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Article Summary: This article presents a study of Nebraska Populism, emphasizing the movement at its grass roots level. Who were the Populists and who were their enemies? What helped to influence the political loyalties during the era? This study focuses on the county level, seeking answers to these questions.

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## WHO WERE THE NEBRASKA POPULISTS?

BY STANLEY B. PARSONS

**H**ISTORIANS disagree about the nature of Populism, but they generally agree about which Populists need studying. With few exceptions the Populist era is explained in terms of state or national politics or with the ideological formulations of the leading elite.<sup>1</sup> The politics of the elite is of great importance but perhaps a new per-

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<sup>1</sup> Of the earlier works on Populism in the plains states see the unpublished Ph. D. dissertation (Harvard, 1929), by John D. Barnhart, "The History of the Farmers' Alliance and of the People's Party in Nebraska," as the most pertinent for this study. Other studies, which emphasize the economic basis of Populism are: Raymond C. Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XI, (March, 1925); Herman C. Nixon, "The Populist Movement in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXIV, (January, 1926), 3-107; Hallie Farmer, "The Economic Background of Frontier Populism," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, X, (March, 1924) 406-427. Recent studies which show concern with agrarian ideology include: Richard Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, (New York: Knopf, 1955); Victor C. Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *The Western Political Quarterly*, X, (June, 1957), 350-373; and John Higham, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A reinterpretation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII, (1957), 559-78.

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spective can be added if the movement is surveyed from its lower levels. In reconsidering Nebraska Populism this study will emphasize the movement at its grass roots level.<sup>2</sup> Local issues, such as class or ethnic conflicts, contributed to the tensions of the era and helped to determine who won or lost in the state political battles. Analysis of county and precinct politics will also aid in delineating those groups of citizens which joined or failed to join the Populist movement. Everyone is familiar with the stock Populist descriptions of their enemies, but the terms "plutocrat" and "corporation" are vague terms for one's opponents. The lines of political conflict need to be more rigorously drawn. Who were the Populists and who were their enemies? What helped to influence political loyalties during the era? These questions are particularly pertinent when they are studied at the county level.

Populism in its rural setting has been neglected for several excellent reasons. In the first place most historians find analysis of politics at the state and national level more suited to their methodological techniques. Metropolitan newspapers, letters of nationally known figures or memoirs offer solid ground on which to base research. On the other hand the sub-levels of the Populist movement are difficult to investigate because of the scarcity and unevenness of source material. Public records are missing or have been destroyed. County editors either omitted important political events from their columns or reported them in the most haphazard manner. Any historian attempting to reconstruct a local political situation is on less sure ground, methodologically speaking, than the modern student of political behavior. However, some sources and techniques are

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<sup>2</sup> A pioneering study of local conditions in Nebraska during the Populist era is Arthur R. Bentley, "The Condition of the Western Farmer as Illustrated by the Economic History of a Nebraska Township," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, (July-August, 1893). A model for this type of study is Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community*, (Stanford, 1959). An attempt at voting analysis on the county level is George Lundberg, "The Demographic and Economic Basis of Political Radicalism and Conservation," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXII, (March, 1927), 719-732.

available. Power relationships can be subjectively assessed from the social, political and economic items in the county newspaper.<sup>3</sup> Voting statistics on the precinct level are available in some counties. Census manuscripts list the nationality and economic description of each citizen, while the United States Census provides a statistical description of each county. When used and analyzed these sources show some aspects of populism as it existed in the villages and rural areas of Nebraska.

Seven Nebraska counties were selected for the first part of this study. This sample represents eight per cent of the counties in the state in 1890. The following factors determined selection. (1) The availability of source materials, chiefly files of newspapers during the late eighteen eighties and early eighteen nineties. (2) The political climate of the county. Of the seven counties two were Republican, two were Democratic and three were Populist. The Republican counties, Hayes and Scotts Bluff, are located in the arid, western section of the state. The Populist counties, Hamilton, Howard and Kearney lie in the central third of the state, while the two Democratic counties, Cuming and Colfax, are located in the prosperous northeastern section.

In this study of Nebraska politics at the county level it soon became evident that much of the struggle for political power during the Populist era was a struggle between the farmer and the villager. Before the Populist revolt the small towns and villages of Nebraska supplied a disproportionate share of the political leadership of the state. Not until 1890 did Omaha produce a governor, while Lincoln had to wait until well into the twentieth century to place one of its citizens in the governor's chair. Farmers

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<sup>3</sup> Works which are suggestive of ways to approach power relationships in small communities are Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society, Class, Power and Religion in a Rural Community*, (Princeton, 1958); Murray E. Levin, *The Alienated Voter*, (New York, 1961); Peter H. Rossi, "The Study of Community," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, I, (March, 1957); Rudolph Heberle, "On Political Ecology," *Social Forces*, XXIX, (October, 1952), 1-9.

too furnished few leaders at the state level. Prior to 1890, no governor, senator or congressman had been a practicing farmer when elected to office. The source of Nebraska's political leaders was the town of five thousand population or under.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did the town supply a disproportionate share of the officers of the state government, but it also dominated the local leadership of the two old parties. Of twenty-three Democratic or Republican county chairmen, 1888-1893, in the seven counties studied, fifty-six per cent came from the county seat towns, twenty-one per cent came from other villages in the county, seventeen per cent were of unknown residence, while only five per cent came from the farm. County office holders confirmed the same pattern of leadership recruitment. Of fifty-one clerks, treasurers, sheriffs and county attorneys in four counties, forty-nine per cent listed the county seat town as their place of residence when elected, fourteen per cent listed other villages in the county, four per cent listed rural residence and the residence of thirty-five per cent could not be identified.<sup>5</sup> While there was political participation at all levels in the counties studied, the village and especially the county seat town provided a large proportion of the leaders of the two older parties. In marked contrast to the Democrats and Republicans, the Populists recruited all but one of their county chairmen from the actual farming population. The exception, a Populist editor, arrived on the scene after the

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<sup>4</sup> *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, (New York, 1904); J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln, 1918).

<sup>5</sup> To secure this information lists were compiled of all delegates to county conventions during the years under consideration. Since the county chairman had usually served as a precinct delegate, it was a simple matter to find his residence. The great difficulty was that many county editors failed to report consistently on the membership of the county convention. On other occasions they would report the precinct delegations and not mention the name of the county chairman. The same difficulties, of course, applied to the county officers.

Nineteen county newspapers were used to compile the lists of political leaders.

initial Populist successes.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the power of the villagers is obvious in the personnel of the delegations sent to the state conventions of the major parties. Here again the names of the villagers appeared repeatedly as significant figures at the county conventions and as delegates to the state conventions.

A contemporary account pictures community decision-making in the following manner:

. . . bankers and lawyers were presumed to be endowed with superior wisdom and acumen, which peculiarly fitted them to be the especial advisors and guardians of the people in all matters political . . . when it came to the more important offices of members of the state legislature's and congress that they . . . alone were qualified to fill these big positions . . . convention nominations were usually made on the day preceding the conventions in the back room of the "bell wether" Shylock of the county . . .<sup>7</sup>

The farmer hardly can be blamed for his use of the conspiracy theory. Repeated defeats at the hands of the village leaders left him with frustrations common to alienated groups. He felt thwarted at the local level, as well as in the state and national capitals.

Although political power gravitated to the town before the Populist crusade and added to the frustrations of the farmer, Populism was more than a quarrel over leadership. A real clash of interests deepened the hostility between the two groups. Before 1890, however, conflict had been obscured by several common interests. Both groups had been heavily engaged in speculative activities. The farmer counted on rising land values to underwrite credit purchases and expansion, while the villager's interests were tied to rising land values in the town or increased mercantile activity engendered by a growing population. The urban real estate boom was at its height between 1885 and 1889 and most of the villages studied avidly participated in it. The imaginative citizens of Kearney carried the

<sup>6</sup> *St. Paul Phonograph*, August 22, 1896.

<sup>7</sup> W. F. Porter, "Populism and What It Stood For," MSS, (State Historical Society of Nebraska Library, Lincoln). For a similar view see, Omar M. Kem, (Unpublished Memoires, I, Owned by Claud J. Kem, Coitage Grove, Oregon), 91-93.

speculative fever to its hopeful conclusion when they agitated for the relocation of the national capital in their village.<sup>8</sup> Although town booming may not have been profitable in the long run, village leaders looked upon it as a solution to many of their financial problems.<sup>9</sup> At West Point in Cuming County the West Point Building and Loan Association reported a profit of forty per cent on its capital stock, while a similar organization in Gering, Scotts Bluff County, reported a dividend of fifty per cent in the spring of 1890. Most of the loans of these associations were on village property.<sup>10</sup>

Although booming the county and the village was an activity in which the farmer and the villager could both participate, the two groups shared few views on how prosperity could be achieved. One of the major irritants, as reported in the county press, concerned the intensity of the Populist complaint, or Populist "calamity howling". The fierceness of the Populist rhetoric frightened the village leaders, for they believed that if plans for the expansion of their villages were to materialize the state could not be pictured as it was in the Populist press. Many leaders in the villages realized the validity of many of the Populist complaints, but they were not ready to relinquish economic and political leadership to a group which had been secondary to them.<sup>11</sup>

On other issues the villagers complained about the farmers' lack of interest in projects considered vital to village interests. A case in point is the villagers' frequent attempts to acquire state institutions. During most of the period covered in this paper the citizens of Aurora, the

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<sup>8</sup> *St. Paul Phonograph*, August 15, 1890, November 1, 1889. *Hayes County Republican*, April 3, 1890, July 10, 1890. *Hamilton County Register*, November 21, 1891, November 14, 1891.

<sup>9</sup> See the unpublished thesis (Nebraska, 1927) by H. L. Glynn, "The Urban Real Estate Boom in Nebraska During the 80's."

<sup>10</sup> *Gering Courier*, April 11, 1890, *Cuming County Advertiser*, May 20, 1890.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lowitt, "Populism and Politics: The Start of George W. Norris' Political Career," *Nebraska History*, XLII, (June, 1961), 76. *Hayes County Republican*, July 3, 1890. *Minden Courier*, May 16, 1890.

county seat of Hamilton County, made repeated attempts to obtain a state normal school. Despite some sympathy for the farmer's cause the Democratic and Republican leadership in Aurora was much more interested in the immediate and more tangible problem of obtaining the school than in fighting for the causes of the farmer. In 1886, A. W. Agee, a village leader, ran for the legislature on the normal school platform. He won, but the plan never materialized.<sup>12</sup> However, the leaders of Aurora did not give up the fight and during the 1891 session of the legislature they again descended upon Lincoln in an effort to lobby the bill through for their city. Hamilton County, by this time, was represented by two Populists of rural residence, and even though they supported the Aurora Normal Bill, they were attacked in the regular Democratic paper for their ineffectiveness in aiding the village. Representative Newberry in particular was severely reprimanded:

His opposition to the measures was vindictive. He used strong invective in place of argument. Attacked Douglas and Lancaster county delegations and alluded to them as "robbers of the state". Newberry is so violent that he lost all support even among Alliancemen, and the Aurora Normal Bill was defeated.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of the bill in the minds of Aurora's leading citizens is indicated by the number of them who took the trouble to travel to Lincoln to lobby for the school. Both Democrats and Republicans were equally interested, only the Populists dragged their feet. The Democratic weekly was hostile to both of the Populist representatives from Hamilton County, and it concluded an attack on them by suggesting that the next representatives from Hamilton County be selected on the basis of pushing the Normal School. Representative Newberry, the editor thought, had spent too much time attacking the railroads.<sup>14</sup>

The major conflict between the farmer and villager was caused by the farmer's entrance into competition with the local merchants. With the growth of the farmer's

<sup>12</sup> *Aurora Sun*, November 2, 1889.

<sup>13</sup> *Aurora Sun*, April 4, 1891.

<sup>14</sup> *Aurora Sun*, March 14, 1891.

movement the Farmer's Alliances established cooperatives throughout the state. These cooperatives bought grain and retailed basic commodities. They offered significant competition to the merchant during the early years of the farmer's movement. In addition to the "store" the Farmer's Alliances moved into the insurance, loan, and indirectly, the newspaper business. They often encountered bitter opposition from most elements of village commercial life.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Standard Oil Company's agent at Hastings refused to sell to agents of local Alliances at wholesale prices. The Alliances attempted to fight such policies by boycotting these merchants, but this only engendered further hostility.<sup>16</sup> The real concern of the village interests is illustrated by the following item in the *Aurora Sun*:

It is practically impossible to conduct a country newspaper without the hardy support of the businessmen of the town in which it is printed. At present the alliance seems to be working to abolish the "middle man", and to transact their business through alliance stores, elevators and other cooperative enterprises. In some places the old dealers have been formally boycotted. Under such circumstances the alliance newspapers cannot expect the support from the townspeople needed to insure their financial success. The Newspaper . . . is . . . a part of a grand system of specialized industry that has been built up by the demands of modern life. A blow aimed at the old and well established methods of buying and selling goods strikes the country newspaperman even harder than it does the merchant or the grain and stock dealer. A few alliance papers may gain circulation large enough to justify their continued publication, but a fight between the farmers and the townspeople means that the paper devoted to the alliance interest must get along without much home advertising . . .<sup>17</sup>

The *Hamilton County Republican* joined in the attack upon the farmer and his newly acquired voice.

. . . businessmen have acknowledged that it is not good policy . . . to support a paper that is always using its influence to separate the farmer of the country and the businessman of the city. It is the wild harpings of the would be McKeighan stripe of Newspapers that breeds most of the

<sup>15</sup> *Hamilton County Register*, February 24, 1891.

<sup>16</sup> See the unpublished thesis (Nebraska, 1927) by Freida C. Keuster, "The Farmers Alliance in Nebraska," 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Aurora Sun*, February 21, 1891. This editorial was originally printed in the *State Journal* (Lincoln).

dissatisfaction between the farmer and the businessman. This stripe of newspapers are always preaching to the farmer that there is a combination somewhere to rob the farmer . . . this "newspaper" then prints mailorder ads and the farmer sends for it and ends up with goods our merchants would not sell at any price.<sup>18</sup>

These quotations are typical of the point of view of many of the county papers in Nebraska, and they illustrated the hostility and the conflict of interests between the farmers and the villagers. In the early days of the Alliance the Republican editors approved of the farmer's movement, but when the farmers began proposing concrete programs for their own economic advancement the Republican editors generally withdrew their approval. The Democratic county press took a similar position. Originally the Democratic editors applauded the farmer's attacks on the dominant Republicans and hoped the farmers would accept Democratic guidance. However, when the farmers continued their "calamity howling" and their advocacy of programs which the Democratic villagers considered too radical they also became openly hostile.<sup>19</sup> The Populists noted this behavior on the part of their old leaders, and one editor commented that at long last the politicians were learning that "the farmer's can't be led around by the nose". Another Populist editor summarized agrarian feeling in the following manner:

Until this year 1890 the farmers have always been nice people, but no account in politics. Now they are radicals, extremists and anarchists, but if they adhere to their present course they may in time be almost as much consulted by the old parties as ward strikers . . .<sup>20</sup>

The extent of conflict between the villager and the farmer is shown by voting statistics from six of the seven counties studied. In these counties, there were ninety-nine precincts. Of these, seventy-four were completely agricultural, eighteen were mixed between farmers and villagers,

<sup>18</sup> *Hamilton County Republican*, April 2, 1891.

<sup>19</sup> *Hamilton County Republican*, March 3, 1890.

<sup>20</sup> *Hamilton County Register*, February 14, 1890, December 6, 1890.

and eight represented the larger county seat towns.<sup>21</sup>

Before the election of 1890, when the farmer was of "no account in politics" there was a striking similarity between agrarian and village voting behavior. In the gubernatorial election of 1888 the Republican vote was highest in the county seat towns with fifty-eight per cent of the two party vote. The mixed precincts voted fifty-two per cent Republican, while the agrarian precincts returned forty-nine per cent for the GOP.<sup>22</sup>

In the critical election year of 1890 the split between farmers and villagers reached its greatest proportions. In the villages and towns the vote for the old parties held up well, the Populists appealed little to these people; they won only twenty per cent of the vote in the mixed precincts and ten per cent of the vote in the county seat towns. However, the Populists carried rural precincts in all but the Catholic and far western counties. In the six county sample they polled thirty-nine per cent in the rural precincts compared with thirty-five per cent for the Democrats and twenty-five per cent for the Republicans.

The election of 1896 illustrated the division between the village and the countryside more emphatically than the election of 1890 because the prohibition question was removed as an issue. By 1896 fusion was effected and the Popocrats carried the agrarian precincts with sixty-three per cent, the mixed precincts with fifty-three per cent, but lost in the county seat towns with forty-six per cent of the vote.

The election statistics cited for the three elections confirm the information noted in the county press. Populism

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<sup>21</sup> *Eleventh Decennial Census of the United States, 1890, XXIX, 260-273.* The rural-urban classification of the Bureau of the Census is not used in this paper. For this study the rural precinct is one with no village of any size in it. If the precinct contains farmers and villagers it is classified as "mixed". The town precincts represent the voters in the larger, county seat towns. The same classification of rural and town dwellers is used in the statistical portion of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> Precinct returns were obtained from the County Clerk's Office in each of the counties studied.

tended to polarize political allegiance between the village and the countryside. Between 1888 and 1896 Republican support declined twelve per cent in rural precincts, five per cent in the mixed rural-village precincts, and four per cent in the county seat town precincts. After 1890 agrarian antagonism to the villages grew until a difference of nearly twenty per cent existed between the votes that the Republicans were able to capture in the towns and the votes they could command in the rural areas.

It is evident that all the enemies of the farmer were not the tools of the railroads or of Wall Street. Many townspeople were sympathetic with some of the farmer's goals, but quarrels over local issues and leadership caused them to oppose Populism. Twenty years after opposing the farmers in 1890 some of the same village leaders became Progressives and championed many of the old Populist reforms.

In the election of 1890 several sections of the state did not participate enthusiastically in the Populist revolt. Voters in these areas displayed interests which transcended the economic issues which so concerned the Populists.

Far western counties such as Scotts Bluff and Hayes showed comparatively little interest in Populism in 1890. Even the farmers in these counties did not rally to the Populist cause as did farmers in the central part of the state. The westerners' interests in securing railroads, irrigation projects or beet sugar factories made them more dependent upon financial interests closely identified with the old order. Although these western counties voted Republican, and show impressive percentages of votes for that party, their sparse population lessened their political influence.<sup>23</sup>

The most important group which failed to join the Populist cause was the Catholics of northeastern Nebraska.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas L. Green, (ed.) *Scottsbluff and the North Platte Valley*, (Scottsbluff, 1950), 71-80. *Gering Courier*, September 22, 1887, October 3, 1889.

For these German and Bohemian farmers prohibition surpassed economic depression as an important issue. Long before the Populist era the German and Bohemian voters began their exodus from the Republican Party. After 1877, prohibition became an important issue in the state. In 1881 the Slocumb High License Bill passed the legislature and finally in 1888 the Republicans sponsored a move to add a prohibitory amendment to the state constitution.<sup>24</sup> Until Hunt, "The Control of the Liquor Traffic in Nebraska, 1865-1890," the Republicans became associated with the prohibition movement they had held the loyalties of the Catholic, German and Bohemian voters, but from 1877 on these groups became increasingly alienated from the GOP.<sup>25</sup> Cuming and Colfax counties, with their large German and Bohemian vote, became the banner Democratic counties in the state. Unlike many Populist counties, which were voting Republican again by 1900, the German and Bohemian counties remained Democratic. As late as 1936 the top quartile of Democratic strength in Nebraska remained appreciably where the prohibition issue had placed it in the 1880's.

The over-riding importance of the prohibition issue to the German population is illustrated by voting statistics from heavily German precincts in the northeastern part of the state. In these precincts the German farmers did not react to the economic depression as did the farmers of other localities, but because of the prohibition crisis they actually increased their Democratic pluralities. Nine rural precincts which averaged about eighty-five per cent German voters illustrate this tendency.<sup>26</sup> In 1888 these precincts averaged seventy-three per cent Democratic. In 1890, even with economic conditions vying with prohibition as an issue, the Democrats raised their vote to seventy-nine per cent. In

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<sup>24</sup> See the unpublished thesis (Nebraska, 1932) by George T.

<sup>25</sup> *West Point Republican*, December 27, 1895.

<sup>26</sup> Ethnic composition at the precinct level is available in the manuscript, *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885*, State Historical Society of Nebraska, Lincoln. Precincts of known or suspected large foreign born population were located and then the population was counted. The per cent of foreign born voters is much higher than the per cent of foreign born citizens since children are nearly all native born.

the same year in these precincts the Populists polled twelve per cent of the vote while the Republicans won only nine per cent. After 1890 when the prohibition issue became less important the German counties increased their Populist vote, but by and large they remained suspicious of the Populist interest in prohibition. The Bohemians also failed to join the Populist cause because of the prohibition issue. Four heavily Bohemian rural precincts in Colfax county gave the Populists only one-tenth of one per cent of the vote in 1890. The Danes, on the other hand, swung from the Democratic party to the Populists in 1890. In two heavily Danish precincts in Howard County the Democrats won sixty-four per cent of the vote in 1888, but the Populists carried them with sixty-nine per cent of the vote in 1890, and seventy-six per cent in 1896.

Of the major immigrant groups in Nebraska the Swedes showed the most pronounced Republican proclivities. In six rural precincts composed of over sixty-five per cent Swedish voters, the Republicans won seventy-six per cent of the vote in 1888. In 1890 the Populists carried these precincts with forty-five per cent of the three party vote, but by 1896 they had returned to their previous pattern with sixty-five per cent Republican vote.

As indicated in this study, ethnic factors and rural-village antagonisms influenced the political loyalties of many voters in nineteenth century Nebraska. However, most historians agree that the roots of Populism lie in the economic difficulties of the time. While social conflicts are observable in the columns of the county press and in precinct voting records, the economic antecedents of Populism are more difficult to evaluate. According to the Populists they were simply the most oppressed, poorest and most interest-burdened people in the state. On the other hand, historians often disagree about the relative importance of factors believed to be directly related to Populism. One approach to this problem, which is consistent with the nature of this paper, is offered by the statistical method of multiple correlation analysis. This statistical method in-

dicates the relationship between seven factors often associated with Populism, and the per cent of the Populist vote in each county in the election of 1890.<sup>27</sup>

The following variables were thought to be of significance in predicting the per cent of Populist vote in Nebraska's eighty-nine counties.<sup>28</sup>

- (1) The per cent of the population in each county residing on a farm.
- (2) The per cent of the population in each county of native birth.
- (3) The per cent of the population in each county of Protestant cultural background.<sup>29</sup>
- (4) The per cent of arable land in each county planted in wheat.
- (5) The per cent of arable land in each county planted in corn.
- (6) The per cent of farm income in each county paid in interest charges.
- (7) The average value of farm products per farm in each county.

The multiple correlation coefficient obtained from the problem was a relatively high .67. The coefficient squared, or forty-five, represents the per cent of the variations in voting accounted for by the seven variables. In other words, the seven factors used in the problem explain about one half of the variation in the Populist votes in 1890.

More interesting for this study are the partial correlation coefficients. These indicate the relative importance of each variable in obtaining the multiple coefficient.

<sup>27</sup> A multiple correlation coefficient indicates the degree to which changes in one variable depend on changes in two or more other variables. The square of the coefficient indicates the actual proportion of changes in the first variable that can be explained by changes in the other variables.

<sup>28</sup> Election statistics by counties are found in *The Nebraska Blue Book and Historical Register*, 1918, (Lincoln, 1918). The economic and population statistics used in the problem were obtained from the *Eleventh Decennial Census of the United States*, 1890.

<sup>29</sup> This figure was derived by separating the population into ethnic groups related to religious denominations. There were several reasons for this. First, only nineteen per cent of Nebraska's citizens belonged to any church. Second, although some Germans were Lutherans they all had similar feelings toward prohibition. The Protestant "cultural" groups therefore contain all Nebraskans but the Germans, Bohemians and Irish.

Per cent rural residence.....	.03
Per cent native born.....	—13
Per cent Protestant.....	.38
Per cent of land in wheat.....	.39
Per cent of land in corn.....	.15
Per cent of income paid as interest.....	—35
Average value of farm products.....	—32

The per cent of the population living on farms was of little value in predicting Populist voting behavior. Although it would seem logical that counties with a high per cent of farmers would return a high Populist vote, this was not the case. Counties in the western part of the state were the most rural and voted heavily Republican. German farmers voted heavily Democratic because of prohibition. Residence alone had little effect on voting behavior; only when it was combined with other factors was it of any significance.

The per cent of native-born in a county was not a significant factor in predicting the Populist vote. Although Populists are accused of nativism there was no tendency for counties with high percentages of native born to vote Populist. Apparently the different ethnic groups in Nebraska were fairly well divided between the three parties.

Protestant religious affiliation was a significant factor in predicting the magnitude of the Populist vote. The reverse of this variable, that Catholics were often Democrats, is indicated in the narrative portion of this paper. The importance of this variable suggests that although the Populists were not nativists in the strictest sense of the word, they might have given support to anti-Catholic organizations such as the American Protective Association. However, this is improbable since the counties with large Catholic populations eventually joined the Populists. The Populists, as Protestants, might have had some sympathy for the program of the APA, but they put economic issues first and fused with the Catholic Democrats after 1890.

The per cent of improved land in wheat was the most important factor in predicting the Populist vote. Counties which had the highest per cent of land in wheat tended to

return the highest Populist vote. On the other hand, the per cent of arable land in corn did not aid in prediction. Wheat production is often considered a less mature type of agriculture than the corn-hog pattern. Less capital is required for wheat while a corn economy requires a considerably larger amount of capital to be spent for the purchase of livestock, fencing and the like. The wheat economy is considerably less stable because the bulk of the product dictates high freight costs and because the international wheat market fluctuates widely.<sup>30</sup>

The amount of interest paid by the farmer in Nebraska's counties has a negative effect in the equation. The Populists may have been paying exorbitant interest charges, but others in Nebraska were paying more. Interest rates and charges apparently were more of a rallying cry for Populist orators than factors which independently influenced political loyalties. Similarly insignificant in predicting the Populist vote was the variable, average value of farm products per farm. The Populists were obviously not the poorest farmers in Nebraska. As with the interest variable the poorest and most debt-ridden farmers were often Republicans living in the far western sections of the state.

When Nebraska's Populists are reconsidered in their local setting they reveal many of the characteristics of groups living on the fringes of society. Because of the isolation inherent in their environment, the farmers had not participated effectively in politics. To rationalize their political frustrations even at the county level they may have talked, with considerable justification, in terms of conspiracy. Even if represented in the state legislature by a sympathetic villager, the difference between the goals of the farmer and villager tended to work against the farmer.

The Populist might have been disenchanted with his political and economic system, but he did not join those who attacked it in racial terms. Many people of foreign

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<sup>30</sup> Louis B. Schmidt, "The Internal Grain Trade of the United States, 1860-1890," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XIX, (April 1921), 196-245.

birth joined the movement. Even the Catholic, German and Bohemian groups, after some uneasiness about the Populist inclinations toward prohibition, found fusion with the Protestant Populists possible.

Finally, the Nebraska Populist earned his living in an environment located between the frontier farmer and the farmer of eastern Nebraska who had the capital and climate to engage in corn-hog production. The Populist was not the poorest nor the most interest-burdened farmer in the state, but because of his greater emphasis on wheat production he was particularly vulnerable to economic crisis.