

Populism and the Election of 1896

Central Historical Question:

Why did the Populist Party attract millions of supporters?

Materials:

- Populism PPT
- Copies of Document A: Mary Elizabeth Lease speech
- Transparency of Mary Elizabeth Lease speech
- Copies of Document B: William Jennings Bryan speech

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction mini-lecture: *In the 1870s and 1880s, life for farmers became increasingly difficult. Farmers in the West and South decided to organize politically. Their party was called the Populist Party.*

Mini-lecture on Populism: Powerpoint

Slide 2: Review farmers' problems

Slide 3: One of the main things farmers needed was cash, so one of their main goals was making the dollar worth less so that there would be more cash in the system.

They also pushed for political reforms that gave people more power in politics. They also tried to unite with workers in industry.

Slide 4: Farmers began organizing as early as the 1860s. At first they focused on forming collectives (the Grange), in an effort to raise prices by uniting and holding grain from the market. But the railroads and banks were too powerful, so that's when they started to get political.

As you can see with the formation of the Colored Farmers' Alliance, black farmers and white farmers didn't unite, especially in the South. Racism was still too strong.

Slide 5: In 1892, they ran the first Populist presidential candidate and he did extremely well, considering he was a third-party candidate.

Slide 6: In 1896, they realized that if they were going to have their issues dealt with nationally, they had to support one of the major candidates. William Jennings Bryan was a Democratic candidate who pledged to support the silver issue.

In general, NEITHER party supported the interests of poor farmers. But between the two parties, Populists thought they had more in common with Democrats.

Slide 7: Bryan loses but carries most of the South and West.

Today, we're going to look at what made the Populist Party appealing to many Americans at the end of the 19th century.

5. Guided Practice on **Close Reading**: Mary Elizabeth Lease

Hand out Document A and put transparency on overhead. As you ask students the following questions, have them take notes in the margins of the document:

- a. *Sourcing*: Who wrote this? When?
- b. *Contextualization*: What was going on for farmers at the time? Lease is a woman who is speaking to a group of women. What does this say about women's involvement in politics in the 1890s?
- c. *Close reading*: Explain: *Now I'm going to read carefully and ask 'how is this document supposed to make me feel?'*

Read first paragraph and ask students: How is this supposed to make the audience feel? Why might she use religious references?

Read second and third paragraphs together: How was this supposed to make the audience feel? Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? What emotions does she appeal to?

Read final paragraph: How was this supposed to make the audience feel?

6. Independent Practice: William Jennings' Bryan

Hand out Document B and Guiding Questions.

7. Review student answers to Guiding Questions.

8. Discussion:

- Why were the speakers like Lease and Bryan popular in the 1890s?
- What images and *rhetorical devices* did they use to excite their audiences?
- How did their audiences feel when they listened to these speeches?

- Do these themes resonate today? Which parts of these speeches could we expect to hear from today's politicians? Which parts seem outdated?

Citations:

William Jennings Bryan, speech at Democratic National Convention, July 1896.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/>

Mary Elizabeth Lease, "Speech to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union," in Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press and McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 154–160.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5303/>

Document A: Mary Elizabeth Lease, 1890 (Modified)

The mightiest movement the world has known in two thousand years. . . is sending out the happiest message to oppressed humanity that the world has heard since John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness that the world's Redeemer was coming to relieve the world's misery.

To this sterile and remote region, infested by savage beasts and still more savage men, the women of the New England States, the women of the cultured East, came with husbands, sons and brothers to help them build up a home [in the West] . . . We endured hardships, and dangers; hours of loneliness, fear and sorrow. . . We toiled in the cabin and in the field; we helped our loved ones to make the prairie blossom. . .

Yet, after all our years of toil and deprivation, dangers and hardships, our homes are being taken from us by an infamous [wicked] system of mortgage foreclosure. It takes from us at the rate of five hundred a month the homes that represent the best years of our life, our toil, our hopes, our happiness. How did it happen? The government, siding with Wall Street, broke its contracts with the people. . . . As Senator Plumb [of Kansas] tells us, "Our debts were increased, while the means to pay them [cash] was decreased."

No more millionaires, and no more paupers; no more gold kings, silver kings and oil kings, and no more little waifs of humanity starving for a crust of bread. We shall have the golden age of which Isaiah sang and the prophets have so long foretold; when the farmers shall be prosperous and happy, dwelling under their own vine and fig tree; when the laborer shall have that for which he toils. . . . When we shall have not a government of the people by capitalists, but a government of the people, by the people.

Source: Mary Elizabeth Lease became politically involved as a speaker for the rights of workers and farmers. She had a powerful voice and charismatic speaking style. In this speech, Lease gave a speech to the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1890, a women's movement against alcohol.

Document B: William Jennings Bryan, 1896 (Modified)

The merchant at the corner store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day...is as much a businessman as the man who [works on Wall Street].

We come to speak for this broader class of businessmen....It is for these that we speak. We are fighting in the defense of our homes and our families. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged, and they have mocked us.

We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them!

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country.

Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands 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.

Source: The speech above was delivered by William Jennings Bryan at the Democratic National Convention in July 1896. It is considered one of the most famous speeches in American history. The passage is an excerpt.

Guiding Questions

Name _____

1. **Sourcing:** Where is Bryan speaking? What is his purpose?
2. **Context:** Based on the speech, how do you think farmers and workers were feeling about business and industry? Find a quote to support your answer.
3. **Close reading:** What is the main point of his speech?
4. **Close reading:** What makes the speech so powerful? Pick the line that you think is most powerful and explain your choice.
5. **Corroboration:** What are two similarities between this speech and the speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease?

Using both speeches, write a paragraph in response to the following question:
Why were speakers like Lease and Bryan popular with farmers in the 1890s?