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