
4. They focus on the tariff issue to the exclusion of other important concerns.
5. The goal of the Populists was to restore government to the hands of the common people, where it originated.
6. Possible answer: The Democrats and Republicans came to realize the importance of the issues supported by the Populists, adopting them as their own in future party platforms.

ACTIVITY

Platforms should reflect an understanding of the Populist preamble.

BIOGRAPHY

1. They aroused northern patriotism and increased public support for the North.
2. His cartoons brought about the downfall of the corrupt political machine of William "Boss" Tweed.
3. His symbols for the Democratic and Republican parties are still used today, and his conception of Santa Claus is still popular.
4. Possible answer: They can portray the heart of an issue simply and directly.

ACTIVITY

Students' captions should reflect a clear understanding of the intended message of each cartoon.