



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: A Natural Partnership: Nebraska's Populists and Democrats and the Development of Fusion

Full Citation: David Stephens Trask, "A Natural Partnership: Nebraska's Populists and Democrats and the Development of Fusion," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 418-438.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975Fusion.pdf>

Date: 2/10/2016

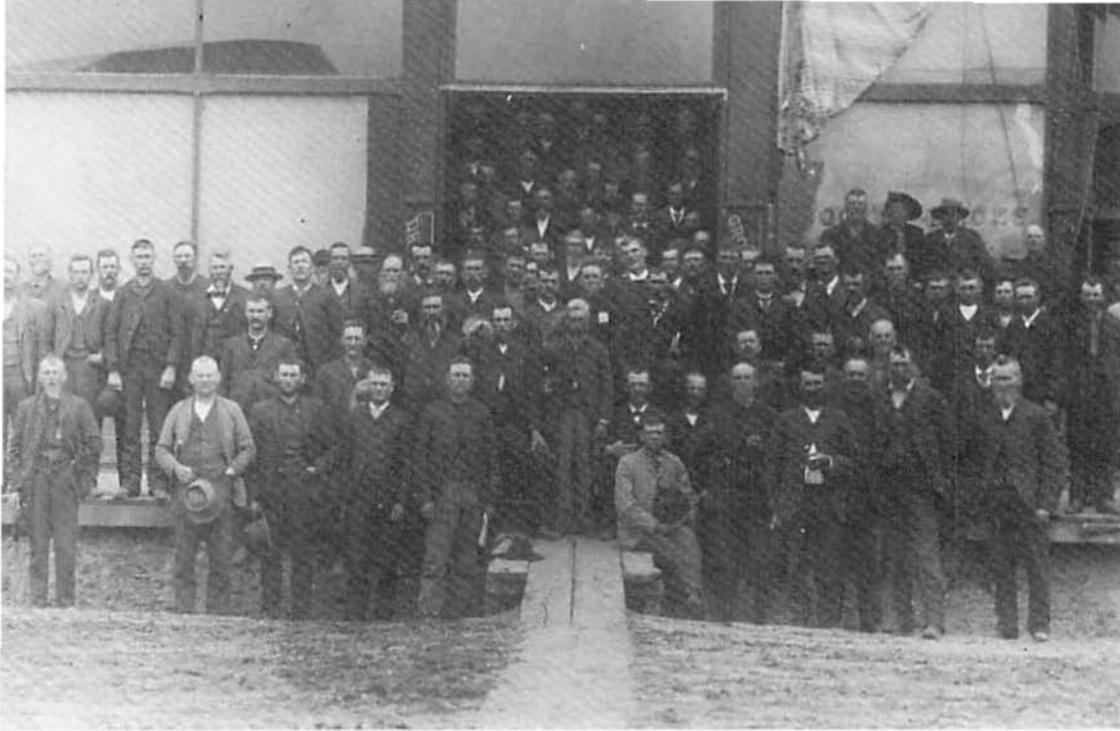
Article Summary: Nebraska's Populists and Democrats developed a close working relationship before the "critical" year of 1896. The state's Populist Party fed on the votes of disgruntled Democrats from the outset, due to the out of step state Democratic leadership which refused to recognize the emergence of new problems.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John H Powers, Addison E Sheldon, J Sterling Morton, Charles Van Wyck, Silas A Holcomb, Jay Burrows, William Jennings Bryan, William V Allen, Henry Teller

Keywords: People's Independent Party [Populist Party]; Farmers' Alliance; "People's Committee;" Free Silverites; the Bourbon Democrats; Democrats; anti-monopoly Republicans; "calamity howlers"; "gold bug" Democrats; Bryanites; the "Cleveland" depression; "paddle our own canoe"; "middle of the road"; Silver Republicans; Nebraska independents

Photographs / Images: the Populist Party district convention in Columbus, Nebraska, 1890; John H Powers, using a wheel hoe on his Trenton farm, 1916; portrait of Silas A Holcomb, Populist, elected governor of Nebraska on a Fusion ticket in 1894; portrait Charles Van Wyck, Democratic U S Senator 1881-1887, the unsuccessful Populist candidate for governor in 1892; J Sterling Morton, a Bourbon Democrat, with a grandson Wirt, son of Carl Morton



The Populist Party district convention met in Columbus, Nebraska, in 1890. . . . The candidate for governor was John H. Powers, shown below using a wheel hoe on his Trenton farm. The photo was made in 1916 when Addison E. Sheldon, later Nebraska State Historical director, made movies at the Powers place.



A NATURAL PARTNERSHIP: NEBRASKA'S POPULISTS AND DEMOCRATS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUSION

By **DAVID STEPHENS TRASK**

Historians have long been fascinated by the free silver issue. Presumably because of that issue the national Populist Party "fused" with or supported the Democratic Party and its presidential nominee in 1896.¹ The emphasis on the political developments of this election year has led scholars to minimize the development of Populism at the state level prior to 1896. This is unfortunate because the participants at the Populist national convention of that year were products of state and local political conditions and had already encountered if not adopted the tactic of fusion there. This prior experience was crucial in the individual decisions of delegates to fuse behind the Democrats and Bryan or to stick to "the middle of the road," the phrase used by fusion's opponents. In the South, for example, Populists were exceedingly reluctant to fuse in 1896 because of the bitter animosity which existed between themselves and the Democrats. At the same time the reason that non-Southern Populists accepted presidential fusion was the result of more salutary inter-party relations before 1896.² Viewed from this perspective, the "magnetism" of free silver becomes less important than local political conditions in delegate decisions to support Bryan through fusion. Nebraska in the 1890's is a case in point.

In brief, Nebraska's Populists and Democrats developed a close working relationship before the "critical" year of 1896. The state's Populist Party fed on the votes of disgruntled Democrats from the outset. The source of disenchantment was the out-of-step state Democratic leadership which refused to recognize the emergence of new problems and clung to moribund

issues. This situation prompted an exodus of rank-and-file Democrats to Populism while at the same time causing intra-party strife between existing and would-be leaders for control of the Democratic organization and its depleted following. The 1894 state convention resolved the leadership conflict by banishing the traditional state Democratic leaders from power. It then made good political sense to reunite ideologically like-minded Democrats whose basic disagreement had been the method of dealing with the unpopular but entrenched leadership. Further impetus toward fusion was provided by the inability of the Populists to gain control of all facets of state government at election time. For these reasons fusion in Nebraska was established in 1894 and was maintained in major state races thereafter. Consequently Populists and Democrats in Nebraska expressed little disagreement concerning the proper course of action once Bryan had been nominated by the Democrats.

In the 1880's Nebraskans were well acquainted with the basic goals of both of their major parties. The G.O.P. concentrated upon its self-proclaimed role as the state's economic developer.³ That party's leaders, drawn predominantly from small towns on the make, argued consistently that the boom-times of the 1880's as well as future prosperity depended upon the continued election of Republicans to state offices. The organization contained dissenters to this view — an "anti-monopolist" faction which was concerned with the harmful side effects of unregulated economic expansion — but they were an ineffective minority after the start of the decade. When Republicans considered social questions, they tended to favor prohibition regardless of economic conviction. The Democrats found this aspect of Republicanism most disturbing.

Throughout the 1880's the Democrats lead the opposition to prohibition as well as to women's suffrage.⁴ The latter appeared as a constitutional amendment (defeated) in 1882 while the former issue comprised a recurring theme in the decade. Many immigrant Democrats regarded these proposals as attempts to force minority groups to alter their traditional behavior patterns in order to conform to the cultural values of the dominant elements in society. They fought these attempts as infringements upon the personal liberty of Nebraskans. As long as the right of some voters to adhere to traditional practices, such as

the consumption of alcohol, was threatened, the Democrats could count on a strong though second place finish at the polls. Economic attitudes of Democrats ran the full gamut from *laissez-faire* to business regulation.

Because the primary concerns of the two parties did not overlap, there were no actual political debates at election time. Instead, leaders of each party reinforced the attitudes of their followers by reasserting their continued involvement in either economic development or personal liberty matters. The 1882 election offers a good example of this lack of dialogue.

The Nebraska Republican Party split into two factions which offered separate slates in the 1882 campaign. The wedge between the two wings was the question of the degree of domination exercised by railroad corporations over party decisions. The regular Republicans, who normally promoted railroad expansion as necessary to economic development, controlled the state convention and filled all nominations with their cohorts. Subsequently the minority anti-monopoly Republicans, those who asserted that their party was being run for the benefit of the railroads instead of for the people, selected their own, largely agrarian ticket for state offices.⁵

It seemed obvious that the time was right for the Democrats to capture the state offices for the first time ever, but that party, intent upon representing the interests of its constituency, did not attempt to exploit the Republican division. Instead, Democratic leaders focused their attention on the women's suffrage amendment to the state constitution which appeared on the ballot. In a typical expression of sentiment, the state's leading Democratic newspaper continued to stress the social differences of the two parties:

Presently it [the goal of the Republican Party] is prohibition which would invade your liberty and tell you what to drink and women's suffrage which would unsex your women and force them out of their God-given place in the home.⁶

Declining to capitalize on Republican infighting, the Democrats once again lost to the regular Republicans who also weathered the anti-monopoly revolt. Opportunity had knocked at the Democratic door and they had refused to answer. Phelps D. Sturdevant, the Democratic candidate for state treasurer who also carried the endorsement of the anti-monopolists, proved

the Democrats could have won with a change of tactics. He became the first Democrat to hold a state level office since statehood.⁷

The Democrats feebly attempted to utilize this knowledge in 1884. They fused with the weakening anti-monopolists (the lure of presidential patronage encouraged orthodoxy in G.O.P. ranks) behind their own candidate for governor, J. Sterling Morton. This "Bourbon"⁸ Democrat advocated personal liberty and *laissez-faire* economics. Morton wanted no government intervention in the economy although his political partners believed that government should regulate business. The improbable alliance was beaten by the Republicans, and anti-monopolism ceased to be an effective political force.⁹

The remainder of the 1880's saw a continuation of this dual conception of the important issues. The Democrats remained apprehensive over the constantly threatening specter of prohibition while the Republicans took credit for the statewide boom of the 1880's, the greatest in the state's history. This ritualized expression of the diverse nature of Nebraska's pressing political issues continued until the 1890 election.

Although the presence of a prohibition amendment on the ballot in 1890 gave the campaign a flavor of the contests of the past, the election began a decade in which agrarian issues played a primary rather than a secondary electoral role. The placing of the prohibitory amendment on the ballot and its subsequent defeat signalled the decline of personal liberty as an important issue among the voters. Thus the Democratic Party lost its *raison d'être*, and its Bourbon leaders no longer held unchallenged control of the organization. The new party, the People's Independent (called Populist from 1892 onward), displayed an appeal and a durability which was uncharacteristic of the earlier, episodic agrarian movements in Nebraska. This durability, not coincidentally, was established at the expense of the Democratic Party.

The People's Independent Party, which emerged as a potent force in Nebraska politics in 1890, was a coalition of several distinct factions. Leaders of the Farmers' Alliance as well as a remnant of anti-monopoly Republicans played key roles in creating the new organization; disaffected Democrats contributed significantly to the party's turnout in November. But of

the three groups, members of the Farmers' Alliance, a social, educational, and at first unwillingly, a political organization, dominated the leadership in 1890.

Following county level political experiments in 1889, members of the rapidly growing Farmers' Alliance launched the agrarian revolt the following spring. At first Alliance leaders hesitated creating a third party for fear that their system of county and local alliances would die. But at the same time these men did not wish to lose control of a membership which seemed increasingly intent upon going into politics. Finally, in May, 1890, a "People's Committee" circulated a petition to test the depth of sentiment in favor of an "independent" political organization. Farmers' Alliance leaders were the driving force behind this maneuver; the petition represented their attempt to challenge what they regarded as the unresponsive established parties while adhering to the organization's constitutional provision against partisan politics.¹⁰ The success of the petition drive — 15,000 quickly signed the document — prompted the Alliance leaders, again under the guise of a "People's Committee," to call a state-wide convention of "independents" to meet in Lincoln.

Anti-monopoly Republicans watched these developments with interest. They did not possess a following organized at the county or school district level; neither could they gain control of the Republican machinery. Consequently they hoped that the mass of Alliancemen would unite behind anti-monopoly leaders to throw the regular G.O.P. leaders out of power in the fall election. Anti-monopolists such as Charles Van Wyck, former U.S. senator, urged Alliancemen to ignore the farmer organization's constitutional provision against partisan politics and establish a new party. Van Wyck and his backers fervently hoped that the new party, once created, would reject the politically inexperienced Alliance organizers in favor of them.¹¹

The delegates to the state convention voted narrowly to support the Alliance leaders in the upcoming campaign. State Alliance President John Powers secured the gubernatorial nomination over tradition anti-monopolist Charles Van Wyck. The tally was 474 to 390.¹² As a payoff to the Van Wyck faction, one of their number was selected to run for the post of lieutenant governor.¹³



Silas A. Holcomb, Populist, was elected governor of Nebraska on a Fusion ticket in 1894

The 1890 campaign provided the voters with three distinct issues to consider before casting their ballots. The Populists urged the voter to replace the entrenched Republican officeholders with men who would serve the people instead of the railroads. The thrust of Democratic oratory was, of course, the necessity of the defeat of prohibition while Republicans favored the political *status quo* and, generally, the passage of the amendment. In theory the goals of the two out-of-power parties were not incompatible since one could simultaneously vote against the amendment and in favor of Populist candidates. This did not occur frequently because anti-prohibition ethnic voters recognized the anti-liquor bent of many populists and refused to support them.¹⁴

After the November balloting, all three parties could claim a measure of success. The Democrats not only turned back the threat of prohibition, but also elected their gubernatorial candidate. The Independents captured control of both houses of the Legislature while the Republicans won all state offices below the rank of governor.¹⁵

When the election returns are examined more closely it is apparent that the Democratic Party, despite its successes, had begun to crumble. Furthermore, Democratic weakness was most obvious in areas of Independent strength. The Populists, of course, drew the votes of both former Republicans and former Democrats to their fold, but in areas of Populist strength Democrats tended to defect to Populism more readily than Republicans did. At the same time, where a low Populist turnout

occurred, the defections of Republicans to the new party were greater than those of Democrats. But in 1890 the bond which was forming between Democrats and Populists was still well masked; the high defection rates of Democrats took place in counties with lower than average population densities in central Nebraska while the votes which defeated prohibition and placed a Democrat in the governor's mansion came from the more heavily populated counties of eastern Nebraska. No one knew in 1890 that the regional defection of Democrats to Populism would be the beginning of a state-wide trend. But in 1892 it is evident that Populist success was a function of the dissatisfaction of Democrats over their party's continued concern over personal liberty politics.

The relationship between Populist success and Democratic defection can be expressed briefly by relating the rates of defection from the traditional parties to Populism. The counties of Nebraska were arranged according to the percentage of the vote accorded the new party and this listing was divided into five equal groups. The index of defection was determined for each fifth or quintile.¹⁶ Then the average index was calculated for each fifth, as is shown in Table I. Positive numbers reflect a higher defection rate of Democrats than Republicans to the new party. Negative numbers result in instances where Republicans defected to Populism at a higher rate than Democrats. Of course, an index of zero means that defection of both parties to Populism were equal.¹⁷

TABLE I

INDEX OF DEFECTION OF REPUBLICANS AND
DEMOCRATS TO POPULISM IN 1890, ARRANGED
ACCORDING TO QUINTILES OF POPULIST SUPPORT

Quintile of Populist Support	Index of Defection
I8.2
II7.3
III.1.7
IV.	-9.1
V	-16.2

The balance among the three elements of the Populist coalition shifted in 1892. Alliance domination of the party gave way

to the anti-monopoly Republicans who controlled the 1892 convention. At the same time the tendency of Democrats to defect to the Populists with greater frequency than Republicans became statewide. In 1894 these defecting Democrats would take control of the party, but first the anti-monopolists had to try their hand at winning an election.

The decline in strength of Alliance leaders in Independent councils was the result, in part, of high-handed tactics of their leaders. Jay Burrows, editor of the state Alliance newspapers, stepped on many toes at the 1890 convention while trying to maintain Alliance control of the party. Moreover, Burrows sought to insure Populist unity at the polls by urging party members to forego their right to a secret ballot and vote publicly, in front of their cohorts. Additionally, his editorial pronouncements concerning county convention proceedings and the relative merits of county level candidates were regarded as meddling by local leaders.¹⁷ These actions aided the rise of the anti-monopolists within the party.

In the spring of 1892 there were two crucial changes in the Independent Party organization which symbolized the weakening hold of the Alliance over the party. A drive to create Independent clubs in every school district in the state began in late April. In this way Populism's new leaders, the anti-monopolists, sought to free themselves from a party organization based on Alliance chapters. Then in June, the new party leadership removed Burrows from power by merging the *Farmers' Alliance* (Burrows' paper) with the *Independent* of Lincoln to form a new paper called the *Alliance-Independent*. The pretext for Burrows' removal was his acceptance of a railroad pass offered him by the Burlington line.¹⁸

The neutralization of the Alliance element within the party hierarchy resulted in a prosaic convention at Kearney. Powers, the 1890 gubernatorial candidate and Alliance president, announced he would not oppose Van Wyck's attempt to win the gubernatorial nomination and the anti-monopolist prevailed against minimal opposition.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party in 1892 was a ship adrift in the political sea, lacking an issue to act as a rudder to give direction to the organization. The defeat of the prohibition amendment in 1890 momentarily made the appeal of personal

liberty campaigns ineffective. Attempts to revive old fears met with failure. At the same time the Bourbon leaders refused, of course, to champion the new issues raised by William Jennings Bryan and the Free Silverites.¹⁹ The Bryanite focus on the distribution of wealth and free silver did not coincide with the pro-business stance of the Democrats' entrenched leadership. This led to a convention fight between the two wings for the control of the party in 1892, a battle which the Bryanites lost. The key test of strength was Bryan's minority report on the platform which advocated the free coinage of silver. After the plank carried on the first count, some Bryan supporters left the hall in celebration, prompting a demand for a recount by the anti-Bryan forces. This time the Bourbons were victorious; they went on to award the gubernatorial nomination to J. Sterling Morton.²⁰ This was the last victory for the leaders who had dominated the Democratic party during the liquor restriction debates. Lacking electoral support and possessing little hope of winning the state race, they therefore concentrated their efforts on placing Grover Cleveland in the White House, a development which would open the way to presidential patronage.²¹

The weakness of the Democrats turned the 1892 campaign into a confrontation between Populists and Republicans over Nebraska's economic and political conditions. In addition to an accumulation of grievances against local merchants,²² Independents asserted that rising mortgage indebtedness was proof of statewide economic stagnation. The mortgage issue appeared in every issue of the state newspaper in August and September, complete with a liberal sprinkling of statistics. Furthermore, Populists maintained that Republican administrators had precipitated the collapse of boomtimes through administrative corruption.²³ This aspect of the Populist campaign was summarized for the voters in the newspaper columns:

Stand up for Nebraska at the polls by choking off the gang of boodlers who are stealing the state blind, by knocking the railroad and gold-bug candidates clear out of the ring, by voting for the interests of the producers and their families.²⁴

Republicans responded with charges that Populists were "calamity howlers," raising allegations of corruption and vanished prosperity to induce the electorate to turn on their "true" friends, the Republicans. In truth, they said, the state was being efficiently managed and prosperity was obvious to all. The Republicans also admonished voters to "Stand up for Nebraska":

Stand up for Nebraska by casting your vote against those men who say that this fair state is inhabited by a race of paupers and governed by a horde of thieves. The prosperity seen at every hand gives the lie to men in the hope of gratifying their personal ambitions.²⁵

When the ballots were counted, the Republicans had regained their hold over state government; the Populists, despite a slight increase in their share of the statewide vote, had again finished second, also losing their majorities in the state legislature. The Democratic portion of the vote decreased dramatically²⁶ because many staunch Democrats drifted into the Populist camp in response to the latter's refusal to support issues which threatened the concept of personal liberty.²⁷

The 1892 returns revealed that the Democrats lost relatively more voters to Populism than the Republicans did in all parts of Nebraska. Furthermore, the G.O.P. resurgence raised doubts over the ability of the Independents to capture the state government. Simple arithmetic also revealed that a combination of Populist and Democratic votes would overwhelm the Republican organization. These lessons helped bring fusion to Nebraska politics in 1894.

TABLE II
INDEX OF DEFECTION OF REPUBLICANS AND
DEMOCRATS TO THE POPULIST PARTY IN 1892,
ARRANGED ACCORDING TO QUINTILES
OF POPULIST SUPPORT

Quintile of Populist Support	Index of Defection
I.	12.3
II	12.0
III.	15.0
IV.	16.0
V	13.5

Two events in 1893 added impetus to the perfection of fusion in 1894. In this year the Populists learned both the fruits of cooperation and the futility of trying to win elections on their own. At the start of the year the Nebraska Legislature faced the task of filling one U.S. Senate seat, a task complicated by the fact that no single party possessed the majority needed to name a senator. After numerous indecisive ballots, the Populists and Democrats combined behind a new nominee, William V. Allen. Allen, an Independent acceptable to the Democrats, became Nebraska's first Populist senator.²⁸

Charles H. Van Wyck, Democratic U.S. Senator 1881-1887, was the unsuccessful Populist candidate for governor in 1892.



The second event in 1893 which laid the foundation for fusion was the race for Supreme Court judge. In that election Independent candidate Silas Holcomb, a former Democrat, earned the largest share of the electorate ever achieved by a Populist in a state race. Unfortunately, the G.O.P. also won an increased share of the electorate, thereby leaving the Populist party as the state's second strongest.²⁹ This erased some earlier confidence that the party could capture the major state offices.

Central to the acceptance of fusion in 1894 was the thesis which emerged from the 1893 election to explain the increased G.O.P. vote. Presumably monopolistic, "goldbug" Democrats were defecting to the Republicans, thus eliminating some of the elements which had made the Democrats unacceptable as a political partner of the Independents.³⁰

The Populists named the lion's share of the candidates in the first state level fusion between the two parties, accomplished in 1894. It was the Bryanites, however, who initiated political cooperation for several reasons. In addition to the desire to retrieve strayed Democratic voters, they wanted to place William Jennings Bryan in the U.S. Senate. To accomplish these ends they arranged a plan of fusion which the Independent critics of fusion could not prevent.

The two key elements in the fusion arrangement involved a mutually acceptable gubernatorial candidate and support for Bryan for senator. Silas Holcomb fulfilled the first requirement. A former Democrat, he was the most effective campaigner

among the Independents, in part because he was popular among both pro- and anti-fusionists in the Independent party. In return for Democratic support of Holcomb, Populist legislators agreed to help place Bryan in the Senate, thus meeting the second prerequisite. According to the agreement, the Independents could attempt to elect their own candidate, but if their first nominee failed, they were to back Bryan as their second choice.³¹ The willingness of individual legislators to acquiesce in the deal can never be known because G.O.P. won an overwhelming majority of the seats in the legislature in 1894.

The transition of this arrangement from idea to reality occurred in two steps. First, the Independents nominated a full slate of candidates headed by Holcomb as the gubernatorial nominee. Fusion was not openly discussed at the convention because no deal actually existed until such time as the Bryanites wrested control of the Democratic organization from the traditional leaders. This event was scheduled for the upcoming Democratic convention.

Once the party was safely Bryan's, he spoke to the delegates concerning the alternatives confronting the Democratic party. He noted that the Populists were asking the Democrats to support Holcomb while offering nothing in return. Furthermore, Bryan believed that the Bourbons and their cohorts would probably bolt to the Republican party. Bryan then charged his fellow party men to support Holcomb as the only way to achieve a victory for their principles. Subsequently the convention nominated candidates for auditor, treasurer, and secretary of state while reaffirming the Independent nominees for the rest of the state government posts. The Democratic desire to field some candidates was undoubtedly motivated by the hope that the Populists would withdraw their men in these contests. In this way a truer fusion of the two parties would exist. The Populists declined to act on this tacit suggestion. But they did contact their legislative candidates to gain support for Bryan's senatorial ambitions.³²

The fusion arrangement met with minimal success in 1894. Although Holcomb eked out a victory, the rest of the state fusion slate met defeat. Bryan's senatorial hopes died as well because the G.O.P. swept the legislative races. This failure can be attributed to several causes.

In most instances the 1894 vote for fusion did not equal the total vote received by the parties in 1892 when they ran separate candidates. The fusion vote came closest to the potential suggested by the 1892 returns in areas of normal Populist strength. In areas of usual Democratic strength, counties with relatively dense populations in eastern Nebraska, fusion fell farthest short of the 1892 totals. This fact suggests that fusion may have been associated with the "Cleveland" depression of 1893 in the minds of many voters. In the eastern part of the state the Democratic party was a strong if not dominant partner of the Independents. Although the adoption of fusion by the Democrats represented a rebellion against Cleveland's leadership, many of the voters may not have seen it that way. To the west the Populists were the dominant partner, with the Democrats an often inconsequential part of the marriage, and here the association of the Democrats with the depression was not as important.³³

The evidence also suggests that fusion failed because potential urban Democratic supporters frequently rejected the political partnership. This belies the hypothesis that the failure of fusion in this election was the result of rural resentment at the intrusion of urban politicians into Populist councils. Although this rural resentment can be well documented at the leadership level,³⁴ it was not transmitted *in toto* to the rank and file Populist. Precinct returns from eight counties, selected on the basis of geographic distribution and availability of records, underscores this tendency.³⁵ In eighty-two wholly rural precincts inter-party cooperation came closest to achieving its potential with an average of 88.7 per cent. By contrast, fusion received only 71 percent of the 1892 turnout in nine totally urban precincts. Voters in twenty-three mixed precincts, those containing both urban and rural residents, approximated the rural response. There the 1894 return was 86.9 percent of potential. Therefore, it may be more correct to argue that urban Democrats left their party rather than support the Populist dominated coalition.

The fusion arrangement broke up briefly in 1895 when the Democrats attempted to resume the role which the Populists had held in 1894. Meeting before the Independents, they selected a candidate for Supreme Court judge and suggested that



J. Sterling Morton, a "Bourbon" Democrat, became the party nominee for governor in 1892 after vanquishing William Jennings Bryan, a Free Silverite. With Morton (above) in 1891 is a grandson Wirt, son of Carl Morton. (J. Sterling Morton was elected a member of the Nebraska Hall of Fame in 1975, and a bust of him will be placed in the Capitol in Lincoln.)

the Independents could throw their support to him.³⁶ This the Populists refused to do. Independent anti-fusionists maintained that too many principles had been sacrificed and too many appointments had been given to Democrats by Holcomb. Consequently they refused the Democratic offer and nominated a traditional anti-monopoly Republican. Because the proponents of fusion did not know the depth of this sentiment, they were unwilling to buck it in a relatively unimportant contest.³⁷ Fusion was re-established in 1896 because the stakes were high and the fusionist Independents realized that their critics within the party were not electorally significant.

Nebraska's Populists, like most Americans in July of 1896, were surprised at the Democratic nomination of William Jennings Bryan for President. Since the Populists had hoped to hold the standard around which the reform forces would rally, this turn of events required a re-evaluation of strategy. Consequently the party newspaper, the *Nebraska Independent*, sent telegraphic inquiries to numerous Populist leaders, especially members of the state central committee. The responses of these leaders were generally pro-Bryan.³⁸ Of seventy-nine replies made prior to the Populist national convention, sixty favored fusion. Most supporters of Bryan regarded him as the logical choice to ensure unity in the reform forces and victory in November. Concern for the future of the party was scattered among these endorsements. Although several found the selection of a non-Populist standard bearer a difficult decision, they felt it was necessary if the organization were to put principle above power. A few urged the party to choose its own vice presidential candidate as a means of preserving the organization.

Staunch opponents of Bryan and/or fusion also spoke out in the poll. One respondent demanded that the party stick to "the middle of the road" (reject fusion), while another advised "paddle our own canoe." Otherwise the party would die because Bryan was a Democrat, first, last, and always. One writer suggested that the party endorse Henry Teller, the nominee of the Silver Republicans, or — as an alternative — field a blank slate with the purpose of selling the party's electoral votes for Cabinet positions. It was also suggested that each party should run its own man, letting the winning party name the President

while the losing reform party placed its man in the vice presidency.

A state-wide Populist convention held in advance of the national convention in St. Louis confirmed this trend in favor of fusion. Nebraska Independents endorsed Bryan by the overwhelming margin of 699 to 34. Among the opponents of fusion the dissenters were named the "immortal 34."³⁹

The only obstacle to state-level fusion in 1896 was settling on a division of spoils. The Populists, the dominant element within fusion, balked at allowing their weaker partner nominate a few of the candidates for state offices. Eventually, the state nominating convention, held after the St. Louis meeting, reached an apportionment which was acceptable.⁴⁰

The Popocrats claimed a sweeping victory at the polls in Nebraska by capturing the Electoral College votes, the state offices, and a clear majority of the legislative seats. A major aspect of this victory was the marked increase in support awarded fusion by urban residents. Probably because they realized that fusion was not a Democratic sellout and partly because Bryan was a magnetic vote collector, the urbanites returned to the fold.⁴¹ This trend is illustrated in Table III.

TABLE III

THE VOTE FOR FUSION IN THE 1894 AND 1896 GUBERNATORIAL CONTESTS IN 122 PRECINCTS, ARRANGED BY TYPE OF PRECINCT

Precinct Type	1894	1896	Increase	Increase as % of 1894 Share of Vote
Rural	57.6%	61.5%	3.9%	6.8%
Mixed.	50.3%	57.3%	7.0%	14.5%
Urban.	31.2%	39.2%	8.0%	25.6%

The 1896 returns also reveal that the pre-Populist alignment of the electorate was re-emerging because of the exodus of numerous pre-1890 Republicans from fusion to the party of their traditional loyalty. More and more, Republicans come to see that there were only two political parties — one to which they had once belonged and another which contained significant elements of a party which they had formerly opposed. Undoubtedly this pre-Populist political preference corresponds to

the middle-of-the-road stance of some Populist leaders.⁴² Undoubtedly the deterioration of the original, coalitional nature of Populism through the defeat of the Alliance and anti-monopoly leadership groups cost the Independents some of their political uniqueness. Populism began to look too much like the old Democratic party, as limited county-level statistics suggest.

TABLE IV
CORRELATION OF THE 1890 POPULIST AND
1896 FUSION VOTE WITH THE
1888 DEMOCRATIC VOTE IN FOUR COUNTIES⁴³

County	1890	1896
Seward	-.05	.31
Nemaha03	.33
Polk27	.42
Kearney20	.52

In summary, although the Populists in Nebraska accepted fusion with the Democrats behind Bryan, the explanation of this acceptance does not lie in the events of 1896. The decision made by Nebraskans at the St. Louis convention was the confirmation of a political trend, not a new departure for them. The establishment of fusion was the outcome of the gradual coming together of Populists and Democrats, a trend which had begun as soon as the new party had been established. In this sense Populism in Nebraska was a by-product of the reorganization of the Democratic party after the demise of the personal liberty issue. The common ideology of free silver which presumably made presidential fusion palatable to Populists in 1896 was of secondary importance for the Nebraskans.

The evidence suggests a final conclusion about Populism in general. The close relationship between Populists and Democrats in Nebraska would make it seem more fruitful to examine Populism in the context of the total social and political environment from which it rose, and not as an isolated phenomenon. Historians who regard Populists as the vanguard of a national liberal movement as well as those who portray them as pathetic guardians of a vanished America are segregating Populism from the political mainstream of the nation. In this way Populism has been scrutinized to determine the ways in which it was different from general American attitudes. But the evidence

from Nebraska suggests that there was in the 1890's a similarity between Populist and Democratic outlooks, a similarity which went beyond a common advocacy of free silver. Perhaps more time should be directed toward discovering in a much more specific manner the common ground shared by the Populists and members of the other American political parties.

NOTES

1. For the complete story of the election of 1896, begin with Paul Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1964) and Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

2. Durden, *Climax of Populism*, 21-22.

3. Stanley Parsons, Jr., *The Populist Context Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973), Chapter I.

4. The political position of the Democrats in the 1880's is evident in the columns of their newspapers, especially the *Omaha Herald*. This evidence is summarized in David Stephens Trask, "The Nebraska Populist Party: A Social and Political Analysis" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1971), 33-38.

5. The story of Republican infighting at this time emerges from the pages of the *Omaha Bee* which favored the anti-monopolists and the *Lincoln State Journal* which represented the regular party position. Trask, "The Nebraska Populist Party," 41-43.

6. *Omaha Herald*, October 6, 1882.

7. State Journal Company (comp.), *Nebraska Bluebook for 1899-1900* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1899).

8. The term "Bourbon" refers, of course, to the political type delineated by Horace S. Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953). The term does not relate to the politician's attitude toward prohibition.

9. *Nebraska Bluebook for 1899-1900*.

10. Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, III (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1913), 223.

11. *Kearney (Nebraska) Daily Hub*, May 30, 1890. Marie Harmer and James Sellers, "Charles Van Wyck: Soldier and Statesman" XII, *Nebraska History* (1931), 349.

12. Harmer and Sellers, "Charles Van Wyck," 357-358.

13. John D. Barnhart, "The History of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and of the People's Party in Nebraska" (Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1930), 209-211.

14. Coefficients of correlation based on precinct data in a number of Nebraska counties demonstrate a high degree of correlation between support for the Democratic candidate for governor and opposition to the prohibition amendment. Trask, "The Nebraska Populist Party," 107-108.

15. In the gubernatorial contest the Democrat won 33.3 percent of the vote, the Populist, 32.8, and the Republican, 32.2. A Prohibition Party candidate received 1.7 percent. Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau, *Nebraska Bluebook and Historical Register for 1918*, 450-489.

In the Nebraska House of Representative 54 Populists faced 20 Republicans and 26 Democrats. In the Senate 18 Populists outnumbered 7 Republicans and 8 Democrats. *House Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska and Senate Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska*, Twenty-Second Regular Session, 1891.

16. The index of defection was derived by a mathematical calculation. First, the portion of the electorate which voted G.O.P. in 1890 was subtracted from the 1888 Republican vote. This remainder was regarded as the portion of the electorate which transferred political allegiance from the G.O.P. to the Independent Party. This figure was divided by the percentage of the 1890 vote won by the Populists. This dividend (D) was then compared to the 1888 G.O.P. percentage to determine if the 1890 Populist following was more Republican or less Republican than the pre-Populist electorate. The index of defection itself was derived by subtracting D from the 1888 G.O.P. percentage. If the remainder was zero, then the Populist Party was believed to contain as many Republicans as the pre-Populist electorate. If a positive number resulted, then the Populist party was believed to contain fewer Republicans (and therefore more Democrats) than the pre-Populist electorate. A negative result meant that the Populist Party contained more Republicans than the 1888 electorate, meaning that in these instances pre-1890 Republicans tended to find Populism more attractive than Democrats did.

17. Harmer and Sellers, "Charles Van Wyck," 351-355; *Kearney Daily Hub*, October 11, October 31, 1890; S. Edwin Thornton to Luna Kellie, July 19, 1891. *Nebraska Farmers' Alliance Papers* (microfilmed MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln), Roll 1, frames 38-41.

18. The change was made on June 30, 1892.

19. See, for example, *Blair (Nebraska) Courier*, November 5, 1892.

20. Paola E. Coletta, "The Nebraska Democratic State Convention of April 13-14, 1892," XXXIX, *Nebraska History* (December, 1958), 333.

21. To achieve this goal they urged Democrats to support the Populist presidential nominee, James Weaver, in order to deny the Republicans the Nebraska Electoral College votes.

22. The story of local grievances in Seward County, Nebraska, is told in David S. Trask, "Formation and Failure: The Populist Party in Seward County, Nebraska, 1890-1892," 51, *Nebraska History* (Fall, 1970), 281-301.

23. *Alliance-Independent* (Lincoln), August 4, August 18, September 15, September 29, October 20, 1892.

24. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1892.

25. See, e.g., *Seward (Nebraska) Semi-Weekly Reporter*, November 1, 1892.

26. The Republicans collected 39.6 percent of the gubernatorial vote in 1892 compared to 32.2 percent in 1890. The Populists made a modest increase from 32.8 percent to 34.7 percent. The Democrats slipped from 33.3 percent in 1890 to 22.4 percent in 1892. *Nebraska Bluebook and Historical Register for 1918*, 453-454.

27. Frederick Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 152-156.

28. *Alliance-Independent*, February 9, 1893.

29. The Republican party received 39.7 percent of the vote, compared to 36.2 percent for the Populists. The Democrats lagged behind with 20.7 percent of the vote. *Nebraska Bluebook and Historical Register for 1918*.

30. *Alliance-Independent*, November 16, 1893.

31. The details of the *quid pro quo* of fusion were never spelled out by anyone in public. This stipulation, the support of Bryan for the Senate, was certainly sought by the Democrats after the close of both conventions. It is also highly probable, but not subject to concrete proof, that fusion Populists prior to both conventions promised this concession. Although many proclaimed at this time that no deals had been made,

there were numerous outcries against the trades which underlay fusion once Holcomb was elected. *Daily Hub*, September 25, 1894; *Blue Valley Blade*, September 19, 1894. The post-election reaction against political deals is covered in Trask, "The Nebraska Populist Party," 229-235.

32. Paola E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: I. Political Evangelist, 1860-1908*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 99-101.

33. The impact of the 1893 depression on the 1894 election has been frequently noted. See, e.g., Carl Degler, "American Political Parties and the Rise of the City," LI, *Journal of American History* (June, 1964), 41-59. Also Frederick C. Luebke, "Main Street and Countryside: Patterns of Voting in Nebraska During the Populist Era," L, *Nebraska History* (Fall, 1969), 257-275.

34. See, e.g., L. P. Cummins to Luna T. Kellie, July 30, 1894, *Nebraska State Farmers' Alliance Papers*, Roll 1, frames 988-997.

35. The counties were Nemaha, Seward, Washington, Polk, Kearney, Sherman, Red Willow, and Webster.

36. Coletta, *Bryan*, 108-109.

37. *Wealthmakers* (Lincoln), August 22, August 29, 1895; *Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union* (Heartwell), September, 1895.

38. The replies to the telegraphic inquiry appeared in *Nebraska Independent* (Lincoln), July 16, July 23, 1896.

39. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1896, *Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union*, August 15, 1896.

40. *Nebraska Independent*, August 13, 1896.

41. The same counties were used as in the 1894 test cited in footnote 34. Some of the precincts were subdivided between the two elections, thus accounting for the increase in the total number of precincts.

42. Unfortunately, separate middle-of-the-road tickets did not do too well at the polls. The voter presumably stayed with the Populists or reverted to the Republican party. Because of the lack of a statistically significant middle-of-the-road Populist turnout, this assumption cannot be tested.

43. The coefficients of correlation in this table were derived by the Spearman rank-difference formula. In no case did the number of precincts in a county exceed twenty. The relative advantages of this formula are discussed in Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 194.