



What 19th-Century Populists Can Teach Americans about the Roots of Partisan Dysfunction

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Citizen disgust with partisan trench warfare has soared in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center, more Americans now identify as independents than as either Democrats or Republicans. Yet the electoral prospects of independent candidates and the policy prospects of reforms favored by independents remain low. Why?

The United States has seen this movie before. The People's Party was founded in 1891 by disgruntled Democrats and Republicans who wanted to do something about partisan dysfunction. Unlike the better-known progressive reformers that gained visibility later, the Populists regarded partisan polarization and gridlock not as a defect of character or a rash of incivility but as grounded in more serious maladies – plutocracy, culture war, and electoral duopoly.

Plutocracy and Broken Government

Populists made famous the term “plutocracy” to describe the disproportionate power of millionaires and corporations burrowed deep into the structures of government. Plutocracy was on display when politicians exchanged special favors in law for financial backing by special interests, or when the response of government to economic problems was half-hearted at best. For example, when reformers in numerous states pushed for railroad commissions to prevent price-gouging and favoritism, the railroads used their financial clout to control the commissions. At the federal level, the fettering of the Interstate Commerce Commission showed that a handful of corporate lawyers, strategically nominated to serve as regulatory commissioners and appellate judges, could neuter the public response to injustice.

Then as now, elections cost money, and the two major parties made similar assessments about who could provide the funds they needed – leading to a two-party system paralyzed by collusion. For example, in 1893 Democratic attorney general Richard Olney collaborated with Republican senators to block proposed reforms that could have made the Interstate Commerce Commission more effective. This collusion led Milford Howard, an Alabama congressman and People's Party spokesman, to call for Olney's impeachment. “The plutocrats care not whether the Democratic or Republican party wins,” Howard said, “so long as both parties favor the money power.”

Culture Wars Then and Now

Visible topics of national political debate in the 1880s and 1890s reflected a “culture war” mentality, as the major parties mobilized their followers around issues like the prohibition of alcohol and the restriction of immigration; Republicans favored both, and Democrats were opposed to both. Today, national debates often rivet on hot-button cultural issues such as abortion, contraception, gay rights, and the war on drugs.

The Populists saw voter mobilization on cultural issues as a way for the major parties to keep issues of wealth and power off the agenda. Plutocrats were quite content for the voters to hear about issues that distracted attention from what the wealthy really cared about. One reformer posed the resulting problem for democracy in a rhetorical question: “Shall we rail at those who would prescribe our diet and our apparel, and shall we say nothing of those who impoverish, degrade, and disinherit us?”

Today's progressive reformers tend to see cultural issues as Republican ploys to lure low-income voters, but Populists would find this diagnosis too one-sided. Viewed without the aid of red-and-blue-colored glasses, a modern-day Populist would note that twenty-first century Democrats and their corporate donors benefit from an electorate focused on issues of reproduction, immigration, sexual orientation, and drugs, just as much as Republicans and their donors do.

Electoral Duopoly as a Barrier to Change

In economics, a trust refers to a cartel of more than one company that manages to act like a monopoly. In the late nineteenth century, Populists viewed the electoral duopoly of the Democrats and Republicans as the mother of all trusts. Realizing that electoral procedures might hinder the translation of popular appeal into political success, the Populists attempted to enact reforms meant to make elections more fair and democratic; but their efforts were often undone.

- Ballot reforms required state and local governments to print official ballots at public expense and allow voters to mark their ballots in secret. But in the states and localities, Democrats and Republicans figured out how to game or get around the new reforms, crafting rules about ballot access and design that ended up suppressing potential electoral support for independent candidates. The key moves involved keeping independent candidate names off official ballots or making it confusing for voters to figure out how to mark ballots in their favor.
- Nominating primaries were another procedural reform idea of the 1890s, intended to allow voters rather than party officials to determine which names would appear on the final ballot under each party label. But over time primaries have tended to attract partisan extremists rather than a broad cross-section of voters. Urged on by both parties, many U.S. states have also made nominating primaries members-only affairs, shutting independent voters out. Many also set qualifications for ballot access that are more onerous for small parties and independent candidates than for the well-funded major parties.

Over many years, Democrats and Republicans have painstakingly erected legal structures of party duopoly at the state and local levels. To challenge these arrangements, modern reformers in some cities have instituted nonpartisan elections and “instant runoff” ballots, and they have induced some states to institute open primaries and equitable rules for ballot access. Replication of such reforms across all fifty states might allow third parties and independent candidates to make electoral headway without first raising huge quantities of cash from millionaires and corporations. American voters would not have to join the plutocracy in order to challenge it.

In the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street catalyzed and energized ordinary citizens to challenge America’s current version of plutocratic electoral duopoly. But it will be déjà vu all over again unless reforms successfully modify the electoral procedures that reinforce partisan gridlock and plutocratic dominance in our time.

Read more in J.S. Maloy, *Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).