

Independent Black Voices from the Late 19th Century: Black Populists and the Struggle Against the Southern Democracy

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Salvation rests in neither of the old political parties...

Virginia Colored Farmers Alliance Richmond *Dispatch*, August 11, 1891

Fueled by religious and secular conviction, grounded by political reality, and limited by grinding poverty, African Americans in the 1880s would not allow Democratic Party rule to go unchallenged following the collapse of Reconstruction. Between 1886 and 1898 southern African Americans most of whom had been born into slavery, gained their freedom, but were being stripped of their newfound rights as citizens organized an independent movement for economic and political reform: Black Populism. Black farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian laborers collectively produced a new generation of leaders. Together they carried out a range of tactics through grassroots organizations formed out of the networks established by the churches and benevolent associations at the heart of the African American community. At its height, the independent movement comprised over one million men and women through its two principal organizations, the Colored Farmers Alliance and the People's Party, giving mass political expression to the demands of ordinary African Americans across the southern political landscape.

As Black Populism asserted itself locally and emerged as a regional force by the mid-1880s, it met fierce resistance from the Southern Democracy (the "Redeemers") the white planter and business elite that, through the Democratic Party and its network of courts, militias, sheriffs, and newspapers, maintained tight control of the region. Despite such opposition, African Americans led a complex of activities: establishing farming exchanges and economic cooperatives; raising money for schools; publishing newspapers; lobbying for better legislation; mounting boycotts against agricultural trusts and business monopolies; carrying out strikes for better wages; protesting the convict-lease system, segregated coach boxes, and lynching; calling for Black jurors in cases involving Black defendants; demanding political reforms; and running independent and fusion campaigns.¹

Black Populism took shape through the development of several agrarian organizations in the South the Colored Agricultural Wheels, the Knights of Labor, the Cooperative Workers of America, and the Farmers Union whose respective and sometimes overlapping membership were largely consolidated into the region-wide Colored Farmers Alliance. The focus of these early groups was on relief through collectivizing resources, and collective bargaining through boycotts and strikes. Blocked in their attempts to make changes, African Americans began applying political pressure on existing candidates; by 1892 they established a series of state based independent parties with white independents, forming the national People's Party.²

The Southern Democracy reacted with a vengeance to the growth of the independent movement, and in particular to what they dubbed the "Negro Party." The Democratic Party would have causes for alarm: the People's (Populist) Party presidential candidate James B. Weaver received over one million votes in 1892 (approximately nine percent of the vote), winning 22 electoral votes (albeit, mostly in the West); in North Carolina, a Populist-Republican alliance took over the state legislature in 1894; Populists and their allies sat in

Congress, governor's offices, and held dozens of local offices over the next two years; and scores of Black and white People's Party chapters had been established across the region.³ Not since the advent of the Republican Party the other "Negro Party" had a third party grown so rapidly and posed such a threat to the established political order.

By the late 1890s, under relentless attack physical violence, intimidation at the polls, propaganda campaigns warning of a "second Reconstruction," and targeted assassinations of independent leaders and foot soldiers Black Populism was crushed. Although it had been destroyed, marking the end of organized political resistance to the Southern Democracy in the late 19th century, the movement nevertheless stood as the largest independent political uprising of African Americans in the South until the modern civil rights movement.

From the Colored Farmers Alliance to the People's Party

By 1890 African Americans affiliated with the Colored Alliance began favoring an independent electoral strategy that could open up the political process in order to make policy changes. They started lobbying elected officials in the late 1880s in 1890 the Colored Alliance unanimously supported federal supervision of elections (the Lodge Bill, named after its Congressional sponsor, Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts) but their efforts had virtually no impact. James H. Powell, an officer of the Mississippi Colored Alliance, added his voice to the growing chorus of criticism against elected officials. In a letter to the *National Economist*, Powell wrote scathingly: "Down with our own old politicians ... send new men. It is the aim of every colored farmer of Mississippi to send men to our national legislature who will represent the farmer." He challenged Black farmers and sharecroppers to look elsewhere: "We know that the men who have been sent there before will not do ... if we depend upon our present members [of Congress] to do anything, we are deluded."⁴

Over the next year, Colored Alliance leaders such as Powell would shepherd Black Populism from its focus on agrarian reforms and lobbying of the "old politicians" towards an independent electoral strategy. Among the most prominent leaders in this shift were the Rev. Walter Pattillo, North Carolina's dynamic grassroots organizer, and Virginia's William Warwick, accused of "introducing politics" and "getting his nefarious work [into] the secret conclave."⁵ (The Colored Alliance, like other Black Populist vehicles, was forced to do much of its organizing underground for fear of economic reprisals against its members). Pattillo and Warwick were joined by other African Americans who saw the now enfeebled southern branch of the Republican Party as still a viable vehicle to build the independent movement in places where it exerted local organizational strength. George W. Murray, a Colored Alliance lecturer and organizer from South Carolina, known as "The Black Eagle of Sumpter," would be elected to Congress in 1893 through the Republican Party.⁶ Using the Republican Party alone, however and as Murray experienced first-hand in his fight against Black disfranchisement in South Carolina was not enough to challenge the stranglehold the Democrats held over the electoral process. A broader alliance was needed.

As early as 1890, the idea of uniting Black and white voters into a new party while working with the Republicans through fusion (where two parties field a shared slate of candidates) to challenge the Democrats had gained considerable support among African Americans. In August of that year, Joseph J. Rogers, a Colored Alliance superintendent, reported that the Colored Alliance in South Carolina, comprising 40,000 African Americans, was prepared to vote *en masse* for candidates mutually agreed upon with white Populists; in December, the white General Superintendent of the Colored Alliance, Richard M. Humphrey (the organization's key propagandist between 1886 and 1891), announced: "[From] the inception of the Alliance movement among Negroes they have been in favor of a new political party."⁷ Most African Americans nevertheless remained reluctant to leave the Republican Party; some supported Democrats.

Although few in number, there were African Americans who willingly voted and even ran as Democrats in return for patronage. In Alabama Black Republicans, for instance, endorsed Democrat William Oates for Governor over the Populist candidate Reuben Kolb in 1893. In response to the "negro democrat," the *Atlanta People's Party Paper* wrote:

The negro democrat is a source of inspiration and joy to all who know him. He holds an office. Of course he does that's what he came for. The purpose of [his] life is to get a higher and better one The negro democrat cares nothing about the poor and the oppressed of his race. Having sold out his own color in order to get a democratic office, nothing better could be expected of him. He treats the black laborer precisely as the white office-holder treats the white producer with gushing fondness during the campaign and with contemptuous indifference after the election.⁸

Between 1890 and 1892 a series of meetings were held in which Black and white southerners coming out of the Alliances, and other agrarian, reform, and labor groups (including the northern-established Knights of Labor, which *de facto* became a Black organization as it spread into the South), wrangled over whether or not to form a third party. The case for doing so was most strongly made by African Americans who also insisted on their respectful treatment by white delegates especially those of the mostly antagonistic white Southern Farmers Alliance. (Many of the members of the Southern Alliance were the landlords of rank and file members of the Colored Alliance. The tactical differences between the two organizations was most clearly evident in the latter's strong opposition to the Colored Alliance's Cotton Pickers Strike in the fall of 1891.)

During the St. Louis convention of February 22, 1892 Colored Alliance delegates protested their "shoddy treatment" by white participants in the main hall. Rising from his seat "in a dignified but extremely earnest manner," William Warwick of the Virginia Colored Alliance "firmly demanded" that no discriminatory practices against Black delegates be tolerated nor permitted to disrupt the process of forming a national third party. No sooner did he take his seat than a sympathetic white delegate from Georgia at the rear of the convention nominated him for the position of assistant secretary. Another white delegate, this time from Alabama, moved that the "colored gentleman" be unanimously elected. When the motion was put to the floor, only a single objection was heard in defiance of the "several hundred" voices filling the hall with a resounding "aye" for Warwick's election.⁹

At the end of the St. Louis meeting a call was put forth for a convention to be held in Omaha, Nebraska on July 4, 1892 to nominate the party's presidential candidate.¹⁰ Among those whose names appeared on the call to convention were Warwick and L. D. Laurent. Warwick went on to urge the party's national committee that a newspaper edited by African Americans be created to help organize Black voters; Laurent, a Colored Alliance delegate from Louisiana, had represented his state at the Conference of Industrial Organizations in Washington in 1891, which brought together other reform groups, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union.¹¹ Over 1,400 Black and white delegates met in Omaha, where a national committee reported that upwards of 400,000 African Americans had joined the People's Party.¹² Another Black delegate, known only as "Brown," would march in the procession during the convention's Independence Day celebration. As part of the celebration, Brown stood on the main stage with his white counterparts holding an American flag on a cane. Together, newspapers reported, they formed "[an] apex at the center of the stage," demonstrating (in much the same way that Black Populist E. C. Cabel had done on the main stage at the earlier St. Louis conference) the presence of African Americans in the front ranks of the party.¹³

Delegates nominated James B. Weaver for president and ratified a platform calling for a comprehensive and radical set of demands: government ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and steamships, a progressive income tax, the direct election of U.S. Senators, an eight-hour workday, an expansion of paper currency, and a subtreasury loan program (in which farmers would be paid in "greenbacks" by the government for crops that were stored) most of which were enacted as national policies within a generation.¹⁴ More radical still than the planks set forth, however, was the coming into existence of an electoral vehicle a potentially powerful political tool to break up the Democratic Party's monopoly in the South.

The rise of the People's Party through a cadre of dedicated field organizers who galvanized the Black community to political action, posed an immediate threat to the Southern Democracy. Kansas led the way by establishing the first People's Party. Launched under the banner of the Alliance Party in June of 1890, it was soon renamed the Kansas People's Party with the Rev. Benjamin F. Foster, a Black minister and educator,

running for state auditor on its ticket.¹⁵ A string of other People's parties were subsequently formed with African Americans in leadership positions. In August of 1891 Texans formed a People's Party with two African Americans the Rev. Henry J. Jennings and R. H. Hayes serving on its state executive committee.¹⁶ Louisiana independents, where a People's Party was formed in October of 1891, nominated C. A. Roachborough as state treasurer; and in December of 1891 Georgians established their People's Party, through which the Rev. Henry S. Doyle grew to prominence.¹⁷

On August 11, 1892 the Dallas *Southern Mercury* published a lead article by the Black Populist P. K. Chase, entitled "The Colored Man and Politics," in which he made the case for Black independence through the People's Party:¹⁸

I have said before and say now, that there is not enough political independence among colored voters. The fact that a man is colored should not be self-evident that he belongs to any particular party. As a rule the colored people are Republican, the results of which were perfectly natural. But more than a quarter of a century has thrown around him the light of intelligence ... the two old parties have not kept pace with the great demands of the common people.... Now in my view of the above facts ... *the one and only advantageous political course of the Negro, under present existing affairs, is to support the People's Party ...*¹⁹ [emphasis added]

Texas

Black and white independents in Texas, where the Colored Alliance had been founded in 1886, would hold their first statewide People's Party convention in Dallas on August 17, 1891. One of two African Americans nominated to the party's executive committee, the Rev. Henry J. Jennings, helped to launch what became the state's "colored clubs."²⁰ Between July and August of 1892 the 71-year-old Jennings, a veteran of Black struggles going back to the antebellum era, spoke at independent political rallies in no fewer than 14 different counties.²¹ Reports from the People's Party's state convention the following year conveyed widespread support among Black farmers and sharecroppers, in large measure because of the efforts of Jennings and other grassroots organizers. Delegates from southern Texas boasted: "colored people are coming into the new party in squads and companies," underscoring how "colored third party speakers are organizing colored clubs."²²

Perhaps the most skilled Black Populist in Texas certainly the best known was John B. Rayner, hailed as the "silver-tongued orator of the colored race."²³ Born into slavery like almost all other southern African Americans of the era, he attained an unusually high level of education at colleges in North Carolina before moving to Texas. Rayner used his oratory during the mid-1890s to expand the People's Party among African Americans. He reportedly directed a "corps of colored assistants" up and down Texas who, in turn, recruited others.²⁴ When People's Party delegates gathered in convention Rayner was enthusiastically elected a member at large of the state's executive committee and as a member of its platform committee. Most impressively, in the face of Democratic *and* Republican opposition, Rayner was personally credited with organizing over 25,000 African Americans into "colored Populist clubs."

The "Colored clubs" organized by Rayner, Jennings, and other African Americans served as important venues for political education and leadership training. As William Teague, a Black independent from Tilton, noted in the *People's Party Paper*, a large chapter had been formed in his county in which rural African Americans were studying and "investigating subjects related to politics."²⁵ Gatherings of the kind were essential to the movement's growth, and translated into electoral success. While in 1892 the People's Party won only eight out of 128 seats in the state legislature, by 1894 the independents nearly tripled their representation.²⁶ Such advances, however, fell short of winning enough seats to pass statewide political reforms in the way that independents had been able to do in North Carolina.²⁷

North Carolina

The North Carolina People's Party, formed in Raleigh in August of 1892, was said to be “about equally composed of Republican whites . . . negroes and disappointed Democrats.”²⁸ Propelling the party were the 45,000 members of the state's Colored Alliance, which, like its organizational equivalents in other areas of the South, created an independent base from which to recruit and train new activists. North Carolina's leading Colored Alliance organizer, the Rev. Walter A. Pattillo was among the first to call for the formation of a national independent party. Following his lead locally, Black and white independents launched a People's Party which soon affiliated with others to form the national party.

A particular event in North Carolina's capital captured the spirit of independence sweeping the state. On the afternoon of September 29, 1892 the People's Party organized a show of strength in Raleigh, bringing out hundreds of African Americans onto the streets in open defiance of the Democratic Party.²⁹ Cheered by large crowds lined along the main dirt road leading to the city's Brookside Park, the independent party's presidential candidate, James B. Weaver, rode slowly and confidently, flanked by some 350 men on horseback, 50 of whom were Black.³⁰ The African Americans who paraded with Weaver were not only welcoming the presidential candidate to the city, but were reflecting the growth of independent black politics in the region.³¹

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Hundreds of African American men, women, and children joined the parade to Brookside Park, and applauded Weaver elsewhere in the state.³² “[The] procession yesterday was a motley crowd,” reported the *Raleigh News and Observer*. “[B]y actual count 175 men and boys and negroes [were] on horse and mule-back,” noted the newspaper. “There were probably 500 negroes present. Taking it all together, we conclude that 1,500 would cover the number of Third party people present.”³³ In the days following the parade, newspapers wrote about the enthusiasm among African Americans for Populist candidates. “[N]egro marshals filed by,” wrote one reporter. “Hurrah for Weaver,' shouted a big buck Negro as he cast a significant smile at T. R. Purnell, the Radical candidate for Attorney General.”³⁴

While the majority of African Americans in North Carolina, as elsewhere, continued to vote Republican in 1892 (but often splitting their ticket below the office of president), a clear defection to the People's Party was recorded in the press, individual memoirs, and the legal testimonies of those who had been prohibited from voting.³⁵ The rampant fraud of the election that year, however, makes it difficult to determine the actual size of the defection. Democrats openly stole votes, stuffed ballot boxes, and intimidated voters, further corrupting an already undemocratic political environment in which laws were designed to keep African Americans from voting.³⁶ In 1892, despite the array of political and legal obstacles set up by the Democratic Party, the People's Party received over 17 percent of the statewide vote (approximately 47,000 votes) and elected 11 members to North Carolina's legislature.³⁷

Within two years African Americans had become a critical part of a fusion strategy in North Carolina by virtue of their large numbers in the state's Republican Party: fully two-thirds of all Republicans in the state were Black.³⁸ But Black Populists were forced to contend with hostile African American leadership in the Republican Party almost exclusively members of a small urban elite who opposed fusion in 1894. Their hostility was framed in ideological terms, focused on party platform differences.³⁹ As one Republican leader declared, “Expediency is the only bond of union [between the Populists and Republicans]. I have tried to reconcile it . . . I can't do it. Being, as I am, Republican to the core, I can't be a Populist even skin deep.”⁴⁰

Such a perspective was in marked contrast to the posture taken by Black Populists. The fusionists held no common ideology but instead focused on the potential for structural political reforms in making a competitive bid against the Democrats.⁴¹ The call for reform would, in fact, unite a disparate group of “pro-tariff piedmont industrialists, merchants, businessmen, small farmers, and African American laborers.”⁴² Here was an opportunity to leverage power well beyond what the Black community could wield on its own. Black independents moved quickly to seize the unusual moment bringing seemingly antagonistic forces together in opposition to the Democrats, while many Black Republican leaders remained scornful.⁴³

Democrats lashed out in reaction to the independent Black-white alliance. During the election in Anson County, North Carolina African Americans who tried to vote for the People's Party risked being beaten, or even killed. Congressional testimony by Lewis N. Jones, a 42-year-old member of the Anson County Colored Alliance who worked in a mill grinding corn, suggests the kinds of dangers he and others faced. After Jones openly declared his support for the People's Party, he was brutally attacked by a local white merchant. After striking Jones in broad daylight, his Democratic assailant pulled out his gun and shot him in the leg. Jones later testified in court about the kinds of verbal abuses and physical assaults African Americans such as himself endured during the election.⁴⁴

Despite the attacks on Black Populists during the 1894 election, independent mobilization led to a stunning political victory. A spate of political reforms followed, not seen since the days of Reconstruction. People's Party candidates won control of both North Carolina's state senate and, together with Republicans, a majority of its assembly. Three Populists, three Republicans, and one "Independent" won congressional seats, the latter with the coalition's support.⁴⁵ The Populist-Republican government revised and simplified election laws, making it easier for African Americans to vote, and restored the popular election of state and county officials, dismantling the appointive system used by Democrats to keep Black candidates out of office.⁴⁶

Georgia

Although unsuccessful in actually taking over the reigns of government as had their North Carolina counterparts, independents in Georgia were just as engaged as a counter-force to the Democrats. The boldness of a young Black minister, the Rev. Henry S. Doyle, demonstrated the extent to which African Americans were willing to put themselves in danger to develop independent politics in the South. In 1892, Doyle delivered over 60 speeches in support of white Populist Tom Watson, who was running for Congress as an independent. Speaking to Black and white audiences during a violence-wracked campaign in which at least 15 African Americans were killed, Doyle was himself nearly lynched.⁴⁷ Threatened by a white mob of Democrats in the weeks before the election, 2,000 armed white Populists, summoned by Watson, converged to prevent the lynching of the Black minister, who actively continued to organize support for the People's Party among African Americans.

Black Populists such as Doyle not only campaigned for white Populist candidates, but were active in leadership positions. In May of 1894, two dozen African American delegates representing 11 counties attended the Georgia People's Party state convention; Black Populist E. V. White was elected to the party's executive committee. White introduced an important resolution asserting that it was "the right of every man, without regard to his race or color, who has qualified under the law to vote, to cast his vote according to the dictates of his judgment, and that it shall be honestly counted when voted." The resolution passed successfully.⁴⁸

Black and white independents were now in tactical alliances across the region through state-based People's parties collectively deplored as the "Negro party" by the Democrats.⁴⁹ But while the Democrats employed the word "Negro" as a term of opprobrium, intended to remind white southerners of the "horrors" brought on by "Negro rule" during Reconstruction (a myth, since most office holders during Reconstruction were actually white), the enemies of the People's Party were acknowledging the role of Black Populists in what became the most significant third party in the nation since the rise of that other "Negro party" the Republican Party.⁵⁰ Towards this end, a correspondent for one of the South's leading Black newspapers, the *Georgia Baptist*, remarked: "To the colored man[,] the People's Party in Georgia is largely what the Republican Party was to him in this nation thirty years ago." The editorial added that the independent party had already begun to "[deliver] the colored voter in Georgia from political bondage."⁵¹

Contrasting the Democrats' practice of exclusive "white primaries," E. I. Taylor, a Black worker from Wadley, wrote that the People's Party had, in fact, "done more for [African Americans] than anybody else has done ... they have opened their primaries" a key structural political reform that the independents adopted for their party

in order to maximize participation (not close the process down to control nominees, as did the Democrats).⁵² Along the same line, the Rev. W. J. White, editor of the *Georgia Baptist* wrote during the summer of 1894:

Already the People's Party in Georgia has been a great benefit to the masses of the colored people. This party opened the way to the ballot box for the colored men of Georgia two years ago as it had never been opened before. In many counties colored men went to the ballot box and voted as they pleased ... the first time they had done so in twenty-five years.... It is to the political interest of the colored voter to cast his lot with any party that will recognize his political manhood. The democratic party [sic] of the South has never recognized the colored vote....⁵³

African Americans in Georgia were mobilized to vote for the People's Party through a combination of Populist county organizations divided into "militia districts," local chapters of the Colored Alliance, and Republican Party organizations.⁵⁴ Reports surfaced of "colored committees" organized by the Colored Alliance to mobilize support for the People's Party.⁵⁵ Following the election, in almost every county in which the People's Party won, African Americans were credited with providing the margin of victory: In Butts County "Negroes voted solidly for the populist candidate" in Pike County "Three-fifths of the third party vote [came from] Negroes ..." in Laurens County "the negroes ... secured a populist victory" and in Gwinnet County "Negroes ... held the balance of power and voted with the Populists."⁵⁶ That fall the *Atlanta Constitution* boldly announced: "The Negroes Voted Solidly with the Third Party."⁵⁷

The strong showing for the People's Party among African Americans led Democrats to intensify their manipulation of the electoral process. Fraud was so rampant in Tom Watson's congressional race in 1894, for instance, that his Democratic opponent, James C. C. Black, was eventually compelled to resign his seat and agree to a second election (albeit seven months later). In Richmond County, the Democratic candidate received 14,000 votes nearly 2,000 *more* votes than the *total* number of registered voters.⁵⁸ Such blatant acts of corruption, a pattern seen throughout the South, may be viewed as counter-measures to successful independent Black organizing.

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Over the next two years Black independents faced a barrage of attacks in response to their growing presence and influence in the electoral arena. Paramilitary violence combined with a region-wide propaganda campaign designed to divide Black and white independents were debilitating to the movement. Terrorism in the form of lynching (of which there were some 500 known cases of African Americans having been hung, mutilated, torched, or dragged to death during the mid-1890s) and the legal segregation and disfranchisement of African Americans through state constitutional amendments i.e., Jim Crow were responses by the Southern Democracy to the political challenges being made by African Americans. Adding to Democratic hysteria and political reaction was the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, legalizing the notion of "separate but equal" in public transportation, and a string of lower court rulings, effectively sanctioning the erosion of Black civil and political rights through state law. The increasingly reactionary climate was all too apparent during the 1896 national People's Party nominating convention, which saw the independent party's capitulation to the Democrats.

1896 Nominating Convention

By mid-morning of July 25 several hundred Black and white delegates, observers, and reporters from across the country had arrived in St. Louis, Missouri for the convention's proceedings.⁵⁹ Only four years earlier, Colored Alliance delegates had gathered in the same city with their white counterparts to establish the People's Party. Now, ironically, after helping to create the independent party to break the Democratic Party's monopoly in the South, Black delegates found themselves in St. Louis again, but this time trying to persuade the majority of white delegates from endorsing the Democrat's choice for president William Jennings Bryan. Bryan's impassioned advocacy for the unlimited coinage of silver, one among several Populist demands, led white

Populist leaders to see his candidacy as an opportunity to advance themselves.⁶⁰ African Americans, on the other hand, viewed the proposed endorsement of Bryan as nothing short of political suicide fatally compromising the very independence of the movement.⁶¹

Delegates bitterly debated the merits of nominating their own candidate versus endorsing Bryan. “The most eloquent speeches were those of whites and blacks explaining to the convention what the rule of Democrats meant in the South,” wrote Henry Demarest Lloyd, a reporter who had traveled from New York. “A delegate from Georgia, a coal black Negro, told how the People's Party alone gave full fellowship to his race when it had been abandoned by the Republicans and cheated and betrayed by the Democrats.”⁶² In the end, however, despite the objections made by Black delegates, the majority of the convention voted to nominate Bryan (who proceeded to lose the general election against Republican William McKinley). Abandoning its independence by fusing with the Democrats, the People's Party, and the broader independent movement from which it came, had lost its cutting edge. It had been one thing to fuse locally with the Republican Party, as it served the tactical interests of Black and white independents by bolstering support against the Democratic Party; it was quite another to fuse with the Democratic Party, the electoral arm of the Southern Democracy.

The fight over whether or not to employ fusion in the 1896 presidential election would underscore the divergence between Black and white Populists, making plain the political vulnerabilities of African Americans in the mid-1890s to their white counterparts, many of whom either returned to the Democratic Party fold as Populism collapsed or abandoned electoral politics altogether.⁶³ As the 19th century drew to a close, the Democratic Party regained full control of the South while the Republican Party held on to the federal government. Southern Black farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian laborers were financially in ruin. Mounting debt, low wages, and poor crop prices kept most African Americans (as well as millions of white southerners) in a state of chronic poverty (the price of cash crops such as cotton, slipped further still down to six cents per pound). Many African Americans simply opted to leave the region. Economic hardship, combined with political repression, would propel what became the Great Migration. Over the next generation, millions of Black men and women moved from the southern countryside to the region's cities, and from there, westward or to the North.

Collapse and Legacy of Black Populism

By the turn of the century, virtually every southern state legislature had amended its constitution to disfranchise African Americans. Literacy tests, poll taxes, white primaries, grandfather clauses, and other measures used to disqualify Black voters from participating in elections produced a dramatic fall in voter registration. Between 1896 and 1890 registration among African Americans in Louisiana, for instance, plummeted 96 percent from 130,344 to 5,320.⁶⁴ The “Mississippi plan” of amending state constitutions with the explicit purpose of disfranchising Black voters, which the state's Democratic legislature launched in 1890, was implemented in South Carolina in 1895, Louisiana in 1898, North Carolina in 1900, Virginia and Alabama in 1901, and in Georgia by 1907.⁶⁵ For all intents and purposes, the southern Black electorate had been eviscerated with the opening of the 20th century; the electoral arena all but closed to Black independents.

The brutal takeover by Democrats of the two remaining independent political strongholds in the South Wilmington, North Carolina (1898) and Grimes County, Texas (1901) signaled the end of Black Populism. In both places Black independents and their white allies were elected to office, and in both places African Americans were murdered as part of a campaign to terrorize them into submission as the Democrats reasserted their authority.⁶⁶ Rural African Americans in the South, however, continued to challenge the Democrats into the 20th century. The spread of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association beginning in the mid-1910s, and the combined efforts of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, the Louisiana Farmers' Union, and the Communist-led Alabama Sharecroppers' Union in the 1930s, being the most important examples of independent Black activism in the region following the demise of Black Populism.⁶⁷ It would take over half a century, and a new generation of Black independents in the form of the modern civil rights movement, for the edifice of Jim

Crow to be dismantled for voting rights to be restored and public facilities reintegrated, with the backing of the federal government.⁶⁸

Today, the struggle for Black independence has shifted to urban areas, where most African Americans have lived since the early 20th century. Principally under the leadership of Dr. Lenora Fulani, the first woman and the first African American presidential candidate ever to be on the ballot in all fifty states running as an independent, and the leading advocate for Black political independence in the United States, growing numbers of African Americans are once again challenging the Democratic Party (which, since the New Deal, followed by the modern civil rights movement, captured the loyalty of most African Americans).⁶⁹ While the Democratic Party has projected itself as the “party of the people” since the mid-1930s, it has largely abandoned poor and working people.

Presiding over chronic levels of poverty in inner cities across the nation, the Democratic Party has consistently failed to stand up to the most egregious Republican economic and political policies (whether in the area of domestic affairs or regarding foreign policy).⁷⁰ Moreover, and more perniciously, it remains (in collusion with the Republican Party) the principal force of opposition to independents as recently displayed by the Democrats' successful efforts to remove the independent presidential candidacy of Ralph Nader from the ballot in over one dozen states, in effect denying tens of millions of citizens the right to vote for the most progressive candidate with national stature during the 2004 general election.

With regard to Black farmers, their numbers (like those of small white farmers) have significantly declined since the early 20th century. Whereas there were approximately one million Black farming families in 1910, today there are less than 25,000 the result of agribusiness and bipartisan sanctioned discriminatory policy. In 1997, a class-action suit was filed by 94,000 petitioners against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for discriminatory lending practices towards Black farmers in particular.⁷¹ Incredibly, the farmers won their case. The incoming Republican administration in 2001, however, stopped compensation payments (with 86 percent being denied financial restitution). The case is now being litigated and a new campaign led by the National Black Farmers Association, under the leadership of Virginia tobacco farmer Dr. John Boyd, is calling for full compensation.

The social and economic damage to the life of rural Black communities may never be fully repaired or compensated. While voting rights have been guaranteed by the federal government since 1965, and despite the fact that thousands of African Americans now hold elected office (including some at the highest levels of government), and notwithstanding the growth of a visible Black middle class, most African Americans remain intractably poor and politically dependent on the Democratic Party.⁷² Quoted in the *Richmond Times* following the 2004 general election, Boyd commented: “The black vote is totally being taken for granted by the Democratic Party,” and noted the “shift” in political sentiment away from the Democrats.⁷³ According to the most recent statistics by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 25 percent of African Americans now identify themselves as politically independent up from 18 percent only a few years ago (with nearly 40% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 identifying as independent).⁷⁴

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The voices of Black Populists from the late 19th century continue to reverberate through the demands being made by Black independents in the early 21st century specifically, the demand for democracy and equal access to the electoral process. With the independent voter becoming a more visible feature of contemporary politics (especially since 1992, when 20 million people voted for the independent candidate Ross Perot, including several hundred thousand African Americans), politicians from the major parties have begun to see the practical value of working with independent leaders and parties (New York's Independence Party being the best example of this, regularly running independents, Democrats, and Republicans on its line). Leading and intersecting these trends, Black independents are building upon strategies and tactics that have translated into political power, namely fusion.

Fusion, a tactic stretching back to North Carolina between Populists and Republicans in 1894, has already elected pro-reform candidates in New York who have publicly championed structural political reform issues (including nonpartisan elections, initiative and referendum, and ballot access reform).⁷⁵ Just as importantly, fusion is allowing for new kinds of coalitions that challenge bipartisan politics. It may very well be the transitional electoral mechanism towards a more open political process. The building of third parties focused on political reform, creating independent associations, and bringing together gatherings of individual independents for leadership training state by state, undoubtedly complement fusion which remains prohibited in most states.⁷⁶

Whatever the future holds, Black independents today, like their counterparts in the late 19th century, are guided by a view of politics and political change that has become increasingly compelling to larger numbers of African Americans. As the Virginia Colored Farmers Alliance in 1891 put it so succinctly: "Salvation rests in neither of the old parties."⁷⁷

Notes

Notes

1. Black independents created economic exchanges in the ports of Norfolk, Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans, and Houston; their newspapers included the *National Alliance* in Texas, the *Midland Express* in Virginia, and the *Alliance Advocate* in North Carolina; notable strikes included the sugarcane workers strike of 1887 in Louisiana and the cotton pickers strike of 1891 in Arkansas; boycotts included the jute boycott from 1889 and 1891 in Georgia, and the general merchandise boycott in Mississippi in 1889; Omar H. Ali, "Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1898," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2003, see Chapter 2.
2. Although women comprised a quarter of the membership of the Colored Alliance in 1891 (some 300,000, out of 1.2 million members, according to figures supplied by the organization's General Superintendent) and many, like their male counterparts, also worked as farmers and agrarian laborers we know little about their leadership role in the movement. The careers and contributions of African American female organizers in the movement include Phoebe Cobb and Fanny "the queen" Glass of the Black Knights of Labor in North Carolina in 1889; there were all-female assemblies of the Knights of Labor in Virginia, Arkansas, and Florida. The best known Black Populist female was Lutie A. Lytle, who served as the assistant enrolling clerk of the People's Party in 1895. She would later hold the distinction of becoming the first woman to teach law at the university level in the South. See Richard M. Humphrey, "History of the Colored Farmers National Alliance and CoOperative Union," in *The Farmer's Alliance History and Agricultural Digest*, Nelson A. Dunning, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Alliance Publishing Co., 1891), 290; Robert C. McMath, Jr., "Southern White Farmers and the Organization of Black Farm Workers: A North Carolina Document," *Labor History*, 18 (Winter 1977), 118-119; Noreen R. Connolly's "Attorney Lutie A. Lytle: Options and Obstacles of a Legal Pioneer," *The Nebraska Lawyer* (January 1999), 9.
3. In 1892, Weaver received 1,027,329 popular votes. The People's Party gained notable support in areas of Louisiana and Virginia. The Party's gubernatorial candidates narrowly lost in Alabama and Texas, as well as Congressional seats in Georgia, including Tom Watson's; North Carolina elected 11 new independent representatives to the legislature; Joseph H. Gerteis, "Class and the Color Line: The Sources and Limits of Interracial Class Coalition, 1880-1896," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1999, 162.
4. William Gnatz, "The Negro and the Populist Movement in the South," M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1961, 113-114; *National Economist*, September 13, 1890.
5. William E. Spriggs, "The Virginia Colored Farmers Alliance: A Case Study of Race and Class Identity," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Summer 1979), 198.

6. William J. Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 1977), 258-269.
7. Lynchburg, *Daily Virginia*, August 21, 1890; Spriggs, 194; New York *Sun*, December 4, 1890, quoted in the *New York Age*, December 13, 1890. Humphrey reportedly also made a speech along these lines at the Colored Alliance meeting at Ocala in 1890; *National Economist*, December 27, 1890.
8. *People's Party Paper*, July 27, 1894; Gerteis, 185, 229.
9. *National Economist*, March 5, 1892; Gerald H. Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Revolt: Ballots and Bigotry in the "New South"* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 38, 40; Warwick's election as Assistant Secretary is detailed in the minutes taken at the St. Louis Convention of February 22, 1892, contained in the *National Economist*, March 5, 1892.
10. Jack Abramowitz, "The Negro in the Populist Movement," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1953), 263; *National Economist*, March 5, 1892.
11. *Virginia Sun*, July 13, 1892; Spriggs, 200.
12. *Topeka Call*, July 24, 1892; Abramowitz, 278; Gaither, 41-43.
13. *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 5, 1892; *Topeka Call*, July 24, 1892; Girard T. Bryant, "The Populist Movement and the Negro," M.A. thesis, University of Kansas, Lawrence, 1939, 66.
14. The 1892 Omaha platform foreshadowed amendments to the U.S. Constitution, as well as various pieces of local legislation and policies, enacted in the early 20th century. Regulatory measures against transportation monopolies (the Hepburn Act of 1906, for instance, gave the Interstate Commerce Commission greater power to regulate railroads, keeping costs down for small farmers who were trying to get their products to market), the 16th and 17th U.S. Constitutional Amendments (providing for the direct election of U.S. Senators and a progressive personal income tax, both in 1913), and federal subsidies for farmers (not until the 1930s through the Farm Securities Administration, and favoring more affluent and white farmers). The Farm Tenant Act of 1937 provided some loans to sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and agrarian laborers for purchasing land, supplies, livestock, and equipment, but largely hurt small farmers.
15. Gnatz, 29.
16. Ernest W. Winkler, ed., *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas*, No. 53, *Bulletin of the University of Texas*, 1916 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1916), 293, 297.
17. Gnatz, 29.
18. Bryant, 70; Abramowitz, 269.
19. *Southern Mercury*, August 11, 1892.
20. Abramowitz, 267.
21. *Southern Mercury*, June 30, 1892.
22. Quoted in Abramowitz, 267.

23. Gregg Cantrell's *Feeding the Wolf: John B. Rayner and the Politics of Race, 1850-1918* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2001).
24. Lawrence Rice, *The Negro in Texas: 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 79; Winkler, 332; Roscoe C. Martin, *The People's Party in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970; first published in 1933), 133; quoted in Abramowitz, 270.
25. Gnatz, 118; *People's Party Paper*, April 9, 1894.
26. The People's Party won 22 seats in the Texas legislature in 1894. Martin, 210-211; Abramowitz, 268.
27. Gaither, 121.
28. *Wilmington Star*, August 1892; Simeon A. Delap, "The Populist Party in North Carolina," *Trinity Archives*, 14 (1922), 51.
29. *Raleigh News and Observer*, September 30, 1892. Jack Abramowitz notes the scene in "The Negro in the Populist Movement," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (July 1953), 282.
30. *National Economist*, October 8, 1892. The *Raleigh News* reported on September 30, 1892 that Weaver was "escorted to Brookside Park by 300 white men and fifty negroes, all on horseback."
31. *Raleigh News and Observer*, September 30, 1892; *National Economist*, October 8, 1892.
32. Craig M. Thurtell, "The Fusion Insurgency in North Carolina: Origins to Ascendancy, 1876-1896," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1998, 146.
33. *Raleigh News and Observer*, September 30, 1892.
34. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1892.
35. *Contested Election Cases, Martin v. Lockhart* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 176-177.
36. Thurtell, 150-151.
37. William A. Mabry, *The Negro in North Carolina Politics Since Reconstruction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940), 35; Abramowitz, 282.
38. Thurtell, 46, 48.
39. Nationally, the Republican Party favored the gold standard, a protective tariff, pro-banking legislation, and other legislation partial to the business community. Civil and political legislation were increasingly sidelined at the national level, impacting on state parties and conservatizing African American leaders in the party. In contrast to the Republican Party platform, Populists demands included election reform, government ownership of railroads, telephone, and telegraph companies, the Alliance subtreasury program, and free and unlimited coinage of silver policies almost diametrically opposed to the principles of the Republican Party. Gaither, 90.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Gaither makes careful note that despite the lure of money or favors offered to African Americans to vote for Democratic candidates, "[black] voters still supported the Fusionists and their program in their eagerness to overturn somehow the seemingly irresistible Democratic hegemony"; *Ibid.*, 92-93.

42. Thurtell, 219.

43. The coalition is reminiscent of Black Abolitionists working in the unusual coalitions that culminated in the establishment of the Republican Party northern Whigs, Know Nothings, Barnburner Democrats, Free Soilers, and white Abolitionists. See Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

44. *Contested Election Cases, Martin v. Lockhart*, 176-177. See also James M. Beeby, "Equal Rights to All and Special Privileges to None': Grass-Roots Populism in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (April 2001): 156-186.

45. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 276-277; Thurtell, 213-214.

46. Gnatz, 43; The fusion coalition also reversed discriminatory "stock laws" (fencing off land) that made it harder for small farmers to compete against large landowners.

47. Black Populists helped Watson transform his image: "Watson's earlier anti-Black voting record in the Georgia Legislature brought him under fire from Black audiences when he ran for re-election to Congress in 1892 as a Populist. His attempts to explain his record were apparently met with skepticism, and his supporters were compelled to argue that Watson was ... a new man"; Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), 73. See also Charles Crowe, "Tom Watson, Populists, and Blacks Reconsidered," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 60 (April 1970), 99-116; Abramowitz, 1953, 275.

48. Gnatz, 77; *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1894.

49. The *Virginia Sun* on October 12, 1892, wrote, "It is time the Democrats ceased abusing the People's Party as a negro party." Historians have noted "... the efforts of the dominant party [i.e. Democratic Party] to portray the third party as the 'Negro party' ...," or as "the party of the Negro." See Abramowitz, 275, and Gaither, 84.

50. White Democrats began to panic even at the earliest stages of the People's Party's development. North Carolina's Democratic Governor, Zebulon Vance, wrote in 1890 "There is an uprising of the agricultural class ... which amounts to little short of a revolution." Vance to Elias Carr, July 1, 1890, *Elias Carr Papers*, East Carolina University Manuscript Collection, North Carolina.

51. *Georgia Baptist* quoted in *Progressive Farmer*, October 30, 1894.

52. Letter from H. I. Taylor, *People's Party Paper*, September 14, 1894.

53. *Ibid.*, June 22, August 31, 1894; Gnatz, 120.

54. *People's Party Paper*, February 16, 1894.

55. *Savannah Tribune*, August 25, September 1, 1894; *People's Party Paper*, May 11, 1894; Gnatz, 79.

56. *Atlanta Constitution*, October 4, 5, 1894; Abramowitz, 275-276.

57. *Atlanta Constitution*, October 5, 1894.

58. Gerteis, 232, 235.

59. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 295-296; Gerteis, 163.
60. The Omaha Platform of 1892 (building on the Cleburne Demands of 1886) had called for the direct election of U.S. Senators, an eight hour workday, a progressive personal income tax, a federal sub-treasury loan program, and government regulation of railroads, telegraph, and steamboats.
61. Abramowitz, 287.
62. Henry D. Lloyd, "The Populists at St. Louis," *Review of Reviews*, Vol. 14 (September 1896), 299-300; William L. Katz, *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1967), 319; Allen, 69.
63. In 1896, Tom Watson was successfully nominated by the People's Party for Vice-President over the Democratic nominee Arthur Sewall. Bryan would however ignore Watson's position on the ticket and never publicly accepted Watson as a running mate. Consequently, Watson's name did not even appear on the ballot in several places. Locally, the People's Party proceeded with fusion arrangements with Republicans. Gerteis, 163.
64. Daniel Brantley, "Blacks and Louisiana Constitutional Development, 1890-Present: A Study in Southern Political Thought and Race Relations," *Phylon*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1987): 58; Gaither, 117-118.
65. Bryant, 118; Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).
66. Ayers, 301-304; Lawrence Goodwyn, "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study," *American Historical Review*, 76 (December 1971), 1453-56.
67. Robin D.G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Winston James, "Being Red and Black in Jim Crow America: On the Ideology and Travails of Afro-America's Socialist Pioneers, 1877-1930," in Charles Payne and Adam Green, eds., *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 336-399; Greta d Jong, "'With the Aid of God and the F.S.A.' The Louisiana Farmers' Union and the African American Freedom Struggle in the New Deal Era," in *Time Longer Than Rope*, 230-275.
68. C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 149-188.
69. In 1988, Fulani was on the ballot in all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. She was also on the ballot in over forty states in 1992, running for president as an independent for a second time. Additionally, she became the second independent to receive federal matching funds. Hanes Walton, Jr., *Black Politics and Black Political Behavior* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994); Lenora B. Fulani, *The Making of a Fringe Candidate* (New York: Castillo International, 1992).
70. Relative to the total U.S. population, the Black community has markedly higher levels of infant mortality, disproportionately higher levels of incarceration, unemployment, and lower life expectancy rates. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 154-159; Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, rev. 1995).
71. Timothy Pigford, et. al., *Plaintiffs v. Dan Glickman, Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture, Defendant*, 185 F.R.D. 82, U.S. Dist. Lexis 5220 (U.S. District Court, D.C., April 14, 1999); See detailed report by Arianne Callender and Brendan DeMelle, "Obstruction of Justice: USDA Undermines Historic Civil Rights

Settlement with Black Farmers,” (Washington, D.C.: Environmental Working Group, 2004)
<<http://www.ewg.org/reports/blackfarmers/>> [Accessed Sun Dec 5 10:48:22 US/Central 2004]

72. In 1972, for example, there were 2,427 Black elected officials; in 1993 there were 8,106an increase of 334%. Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African-Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

73. Jamie C. Ruff, “Democrats faulted for weak rural showing,”
Richmond Times, November 8, 2004.

74. David A. Bositis, “Diverging Generations: The Transformation of African American Policy Views”
(Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2001)

75. Jacqueline Salit, “Unpopular Partnerships (Bloomberg's Dilemma),”
The Neo-Independent: The Politics of Becoming, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 18-19.

76. In 2003 a national organizing process called Choosing an Independent President, sponsored by the Committee for a Unified Independent Party, was launched to bring together independents from around the country to continue to build the political presence of independent voters. That process actively includes some three thousand individuals from several dozen organizations and state-based political parties, including the Alabama Independent Movement, the Massachusetts Coalition of Independent Voters, the California Coalition for Political Reform and the Committee for an Independent Voice, Independent Texans, the Independence Party of New York, the Green Party of Pennsylvania, and disaffected Democrats and Republicans across the country. See: <<http://www.cuip.org/chip/chip.html>> [Accessed Sun Dec 5 11:17:42 US/Central 2004]

77. Richmond *Dispatch*, August 11, 1891.