

The Ideological Foundation of the People's Party of Texas

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Short lived insurgent third parties are a common feature in American political history, though few were as impactful as the nineteenth century People's Party.¹ Although the People's Party itself faded out of existence after a few decades, the Republican and Democratic Parties eventually adopted much of their platform.² In recent history Ross Perot and Donald Trump's appeals to economic nationalism is reminiscent of the old Populist platform. Since its inception, the ideological foundation of the People's Party has remained a point of contention among historians. Traditional historiography on the People's Party, which included figures such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Richard Hofstadter, described it as a conservative movement rooted in agrarian Jacksonianism. In 1931 John Hicks' *The Populist Revolt* presented the new perspective that the People's Party, far from being conservative, was the precursor to the twentieth century Progressive movement. For the purpose of this study I focused exclusively on the ideological foundation of the People's Party as it existed within the state of Texas.

The study focused exclusively on the People's Party within Texas for two reasons. The first reason is because the People's Party organized itself on a statewide basis. The nationwide People's Party operated as a confederation, each state party had its own independent structure and organizational history, therefore each state party itself must be studied independently.³ The second reason is because one of the People's Party's immediate predecessors, the Southern Farmers' Alliance, had its roots in Texas.⁴ If one is attempting to study the origins of the People's Party, then one must examine it where its roots are oldest.

¹Howard P. Nash, *Third Parties in American Politics* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1959), v.

²Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), viii.

³Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 12.

⁴Donna A Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and the People's Party of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 3.

This study examined the history of the Texas People's Party, and its relationship with the wider nationwide one. The research focused on the circumstances leading to the rise of the Party, as well as its rapid decline after the 1896 Presidential election. There was significant continuity between the various third parties active in nineteenth century Texas, and the relationship between them is crucial to understanding Texan Populism.⁵ Therefore in order to conduct an effective study of the Texas People's Party one must not only study the history of the Party itself, but also the various organizations which preceded it. These included the Texas Farmers' Alliance, the Greenback Party, the Union Labor Party, and the Knights of Labor. I examined the history of these organizations, their relationship to each other, and towards their counterparts in other states. I also studied the relationship between Populism, Progressivism, and Socialism in Texas and how this affected the Texas People's Party itself.

The primary sources for this study were contemporary news articles, relevant contemporary publications, the minutes and platforms of state conventions, and Presidential election results in Texas from 1880-1912. The study utilized contemporary articles from both pro-Populist and anti-Populist publications, in order to maintain objectivity. This included both Texan newspapers reporting on local events, as well as larger nationwide newspapers.

Throughout the history of Texan Populism several significant trends are apparent. Working class organizations in Texas were nearly always more conservative than their nationwide counterparts. Organizations such as the Knights of Labor and the Farmers' Alliance in Texas were highly conservative in comparison to their northern counterparts, and never openly challenged the foundations of southern society. The early Socialist movement was highly

⁵Robert B. Mitchell, *Skirmisher*, The Life, Times, and Political Career of James B. Weaver (Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2008), 3.

influential in the development of Populism throughout the West, yet was nearly entirely absent from Texas.⁶ This lack of ideological diversity in Texas forced Texan Populists to conform to the more conservative atmosphere of the state.

In addition many leaders of the Texas People's Party openly associated with conservatism. Populist organizations in Texas advocated for reform, but not for progressive reasons. They typically claimed that their reforms were necessary to prevent radical changes in society, and based their ideological vision on a highly idealized past.⁷

The People's Party of Texas was a fundamentally conservative movement, and was decidedly not a precursor to the Progressive movement. In many states across the West and Midwest there was significant interaction between Populism, Progressivism, and Socialism.⁸ In those states the three movements influenced each other in many significant ways. There is however, no evidence for this in Texas. There was little electoral correlation between Populism and Progressivism within the state of Texas, and the Socialist movement did not spread into Texas until well after the high point of Populism.⁹

While Texan Populism was rooted in conservatism, this is not necessarily true for the entire nationwide party. Similar studies may be conducted in the future on the People's Party in various other states across the South and West, which may yield radically different results. The

⁶Social Democratic State Convention, 1900 from Ernest William Winkler, *Platforms of Texas Political parties* (La Crosse, WI: Brookhaven Press, 2001), 418.; George Harmon Knoles, *The Presidential Campaign and Election of 1892* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 14.

⁷*Austin Daily Statesman*, July 5, 1892; *Dallas Morning News*, January 18, 1891 from Alicia Esther Rodriguez, "Urban Populism: Challenges to Democratic Party Control in Dallas, Texas: 1887-1900." PhD diss., (Santa Barbara: University of California Santa Barbara, 1998), 98-99.

⁸*The McKinney Democrat*, September 28, 1893; Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 2.

⁹Social Democratic State Convention, 1900 from Winkler, *Platforms of Texas Political parties*, 418.

heterogeneous nature of the People's Party makes this necessary, and further study conducted in this manner will provide tremendous insight into the history of American Populism.

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