

Populist Party Platform 1892

The Populist (or People's) Party platform in 1892 incorporated a host of popular reform ideas, including the following:

- **Australian (or Secret) Ballot.** Voting was still conducted publicly in many areas, potentially subjecting voters to pressure or recrimination by employers and landlords. (This proposal was adopted almost everywhere in the United States in the early 20th century.)
- **Popular Election of U.S. Senators.** As provided in the Constitution (Article I, Section 3), senators were selected by the state legislatures, not by popular vote. It was believed that business lobbies exerted inordinate influence over the selection of these officials. (This plank would become part of the Constitution in 1913 when Amendment XVII was ratified.)
- **Direct Democracy.** The Populists urged the adoption of the initiative, referendum and recall as means to give the people a more direct voice in government. (Some or all of these procedures became part of the constitutions of many states during the early 20th century.)
- **Banking Reform.** The Populists believed that much of their economic hardship had been caused by bankers' unfair practices. They proposed to end the national banking system, a point of view not widely held. (The Populists failed with this proposal and a Federal Reserve System was established by law in 1913.)
- **Government Ownership** of the Railroads. Anger against the railroads for alleged price discrimination was so intense that the Populists advocated for federal appropriation. (Opponents charged the Populists with socialism and little public support existed for this plank. However, during the Theodore Roosevelt administration, steps were taken toward reform of the railroads.)
- **Graduated Income Tax.** The Populists viewed the graduated income tax as a means to pry loose a portion of the tremendous wealth of the nation's most prosperous citizens. A "graduated" tax meant that the rate of taxation would increase as one's income increased. (A step was made in this direction in the Wilson-Gorman Tariff of 1894 when a uniform tax was imposed, but that portion of the law was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court the following year. Authority to impose such taxation was granted to Congress under Amendment XVI in 1913.)
- **Free and Unlimited Coinage of Silver.** The Populists in 1892 raised the silver issue, but not with the same fervor that would emerge four years later. (The free silver crusade would die a natural death in the years following 1896 as prosperity returned and the world's gold supply increased.)