
The Situation Facing the People's Party in 1896

by Eugene V. Debs

Published as "The Situation in 1896" in *Batavia [IA] Sentinel*, Aug. 9, 1895.
Copy preserved in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 14.

If I were to base conclusions relating to political conditions in 1896 upon the decision of the people in 1894, I should be quite positive that the Republican Party would carry the country by a sweeping plurality. But in late years there appears to be a determination on the part of the people to break away from old alliances, and no political seer feels competent to forecast conditions in the immediate future.

During the past 25 years the old parties found it an easy matter to formulate platforms and bring their followers into line. The platforms were constructed to catch the unthinking masses, and this done, they were promptly relegated to the limbo of useless lumber. But a new era has dawned. The spider's song to the fly has been overworked.

Men can no longer be bought in "blocks" and delivered on election day. The spoils of office have been greatly reduced by civil service regulations; besides, the masses have advanced and the herds of "dumb driven cattle" are no longer driven to the polls to be voted by the bosses. Such things have brought about conditions that have changed the aspect of political affairs.

The imperative duty of constructing platforms is even now giving the old parties vast vexation.

The Democratic Party had a platform in 1892. It was plausible. The people accepted it as an honest expression of principles and policy. The party turned traitor to professions and met the fate of Ananias, its prototype.¹

¹ The 5th chapter of the Biblical book of Acts tells the tale of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about the price realized for land they had sold to apostles of the church, not making the full sum available to them but keeping part of the proceeds hidden for themselves. The pair were then both struck dead by supernatural forces for having attempted to deceive the all-knowing Holy Spirit.

The Republican Party reads its doom if it follows the Democratic example.

Both of the old parties are split upon the money question, and no dodging or hedging will be tolerated.

Out of the entanglement of bimetallism, monometallism, gold standard, silver standard, double standard, and single standard, they will be required to state explicitly their principles and their policy and there is no way to escape. They will find that the people mean business.

I refer to such things merely to show the complications of the political situation.

Relying upon current comment, the Democratic Party is dead. The statement is scarcely correct. The Democratic Party is not dead but disgraced, equivalent to death. Those who are trying to white-wash it find it difficult, and to make the situation as bad as possible, it has, in so far as Grover Cleveland and his office holders are concerned, fallen into line with the Republican Party on the money question, and in 1896 we may see the Republican Party swallow what is left of the party of Jefferson, Jackson et al.

To make it still more difficult to forecast "results in 1896," I point to the Populist Party.² It has been called into existence by the voice of millions of men formerly acting with the two old parties. It is young, strong, aggressive, and enthusiastic.

It demands reform in every department of the government. It demands the free and unlimited coinage of silver. It denounces the debauching alliance between the government and the national banks and demands that the still more shameful and corrupting alliance between the government and the Rothschilds, the rapacious shylocks, whether foreigners or natives, be dissolved. It would wrest the scepter of power from trusts, corporations, syndicates, and every combination of plutocrats, regardless of name, and reestablish a government by the people.

This party has become a standing menace to plutocracy. It confronts and denounces its schemes everywhere.

The farmers, cajoled and cheated, poor and penniless, with their possessions shingled all over with mortgages, have determined to abandon the old parties.

The workingmen who think are everywhere aroused and are asserting their manhood, determined to no longer be victimized by po-

² That is, the People's Party.

litical parties which, after their votes are cast, regard them as so many swine.

What will this party do in 1896? Who can tell? If it fulfills its mission, it will hold the balance of power in the next Congress and will dictate legislation. If not strong enough to enact its reform measures into laws, it will be strong enough to arrest infamous legislation by either of the two old parties. Standing by the right, yielding never a jot or tittle of its reform principles, the people will endorse its fealty to the welfare of the nation and with the new century it will come into possession of the government.

With all the light I can command and reasoning from cause to effect, and from effect to cause, I predict a vast increase of the Populist vote in 1896 and an overwhelming victory for the party in 1900.

Eugene V. Debs,
McHenry County Jail,
Woodstock, Ill.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.