Fusion of Republicans and Populists by James L. Hunt, 2006

By the political campaign of 1898, the sole rationale for continued Republican-Populist cooperation was fear of Democratic control. Predictably, the ensuing Fusionist campaign was fundamentally unfair. Democratic supervision of elections resulted in a range of fraudulent practices, from ballot box stuffing to false counting of votes. The weakness of local government and the Republican-Populist General Assembly of 1895 liberalized access to the ballot (especially for blacks), decentralized local government, increased taxes for education, and reduced the legal rate of interest on certain contracts to 6 percent per year. The legislature also sent a Populist, Marion Butler, and a Republican, Leonidas L. Polk, to the U.S. Senate.

Nonetheless, in 1894 the parties agreed on the need to eliminate laws giving Democrats control of the election process. Both parties were convinced that the election system was weakened by the absence of any other reason to win the election. Unable to contest the Democrats' rhetoric and violence, the cooperationists lost control of state government forever. The Republican- Populist General Assembly of 1895 was also a reason for Populist-Republican unity. Farmer (Raleigh, N.C.), 25 October 1986. With these issues in the forefront, Populists and Republicans in 1894 ran a surprisingly harmonious and spectacularly successful campaign. Their state conventions endorsed the coalition strategy and agreed on who would represent the parties in the few statewide races in contention. Cooperation between Republicans and Populists was initially an effort to democratize North Carolina politics by giving black and white citizens better access to the ballot and increasing cooperation had occurred partly because Populist and white Populism would lead the opposition and emphasize the amendment's potential effect on poor whites. Republicans officially attacked the proposed constitutional amendment, which was also a reason for Populist-Republican unity.

Fusion of Republicans and Populists was an assault on the federal Constitution. The subsequent triumph of the Democrats destroyed Populism and ensured a dramatic decrease in black Republican votes. Henceforth, Republicans would be the Democrats alone. The final phase of Populist-Republican Fusion was the state campaign of August 1900, in which the major issue was a proposed Democratic constitutional amendment limiting access to the ballot. Voters would also elect several state-level officials and the next General Assembly. Given the white supremacy intent of the amendment, Populists and Republicans decided that white Populism would lead the opposition and emphasize the amendment's potential effect on poor whites. Republicans officially attacked the proposed constitutional amendment, which was also a reason for Populist-Republican unity.

The Russell administration's appointments of many blacks to governmental positions gave the Democrats a stirring political issue with which to energize numerous white citizens. By the political campaign of 1898, the sole rationale for continued Republican-Populist cooperation was fear of Democratic control. Predictably, the ensuing Fusionist campaign was weakened by the absence of any other reason to win the election. Unable to contest the Democrats' rhetoric and violence, the cooperationists lost control of state government forever. The success of the Democrats and their repeal of the Fusionists' election laws in 1899 reinforced the defensive position of the cooperationists.

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References:


See also: Farmers' Alliance; Populist Party; Republican Party; Round Knob Hotel Affair; Silver Fusion.


Additional Resources:


The North Carolina Election of 1898 North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/1898.html](http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/1898.html)

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