

WE THE PEOPLE: Populism and Party Realignment in the
United States

by

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Populism is an increasingly relevant topic in the current American political sphere. From the People's Party to George Wallace, there is plenty to be learned about this movement and its previous influences on the American political party system in order to predict what influences it could potentially have in the future. This thesis seeks to tie the occurrence of third-party populist movements with political party realignment in the United States. This is done through case study analyses of three different third-party populist movements at three times of political party realignment: the 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s-1970s. The resulting analyses show a strong link between the rise of populist third parties and populist third-party candidates with the occurrence of political party realignments. This link is further strengthened as deeper analysis shows that the political system at the time either reoriented around issues that were critical to populists and/or influenced the changing platforms of the major parties.

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Introduction

“Populism” is increasingly becoming the political buzzword of the moment. This is a result of its escalating influence in the current political sphere worldwide, from the U.K. Independence Party and Brexit in the U.K., to Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, as well as the populist socialism of South America. In the United States, the 2016 election brought with it two candidates that were branded as “populist”: Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Sanders’ populist rhetoric took aim at big money, whether it was the banks that set off the 2007 recession, billionaires and their Super-PACs, or the government whom he and his supporters saw as beholden to these moneyed interests. Trump similarly sought to remove entrenched, corrupt bureaucrats and politicians (hence his famous campaign phrase “drain the swamp”), whom he and his supporters believed were putting their own interests above the people, but also saw fault in other groups that they believed received special treatment from the government.

Although these appeals did not win Sanders the Democratic nomination, Trump rode a tide of populist support in the general election to the White House. Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner even propose that the main reason for Trump’s victory was his appeals to populism.¹ Even though it is contested whether or not Trump has stayed true to his populist base,² one thing is certain: this populist base is gaining ground and has shown that they have the support and numbers to influence something as impactful as a presidential election. In fact, On November 15, 2016, one week after Trump was elected

¹ Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley, and Michael W. Wagner, “Ideological Heterogeneity and the Rise of Donald Trump,” *The Forum* 14, no. 4 (2016): 385.

² Peter Baker, “As Trump Drifts Away From Populism, His Supporters Grow Watchful,” *The New York Times*, 18 April 2017, accessed 10 May 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/us/politics/populism-donald-trump-administration.html?_r=0.

president, Robert Kuttner, a political journalist and author, spoke to the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at the University of Oregon about the future following the election of Trump and what the 2016 election means for the next four years in American politics. Importantly, he posited that as the Democratic Party is looking to recuperate the support lost during the 2016 election, they must embrace the populism that has once again taken hold in the United States.³ Populism is gaining ground in the United States, and support is high enough to earn serious attention from both major political parties.

The importance of populism to the political moment and party system in the United States is far from new. The rise of the People's Party (whose supporters, called "Populists," are from where the term "populism" is drawn) held a considerable amount of power in the 1890s political system; for instance, they held enough sway to get William Jennings Bryan, considered a populist, nominated as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the 1896 election, and subsequently made the issue of the silver versus gold standard (the main issue championed by the Populists) an issue debated at the national level.

During the 1930s, Roosevelt was so worried about the potential third-party candidacy of populist Huey Long that he reportedly told his advisers that he wanted the second New Deal to appeal to populists in order to "steal Long's thunder"⁴ since he saw the success of Long's populist appeals as a threat to getting reelected. And in 1976, the psychologist Donald Warren correctly predicted that the disaffected Middle American

³ Robert Kuttner, "Challenges for the New Administration" (presentation, Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at the University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, November 15, 2016).

⁴ Edwin Amenta, Mary Bernstein, Kathleen Dunleavy, "Stolen Thunder? Huey Long's 'Share Our Wealth,' Political Mediation, and the Second New Deal," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 5 (1994): 678.

Radicals, the populists of the 1960s and the 1970s, would be the group for the major parties to woo in the coming elections, as their influence would be the deciding factor as to who would take control of the political order.^{5 6}

Populism is once again becoming an increasingly relevant topic, and research into populist movements and appeals is important now more than ever for increasing understanding about how they structure American politics. Examples such as the ones given above yield important information about the effects of populism on the American political party system, and subsequently may also teach important lessons about the current political moment in the United States.

The principles of populism have been present in politics in the United States since the founding of the nation, starting with “We the People” in the preamble to the Constitution, well before the advent of the word “populist,” but periods of surges in populist rhetoric and appeals such as those described above have special influence on the state of the American party system and politics and thus must be given special attention as well.

The purpose of this thesis will be to explore the emergence of populist movements at given times and their relation to party realignments in the United States, and will seek to argue that the emergence of such movements, particularly when tied to the third party (or threat of a third party), may be an indication of impending political party realignment. I plan to do this through a case study of the three populist movements: the late 1800s and the Populists, the 1920s-30s and Huey Long, and the

⁵ Donald I. Warren, *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 156.

⁶ As it turns out, the MARs had already greatly impacted the elections of 1968 and 1972, as well as the platforms of the two major parties at this time. This will be discussed in greater length in chapter two in the third case study of the 1960s and 1970s.

1960s-70s and George Wallace. This will include an in-depth analysis of each of the movements, the subsequent realignments, and the effects and impact that populism and their corresponding candidates and third parties had on each of these realignments.

Chapter 1: Background

Before delving into case studies of populism and its relationship with party realignment, a definition and history of populism, as well as the history of theory regarding party realignment in the United States would be highly beneficial to the conversation.

Populism

Definitions

Populism is a slippery term, and given its broad application (sometimes referred to as a “political buzzword”⁷), especially in recent years as it is used to describe movements, parties, and politicians from the left and the right, the definition can be difficult to nail down. Mudde and Kaltwasser hypothesize that this is due to the fact that rarely do any politicians or political movements claim themselves to be populist: rather, the term is ascribed to them.⁸ To make defining populism even more difficult, the essence of populism is still hotly debated amongst scholars, and there has not been a consensus over whether to classify populism as an ideology, a movement, a syndrome, or something else.⁹

Many different scholars give slightly different definitions of populism. For instance, Kazin, a top scholar on populism at Georgetown, defines populism as a reform of rhetoric: “[Populism is] a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-

⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.”¹⁰ Cainani’s entry in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* on populism seeks to reach a definition of populism as well, defining it as a type of movement or process: “Populist movements attempt to create a direct connection between the people and the political power, bypassing the electoral process.”¹¹ Judis, a political journalist, presents populism as a broader idea that “assumes a basic antagonism between the people and an elite at the heart of its politics.”¹² There have been many people, parties, and movements that have been labeled as populist throughout the hundred-plus year history of populism in the United States, which makes this definition even more difficult. The People’s Party, the party which originally sparked the use of the term “populist,” and Donald Trump, who has some policies and uses rhetoric that has been labeled populist, are two examples of clearly different instances in which the term “populist” has been applied. Under what definition can these two examples both be labeled as populist?

Perhaps the most accurate definition of populism is presented by Mudde and Kaltwasser. This definition is flexible and allows for movements as different as left-wing and right-wing populism to be compared under one umbrella.¹³ They define populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated

¹⁰ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995),

1.

¹¹ Manuela Cainani, “Populism/populist movements.” In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. David A. Snow (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 1.

¹² John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016): 15.

¹³ Mudde and Kaltwasser’s definition also allows it to be flexible enough to encompass populist movements from across the world as well. However, since the focus of this thesis is on populism in the United States, this international application of the term is not as necessary.

into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (emphasis by author).¹⁴ The term “thin-centered ideology” deserves some explanation: Mudde and Kaltwasser define thin-centered ideologies as those ideologies that cannot stand alone—they must be attached to another one, such as fascism or liberalism, that is concerned a “full-centered ideology”, i.e. an ideology that can stand alone.¹⁵ Mudde and Kaltwasser also do an excellent job of explaining why this definition is so useful and so applicable across time and place:

This means that populism can take very different shapes, which are contingent on the ways in which the core concepts of populism appear to be related to other concepts, forming interpretative frames that might be more or less appealing to different societies. Seen in this light, populism must be understood as a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality. It is not so much a coherent ideological tradition as a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies.¹⁶

Their identification of populism as a “set of ideas” helps capture a sentiment that can be held with or without the existence of a large movement, and their classification of it as a thin-centered ideology makes it more flexible than a full-centered ideology; it can (and has) shown up across the political spectrum. Most importantly, it also captures the heart of any definition of populism: the concept of the people versus the elite.

¹⁴ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

This definition that I have chosen to use is a very broad concept, because populism itself is a very broad concept. However, in the context of this thesis, the populist movements that I will discuss here are identified with either a manifestation of a third party or the threat of a manifestation of a third party. This is because the periods that I will be analyzing for these case studies had realignments that were kick-started by either the effects of populist third party success or the threat of populist third party success at the national and local levels. Third parties or the threat of third parties are important in the context of the two-party American system because of the potential threat of the spoiler effect. The spoiler effect occurs when a third party draws support away from one or both of the existing parties, posing a major problem in a winner-take-all system of voting, as the third party may be successful enough to pull supporters away from one party and effectively give the election to the other party. Therefore, the third party is seen as a threat to the success of the entrenched two parties, and the parties are then willing to do whatever possible to stem the success of the third party and court third-party support.

There are plenty of much weaker populist movements in the United States that never became strong enough to develop into a third party or popular enough to affect a party realignment. Because of their lack of strength and popularity and their inability to foster or threaten to foster a third-party movement, these are not the movements that I will seek to study in this thesis. Therefore, I will be studying three periods of populism that resulted in a third party or threatened a third party run: the 1890s and the People's

Party, the 1930s and Huey Long,¹⁷ and the 1960s and George Wallace's American Independent Party.

History of Populism in the United States

The terminology of populism first emerged in the United States as a way to describe the movement within agriculture at the end of the 1800s to retake power taken by the rich establishment to which the political establishment was unsympathetic. Small farmers' livelihoods were threatened by drought, increased railroad transportation prices, and increasing loan rates that kept farmers forever in debt. These farmers banded together to represent the "people" in order to get the government to implement regulations that would benefit these small farmers. Neither of the dominant parties would support these populists, so they formed their own party called the People's Party. The term "populist" was created during this time as a result of the People's Party—it comes from the Latin for "the people," and was created as a shorthand term to reference members of the People's Party.¹⁸ The People's Party fielded a candidate, James Weaver, for the 1892 presidential election, and won 8% of the popular vote and five states. The People's Party also won eight congressional seats in the 1894 election. However, after this point, the Populist Party faded, mostly due to the fact that supporters wanted to support more electable candidates and parties, and its ideals were absorbed by the preexisting parties.¹⁹

¹⁷ Huey Long never ended up forming a third party for a couple of reasons: first, the Democrats feared that he would form a third party for a run for the presidency in 1936, so they incorporated many of his ideas; and second, he was assassinated in 1935.

¹⁸ Robert C. McMath Jr., *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993): 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-27.

After this time, populist movements continued to spring up throughout the next hundred plus years. Sometimes these movements were strong and sustained, and even reached the level of creating a third party, such as was the case of the populist movement in the 1960s, represented by George Wallace and the American Independence Party. Other times, the movement was strong but did not result in a third party, like with Huey Long and his populist “Spread the Wealth” campaign in the 1930s. More often than not, populism will pop up briefly either in a small group of people, or in the rhetoric of a candidate for office. Candidates from Democratic moderate Bill Clinton to Neo-Nazi David Duke have been labeled as populist,²⁰ showing just how broadly the term can be applied and how often it can appear in American politics. This thesis, however, will deal with those populist’s movements powerful enough to shift the entire party system as we know it: the strong, popular populists, such as the People’s Party, Huey Long, and George Wallace.

Political Party Realignment

Theories

Political party realignment theory, also known as electoral realignment theory, is a theory that has existed for over sixty years, but is still evolving and challenged by academics in the field to this day. For an analysis of political party realignment theory, it makes the most sense to outline the theories of political party realignment in roughly chronological order (with some jumps to theories that address issues directly dealt with in the current theory) partially because later theories build upon earlier ones, and

²⁰ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 270.

partially because the most recent theory I discuss, formulated by Arthur Paulson in 2007, is the theory upon which I will ultimately base my research into realignment theory and its relationship to populism. This theory also pulls together theories that have shown to be reliable so far in the history of party realignment, while also discarding theories that are too narrow and subsequently exclude instances that should be classified as realignment.

The theory of political party realignment was first coherently formulated and articulated by V.O. Key, Jr. in his 1955 essay “A Theory of Critical Elections,” in which he sorted elections into two main categories. The first category, critical elections, are elections during which “voters are, at least from impressionistic evidence, unusually deeply concerned...the extent of electoral involvement is relatively quite high, and...the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate.”²¹ These elections lead to party realignment during which “new and durable electoral groupings”²² are formed; that is, the voting bases of the existing parties change, and these changes are sustained over many years. Conversely, the second category is noncritical elections, in which electoral groupings stay essentially the same: they are elections like any other. Electoral realignment does not follow these elections. Although many conceptions of critical elections and party realignment theory have followed Key’s original formulation, there are two main elements of this definition that other scholars seem to agree with: that the change must be substantial, and must be sustained for a long period of time. The first element is usually fairly easily to tell at the time; the second element is more difficult to ascertain at the time of a realignment, so

²¹ V.O. Key, “A Theory of Critical Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 17, no. 1 (1955): 4.

²² *Ibid.*

because of this, realignment is usually analyzed and becomes part of political cannon years after it occurs.

Burnham expanded upon Key's idea of critical elections in "Party Systems and the Political Process," in which he formulated five main periods of party alignment in US history, each of which ends with a critical election, segueing into a new alignment period: 1789-1820, 1828-1854/60, 1860-1893, 1894-1928, and 1932 through an unspecified date (the essay was published in 1967).²³ He argues that these periods occur in intervals of roughly thirty years, and are prompted by a major economic (i.e. Great Depression) or political (i.e. Kansas-Nebraska Act) event.²⁴ Additionally, adding to Key's idea that the populace is unusually involved, Burnham asserts that the party or candidate that is challenging the previous political alignment is "exceptionally ideological", which polarizes the opposing party or candidate, taking up the opposite ideological stances.²⁵ Burnham so believes in party realignment and its power to shape American politics that he even goes so far as to assert that "the critical realignment may well be regarded as America's surrogate for revolution."²⁶

Key amended his theory of party realignment in "Secular Realignment and the Party System," published 1959, four years after his original paper. In this essay, he partially backs off of the importance of "critical elections", instead favoring what he terms as "secular realignment", where realignment takes place over a period of time rather than just one pivotal election. Although there may be an election in which this

²³ Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *Stages of Political Development*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 289-304.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

change seems to crystallize (the “critical election”), Key argues that this is just part of a larger process: “Yet the rise and fall of parties may to some degree be the consequence of trends that perhaps persist over decades and elections may mark only steps in a more or less continuous creation of new loyalties and decay of old.”²⁷ Sundquist, writing in 1983, sought to reconcile Key’s ideas of critical elections and secular realignment, stating that although it is true that realignment is an ongoing process, there are certainly elections where there is a substantial upheaval that leads to a sustained change in the party bases constituting a “critical election”: specifically, he cites critical elections in the 1850s, the 1890s, and the 1930s. Using these elections as examples, Sundquist combines critical elections and secular realignment into one cohesive theory, stating that they are both essential parts of the larger process of party realignment. In other words, they are not opposite theories—they can exist together.

Schattschneider added onto what Key’s already established theories of electoral realignment by asserting that in order for such realignment to take place, not only is there a major and durable shift in party support, but these changes must take place alongside a change in the issues that parties are focused around; that is, the political agenda in the United States also changes.²⁸ Sundquist backed this up using his own research, stating that these shifts are just as important as the other changes originally stated by Key; he refers to them as an effect of what he calls “shifts in the party balance” which are “redistributions of party support, of whatever scale or pace, that reflect a change in the structure of the party conflict and hence the establishment of a

²⁷ V.O. Key, Jr., “Secular Realignment and the Party System,” *The Journal of Politics* 21, no. 2 (1959): 198.

²⁸ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Northeastern University Press, 2007): 86.

new line of partisan cleavage on a different axis within the electorate.”²⁹ This “new line of partisan cleavage” creates (or brings to light) new issues that were not problems dealt with by the previous order. Sinclair uses the emergence of new political issues as the centerpiece of her identification of party realignment (which she refers to as “the result of the mass electorate’s response to a new and highly salient issue which cuts across old party lines”³⁰), and goes on to detail the changes to the political agenda in the period of 1925-1938 as a result of the 1932 electoral realignment.

Despite many theories supporting Key’s original idea of electoral realignment, there are also many theorists who see electoral realignment as an ineffective theory. Mayhew’s 2002 *Electoral Realignments* is perhaps the strongest and best-known challenge to party realignment theory. Mayhew compiles a list of fifteen points that different realignment theorists have presented about the characteristics of realignment during the then fifty-plus years since the inception of realignment theory; he then proceeds to refute against each one, arguing that most of the fifteen points do not easily apply to each period of hypothesized party realignment. He also argues that theories that are looser and try to encompass all periods of hypothesized party realignment are too broad and span too much territory to truly be effective.³¹ He argues this is especially true in the modern era, since there does not seem to be a mass consensus amongst

²⁹ James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution, 1983): 14.

³⁰ Barbara Deckard Sinclair, “Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda: The House of Representatives, 1925-1938,” *The American Political Science Review* 71, no. 3 (1977): 940.

³¹ David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of the American Genre* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 2002): 39-40.

political scientists about the occurrence of a party realignment since the critical election of 1932.³²

In addition to Mayhew's many objections to realignment theory, many political scientists have championed dealignment theory as an alternative to realignment theory in recent years. Theorists of dealignment theory hypothesize that while realignment theory was previously useful for explaining the processes through which parties and their bases underwent change, it no longer fits with the state of the current political party system in the United States. Dealignment theorists state that political parties have lost their importance and influence steadily since the New Deal. This means that people are more likely to identify as Independent, resulting in the "erosion of party loyalties in the mass electorate."³³ Mayhew refers to dealignment as the "decomposition of American parties in the 1960s and 1970s."³⁴ For evidence of the existence of dealignment, Carmines, McIver, and Stimson cite the increased number of self-declared independents from 1964 onward, ratcheting up from a baseline of about 22% to a high of nearly 38% in 1980 (the article was published in 1987),³⁵ as well as an increase in split ticket voting³⁶ amongst even the most loyal party members.³⁷ Effectively, this means that voters are not asking for the parties to realign in order to fit their needs; instead, they are dealigning from the party system altogether and voting for candidates

³² Ibid., 35-36.

³³ Edward G. Carmines, John P. McIver, and James A. Stimson, "Unrealized Partisanship: A Theory of Dealignment," *The Journal of Politics* 49, no. 2 (1987): 377.

³⁴ Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments*, 36.

³⁵ Carmines 377.

³⁶ Split ticket voting is when voters do not vote along party lines. For instance, as a voter, I may choose to vote for a presidential candidate that is a Democrat while voting for a Republican representative and a third-party senator. This is opposed to "straight ticket" voting, wherein the voter chooses candidates from a singular political party.

³⁷ Carmines, et. al., "Unrealized Partisanship," 378.

and policies irrespective of party affiliations. Unlike realignment, in which large numbers of people put pressure on the parties to change to fit their needs and subsequently move across party lines en masse, dealignment hypothesizes that people remove themselves from party identification altogether.

Arthur Paulson offers one of the most recent formulations and defenses of realignment theory in his 2007 book *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*. Most significantly, he addresses Mayhew's criticisms of realignment theory as well as the growing prominence of the theory of dealignment. He argues that Mayhew's critiques, along with other political scientists' theories, analyze potential instances of electoral realignment far too closely. He argues for a much looser definition of electoral realignment: "[R]ealignment should be understood contextually, in terms of the system of change it represents....the result of these electoral outcomes will be a new and persistent governing coalition, yielding a new policy agenda."³⁸

These new guidelines offer the opportunity to analyze potential realignments on a case-to-case basis while also giving the chance for realignment theory to evolve across time, and do not constrain identification of realignments based on some characteristics that the first few instances of realignment happened to have that others may not. For instance, many theorists (including Burnham, as discussed earlier) have identified "cycles" of realignment, in which each realigning period takes place over a period of roughly thirty years, but with his theory, Paulson deemphasizes the importance of this periodicity requirement. It also relaxes other stringent requirements such as coalition change, new party majority, and mass voter mobilization that are requirements of other

³⁸ Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007): 148-149.

common definitions. Paulson presents this table to show how his theory fares versus other conceptions of party realignment:

Dimensions of Realignment: Electoral Change and Policy Change						
<i>Realignment Characteristic</i>	1824–1832	1854–1860	1892–1900	1928–1936	1964–1972	
<i>Input: Electoral Outcomes</i>						
Coalition Change	–	x	x	–	x	
New majority party*	x	–	x	x	–	
Displacement	x	–	–	x	–	
Emergence	–	–	x	–	–	
Decline	–	x	–	–	x	
New parties	–	x	x	–	–	
Voter mobilization	–	x	x	x	x	
New issue cleavages	–	x	x	x	x	
Ideological polarization	–	–	–	–	–	x
<i>Output: New Governing Coalition/Policy Agenda</i>						
New governing coalition	x	x	x	x	x	x
Unified government	x	x	–	x	x	–
Divided government	–	–	x	–	–	x
New policy agenda	x	x	x	x	x	x

Table evaluates whether qualitative change along named dimension was persistent during each electoral era. See related text in this chapter, and detailed discussion in chapter 2, supporting this argument. Originally published in Paulson, *Realignment and Party Revival*, p. 286.

*Displacement = Displacement of old majority party with new majority
Emergence = New majority party emerges from competitive electoral environment
Decline = Decline of majority party without emergence of new majority party
New Parties = New major parties develop during realignment

Figure 1: Dimensions of Realignment: Electoral Change and Policy Change

Paulson details the effectiveness of requirements for electoral realignment hypothesized by other political theorists against his own requirements, effectively showing that his are far more effective for describing past realignments and possibly identifying future ones as well (Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 150).

In effect, Paulson argues that his definition will include all instances of party realignment, much more so than the previous laundry list of requirements that were never checked off in previous realignments. This is shown in this table, as all of the requirements for his definition are checked off for each theorized period of realignment

(including 1964-1972, a realignment that many political scientists cannot agree on because it did not fit the original checklist), whereas other requirements put forth by other political scientists are not consistently met across realignments. Paulson's theory strips away the little particularities of realignment theory that political scientists have included along the way, and takes two points from Key and one from Schattschneider: 1) a new governing coalition, which is 2) durable/persistent with 3) a new policy agenda.

Paulson also argues against dealignment theory and in favor of realignment during the period of 1964-1972. He argues that during the expanded period of 1964-1994, the United States experienced a period of "critical realignment at the top, secular realignment at the bottom"³⁹ wherein a drastic and polarizing realignment took place at the national (presidential) level between 1968 and 1972, whereas realignment at the more "local" level (i.e. Senate and House races) took place at a much slower rate between 1968 and 1994.⁴⁰ He hypothesizes that this happened for a couple of reasons: first of all, as Tip O'Neill always said, "All politics is local"—that is, voters are more likely to support whoever is "bringing home the bacon" and helping their local community. Therefore, they are not as likely to vote for someone purely or even primarily on ideological grounds; they will vote for them because they are fighting at

³⁹ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 116.

⁴⁰ This period of realignment raises other questions about the election of Bill Clinton, a Democrat, to the Presidency in 1992 and 1996. This does not necessarily discount the entire theory—between the period of 1968 and 1994, Republicans had control of the presidency for five out seven elections. This becomes a larger problem expanded out to 1968 through the present, where Republicans had control of the presidency eight of thirteen elections, which does not appear to be strong evidence for a Republican electoral order. However, much like I stated earlier, electoral realignment is hard to identify as it is happening or soon after it has happened. There is a chance that the United States has experienced another electoral realignment between 1968 and the present, or potentially dealignment has recently taken hold. Either way, Carter's brief stint as president from 1977-1981 and Clinton's two term incumbency from 1993-2001 do not necessarily discount Paulson's theory of 1968-1994 staggered realignment.

the national level to do good things for their constituents. However, as the decades progressed and issues became even more polarized at the national level, local politics became more polarized as well, which moved the realignment along at the local level as well.⁴¹ Paulson also points to incumbent advantage as a reason for secular realignment at the bottom.⁴² According to incumbent advantage, a politician that is already in office is more likely to be reelected to that office by his constituents than for such voters to elect a challenger. This advantage is accentuated for conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, as they are closer to the ideological center and henceforth closer to the ideology of the average voter. Therefore, in order to replace these senators and representatives and reflect the change that took place at the national level, the nation had to wait several decades for incumbents to leave office and for the voters to become more ideologically polarized in order to fill these empty seats in a way that reflected the national attitude. Campbell supports this evidence statistically, and states that the “1994 midterm election brought the long-anticipated deepening of the 1960s realignment into congressional elections.”⁴³ Paulson’s theory helps to explain why Republicans came to dominate the presidency (with one four year interruption by a moderate Democrat) between 1968 and 1992, but were not able to take control of the House and Senate until 1994.⁴⁴ It also weakens the argument for dealignment theory.⁴⁵ By his theory, instead of dealignment, voters experienced split realignment, which took place all at once at the

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁴² Ibid., 122-123.

⁴³ James E. Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignments in the United States, 1868-2004,” *Social Science History* 30, no. 3 (2006): 379.

⁴⁴ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 133.

⁴⁵ This may weaken the argument for dealignment theory, but that does not mean it should be discounted altogether. For instance, declining levels of voting since the 1968 election can be seen as evidence in favor of dealignment theory.

national level and over a period of two and a half decades at the local level. Campbell argues for a similar staggered realignment at the local level (i.e. in state-, county-, and citywide elections), but he argues that this is because the South had been so solidly Democrat for so many decades that it took time to build up a “serious” Republican Party in the South.⁴⁶

In the context of this thesis, I will be using Paulson’s requirements for party realignment (which is a formulation combines Key’s and Schattschneider’s points), as it is the modernized version of realignment theory that aptly addresses points against realignment theory made by Mayhew and proponents of dealignment theory. It also includes 1896, 1932, and 1964-1972 as periods of party realignment, the three periods that I will be analyzing as my case studies for the relationship between populist movement and political party realignment.

⁴⁶ Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignment in the United States,” 380.

Chapter 2: Case Studies

With a working definition and history of populism, as well as a conceptualization of political party realignment in the United States, I can now analyze the relationship between the two using three case studies: the 1890s, 1930s, and 1960-1970s. Each of these periods saw a political party realignment, as well as a significant populist surge that was significant enough to yield either a third party or the threat of a third party. In order to analyze the interplay between these two phenomena during each time period, I will first go through a brief history of the time period in question, then background about each of the populist movements, followed by political theory about each of the realignments, and finally finish with an analysis of the relationship between populism and the given realignment.

Case Study I: 1890s—Populism, the People’s Party, and the 1896 Realignment

The first populist movement in the United States, which culminated in the creation of the People’s Party during the 1890s, was the result of agrarian activism to protect the interests of “the people”. This original movement spanned three decades, starting in the South in the 1870s and spreading through the Plains and through the rest of the U.S. in subsequent decades. Although it ultimately dissipated in the late 1890s, it had a profound impact on the politics of the 1890s and its legacy has continued over the next hundred plus years of American history.

A Brief History of the Late 1800s

The beginnings of the Populist movement in the late 1880s can be traced back to the end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era as well as the conditions of farmers

in the Plains and the South. The South had long been an agricultural boon before the Civil War, predominantly built on the backs of slaves on cotton and tobacco farms and plantations. The end of the Civil War and the ensuing ban on slavery and requirements of Reconstruction meant that landowning farmers faced a new challenge: figuring out how to continue to prosper while adhering to new labor laws and working to recuperate wealth lost during the war. This led to an increased amount of sharecropping, wherein landowners rented out pieces of their land for workers to cultivate. The workers had a degree of autonomy and got a percentage of the profits from the land that they worked, but became indebted to the landowner in order to support themselves and their families, which made it nearly impossible for sharecroppers to acquire their own land.⁴⁷

Sharecroppers were not exclusively freedmen (in fact, white men became a much larger portion of sharecroppers throughout the 1880s and 1890s as landowning became less and less attainable for all⁴⁸), but the relationship between a sharecropper and landowner mimicked that of the master and slave pre-Civil War. This relationship gave the landowner the opportunity to continue to prosper at the expense of the sharecropper. At this same time, the railroad was a newly important and booming industry in the United States, and thousands of miles of track made it easier and faster for farms to transport their goods to other parts of the country.

Starting in the 1870s, there was a large agricultural boom as farmers, many of whom were sharecroppers in the South looking to leave the cycle of debt of

⁴⁷ McMath, *American Populism*, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

sharecropping and own their own land,⁴⁹ moved in large numbers to the agriculturally promising Plains states, predominantly in the Dakota Territory, Nebraska, and Kansas. From the 1870s to the 1890s, these areas experienced a huge influx of settlers (first to Dakota, then to Nebraska and Kansas), and altogether these areas increased their population during this time by about 500%, from half a million to 2.5 million.⁵⁰ The boom was so large that the U.S. Census office declared the Plains closed to hopeful settlers.⁵¹ (On a related note, Goodwyn estimates that following the Civil War, farmers were the largest occupational group, outpacing urban workers and commercial classes.⁵²) People flowed into the Plains states in massive numbers as a direct result of the opportunity to purchase cheap land to grow crops that were in great demand in large numbers. Wheat and corn were the crops of choice, with wheat flourishing particularly in Dakota and corn in Nebraska and Kansas. And, much like the South, farmers in the Plains also were able to make good use of the railway system to transport their goods quickly to other parts of the country, but it also made it possible for the homesteads in the Plains to be more easily connected to each other.

Not all was perfect for farmers during this period, however. Following the restructuring of the party system following the end of the war, both parties in the North and South were increasingly receptive to the needs of business and finance entrepreneurs and subsequently less in tune with the needs of farmers.⁵³ Therefore, farmers felt abused by industry with the consent of the government. For instance, even

⁴⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 25.

⁵⁰ McMath, *American Populism*, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

though farmers knew how important the railroad was to their industry, they could not help but feel exploited by the ever-increasing costs of freight implemented by the railroad magnates, who continued to consolidate companies and therefore create a near monopoly on the industry. Because the railroad was by far the fastest mode of transport at the time, and therefore railroad magnates had the ability to set freight prices as high as they wanted, farmers were forced to either pay exorbitantly high freight costs or give up their land. McMath, Jr. succinctly states why the railroad barons' price gouging was particularly inflammatory to landowners and labors on their farms: "To farmers hard-pressed to pay the freight, it seemed that railroad barons made a profit, not because they added value to the economy, but because of their political influence and the strategic control over the lanes of commerce."⁵⁴ In an industry built for hundreds of years on hard, honest work, farmers felt as though this hard work was being exploited by those who did not deserve the money they raked in, while also being implicitly protected by the government through its refusal to act to protect farmers.

There arose a similar exploitative problem, specifically for farmers in the South, known as the "crop lien" system. In this system, many farmers were exploited by credit holders (taking advantage of the poor economic situation in the South following the war) from whom they received the credit to buy supplies for day-to-day life. In this relationship, the merchant (credit holder) sold items to the farmer throughout the year in exchange for that year's crop. If, at the end of the season, the crop was worth less money than the farmer owed the merchant, then he would be forced to sign away the next year's crop as well in order to pay the remaining debt. Payback rates for these

⁵⁴ McMath, *American Populism*, 45.

goods were so high that farmers were stuck in a constant cycle of debt, and nearly all profits from the crop each year went to credit holders instead of those who actually worked the land. Generally, this created a protracted cycle of debt that could last for years on end. Payback rates were much more agreeable for those who purchased goods from merchants using cash, but the end of the Civil War had left the South with barely any print money (Confederate money was next to worthless) or capital, making paying outright for goods nearly impossible for most farmers.⁵⁵

The financial situation following the Civil War also put many farmers in the South and in the Plains in a bind. Debate over how to rectify the depreciating dollar led the government to institute a currency contraction program whereby the government stopped printing money, despite the increasing population and growing economy, in order to increase the value of the dollar. This was devastating to farmers for two reasons. First of all, this meant that over time, the same crop yield was worth much less, and subsequently farmers made much less money. For example: “[T]he Southern cotton crop of 8.6 million bales in 1890 brought \$429.7 million to the farmers; the next year’s crop, 9.0 million bales, brought only \$391.5 million—a decrease of \$38.2 million despite an increase in production.”⁵⁶ Due to currency contraction, crops of the same yield were worth less year to year. Secondly, this decrease in income made it far more difficult for farmers to pay back the loans that they had made after the end of the war; although the loan repayment amount stayed steady, the farmer’s dollar did not go as far. Essentially, because of the increasing value of the dollar, it was as though the farmer

⁵⁵ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 20-22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

was paying far more for the loan than they had borrowed.⁵⁷ This same principle can be applied to the crop lien system; decreasing crop value made it more difficult for farmers to escape their cycle of debt with merchant creditors as their crop bought fewer and fewer goods. This financial system greatly benefitted creditors, who received much greater payments than they were owed, and dealt a significant blow to farmers, especially those with large loans, who ended up paying creditors more than they would have otherwise.

Although financial exploitation was not nearly as widespread in the Plains, the agricultural boom in the Plains stalled in the late 1880s and early 1890s when drought hit. During this time, crop yields dropped by as much as 80%, and profits for crops were cut in half.⁵⁸ This economic turn, coupled with rampant over speculation in the 1870s and 1880s that had led to a surplus of farmers and crops in the region, thousands of people simply abandoned their homesteads in search of better-paying work.⁵⁹

The Rise of Populism: The Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party

Although the farming industry appeared at first glance to be an extremely attractive line of work in the late 1800s, issues such as financial exploitation of farmers through railroad prices and the credit lien system, over speculation, and drought led to unrest amongst farmers across the South and the Plains. This was all compounded by the government's refusal to respond or even listen to the needs of farmers, instead favoring the financial and business barons who continuously took advantage of these farmers.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

⁵⁸ McMath, *American Populism*, 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 47.

As a result of being ignored and exploited by other groups, many farmers decided that it was time to band together in order to protect themselves and their interests. The first such group to represent the interests of farmers was known as the Farmer's Alliance (originally known as the "Knights of Reliance"), an organization formed by a group of farmers at the farm of J.R. Allen in Texas in 1877. It was created as a form of political organization with a social aspect, so that farmers could prepare for the day when all the country's products of labor were concentrated in the hands of the few.⁶⁰ It spread across the South in subsequent years and into the Plains states in the following decade.

The Alliance had some difficulties spreading without a face or voice for the movement. The first such mouthpiece of the movement was Mississippian S.O. Davis (referred to as the "first Populist"⁶¹) speaking on behalf of farmers in the Alliance. In 1883, he was given a position working for the Farmer's Alliance as the "Traveling Lecturer," where he was in charge of appointing chapter organizers and lecturers to invigorate the public and the Alliance's members, while also traveling across the country "denouncing credit merchants, railroads, trusts, the money power, and capitalists."⁶² William Lamb, a Tennessean chapter head, became Davis's protégé, before quickly passing him in terms of Alliance support and speaking credibility. These orators, amongst others, are the ones to be credited for the quick spread of populism through the South and Plains states during the 1880s.

⁶⁰ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 25-26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

Despite the popularity of the Alliance, many members felt as though the movement would be more effective organized as a political party rather than simply a social organization. The People's Party first started to emerge in April 1891 at a meeting in Waco, Texas,⁶³ with much hesitation from many of those in the Farmer's Alliance, particularly in the South. Many Southern members of the Alliance were wary of creating a third party, and instead wanted to continue to try to work with the Democratic Party to get them to meet their demands. In response to this reticence, the Populists⁶⁴ launched an educational campaign (which some referred to as propaganda⁶⁵) through the media to tell people about the ideals of the party and their relationship to the political climate at the time. They worked simultaneously to mobilize people for the Populist cause while also dividing them from the political parties with which they had had close ties with, many times for many decades.⁶⁶

A crucially important part of this media blitz was the huge number of political cartoons about the political situation of the 1890s. A large number of the cartoons published at this time were highly critical of the political establishment, industry (particularly its barons), the gold standard, and many other issues that were also the centerpieces of the Populist agenda. For example, the *Republic Country Freeman*, a newspaper in Belleville, Kansas, right at the heart of the Populist movement, published a cartoon in March of 1892 entitled "A Modern Version of the Ancient Classics."⁶⁷ In

⁶³ McMath, *American Populism*, 144

⁶⁴ Although the term "populist" can refer to a wide range of people and movements across time, from this point onward, I will use the term Populist (distinct in that it begins with a capital "P") to refer to members of the 1890s People's Party and the movement of the party itself.

⁶⁵ McMath, *American Populism*, 153.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154

⁶⁷ Worth Robert Miller, *Populist Cartoons: An Illustrated History of the Third-Party Movement in the 1890s* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2011): 28-29.

this cartoon, the artist references the Greek mythological story of Athena sending snakes to kill Lacoön and his sons because they were going to reveal the secret of the Trojan horse. However, in this representation, Lacoön and his sons are labor, distribution, and production, strangled by the snakes of watered stock, combines, the national bank system, trusts, and other modern forms of production, essentially conveying that greed and capitalist exploitation hinders the honest work of farmers and laborers.

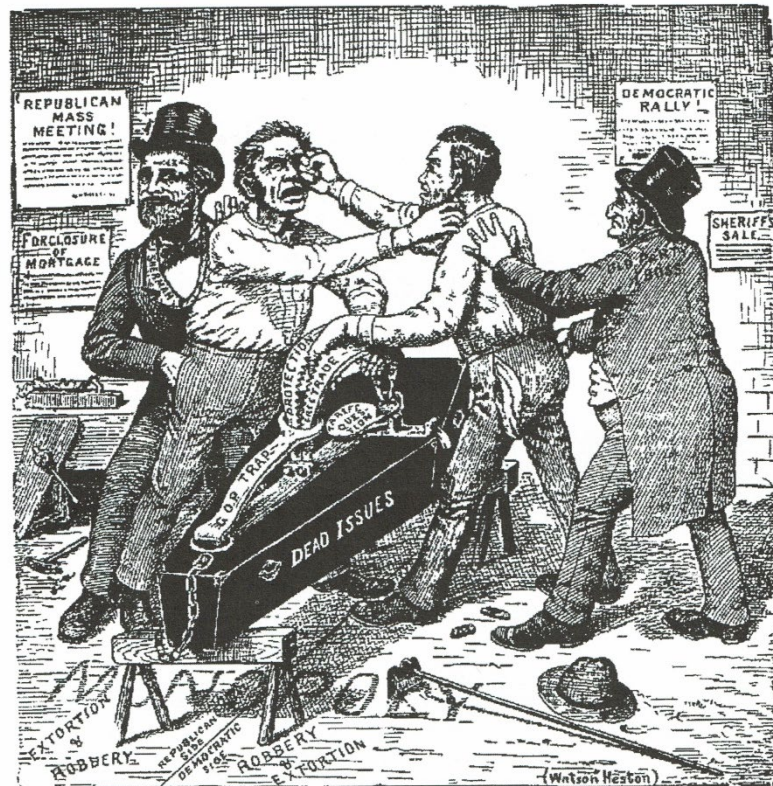


Figure 2: “A Modern Version of the Ancient Classics.”

(Image from Miller, *Populist Cartoons*, 29)

Populist cartoons also took aim at the political establishment and the parties themselves through cartoons such as “‘Reciprocity’ or ‘Tariff for Revenue!’”⁶⁸ (which ran in the *American Nonconformist*, a Kansas paper, in April 1891), which shows the parties creating a fight amongst the voters who reach their hands into a trap in a box labeled “dead issues”, while the party bosses steal from the pockets of party members. This clearly addresses the People’s Party’s distrust of the already-established parties, whom they believed to be stalled out on issues that no longer mattered while trying to distract voters from this fact in order to maintain control over party members and the entrenched political system on a whole.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 50.



“Reciprocity” or “Tariff for Revenue!”

Figure 3: “‘Reciprocity’ or ‘Tariff for Revenue!’”

(Image from Miller, *Populist Cartoons*, 50)

The Populists did not seek merely to point out everything that was wrong with the political system of the moment; they also sought to organize supporters. This can be seen in cartoons such as “The Ballot is Our Weapon”⁶⁹, published in November 1892 in Indiana’s *American Nonconformist*. It portrays a David vs. Goliath situation, with the Populists as David and capitalism and its excesses as Goliath. Goliath’s sword represents the subsidized press and his shield ignorance, while David’s slingshot represents organized labor. This cartoon is a strong underdog metaphor, suggesting the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 63.

power and ability that a small organization such as the People's Party has to overcome the giant that is the political system in the late 1890s.

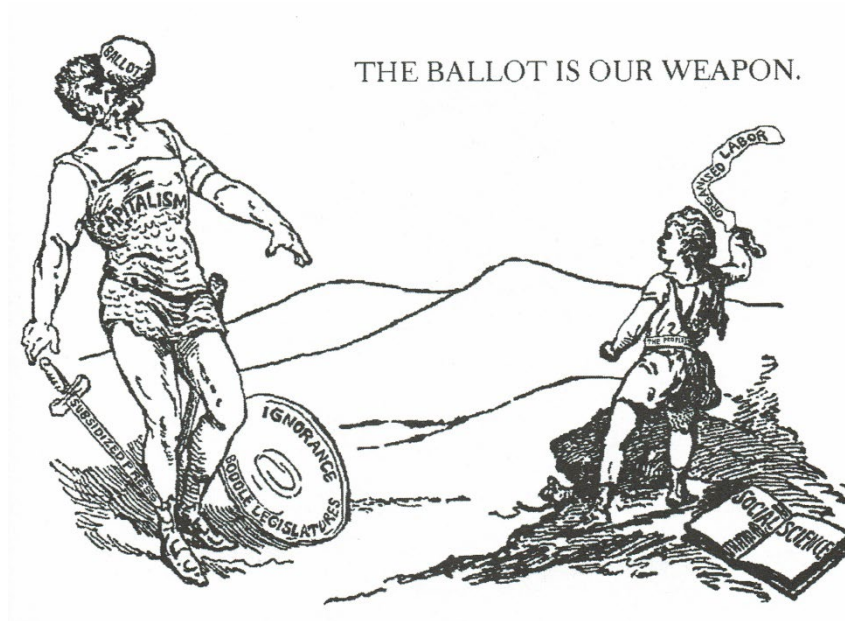


Figure 4: “The Ballot is Our Weapon.”

(Image from Miller, *Populist Cartoons*, 63)

Although the media campaign certainly contributed to the increasing popularity of the People's Party, another crucially important catalyst was the Democratic Party's nomination of Grover Cleveland as their 1892 presidential candidate. Cleveland had already served a term as president the previous decade, ending his tenure in 1889 on unfavorable footing with many members of the party. Most importantly to the Populists, he was against currency reform, a primary issue for Democrat farmers. This betrayal of constituent farmers on the part of the Democratic Party led many Southern farmers who were previously reluctant to support a third party to put their support behind the People's Party.

The surge in support for the Populist cause sparked by Cleveland's nomination led to a rush to form a People's Party nominating convention so that the party could write a platform and field a candidate for the 1892 election. The platform came together fairly easily and quickly, ultimately finished in two days, with ten points addressing issues such as government control of the currency supply, greenbackism,⁷⁰ graduated income tax, and increasing the currency supply.⁷¹ However, finding a presidential nominee was not quite as easy. Unfortunately, the frontrunner and obvious choice, Leonidas Polk, a well-spoken Southern officer of the Populists, died of cancer less than a month before the nominating convention. The Populists instead chose James B. Weaver, a Greenback presidential nominee in 1880 and a former general for the Union in the Civil War.

The People's Party encountered many issues straight out of the gate of the nominating convention that threatened the tenuous footing it held. First of all, the convention had decided to avoid taking stances on the issues of prohibition and women's suffrage, issues that split their voter base down the center; taking a stance on either issue would result in the alienation of half of the voter base. Race was an issue as well, though in a less visible way. The People's Party tacitly supported the rights (political, not social) of the black population in order to court their vote. However, the Democratic Party saw this as an issue, and ran a dual campaign to emphasize the perceived need for white unity as well as to manipulate black votes.⁷² The Democratic

⁷⁰ Greenbackism refers to the movement to inflate currency. This went against the 1870s policy for currency contraction that many farmers opposed because it inflated the amount of money they owed in debts to borrowers.

⁷¹ McMath, *American Populism*, 167.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 173.

Party's intimidation of the black population is shown, for example, in the political cartoon entitled "A Warning," which ran in the Democratic Party-controlled *Raleigh News and Observer* in August 1898:

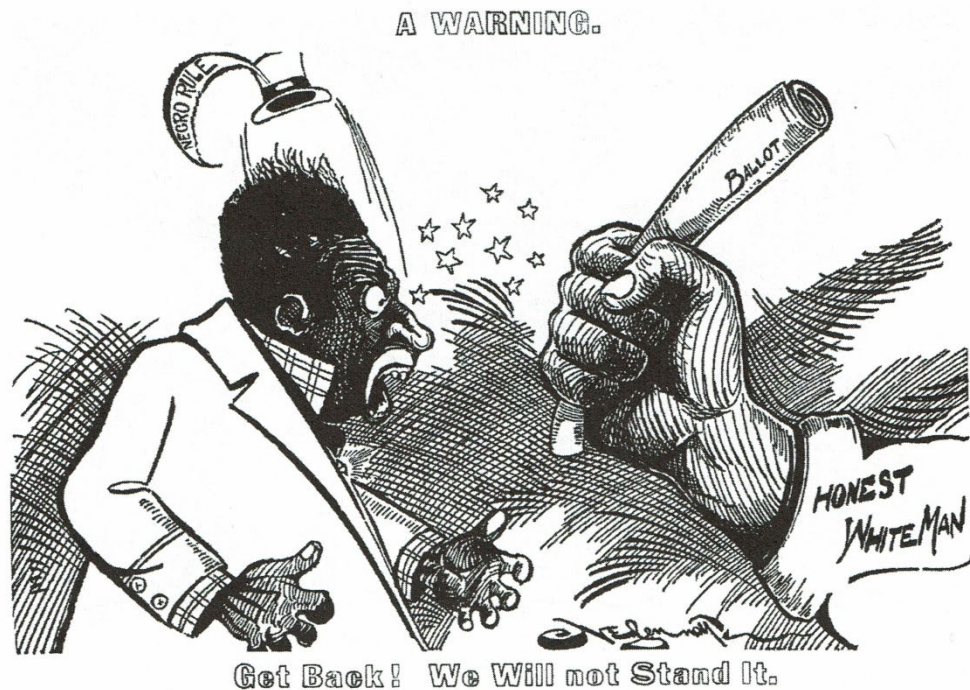


Figure 5: "A Warning."

(Image from Miller, *Populist Cartoons*, 114)

The People's Party was further undermined by the "fusioners"—those who advocated for fusing the People's Party with one of the dominant parties (particularly the Democrats) and then dividing seats of power between the fused parties—and the "mid-roaders"—those who chose not to side with either the People's Party or the Democratic Party.⁷³ Laborers also posed a threat to the Populists. Many were Republicans, but, fed up with then-incumbent President Hayes' policies, chose to cast a protest vote for

⁷³ Ibid., 175-176.

Cleveland.⁷⁴ As a result of these factors, Cleveland won the 1892 election, leaving the Populists alienated once again.

Although the People's Party was unsuccessful in electing a president in the 1892 election, the economic crisis of 1893, which was the nation's largest before the Great Depression of 1932,⁷⁵ only helped to serve the Populists' cause. Although the reasons for the crisis were many of the same reasons that the Populists originally started to organize (over speculation, declining farm prices, over borrowing, a currency system that could not flex properly with the growing population, etc.), many saw the economic crisis as an immediate result of the policies of Cleveland and the Democrats, creating the perfect opportunity for the Populists to go on the offensive. This opportunity was further compounded when Cleveland pushed through a repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which was supposed to increase the money supply in circulation.⁷⁶ With the economic crash, Cleveland pushed the repeal through hoping to help boost the economy, but Populists believed that decreasing the amount of currency in the system would only further aggravate the crisis. Therefore, the current economic and political moment led to mass organization, rallies, boycotts, and many other forms of mass democracy in order to show public distrust of the current political administration.

Despite the perfect political climate necessary for Populists to rise to popularity, the years between presidential elections yielded little net rise in support for the People's Party. By the 1894 midterm elections, the ranks of the Populist Party had reached around two million, a considerable number, but not nearly enough to reach a majority, a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 181.

⁷⁶ Miller, *Populist Cartoons*, 117

requisite to thrive within the entrenched two-party system. Therefore, in order to continue to grow (and, hence, survive), the People's Party had two choices: either wait for one of the major parties to implode, allowing them to take their place in the two-party system, or fuse with one of the major parties in hopes of becoming stronger and gaining the ability to push parts of their agenda. They would eventually be forced into the latter of the two.

In order to limit potential splits in the party over controversial issues, the Populists decided to focus their platform between 1894 and 1896 on the free silver movement. However, at this same time, the Democratic Party decided to include free silver as a part of their platform as well. The Democratic Party even selected William Jennings Bryan, an orator famous for his free silver advocacy and his infamous "cross of gold" speech in which he likened the use of the gold standard to crucifixion, as the 1896 presidential nomination. Although the Republican Party and their 1896 nominee William McKinley continued to back the gold standard, they recognized the appeal of and threat posed by the People's Party, and subsequently made more of an effort to back issues and take stances to satisfy the wants and needs of laborers and farmers.⁷⁷ These efforts made by each of the parties to absorb the causes of the Populists very well may have led to the realignment of 1896.

The 1896 Realignment

The identification of the 1896 as a critical election is widely accepted amongst electoral realignment theorists. Paulson refers to it as the "model for realignment" because it not only led to a new majority coalition, but because there was much shifting

⁷⁷ McMath, *American Populism*, 202.

in the coalitions of each party: the Northeast became solidly Republican, while the heartland, including Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and Nevada became strongholds of the Democratic Party (states in the South were also solidly Democratic, but they had been so before the realignment).⁷⁸

Campbell suggests that the realignment actually began with the midterm elections in 1894—the same term that awarded many People’s Party candidates seats in Congress—and continued through the 1896 election, and was a result of populist backlash against the political establishment whom much of the populace blamed for the economic crisis of 1893.⁷⁹ His statistical analysis shows that 1894 was both a deviating election and a realigning election at the congressional level: it was deviating because the Republican Party experienced an expected surge in support because of the occurrence of the 1893 economic crisis while a Democrat was in the White House, but it was also a realigning election because that surge persisted for decades past that single election.⁸⁰ The surge subsequently spread to the presidential level in 1896 and continued for the next few decades.⁸¹ It is very possible, then, that the presence of the People’s Party, since its influence lines up well with this timeline, greatly altered the future of the American party system for decades to come.

Populism and the 1896 Realignment

Although the ideas that the People’s Party espoused were popular amongst a large portion of the United States, such a party was almost certainly destined to fail in

⁷⁸ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 37.

⁷⁹ Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignment in the United States,” 374.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

the American two-party system. As mentioned before, the People's Party faced two choices as their electoral support stagnated: either wait until one of the other parties collapsed in order to take its place in the two-party system, or fuse with one of the existing parties in order to get at least some issues of interest on the political agenda. The People's Party originally started to decline after the 1894 midterm elections because of loss of support of many voters who decided to vote for those running on the Democratic or Republican ticket, which they saw as more "electable" because they were running on the ticket of the dominant parties.⁸² Therefore, the People's Party could not wait for one of the other parties to fail—they obviously were not going to fail. Their wisest course of action was to fuse with one of the already existing parties. Even though there was far from a consensus amongst the Populists (additionally evidenced by their debates over women's suffrage, prohibition, and race), what remained of the Party reluctantly backed Bryan, even though many of the hardliners did not want to concede to an already-established party.⁸³ Bryan was the obvious choice, as most party members believed that a large portion of supporters in the party would be lost to Bryan anyway because of his position on free silver.⁸⁴ To soften the blow, however, Bryan himself could even be called a Populist because of his support of populist issues, even though he was running as a candidate for the Democratic Party. Therefore, even though the party was forced to back someone running on a different ticket, Bryan could be seen as a Populist in Democrat's clothing. However, there was also a large portion of Populists, especially in the West and South, who fused with the Republicans, the party of their

⁸² McMath, *American Populism*, 204-205.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

families for generations.⁸⁵ Either way, what was left of the Populists dissolved into the Democratic and Republican parties.

One of the most evident signs of populism's influence on the realignment culminating in the 1896 election can be found in the Democratic Party's absorption of many of the policy stances taken and issues argued about by the Populists and the People's Party. This election, a contest between the Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Republican William McKinley, represented the changing ideals of the parties of the time. Bryan clearly personified free silver, the centerpiece of the Populist movement, while McKinley at least tacitly supported many of the other issues that were important to the Populists, but was a staunch advocate of the gold standard.⁸⁶ The populace rearranged itself into parties based around these issues brought to light by the Populists, which was reflected in national voting trends. The heartland states—the ones that were home to many Populist farmers, including Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado—which, prior to the election of 1896, were heavily Republican or Republican-leaning, became either predominantly heavily Democratic or Democratic-leaning.⁸⁷

During this realignment, the Democratic Party incorporated many of the Populists' ideas, and although the Democratic Party lost the 1896 election, these ideas shaped the Democratic Party for decades to come, and the issues of the regulation of the railroad and credit as well as implementation of a graduated income tax continued to be major contentious issues in the political sphere for many years.⁸⁸ The electoral order and coalition support for each party also became the norm for many decades: the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁸⁷ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 38.

⁸⁸ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 28.

Republicans dominated the presidency and both houses of the legislature until the New Deal with a stronghold in the Northeast, whereas the Democratic Party, which rarely won office again until the 1930s, drew its support mainly from across the Midwest and South.⁸⁹ Despite the fact that the Populists ended up on the losing side of the party system during this realignment, their ideas and demands had a strong hand in catalyzing a transition into an electoral order that lasted for over three decades.

⁸⁹ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 38.

Case Study II: 1930s—Huey Long’s Share the Wealth, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats, and the 1928/1932 Realignment

A Brief History of the 1920s-1930s

As the United States exited World War I and headed into the 1920s, the American economy and culture was booming. However, the Roaring Twenties came to a screeching halt in October 1929 when a stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression put huge numbers of Americans out of work. During the Depression, one in four Americans (including men, women, and children) lived in a household without a full-time wage-earner.⁹⁰ Americans looked for the causes of the Depression, and landed on blaming big businesses and the government they saw as permitting little regulation and low taxes in these industries.

The populist movement of the late 1920s and 1930s was a direct result of the onset of the Great Depression,⁹¹ and the resent that they felt towards big business and government fueled the movement. Working-class citizens particularly became very discouraged by the state of the economy and high rates of poverty and unemployment, and looked for promises of change by politicians, particularly looking for those that understood the vital importance of protecting the people against big business that they saw as the cause of the Depression. This solidly paved the way for a populist movement: it pitted the “people” (working class) against big business that the people believed corrupted America. Although there were more than a handful of politicians and

⁹⁰ *Huey Long*, directed by Ken Burns (1985: Corinth Films, 1985), DVD.

⁹¹ This is similar but different in a crucial way to the populist movement of the late 1800s and the economic crisis of 1893: the populist movement of the 1920s and 1930s was a direct result of the Great Depression, whereas the economic crisis of 1893 exacerbated populist sentiments that were already prevalent for over decades beforehand.

activists that sought to represent these populist interests, the populist movement of the 1920s and 1930s manifested itself through Huey Long, a senator from Louisiana who was set to run for president in the 1936 election, possibly in a third party run, and who posed a threat to the incumbent “establishment” Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Rise of Populism: Huey Long and his “Share Our Wealth” Campaign

Huey Pierce Long was born in the late 1800s to a large family in a historically impoverished region of northern Louisiana. Long was said to have the “gift of gab,” and was very talented in interpersonal relations and the art of persuasion. In fact, his very first job was as a traveling salesman before he transferred his oratorical skills to the political realm. Long was also a very sharp political mind—he took one year of classes at Tulane University before he took (and passed) the Louisiana state bar. He had his sights set on public office very early on, and when he opened his own law practice, he refused to take cases against the poor, who he saw as the “common man.” With his forward-thinking, sharp legal mind, Long saw his legal advocacy for the common man as setting the tone for his political career, a career in which he would continue to advocate for the average man on a state-wide and later national stage.⁹²

Long rose quickly in the political world, running for his first elected office (the Louisiana Railroad Commission) when he was just twenty-four years old. He ran for the governorship of Louisiana for the first time at just 31 years old, and won the office the second time he ran at 35. Just a year after this election, the Great Depression descended upon the nation, including an already-poor Louisiana. In order to combat chronic unemployment and pull families out of poverty, Long implemented huge state

⁹² *Huey Long.*

infrastructure projects that created jobs for thousands of Louisianans. During this time, Long's emphasis on the importance of putting the people's needs above those of big business resonated not only within poor Louisiana, but throughout the newly poor nation on a whole.⁹³ As a result of Long's popularity, he was elected as one of Louisiana's senators for the United States Senate in 1932.

While Long was running for Senate, his national popularity meant that many of the 1932 Democratic presidential candidates turned to him for his endorsement. Long ended up endorsing Franklin D. Roosevelt, the eventual recipient of the Democratic nomination and victor of the 1932 election, beating out Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover. Although Long campaigned for Roosevelt during the 1932 election, Roosevelt's actions as president were not comprehensive enough to satisfy Long, who believed that the president's policies were insufficient to end the Depression. Therefore, a feud began between the president and senator. As time between elections progressed, Long made it clear that he was gearing up to run for the highest office of the land against Roosevelt in 1936.⁹⁴ However, because of Roosevelt's popularity with the Democratic Party, this almost certainly would have meant a third-party run for Long.⁹⁵

During Long's national campaigns, he promoted his economic program that he called the "Share Our Wealth" campaign. This central idea of this campaign was the unjustness of wealth inequity in the United States, primarily that a small number of people (owners of big business) held a majority of the wealth, while average working-class men had to share the disproportionately little wealth left amongst them. In order to

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

solve this problem, Long vowed to cap income at \$1 million per family, the rest of which would be collected via taxes and distributed to the rest of the population so that they could have everyday comforts such as a home, a car, access to food, etc.⁹⁶ One of the taglines of his program, “Every Man a King,” referred to his plan to make sure that every person was economically secure, while casting the plan in such a light that made it difficult to criticize as it seemed to promise to benefit everyone. He repeatedly stated that the campaign was grounded in the philosophy of Christianity and the Bible rather than economic theory,⁹⁷ an idea that resonated with many working-class Americans who were God-fearing Christians with little knowledge of the theories of philosophers such as Karl Marx. Share Our Wealth “made claims on behalf of the long-standing poor and American who were economically devastated by the Depression—groups with little organized standing in U.S. politics.”⁹⁸ Long worked to empower those who felt as though they had no voice and to fight back against the big business and subservient government who oppressed them.

However, Long was not universally popular. There were many who doubted his motives, believing that he sought only to advance his own interests. One man in Ken Burn’s documentary on Long and his life stated that he appealed to the masses’ wants and needs in order to make himself more powerful: “Every man a king, but only one wore a crown.”⁹⁹ Many feared that his political ambitions and apocalyptic language

⁹⁶ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 30.

⁹⁷ Michael J. Lee, “The Populist Chameleon,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 4 (2006): 367-368.

⁹⁸ Edwin Amenta, Mary Bernstein, Kathleen Dunleavy, “Stolen thunder? Huey Long’s ‘Share Our Wealth,’ political mediation, and the second New Deal,” *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 5 (1994): 681.

⁹⁹ *Huey Long*.

indicated that he would become a dictator in the Oval Office.¹⁰⁰ However, Long was not given the chance to govern in the highest office of the land—he was assassinated in September of 1935, over a year before the next presidential election, and less than a month after turning 42.

Long was not the only well-known populist of the 1930s. Perhaps the next most significant figure was Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest who spoke for the ever-increasing population of middle-class Irish-Catholics who became the face of the average dispossessed American citizen during the Depression. Prior to World War I, Irish-Catholic immigrants were treated as second-class citizens, but by the end of the war, they were holding down middle-class jobs at much the same rate as their Protestant counterparts.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the Depression reduced anti-Catholic sentiment, as many Protestants saw that the Catholics were in just as much of an economic lurch as they were.¹⁰² Therefore, Irish-Catholics increasingly became the average working-class American, and subsequently searched for political change through activists who understood their plight and looked to defend them against big business and the government who protected such big business. They found what they were looking for in Father Coughlin. Father Coughlin reached his audiences mostly via his radio show in which he mixed Christianity with populist politics. He distrusted big business, the titans of whom he believed to have caused the Depression, as well as intellectuals, particularly economic theorists, many of whom had not seen the Depression coming. He instead relied heavily upon his religious beliefs to guide his political stances. His mixture of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 111.

¹⁰² Ibid., 112.

religious philosophy and hostility toward big business made him a “new kind of evangelical populist.”¹⁰³ In 1934, he created his own social movement called the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ) to promote his ideas and bring his supporters together for action that was meant to be “superior to politics and politicians” and to deal with economic issues that the nation was still facing five years after the onset of the Depression. However, NUSJ was never a political party, and never fielded a political candidate for the presidency or otherwise. Additionally, Father Coughlin himself never ran for political office. Therefore, Long was the only politician or activist that truly posed a threat to Roosevelt and Democrats during this period because he “combined a radical program with a solid record as a vote getter,”¹⁰⁴ which meant that he could not only court substantial support from those searching for change, but that support meant that he could win political office during his electoral campaigns, or at least put the election of other politicians (namely Roosevelt) in danger, either by winning the vote or diverting enough votes to act as a spoiler.

The 1932 Realignment

The realignment of the 1930s is perhaps one of the strongest examples of political party realignment of all realignments in the United States. The United States unequivocally turned away from the Republicans and towards the Democrats, both congressionally and presidentially, in the period following the onset of the Great Depression. Key, the original formulator of critical election theory, argued that the proposed realignment that occurred during this time happened during the 1928 election,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁴ Huey Long.

but much political scholarship since the 1950s has shown that the 1932 election is much more likely to have been the realigning election of this period. For example, Campbell's statistical analysis of surrounding elections shows that the 1932 election had the largest shift of voters from one party to another of any election surrounding it on either side by decades, making it the strongest candidate for realignment.¹⁰⁵ However, he also shows that the realignment began at a congressional level in 1930, the first election immediately following the Depression. Prior to the 1930s, the Democrats held only 30% of congressional seats and were considered a "regional party" because over two-thirds of these Democratic seats were held by congressmen from the South. However, following the 1932 elections, Democrats won over half of all congressional seats, and became the majority party in all regions except New England and the mid-Atlantic. Over the next couple of congressional elections, they became even more popular and dominated every region except New England.¹⁰⁶ Hawley and Sagarzazu point out in particular that over half of those who voted Republican in the South and West shifted their support to the Democrats from the 1928 to the 1932 election.¹⁰⁷ This is illustrated in the Figure 6 graphic below. Areas shaded in dark gray indicate counties where over 50% of those who voted for Herbert Hoover in the 1928 shifted their support to Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932.

¹⁰⁵ Campbell, "Party Systems and Realignment in the United States," 376.

¹⁰⁶ Sinclair, "Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda," 942.

¹⁰⁷ Hawley and Sagarzazu, "Where did the votes go?", 733-734.

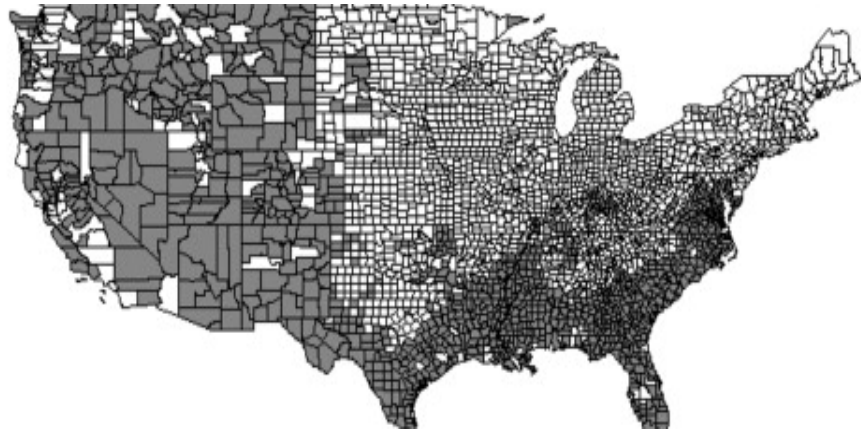


Figure 6: Transfer of votes at the presidential level from Republicans to Democrats, 1928-1932.

Map of the transfer of votes from Republicans to Democrats, 1928-1932. Counties shaded in dark gray are counties where over half of those who voted Republican in the presidential election of 1928 voted Democrat in the presidential election of 1932. This indicates a large shift in support towards the Democratic Party during the 1932 election (image from Hawley and Sagarzazu, “Where did the votes go?”, 734).

The political agenda in the United States changed dramatically as well, toward Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. First of all, there was a new huge emphasis on social welfare policy, a political issue that has its origins in the New Deal, with its first appearance at the 71st Congress in 1929-1930.¹⁰⁸ There was also a focus on regulation of big business and pivot towards small business and farming in order to address the issues that the majority agreed were the cause of the Depression. Agricultural policy also became a highly partisan issue at this time. Prior to the Depression, votes on agricultural policy had been based largely on geography, but Democrats united to provide relief for farmers who had not enjoyed the excesses of the 1920s and were in even more of an economic lurch once the Depression hit.

¹⁰⁸ Sinclair, “Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda,” 947.

There was obviously a large split during this time in supporters for each of the parties, and this split continues following this original 1928-1932 period. This transfer of votes, and represented visually in Figure 6, was sustained past the 1932 election into the following decades.¹⁰⁹ This change is also evidenced by the change in policy during the 1930s. The Democratic Party, which had been a “heavily rural party” following the 1896 realignment, became the “national party”¹¹⁰ with control over the national agenda in the New Deal era.

Populism and the 1932 Realignment

Populism influenced different aspects of the 1930s realignment in a number of ways. First of all, a fair amount of the Democratic support for or opposition to legislation during this time (late 1920s to mid-1930s) had strong influences from populism. For instance, Democrats upheld anti-trust laws, supported a graduated tax code, and worked to close loopholes in the corporate tax code in order to regulate big business.¹¹¹ Additionally, interestingly enough, the strongest support for populist issues in the 1930s came from the Democrats from the South and West,¹¹² the regions that gained the most support from the Republican Party for the Democrats during this election, as shown by the map in the previous section. This suggests that populist issues were the reason for so many people shifting from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party.

¹⁰⁹ Hawley and Sagarzazu, “Where did the votes go?” 734.

¹¹⁰ Sinclair, “Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda,” 942.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 943.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 945.

However, since the realignment during the 1930s started in the period of 1930-32, it is true that its start time makes it too early for Huey Long and his populists to have catalyzed it. On the other hand, a significantly important aspect of realignments is that they must be sustained. The Democrats' turn towards populism after the 1932 election with the second, economic-based part of the New Deal in 1935-36 helped to solidify the realignment that had already begun. This economic-based New Deal legislation was created in order to help mollify those who were dissatisfied with the current state of the American economy, namely the populists who threatened to remove Roosevelt from office, either directly by voting in a new politician such as Long, or indirectly by voting for Long and diverting enough votes away from Roosevelt for a Republican to win office and effectively end the realignment that had begun in 1932.

Roosevelt and the Democrats feared that Long would run on a third-party ticket in the 1936 election, which prompted them to take on the problem of wealth inequality (albeit, in a less extreme way than Long) in the Second New Deal.¹¹³ Without adopting these ideas, Long very well could have received a few million votes from populist voters in the 1936 election (assuming he had not been assassinated), splitting the ticket and effectively giving the election to the Republicans. It is true that Long was assassinated and therefore never ended up being a serious threat to Roosevelt and the Democrats as a third-party spoiler in the 1936 election, but there is little to no way that Roosevelt and the Democrats could have known that Long would die before the election. Therefore, they took the necessary precautions to make sure that Long could not spoil the election. Therefore, it is highly possible that the legislation put forth by the

¹¹³ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 31.

second New Deal was put forth as a way to spoil Huey Long's bid and subsequently steal away the populist voters who flocked towards Long's economic ideas. In fact, Roosevelt reportedly said to one of his advisors that the second New Deal was devised to "steal Long's thunder."¹¹⁴ Amenta, Bernstein, and Dunleavy express doubt over whether or not the second New Deal truly was motivated by Long's potentiality as a challenger or spoiler in the 1936 election,¹¹⁵ but, nonetheless, the populist interests (with or without the leadership of Long) proved strong enough to warrant a whole new set of economic-based legislation from Roosevelt and the Democrats.

Roosevelt's turn towards economic-based programs in the second New Deal as well as the Democrats' decision to take on wealth inequality further changed the platform of the Democratic Party past the 1932 election and helped to solidify the realignment that occurred during it. Without pivoting toward the needs of the populists (Long's followers or otherwise), the Democrats risked losing the ground that they had gained in the previous half decade against the Republicans. This could have meant by way of a third-party victory by Huey Long (highly doubtful but not impossible), Long as a spoiler (much more likely), or Republicans picking up the slack that Democrats could not shoulder. No matter which (if any) of these scenarios would have been most plausible, the Democrats took into account the voices of the populists, met their demands, and solidified their control of the American political system for another three decades.

¹¹⁴ Amenta, Bernstein, and Dunleavy, "Stolen thunder?", 678.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 679.

Case Study III: 1960s/1970s--George Wallace, the American Independent Party, and the 1968 Realignment

A Brief History of the 1960s

The 1960s was a period of discontent for a large portion of the American public. A wide segment of the population labeled middle class no longer felt stable in what had been long-considered a stable position in society. Not only that, but they felt as though those in positions of power did not understand their plight, and instead favored the very groups they viewed as putting their way of life at risk.

Two decades of relative prosperity had not wiped away the economic and cultural insecurities that had fueled mass movements during the Depression. Millions of whites had benefited from union strength in and federal largesse to the defense, education, transportation, and construction industries. But now many felt their good jobs, their modest homes, and their personal safety were now under siege both from liberal authorities above and angry minorities below. No one in power, it seemed, realized that *they* were the real, the indispensable America.¹¹⁶

Much like the farmers of the Populist era, or the unemployed during the Depression, many middle class Americans saw the government as an ineffective, ignorant machine that ignored the wants and needs of the “people.” In the case of the Populists, the “people” consisted of farmers and farm laborers; the Depression-era “people” were the unemployed; meanwhile, the “people” in the 1960s consisted of predominantly white, middle-class Americans. In each case, these groups saw themselves as the backbone of the country, an essential part of the United States that was being treated as second-class to other groups.

¹¹⁶ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 223.

This working class group of Americans had long been represented by the Democratic Party. The average member of the Democratic Party was the “embodiment of the horny-handed producer, the AFL’s average man, the CIO’s citizen proletarian”¹¹⁷; Democrats were the champions of the New Deal, unions, and the general interests of the working class man for decades. However, as the country progressed into the 1960s, the Democratic Party was pulled further left by “New Leftists” concerned with issues of race, poverty, and the Vietnam War, just to name a few.¹¹⁸ Because of this, these working class Americans felt neglected by their party in favor of causes that they did not necessarily support. As a result of this feeling of neglect, many working class Americans went searching for representation outside of the party that they had been a part of for decades, and for a politician that understood their plight. They found what they were looking for in Alabaman politician George Wallace.

The Rise of Populism: George Wallace, the American Independent Party, and the MARs

George Wallace was the figurehead of the populist movement of the 1960s. Wallace was born into poverty in Alabama in 1919, poverty which was exacerbated when the Depression hit when he was ten years old. Wallace had his eye on politics early on, and, despite his family’s economic situation and his father’s deteriorating health, he put himself through two years of prelaw and three years of law school at the University of Alabama while working two jobs and participating in college-level boxing.¹¹⁹ He later joined the Army as a pilot for the United States in World War II, where he was honorably discharged at the end of the war with several medals to show

¹¹⁷ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 224.

¹¹⁸ Kazin *The Populist Persuasion*, 224.

¹¹⁹ Stephan Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998): 37-38.

for his service.¹²⁰ When he returned home at the end of the war, he decided to open up his own law practice in his hometown in order to give himself the proper time and leeway to pursue his political career,¹²¹ despite the fact that he and his wife, Lurleen, made barely enough money to support themselves. He was determined to become a politician, and was willing to go to such lengths in order to achieve this goal. Wallace climbed the Alabama political ladder, serving as a member of the Alabama House of Representatives, a judge, and finally as Alabama's governor starting in 1962.

Wallace ran for president three times, first on the Democratic ticket in 1964 in which he lost the primary to Lyndon B. Johnson, then on a third party ticket for the American Independent Party in 1968, and finally on the Democratic ticket again in 1972 in which he lost the primary to George McGovern. In the first two campaigns, he focused heavily on wooing white Southerners "by linking desegregation to governmental authoritarianism,"¹²² effectively making the issue of desegregation appear as a states' rights issues rather than an issue of race.¹²³ His anti-establishment (especially anti-national government) message presented the people's struggle in terms of freedom and democracy rather than race,¹²⁴ which made it possible for white

¹²⁰ Ibid., 61.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Joseph Lowndes, "From Founding Violence to Political Hegemony: The Conservative Populism of George Wallace," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005): 153.

¹²³ Wallace ended up toning down his segregationist rhetoric during his third campaign to make himself seem more centrist and therefore more electable. From this point on, he did not openly support segregation.

¹²⁴ Historically, however, Wallace is remembered for his extreme racial prejudices in his political stances, particularly his strong support of segregation. He is perhaps best known for his 1963 gubernatorial inaugural address in which he stated that he stood for "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

Northerners who did not necessarily support the idea of segregation to sympathize with white Southerners who did and therefore support him.¹²⁵

Wallace's supporters hailed from both the traditional left and right, substantially pulling support from both the Republican and Democratic parties.¹²⁶ Wallace's stances represented beliefs all across the political spectrum, from economic libertarianism to states' rights, confusing where he (and his supporters) fell on the political spectrum. His ideology, much like his supporters, pulled from both the left and the right: "[H]e was in some ways more New Deal Democrat than right-wing Republican."¹²⁷ Wallace's populist message resonated with populations that did not feel as though their interests were being represented on the national stage at the two-party level, which is a large reason why his supporters came from all across the political spectrum: his ideas were not represented in the already-existing parties. He was perhaps at his most popular and his populist message the strongest during his 1968 run, as his nontraditional beliefs (in that they did not align well with either the stances of the Democratic or Republican parties) were best served in a third-party run.

A large and crucially important part of George Wallace's voter base was made up of the group of the disaffected middle-class Americans described earlier. Social scientists have given this group, which Kazin refers to as the "upset and forgotten,"¹²⁸ many names with slightly different definitions over the years, including the "silent majority" and the "hardhats."¹²⁹ However, the term that perhaps covers this group most

¹²⁵ Lowndes, "From Founding Violence to Political Hegemony," 155.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹²⁸ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 222.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

accurately was coined in 1976 by sociologist Donald Warren: the “MARs”, short for “Middle American Radicals.” This group was made up of voters who did not necessarily subscribe to the traditional political party distinctions of the time;¹³⁰ rather, they identified with certain positions that do not correspond specifically with the ideals of the left or the right.¹³¹ Although MARs are loosely defined by their status as middle class,¹³² they are more accurately identified by their shared resentment of and contempt for the political establishment, and in particular their feeling that the middle class “average” citizen is given far fewer advantages than lower class and affluent citizens. In effect, the MAR ideology “seems to embody a distinct orientation of multiple threats of being caught in the middle between those whose wealth gives them access to power and those whose militant organization in the face of deprivation gains special treatment from the government.”¹³³ The MARs’ complaints about and dissatisfactions with government at all levels are perhaps best summed up in these two figures of information collected by Warren in his research of the group:

¹³⁰ The beliefs of the MARs may not have corresponded perfectly with the ideals of one party over another, but MARs still did generally identify themselves with parties at roughly the same rates as the general population. Warren shows this in a chart of political leanings of MARs compared with the general population: roughly 48% of MARs indicated that they were Democrats or Democrat-leaning; 26% were Republican or Republican-leaning; and 26% were independent (compared with 50%, 26%, and 24% for others) (Warren 155).

¹³¹ Warren, *The Radical Center*, 1.

¹³² At this time, this was a person with education reaching a high school diploma, a median income between \$6,000-\$15,000 annually, and usually in sales/clerical work or skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled labor (Warren 12).

¹³³ Warren, *The Radical Center*, 14.

DISSATISFACTIONS WITH LOCAL INSTITUTIONS: GOVERNMENT					
	<i>Low Income</i>	<i>Average MARs</i>	<i>High Educa- tion Middles</i>	<i>Middles Affluents</i>	
Treat People Differently	41%	65%	45%	43%	41%
No Clear-Cut Policies	32%	52%	32%	28%	19%
Don't Pay Attention	35%	51%	32%	28%	19%
Interfered With	27%	35	29%	28%	24%
Too Much Power	23%	33%	18%	14%	10%
Don't Treat People With Respect	15%	31%+	16%	21%	10%
Too Big	14%	26%	15%	13%	12%
Not Doing a Good Job	19%	39%	22%	28%	22%

Figure 7: MAR complaints about local government.

This image compiled by Warren shows how the attitudes of MARs towards local government differ from those of their counterparts of other groups. In general, they show a greater contempt for local government than those of these other groups (image from Warren, *The Radical Center*, 41).

COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT (PERCENT INDICATING EACH CRITICISM)					
	<i>Low Income</i>	<i>Average MARs</i>	<i>High Educa- tion Middles</i>	<i>Middles Affluents</i>	
Treat People Differently	54%	81%	60%	60%	67%
Don't Pay Attention	62%	78%	60%	55%	53%
No Clear-Cut Policies	50%	75%	56%	60%	66%
Too Big	58%	74%+	61%	75%	78%
Too Much Power	40%	62%	51%	58%	58%
Interfered With	39%	53%	46%	38%	41%
Don't Show Respect	19%	38%	22%	20%	22%
Not Doing A Good Job	35%	58%	41%	42%	49%

Figure 8: MAR complaints about national government.

Much like Figure 7, this shows MARs' contempt for government, this time at the national level (Image from Warren, *The Radical Center*, 75).

As shown by these two figures, in general, the MARs are more likely to have complaints about government at the local and national level than other groups, with some minor exceptions.¹³⁴ Perhaps most significantly, MARs are much more likely to think that the government treats people differently (20% more than the next closest group at the local level, and 14% more than the next closest group at the national level). These statistics match up with Warren's identification of the MARs as a group with much resentment for the political establishment and its unequal treatment of citizens, particularly treatment that disadvantages the MARs.

In the 1972 election, 20% of MARs said that they supported Wallace, making them his strongest support group.¹³⁵ Even though in both the 1968 and 1972 elections MARs showed support in larger numbers for Nixon than for Wallace (51% vs. 21% in 1968, and 31% vs. 20% in 1972), MARs still overwhelmingly made up the largest bloc within Wallace's supporters. That being said, Warren found that Wallace supporters who technically did not meet the requirements to be classified as MARs shared many of the same values as the MARs, including resentment of government and the feeling that it gives out far too many benefits to groups that do not deserve them.¹³⁶ The MARs (and supporters with similar values), with their resentment of government and strong belief in the people, effectively places them strongly within the category of populist, which helps to explain their strong support of Wallace.

¹³⁴ Each statistic with a box around it is considered statistically significant in comparison with the results collected for the other groups. For example, 81% of MARs responded that the national government treats groups of people differently, while 67% of affluents, the next closest group, say the same. This is considered statistically significant, and therefore has a box around it. On the other hand, while 62% of MARs say that the national government has too much power, 58% of educated middles and 58% of affluents say the same. This is not statistically significant, and therefore does not have a box around it.

¹³⁵ Warren, *The Radical Center*, 151.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

At the time that *The Radical Center* was published in 1976, Warren made a prediction that the MARs would be the group that candidates for office would need to court in the upcoming years in order to win elections:

In essence, we might well argue that it is not the “silent majority” that is to be wooed in 1976 or 1980 but rather the 1 in 4 Americans that we have indicated from our analysis who hold a distinct ideology and perspective about American society [MARs]. It is from this group that we may anticipate a fundamental struggle in terms of allegiance in future elections. It is not only a question of whether this group identifies itself with the traditional right or the traditional left, but rather whether candidates come to the fore who seem to represent a rejection of both these traditional political alternatives or extremes.¹³⁷

With this statement, Warren predicted that the MARs, in subsequent years, would have beliefs and the numbers necessary to create substantial change in the existing party system. Warren’s prediction was spot-on, and ultimately this “fundamental struggle in terms of allegiance” that Warren identifies, in which the parties must work to earn the MAR’s support, is what led to the 1968 realignment.

The 1968 Realignment

Unlike the previous two realignments, the period of 1968-1972 is much contested amongst political scientists as a candidate for a critical election and electoral realignment. Paulson makes a convincing argument for the occurrence of realignment during the period of 1968-1972. He argues in favor of this classification for three main reasons: 1) Many states that were solidly Democratic before 1968 (i.e. the South) became solidly Republican and many states that were solidly Republican before 1968 (i.e. the Northeast) became solidly Democratic; 2) even though the Republican Party did not come to dominate the party system at all levels following the elections of 1968 and

¹³⁷ Ibid., 156.

1972,¹³⁸ there was a significant reorientation of policy during this time towards a streak of conservatism, the reverse of much of the New Deal policy following the 1932 realignment; and 3) the change in allegiance to parties and direction of policy persisted and deepened in the following decades.¹³⁹ All three of these points address the conditions necessary for identifying an electoral realignment, as discussed in the section on realignment; points one and three address the need for new (1) and durable (3) shift in party support, while point two addresses the need for a shift in the political agenda. Therefore, these three points place the 1968-1972 electoral period squarely within the realm of an electoral realignment.

However, assuming that Paulson is correct and realignment took place between 1964 and 1972, which election during this period would be considered the “critical” election? Campbell argues that there was a “staggered realignment” beginning in the late 1960s; in effect, he argues that the realignment is spread across the 1968 and 1972 elections, with 1968 serving as the critical election and 1972 serving as a “deviating” election in which Republicans experienced a surge in support that did not ultimately sustain long-term, although a less extreme level of support for Republicans that began in 1968 did.¹⁴⁰ He reaches this conclusion through statistical analysis of the 1964, 1968, and 1972 elections, where he found not only that there is statistical evidence of a change in party system in 1964-1972 from the New Deal system, but also the strongest statistical evidence supported that 1968 was the realigning election, rather than 1964 or

¹³⁸ However, as mentioned in the introduction, Paulson argues that the realignment that took place during this period was a “critical realignment at the top, secular realignment at the bottom” in that there was a realignment at the presidential level in 1968 that took longer to spread to local offices through the next two and a half decades. He gives this as the reason for why the Republicans did not dominate local offices alongside the presidency.

¹³⁹ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 22-24.

¹⁴⁰ Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignments in the United States,” 377.

1972.¹⁴¹ This effectively statistically supports Paulson’s claim that a realignment occurred during this period.

In a similar vein as Campbell,¹⁴² Paulson argues for three different classifications of the presidential elections in 1964-1972—the first election, 1964, was what he calls a “converting election” where the national coalition was greatly altered even though the Democrats still won national office; the 1968 was the critical election, where the new coalition took hold and Republicans earned a popular plurality (not a majority, due at least in part to George Wallace’s supporters pulling support from the two major parties) and an electoral majority; and the 1972 election, which Paulson deemed as a presidential landslide for the Republicans.¹⁴³ Ultimately, using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the election of 1968 in which George Wallace’s populist rhetoric connected with so many voters was the election in which another electoral realignment took place.

Populism and the 1968 Realignment

Not only did an electoral realignment take place during the late 1960s, but George Wallace’s populist stances and the populist needs of his supporters and other disaffected voters (MARs and otherwise) greatly shaped this realignment and the subsequent orientation and policies of the parties. Wallace’s stances prior to 1968 did not perfectly fit with the ideals of either the Democratic or Republican parties. Much like with the People’s Party of the 1890s, George Wallace and his American

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 378.

¹⁴² Here, Campbell and Paulson have different approaches even though they reach virtually the same conclusion. Campbell uses a quantitative approach through analysis of statistics, while Paulson uses a qualitative approach, looking at the general picture of the state of the nation and the results of the elections on a whole. Ultimately, they reach virtually the same conclusion through different methods.

¹⁴³ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 47.

Independent Party were so popular because Wallace's ideals and stances resonated with voters. This was because he understood their frustrations with the current party system and sought to represent them in ways that the entrenched Democratic and Republican parties would not. Lowndes states that Wallace "[cut] new cleavages across the electorate" while "dissolving old political bonds and forging new ones."¹⁴⁴ Although I agree with the second statement, instead of saying that Wallace cut new cleavages, I would argue that Wallace simply brought to light the severity of the cleavages that already existed within the populace. He was the mouthpiece rather than the catalyst; he put words to what this bloc of people was feeling and created stances around those ideas. These new cleavages led to a need for a change in the orientation and priorities of the decades-old political order.

By the time that Wallace ran again in 1972, the Democratic and Republican parties were significantly different than they were in 1968, as they incorporated many of his ideas in order to court his supporters. For instance, during this time, primaries became a much more important part of the nominating process,¹⁴⁵ effectively shifting the presidential nomination process largely out of the hands of the party elite and into the hands of the people. Additionally, the country's political agenda did an about-face, pivoting away from New Deal towards a conservative agenda (even though Republicans did not take back both the House and Senate until 1994).¹⁴⁶

As a result of the major shift in policy and stances of the Democratic and Republican parties, there was a change in popular support that significantly altered the

¹⁴⁴ Lowndes, "From Founding Violence to Political Hegemony," 145.

¹⁴⁵ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 163.

¹⁴⁶ Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, 54.

voter bases for each party. In terms of voting trends, Campbell identifies 1968 as the “onset of the post-New Deal system” in which the national voting trend swung heavily towards support for Republicans, flipping from a three-and-a-half decade record of nearly all Democrats in the White House. All statistical analysis of the period beginning in 1968 shows that Republicans had taken control of national political office.¹⁴⁷

However, perhaps the most important part of this coalition change is the resulting bases for each party. Prior to the 1968 realignment, the Democratic Party had long been portrayed as the party of the “common man”, but many low- and middle-class white voters shifted to the Republican Party, while working professionals, long-time Republicans, shifted to the Democratic Party.¹⁴⁸ This is because the Republican saw an opportunity to gain a large swath of supporters in the millions of white working class Americans (the MARS), a staple of the Democratic Party since the New Deal, who were dissatisfied with the new liberal policies of the Democratic Party. They felt neglected by their party, and were willing to change allegiance for whoever was willing to represent them.

They originally found this representation in George Wallace, but after his failed presidential run in 1968, the Republican Party swooped in and successfully linked the anti-state policies at the center of the party to the everyday concerns of the working class American in order to court their vote.¹⁴⁹ Because of this transition from George

¹⁴⁷ Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignment in the United States,” 378.

¹⁴⁸ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 37.

¹⁴⁹ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 224.

Wallace to the Republican Party, Judis claims that Wallace's campaigns were the "opening wedge" in the realignment of the parties during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵⁰

Much like the cases of the Populists in the 1890s and Huey Long in the 1930s, many party members were worried that George Wallace's showing in 1968 as a third-party candidate would result in the spoiler effect. Wallace did not have enough widespread support to win the election, but he could ultimately affect the election's outcome by drawing enough support away from one of the major parties.¹⁵¹ Seeing the sentiment of millions of MARs and other angry, resentful Americans who voted for Wallace, the parties jumped to action to court these voters away from third-party candidates such as Wallace and to their own party, with Republicans as the "victors":

Though he never got close to winning the White House, Wallace ensured that the 1960s would be a decisive era for the Right. While the New Left soared and then crashed to earth, conservatives were appealing to the resentment of neglect and betrayal by the elite that had deep roots among white Americans. Both Right and Left drew inspiration from the mass outrage against powerful liberals and the system they governed. But only the Right learned how to express that anger in populist ways that gained a respectful hearing among a majority of voters.¹⁵²

Much like Warren predicted, the existing parties jumped at the chance to appeal to those currently outside the two-party system, particularly the populists who voted for Wallace. As Kazin states above, the Republican Party was the party that was able to effectively garner the support of Wallace's populists. Because of this shift in allegiance on the part of the populists, the Republican Party earned the votes of a majority of Americans, and came to dominate the national political agenda for decades to come.

¹⁵⁰ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 36.

¹⁵¹ Kazin 238.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 225.

Conclusion

Populism has long been an important feature of the American political system. From small populist nods such as the Constitution's phrase "We the People" to larger populist movements such as the People's Party and the Populists that movement on a whole was named after, the United States' reputation as the birthplace of populism precedes it. Such populist movements, especially ones that result in large-scale third-party movements, have the profound ability to alter the United States political system as we know it, as evidenced from the three cases studies discussed previously.

The People's Party strongly influenced the political direction of the late 1800s. Although the party ultimately faded into obscurity in the early 1900s, they were able to get a populist nominated as the presidential candidate for a major political party. They were also able to turn the political conversation to issues that were important to them (such as the issue of the gold vs. silver standard) and effectively rearrange the political party system for the coming three decades. Even though the political system favored the Republicans rather than the Democrats, the issues that were important to the Populists (the gold standard, labor regulation, immigration, etc.) became hotly debated issues in the political arena for years to come.

Huey Long, though he came to prominence after the 1932 party realignment had already begun, drew enough populist support away from Roosevelt and the Democrats that the Democratic Party took action to address the populist demands of Long's supporters in order to mitigate the chance that he would be successful on a third-party run in 1936. This populist turn, therefore, solidified the realignment that had begun in 1932. Without this pivot, the Democrats very well may have lost their influence and

subsequently their control over the political system. Instead, they strengthened their control and set the course for a political system that would endure for another thirty years.

George Wallace sensed a vein of populist discontent amongst the average working-class American, and brought the issues most important to them to the forefront of late 1960s politics. Although Wallace never garnered enough support to mount a successful third-party campaign in the 1968 election, the surprisingly large amount of support he did receive indicated a discrepancy of representation in the entrenched two-party system, and caused the Democratic and Republican parties to jump at the opportunity to court these voters. The Republican Party succeeded in grabbing the majority of Wallace voters, causing the types of supporters for each party to shift, giving Republicans the upper hand to push a conservative agenda for at least the next few decades.¹⁵³

It is clear that populism is an indicator of a wider sense of discontent amongst the American populace with the current political system. Often times, populist attitudes result from the feeling that politicians and political parties are not addressing the issues that are important to them, or they feel as though the party platforms do not truly capture their political opinions that pull from different parts of the political spectrum. Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner call this position “ideological heterogeneity,” and identify it as an important aspect of the populist attitude.¹⁵⁴ In large numbers, this heterogeneity indicates a larger discrepancy with representation in the existing party system. If the two parties do not act quickly enough to address these issues, then

¹⁵³ It is unclear whether or not we are still in this cycle of party alignment; only time will tell.

¹⁵⁴ Carmines et al., “Ideological Heterogeneity and the Rise of Donald Trump,” 386.

populists may very well feel alienated by the “entrenched” parties and seek representation outside of the two-party system through avenues such as the People’s Party or the American Independent Party. This is often times a wake-up call for the already-existing parties, who must then appeal to these voters in order to gain (or keep) control of the political order. In order to do that, the parties must shift focus and address issues that are important to these voters, effectively reorienting the party system, eventually leading to party realignment. In summary, large-scale populism is an indicator of impending party realignment.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the most recent presidential election brought with it two candidates tapped into the strong populist current running through the American populace. There has not been a third-party populist run thus far in this current period of populism, but the surge in populism in the United States in recent years echoes that of early years of the People’s Party, Huey Long’s national success, and George Wallace’s appeals to the MARS. It is yet to be seen whether or not populist demands have been or will be met by Donald Trump, but if they are not met by either of the current entrenched parties, history shows that there is a good chance that the United States could be looking at another major reorientation of the party system. But, much like any other party realignment, only time will tell.

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