

Lecture 2.3: Gilded Age Politics, 1877-1900

- Period at end of reconstruction (1876 election) to 1900

Third Party System, 1856 (77) – 1900:

- Gilded age considered era of third party system
- 1856 → republican party shows up in elections (on ballots) → official start
- Complication here: civil war means that this party system has one very specific focus: slavery and the war itself
 - Now, afterwards, there is a shift towards characterizing gilded age
- Democrats vs Republicans
- After end of reconstruction, there are coalitions that are making up these parties
 - Republicans
 - Businessmen
 - Shop owners
 - Skilled labor
 - Professionals
 - Black voters
 - Democrats
 - Unskilled labor
 - Disaffected farmers
 - Catholic immigrants
 - Southern conservative businessmen
 - Southern “redeemers” (people who want to keep slavery)
- Not a distinct class line that make up these two parties
- Interesting: after reconstruction, both parties have almost identical platforms
 - Modernization + industrialization → same platform
 - No clear line between the two
 - Only exceptions (differences in the parties) are race and monetary policy
 - Tariffs and gold standard

Third Party System trends:

- Because the two parties are so similar, there is huge amount of voter turnout (79%)
- High voter engagement → people want to listen to political rallies, speeches, parades, newspapers, etc
- Narrow national elections → super super close elections
 - 3 elections won by <1% of popular vote
 - 2 elections (including 1876 election) : winner lost the popular vote
- Era of forgettable presidents
 - Nobody remembers these guys
 - Serve more as party functionaries
 - Like rubber stamp presidents, who will just check all the boxes and do what the party wants
 - If elections are so close, presidents can't take a lot of risks

Greenback Party (1878):

- Sometimes we have a third party
- Two major parties → one of them is a greenback party
- Single issue 3rd party
 - They have only one agenda → paper currency
- Before the civil war, paper money is produced on “gold standard”
 - Every bill is represented by a real pile of gold somewhere
 - Cannot print that money, if you don’t have gold that represents that amount
- During the civil war: union printed 450 million dollars to pay for expenses without gold backing it to help fund the army
 - Technically “cheaper” money, good emergency solution
- But then, things like Panic of 1873:
 - People who are struggling (small farmers, debtors) want that money in circulation, easier for them to pay off their debts
 - They get together to form the greenback party with agenda to not return to the gold standard
 - Just want easier paper money supply
- Very short lived, because second that depression ends, people say hey you don’t need that money anymore and the party dies out
- But it does start the gold standard debate → do we have to have gold backing all of our bills?

Election of 1880:

- After election of 1876, Hayes had agreed not to run for reelection
- Republicans nominate James A Garfield, 1881
 - Won by less than 10k votes (less than 1%)
- Garfield is assassinated, march-sept. 1881
 - Disgruntled person killed him
 - Could have survived but got bad care
- VP Chester A. Arthur becomes president, fills out rest of the term, 1881-85
 - He doesn’t run for reelection

Election of 1884:

- Arthur doesn’t run
- First democrat since civil war, Grover Cleveland, 1885-1889
- Mostly because republicans can’t get their act together

Election of 1888:

- Republican president Benjamin Harrison (grandson of WHH)
- Lost the popular vote by 100k votes
- 1889-1893

Populist Party:

- Another 3rd party
- Also called the people’s party
- Root cause:

- People are moving to cities
- Small farmers are having a hard time
 - Increased costs, lots of debt, low prices for their crops
 - Having to sell out to bigger corporate farms
- Couple of attempts prior to fix this: self-help organizations such as Grange and Farmer's Alliance
 - Trying to get politicians in power who will be sympathetic to their concerns
 - One success that comes out of this: interstate commerce commission, 1887
 - point is to regulate trade between states
 - As Railroads were charging crazy amounts to ship crops
- 1891 → self help orgs to populist party
 - Freer money supply
 - Lower tariffs, less taxes on imports, and no gold standard
 - Not super different from greenback party
- One exception of the populist party → women have big leadership roles in these parties
- Fairly successful, but by 1886 their ideas are co-opted by Democrats
 - Democrats take their platforms, then populist party voters shifted to voting for democrats
- Trend in US as a whole—Most of the time when 3rd party comes into the US, a major party will come in and take that platform to take that power

Election of 1892:

- Populists get solid amount of votes (not a lot, but they do)
- Cleveland gets elected again, beats Benjamin Harrison
- Only non-consecutive president, second term was 1893-1897
- Only democrat elected during gilded age

Election of 1896:

- Populists are off the field
- William Bryant (D) coopts populist platform but loses to Republican president William McKinley, 1897-1901

Election of 1900:

- McKinley is reelected
- In 1901 he's assassinated
- Makes way for Roosevelt, who marks a shift out of the Gilded age to the Progressive Era
- Roosevelt not gilded age president
- Republicans tend to win presidency