



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: Main Street and the Countryside: Patterns of Voting in Nebraska during the Populist Era

Full Citation: Frederick C Luebke, "Main Street and the Countryside: Patterns of Voting in Nebraska during the Populist Era," *Nebraska History* 59 (1969): 257-275

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1969Voting.pdf>

Date: 10/28/2015

Article Summary: Before 1890 voting summaries show little difference between town and country precincts. Beginning with that election, town precincts went for the Republican party while country districts favored Democratic candidates.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Jennings Bryan

Nebraska Place Names: Clay County, Madison County, Otoe County, Phelps County

Keywords: Farmer's Alliance, Panic of 1893, Populism, Republicans, Democrats, tariff, prohibition, Germans, Main Street, American Protective Association, drought, cooperatives, William Jennings Bryan

Tables and Charts:

Table 1. Mean percentage of votes cast for candidates for president and governor in sample precincts in Nebraska, 1888 to 1898

Chart showing mean percentage of votes cast for Democratic and Democratic-Populist fusion candidates for president and governor among rural, urban, and mixed rural and urban precincts in Nebraska in general elections from 1888 to 1898

Table 2. Percentage point differences between the mean percentages of votes cast for presidential and gubernatorial candidates in sample urban and rural precincts in Nebraska, 1888 to 1898, according to party

Chart showing mean percentage of votes cast for Republican candidates for president and governor among rural, urban, and mixed urban and rural precincts in Nebraska in general elections from 1888 to 1898

Table 3. Percentage of votes cast for major party candidates for president and governor in regionally selected town and county precincts in the elections of 1892, 1894, and 1896

Chart showing mean percentages of votes cast for Populist and Populist-Democratic fusion candidates for president and governor among rural, urban, and mixed rural and urban precincts in general elections in Nebraska from 1888 to 1898

MAIN STREET AND THE COUNTRYSIDE: PATTERNS OF VOTING IN NEBRASKA DURING THE POPULIST ERA

By FREDERICK C. LUEBKE

In the June, 1965 issue of *Nebraska History*, Professor David F. Trask offered a stimulating hypothesis regarding the politics of Populism.¹ After pointing out that the early farmer organizations had encountered strong opposition through the years from local businessmen as well as from "big business," he suggested that a significant change in the political pattern took place with the downturn of the business cycle which culminated in the Panic of 1893. That crisis, he noted, placed "Main Street" in the same camp with the countryside. Like the farmers, the small businessmen of the towns also began to identify the large business concerns of the North and East as the sources of their economic distress. Although antimonopolistic reform sentiments had been present in both major parties for more than a decade, the reformers had been unable to gain control of the machinery of either major party. Accordingly, Trask hypothesizes, Main Street vented its frustrations by casting aside old antagonisms and joined hands with the countryside in the Populist movement. In this way, highly successful partisan politics replaced the pressure group tactics that farmers had been using for two decades.

Professor Trask extended his thesis by suggesting that Populist "fusion" with Democratic party was related to the decline of Populist strength on the local level. "Some evidence," he wrote, "suggests that fusion was often inaugu-

Dr. Luebke is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

ated at the behest of small-town business" leaders who exploited this device in part to sustain the movement. With the return of prosperity after the election of 1896, he suggested, the community of interest between Main Street and the countryside degenerated. The small businessmen returned to their old political allegiances and the farmers renewed their interest in traditional modes of political action. Professor Trask concluded his article with a call for historians to investigate and to test his hypothesis, particularly since it had important implications for the continuities that may have existed on the local level between the leadership of Populism and of the later Progressive movement.

Perhaps the best way to test the thesis is to analyze election data on the precinct level.² According to Trask's model, we should expect significant differences in the political behavior of rural and small town precincts during the 1880's—the pre-Populist period. With the election of 1890, the first in which the Farmers' Alliance entered the fray on a partisan basis, the differences should have been greatly reduced. This trend should have continued as more Main Street businessmen presumably allied themselves with the agrarian radicals. We should expect the highpoint of cooperation in the election of 1894, the first general election after the Panic of 1893. Urban-rural differences should have nearly disappeared as town and country together identified big business as the common enemy.³ With the return of prosperity after the election of 1896, there should have been a gradual return to voting patterns reminiscent of the 1880's.⁴

My analysis is based upon the election records of 186 precincts in 15 Nebraska counties.⁵ Since this study is designed to probe conflicts between the towns and the countryside, the large cities of Omaha and Lincoln were excluded. Counties strongly attracted by Populism were selected as well as several that were less susceptible to the radical contagion. Availability and consistency of election data were also factors in the selection of the counties.

The precincts were grouped in three categories. An *urban* group includes those precincts consisting only of non-farm population in incorporated cities and towns.⁶ If a precinct was located in a rural area but had within its confines a village of 250 or more inhabitants it was classified as *mixed* town and country. A *rural* group consists of precincts in which there were no villages or hamlets exceeding 250 persons.⁷

Percentages of votes cast for the Republican, Democratic, and Populist candidates for governor or president were tabulated for each election from 1888 to 1898. The votes cast for candidates of all minor parties were included in the percentages, but they are not recorded in the accompanying tables. The number of precincts varies among the several elections because voting data are not always available for every precinct in every election and because county and city governments changed the number and boundaries of the precincts from time to time.⁸

The mean percentages of the total number of votes cast for major party candidates in Nebraska in the three groups of sample precincts from 1888 to 1898 are presented in Table 1.

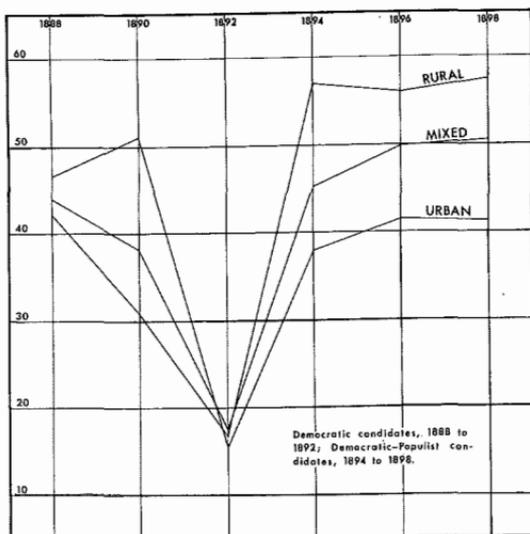
Table 1. Mean percentages of votes cast for candidates for president and governor in sample precincts in Nebraska, 1888 to 1898.

| Political Party | Type of Precinct | Election of | | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 1888 | 1890 | 1892 | 1894* | 1896* | 1898* |
| Republican | Urban | 48.6 | 35.4 | 51.0 | 54.8 | 55.8 | 57.8 |
| Republican | Mixed | 51.7 | 29.5 | 42.3 | 46.9 | 47.7 | 48.8 |
| Republican | Rural | 52.6 | 19.9 | 33.5 | 36.4 | 42.0 | 42.0 |
| Democratic | Urban | 46.8 | 51.1 | 15.5 | 38.2 | 41.8 | 41.3 |
| Democratic | Mixed | 44.0 | 38.2 | 17.9 | 45.4 | 49.9 | 50.6 |
| Democratic | Rural | 42.1 | 30.8 | 17.2 | 56.9 | 55.9 | 57.5 |
| Populist | Urban | | 11.4 | 31.7 | | | |
| Populist | Mixed | | 30.3 | 37.4 | | | |
| Populist | Rural | | 47.6 | 47.3 | | | |

*Democratic and Populist parties nominated the same candidates.

Several important characteristics are revealed by the data. The first is that the election of 1888, used in this study as a pre-Populist base, does not reveal a significant town and country conflict, as the model predicts. Secondly, beginning in 1890, differences in the voting behavior between town and country precincts are very much in evidence. This pattern continued in subsequent contests and was most pronounced in 1894, when fusion between Democratic and Populist candidates for state offices was first tried in Nebraska. A third characteristic is that the distinctive qualities of rural and small town voting, apparently precipitated by the Populist movement, continued almost as strongly after the waning of the Populist party as they had been earlier when the movement was at its peak. Finally, it should be noted that the town precincts were remarkably persistent in their attachment to the Republican party throughout the Populist era, with the exception of the election of 1890. This divergence, as will be explained below, was not the consequence of radical agitation, but rather of ethno-cultural conflicts symbolized by prohibition. In general, therefore, the data does not support Professor Trask's hypothesis. There is no convincing quantitative evidence that Populist successes at the polls were produced by confluence of town and country voting and by a shared perception of big business as the source of economic distress.

Whatever the configuration of issues and traditions were that impinged upon individual voting decisions in Nebraska, they were not expressed politically in terms of a town and county conflict in 1888. The lack of distinctiveness between small-town and rural voting is shown by the fact that only four or five percentage points separate the town vote from the county vote for each party (Table 2). Specifically, the county precincts gave the Republican candidate 52.6 per cent of their ballots while the town precincts were somewhat less Republican at 48.6 per cent; the Republican percentage for the mixed precincts falls between the two at 51.7. The same pattern is revealed in the votes cast for the Democratic candidate; he won 46.8 per cent in the



Mean percentages of votes cast for Democratic and Democratic-Populist fusion candidates for president and governor among rural, urban, and mixed rural and urban precincts in Nebraska in general elections from 1888 to 1898.

towns and 42.1 per cent in the rural sampling. While the countryside was somewhat more attracted to the Republican party and the towns to the Democratic party, the similarities between the two are more important than the differences. Furthermore, the relationships are precisely the reverse of what they became after 1892 when rural preference for Democratic-Populist candidates was pronounced and when Republican majorities in the urban precincts increased regularly in every election to 1898.

Evidence suggests that the election of 1888 was reasonably typical of the pre-Populist period. It serves well as a point of comparison for the political upheaval that followed. Though there was an abundance of agrarian discontent (as there had been throughout the 1880's), crops were fair in 1888. Nor was the election disrupted by unusual circumstances or issues. The tariff tended to dominate the political debate as professional politicians earnestly sought to ignore prohibition, the leading socio-cultural issue of the time.⁹

The big change began in 1890. The Republican party was the first to wither under Populist wrath, fanned as it was by a devastating drought. Republican percentages in rural precincts tumbled 32.7 points to 19.9 per cent as the People's Independent party reaped nearly one-third of all the votes in the state. The GOP also lost ground in the city precincts where it dropped 13.2 points to 35.4 per cent. Many of these urban votes were picked up by the Democrats, whose percentage increased nearly five points to 51.1 per cent, probably because of their uncompromising opposition to the prohibition amendment which appeared on the ballot that year.¹⁰ Like the Republicans, the Democrats suffered losses among the farmers, but theirs were

Table 2. Percentage point differences between the mean percentages of votes cast for presidential and gubernatorial candidates in sample urban and rural precincts in Nebraska, 1888 to 1898, according to party.

| Political Party | Election of | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1888 | 1890 | 1892 | 1894* | 1896* | 1898* |
| Republican | 4.0 | 15.5 | 17.5 | 18.4 | 14.0 | 15.8 |
| Democratic | 4.7 | 20.3 | 1.7 | 18.7 | 14.1 | 16.2 |
| Populist | | 36.2 | 15.6 | | | |

*Democratic and Populist parties nominated the same candidates.

comparatively mild, since they were sustained by thousands of German immigrant voters who marched to the polls as in a phalanx to support the Democracy, their last, best hope against the forces of prohibition, woman suffrage, and compulsory school legislation.¹¹

Although the Alliancemen technically lost the election of 1890, they nevertheless reaped a bountiful harvest of votes. In their first venture into partisan politics they gleaned 47.6 per cent of the votes cast in the country districts, 30.3 per cent in the mixed precincts, and even 11.4 per cent among the urbanites. It seemed obvious that if they could improve their prospects in the towns, victory at the polls would be assured.

Efforts to that end paid off handsomely in 1892 when the Populist party came within a few percentage points of winning a plurality of the votes in the state. Projecting an image of itself as the champion of all the common people in their struggle against malevolent economic forces, the Populist party experienced a remarkable three-fold increase in the urban precincts, where its percentage shot up from 11.4 per cent to 31.7 per cent,¹² a phenomenon that superficially corresponds with Trask's hypothesis. Closer analysis, however, suggests that these Populist gains in the city were largely supplied by immigrant workers who had voted Democratic in the previous election, not by Main Street businessmen, who, by contrast, seem to have provided the votes for the sizeable gain registered by the GOP in the town precincts in 1892.

While Grover Cleveland regained the White House in 1892 with impressive style on the national level, his party suffered a debacle of unprecedented proportions in Nebraska. Attracting no more than 12.8 per cent of the statewide vote in the presidential race, the Democrats saw their share of the urban vote plunge from about half the total in 1890 to less than a sixth in 1892.¹³ In 1890 many Main Street merchants, most of whom were normally Republican, had been convinced that prohibition was "bad business." Like many professional politicians, they tended to see prohibition as the work of puritanical cranks and fanatics. By joining with the Democrats they defeated the prohibition amendment in 1890 and removed it for the time being from the political arena. The crisis having passed, the small businessmen of these sentiments were free to return to their traditional Republican allegiance in 1892. They contributed substantially to the 15.6 per cent increase which the GOP experienced in urban precincts at that time.

It is not likely that many small town merchants were inclined to join the Populist cause. Main Street was "the Establishment" in small-town Nebraska and "the Establishment" was usually Republican. A basic element in

Midwestern respectability, identification with the Republican party, was, as Brand Whitlock described it, "a fundamental and self-evident thing, like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or the flag, or the federal judiciary."¹⁴ Populism, by contrast, was anti-Establishment. It was a massive threat to the *status quo*, As Stanley Parsons has pointed out, a polarity rather than a community of interest characterized town and country relationships during the Populist era.¹⁵ A deep-rooted hostility was inevitable when the Farmers' Alliance, for example, began to establish co-operatives that by-passed the Main Street merchant. Though economic venture of this kind experienced only limited success, farmers used them to buy and to market grain, to retail basic commodities, and eventually even to move into the fields of insurance, loans, and journalism. The local businessmen were keenly aware of the competition posed by the Alliance purchasing agents who placed cash orders for goods directly with wholesalers and manufacturers in Lincoln, Omaha, and cities farther east.¹⁶

In general, the small-town merchants seem to have had more in common with the business interests of the big cities than they had with the farm population which surrounded them. Parsons has pointed out that the "town fathers" were actively interested in expanding the economy of their communities by a variety of promotional schemes, by securing railroad facilities, and by acquiring for their towns industrial enterprises. They bitterly resented any threat to the established financial and leadership structure. While the farmer usually had to trade locally, no matter how angry he was, the Eastern financier did not have to invest capital in prairie enterprise.¹⁷ Thus the town and country conflict was exacerbated, not mitigated, by the economic and political tensions of the 1890's. Just as many farmers felt driven to support Populism, many Main Street businessmen returned after 1890 with renewed confidence to the Republican party as the only adequate vehicle for sound, substantial, respectable progress and reform.¹⁸

The fact remains, however, that approximately one-third of the voters in the town precincts sampled in this study voted Populist in 1892 and that this was a three-fold increase over 1890. According to Trask's hypothesis, this increase may be accounted for by small-town businessmen who latched onto the Populist movement, hoping to sustain it by means of fusionist tactics. Two recent studies lend some apparent support to this view.¹⁹ By drawing upon Hamilton and Otoe county sources, they reveal a noteworthy effort by small-town residents to join the farmers in the Populist party organization. But instead of harmonizing the interests of both groups on the basis of an ideology that identified Eastern big business as a common foe, the entry of the townsmen produced much dissension. A struggle for leadership ensued as the urbanites espoused fusion with the Democratic party and as the farmers fought to keep their party "pure." The countryside refused to follow urban leadership. After all, Populism was in the first instance an agrarian effort to throw off the domination of the city. Farmers inevitably resented urban efforts to take over the leadership of their movement. In the case of Otoe County, the low point of Populism was reached in 1894, the year in which Nebraska City Populists won control of the county organization. Some gains were made in the city, but it is likely that they represented the votes of workingmen rather than Main Street merchants. Most significantly, the leaders of urban Populism in Otoe County were often first or second generation Irish or German immigrants, persons frequently excluded from membership in the Main Street Establishment.²⁰ This suggests that fusion was rather a device employed by urban "outs" to challenge the power of the "ins"—the Anglo-Saxon Protestant Republican merchants and professional persons. It was an urban power struggle in which the farmers found themselves being used as pawns. No wonder they fought fusion so bitterly.

The political realignment wrought by Populism was completed in the election of 1894. Having unseated the

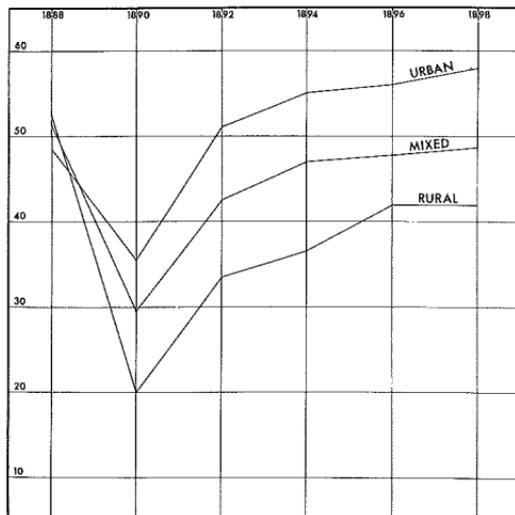
Bourbon leaders of the Democratic party in the state, William Jennings Bryan masterminded the subsequent fusion with the Populists, expecting to be rewarded with a seat in the United States Senate by a legislature elected with this strategy.²¹ But 1894 was a Republican year. The malaise produced by the Panic of 1893, plus the worst drought in Nebraska's history, unprecedented crop failures, and an upsurge of chauvinistic anti-Catholicism spearheaded by the American Protective Association, all worked to the advantage of the Republicans as they scored remarkable victories in Nebraska and across the nation. In Nebraska Bryanite fusion succeeded only in the gubernatorial race; all other state offices, as well as the state legislature, went to the GOP.

For the purposes of this study, however, the most important fact about the election of 1894 is the way in which it hardened the lines of the town and country differences in party preferences. From 1894 through the years 1898 when Populist fortunes were dwindling, the Republican party attracted about 15 per cent more votes in the town precincts than it did in the countryside (Table 2). Conversely, the "Demopop" candidates regularly experienced a comparable advantage in the rural districts.

From the vantage point of comparative partisan strength in town and country, the famed election of 1896 declines in significance. Even though Nebraska's own William Jennings Bryan achieved fusion on the national level and became the Democratic and Populist candidate for president, the pattern of voting did not change significantly from what it had been in 1894.²² The differences in party preference between the towns and the countryside, which had averaged about 18 or 19 percentage points in 1894, were somewhat less pronounced in 1896. This decrease in polarity may be explained by the loyalty Nebraskans presumably felt for Bryan as a presidential candidate from their home state.

In any case, there is no convincing evidence that Main Street switched to Bryan. The greatest statistical change in 1896 occurred rather among rural voters, who increased their percentage for the Republican candidate from 36.4 to 42.0. In 1894 the bulk of these votes had been cast for the splinter Gold Democratic party, mostly by German farmers. Formerly identified with the Democratic party, they switched to William McKinley in 1896 when it became apparent that continued support for the Gold Democrats would be nothing more than a prideful but ineffective gesture.²³

The election of 1898 was included in this study as a post-Populist election to anchor the data for comparison purposes at the end of the period. The most impressive fact revealed by the data is the continued lack of change. All categories display a percentage that varies not more than two points from 1896. This may be accounted for by the fact that the Populist party was by no means as dead in Nebraska as it was nationally.²⁴ Nevertheless, the election of 1898 was a colorless affair; it excited less interest than any since 1888. The return of prosperity had drained the free silver issue of its vitality and imperialism was only beginning to arouse Nebraska voters.



Mean percentages of votes cast for Republican candidates for president and governor among urban, rural, and mixed urban and rural precincts in Nebraska in general elections from 1888 to 1898.

A final dimension of town and country voting patterns may be illustrated by specific examples chosen from different parts of the state (Table 3).

Table 3. Percentages of Votes Cast for Major Party Candidates for President and Governor in Regionally Selected Town and County Precincts in the Elections of 1892, 1894, and 1896.

| Precinct | 1892 | | | 1894 | | 1896 | |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|--------|------|--------|
| | Rep. | Dem. | Pop. | Rep. | Fusion | Rep. | Fusion |
| <i>Phelps County</i> | | | | | | | |
| City of Holdrege | 63.0 | 5.2 | 28.5 | 70.3 | 23.4 | 66.3 | 30.7 |
| Sheridan Township | 38.1 | 1.0 | 56.2 | 34.5 | 62.7 | 49.2 | 48.4 |
| Anderson Township | 7.7 | 1.0 | 87.5 | 7.0 | 91.0 | 14.2 | 82.5 |
| <i>Clay County</i> | | | | | | | |
| City of Sutton | 62.8 | 6.9 | 30.4 | 65.3 | 30.2 | 64.7 | 33.3 |
| Sutton Township | 16.3 | 3.3 | 79.7 | 16.8 | 81.8 | 33.0 | 66.1 |
| <i>Madison County</i> | | | | | | | |
| City of Norfolk | 49.0 | 15.6 | 31.3 | 57.6 | 33.2 | 63.4 | 34.4 |
| Norfolk Township | 31.7 | 21.8 | 42.0 | 35.2 | 56.3 | 44.4 | 54.6 |
| <i>Otoe County</i> | | | | | | | |
| Nebraska City | 38.4 | 27.4 | 31.3 | 50.8 | 38.6 | 48.0 | 48.3 |
| Belmont Township | 26.9 | 26.2 | 46.2 | 35.9 | 38.3 | 42.6 | 51.1 |

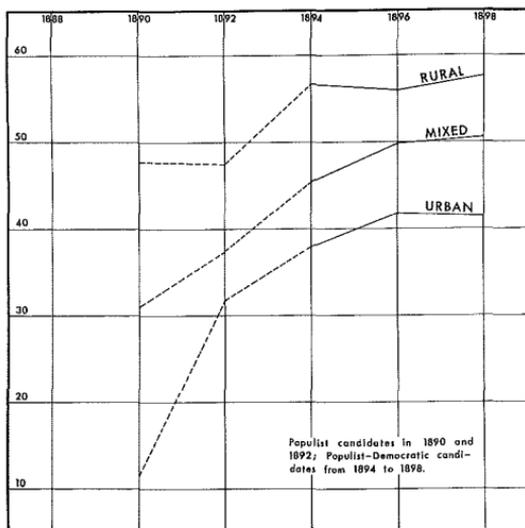
Holdrege, the county seat of heavily Populist Phelps County, remained strongly Republican throughout the 1890's, giving 63.0 per cent, 70.3 per cent, and 66.3 per cent of its total votes to GOP candidates in the elections of 1892, 1894, and 1896, respectively. At the same time, in Sheridan township, a rural precinct situated immediately north of Holdrege, the Republican candidates attracted only 38.1 per cent, 34.5 per cent, and 49.2 per cent in the same elections. Furthermore, Republican strength was all but destroyed a few miles farther out in the countryside. In Anderson township, for example, the GOP was reduced to 7.7 per cent, 7.0 per cent, and 14.2 per cent. In other words, Populism scarcely made a dent in the city while it completely dominated the country. Moving nearly 100

miles east to Clay county, on the edge of the so-called Populist belt, we find that the pattern remained substantially the same. The city of Sutton was solidly Republican throughout the period, regularly winning about two-thirds of the votes cast. By contrast, in rural Sutton township the percentages won by the combined Democratic and Populist tickets ranged from 83.0 per cent in 1892 to 66.1 per cent in 1896.

A modified version of the same pattern may be observed in communities beyond the zones of great Populist strength. In Nebraska City, located on the Missouri River, Republican candidates won 38.4 per cent, 50.8 per cent, and 48.0 per cent in the elections of 1892, 1894, and 1896. In rural Belmont township, located immediately west of Nebraska City, the Republicans registered smaller proportions for the same selections: 26.9 per cent, 35.9 per cent, and 42.6 per cent. A final example is taken from Madison County, located in the northeastern part of the state. In Norfolk, the largest town in the county, the GOP attracted 49.0 per cent, 57.6 per cent, and 63.3 per cent in the three contests. The surrounding countryside, by contrast, gave the Republicans only 31.7 per cent, 35.2 per cent, and 44.4 per cent, again documenting fact that marked differences characterize the voting patterns between town and country. Moreover, the most interesting observation permitted by these examples is that the sharpest differences of all occurred in the areas of greatest Populist strength.

In conclusion, it should be observed that both quantitative and impressionistic evidence reveal a pattern that bears slight resemblance to the hypothesis proposed by Professor Trask.²⁵ Instead, it appears that prior to the entrance of the agrarians into partisan politics in 1890, the pattern of voting in the towns, villages, and countryside of Nebraska was largely undifferentiated. With the advent of drought in 1889 and the obvious failure of reform movements to substantially influence either major party, farmer organizations pursued a variety of political and economic policies

that served to intensify existing animosities between Main Street and its rural constituencies. Sharp differences in political behavior developed quickly, a polarity mitigated somewhat in 1892 when Populists successfully won support from residents of cities and towns. Fusion between Demo-



Mean percentages of votes cast for Populist and Populist-Democratic fusion candidates for president and governor among rural, urban, and mixed rural and urban precincts in general elections in Nebraska from 1888 to 1898.

crats and Populists, which began on the local level well before the Populist movement reached its ideological peak in 1896, had the effect of widening and hardening the lines that emerged from the fluid allegiances of the early 1890's. The Populist fever thus seems to have fixed the attachment of Main Street for the Republican party, even as it increased the proportion of farmers who adhered to the Democratic party. This pattern of party preference continued after vitality of Populism had been sapped by the return of prosperity.

Professor Trask concluded his article by asserting that a test of his hypothesis, regardless of whether it would be sustained or not, is likely to "produce some significant additional insight into the grass roots politics of the most important and controversial movements in American history."²⁶ This prediction will be validated when historians conduct similar grass root studies in Kansas, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, and compare their results with Populism as it existed in the Carolinas, Georgia, and other states of the deep South.

NOTES

¹ David F. Trask, "Note on the Politics of Populism," *Nebraska History*, XLVI, (June, 1965), 157-161.

² Cf. Samuel P. Hays, "The Social Analysis of American Political History, 1880-1920," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXX (Sept., 1965), 373-394; Gilbert C. Fite, "William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896: Some Views and Problems," *Nebraska History*, XLVII (Sept., 1966), 259f.

³ Trask is not clear regarding the relationship of fusion to the Populist movement. He identifies fusion as an urban-based strategy designed to sustain Populism at the polls as the movement weakened, presumably a consequence of the return of prosperity. But in Nebraska fusion came at the height of agrarian distress. On the county level it occurred in some places as early as 1892. Moreover, some Democratic leaders urged their constituencies to vote for Weaver, the Populist candidate for President in that year. Fusion on the state level was effected in 1894, when Populism theoretically should have been strongest and hardly in need of a sustaining device. Trask is correct when he observes that fusion was often urged by small-town Populists for the purpose of shoring up Populist prospects. The confusion rather results from a failure to recognize that Populism reached its high point in 1890 and 1892, not 1896, and that it began to wane during the very years when the depression was most severe, not with the return of prosperity.

⁴ Models of this kind, of course, presuppose the existence of state and local issues and traditions that may cause significant modifications in the configurations of party preferences. Yet, by testing a sufficiently large number of examples, the main trends ought to be revealed.

⁵ The counties selected were, from west to east, Hitchcock, Phelps, Polk, Platte, Madison, Stanton, Seward, Thayer, Jefferson, Cuming, Washington, and Otoe. In addition, data from five precincts from Clay and York counties was available to me and was used in the tabulations.

⁶ As Robert Dykstra has pointed out in a pioneering analysis of town and country conflicts, to speak of "urban-rural" differences in this connection reflects a lack of suitable terms. Since both historians and sociologists have tended to overlook the town and country conflict, an appropriately subtle vocabulary has not been developed. See Dykstra, "Town-Country Conflict: A Hidden Dimension in American Social History," *Agricultural History*, XXXVIII (Oct., 1964), 195-204.

⁷ A typical agricultural precinct in Nebraska in the 1890's, often six miles by six miles in size, had approximately 500 inhabitants. Thus, when a village within a given precinct contained more than

250 persons, it is likely that farmer interests were not dominant, but were balanced to some extent by merchant and professional interests. This view is substantiated by a recent study which demonstrates that Nebraska hamlets and villages frequently performed (and still perform today) important commercial and service functions, despite their small size. See Albert J. Larson, "The Hamlets of Nebraska" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of Geography, University of Nebraska, 1968).

⁸ The range in the number of town precincts is from 14 to 32; for mixed precincts it is from 44 to 50; for rural precincts, from 89 to 104.

⁹ Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 126; Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), pp. 140-141.

¹⁰ Compare this Democratic strength in the town with Walter T. K. Nugent's discovery that Democratic candidates for county offices in Kansas from 1889 to 1892 were more urban-oriented than were Republicans. See his "Some Parameters of Populism," *Agricultural History*, XL (Oct., 1966), 262.

¹¹ Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, pp. 141-148 and *passim*.

¹² At the same time it should be noted that Populist stock did not rise among the farmers in 1892. The percentage for rural precincts remained unchanged at 47 per cent.

¹³ The Democratic party did somewhat better in the race for state offices. Indeed, William Jennings Bryan was returned to his seat in the United States House of Representatives by a slender plurality. Many Democratic voters cast a straight ticket except for the presidential race in which case they deserted Cleveland for Weaver. See Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (3 vols.; Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1931), I, 722.

¹⁴ Quoted in Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, [1959] 1965), p. 48. See also E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (New York: Random House, 1964). Sociologists Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman give an illuminating analysis of the relationships between politics and social structure of the small town in their *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power, and Religion in a Rural Community* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1958), pp. 110-226. The staunch Republicanism of the small-town elite in Nebraska may be discovered by reading the weekly newspapers of dozens of communities during the Populist era.

¹⁵ Stanley B. Parsons, Jr., "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" *Nebraska History*, XLIV (June, 1963), 87-93.

¹⁶ For examples of such economic activity by the Nebraska Alliance and of Main Street's bitter opposition, see Frieda C. Kuester, "The Farmers' Alliance in Nebraska" (unpublished M. A. thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1927), pp. 44-52. David Stephens Trask (not to be confused with David F. Trask) recounts the experiences of Mike Meehan, the editor of the Populist newspaper in Seward, Nebraska. Meehan undercut local merchants by taking orders for groceries supplied by a Lincoln concern. Later he organized the "Honest Front" store for farmers in Seward. Bitter denunciations of Meehan's activity quickly appeared in the "establishment" newspapers of the community. See "Anti-Populism in Nebraska" (unpublished M. A. thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1968), pp. 88-90. See also John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1931] 1961), p. 134, and Parsons, "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" p. 90.

¹⁷ Stanley B. Parsons, Jr., "The Agrarian Myth and Political Reality" (unpublished MS), pp. 4-8.

¹⁸ Although Walter T. K. Nugent does not analyze the characteristics of Populist leaders in Kansas after 1892, he discovered that the most striking differences between Republicans and Populists were related to urban or rural residence. While more than half of the Republicans in his study were engaged in urban occupations, none of the Populists were, with the exception of a scattering of lawyers. Conversely, seven-eighths of the Populists were farmers. "Some Parameters of Populism," pp. 259, 262, 267.

¹⁹ The Hamilton County data is in Stanley B. Parsons, Jr., "The Populist Context: Nebraska Farmers and Their Antagonists, 1882-1895" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of History, State University of Iowa, 1964), pp. 217-219. Otoe County is the focus of an unpublished seminar paper in the Department of History, University of Nebraska, by James Byron Potts, entitled "Urban-Rural Response to the Agrarian Revolt: The Otoe County Populists, 1890-1896" (1968).

²⁰ Parsons noted that the later Hamilton County leaders in the Populist party "were, for the most part, business and professional men." This does not, however, militate against my hypothesis that fusion was more an aspect of a power struggle on the local level than it was of Populist ideology. The businessmen may have been German saloon keepers as in Nebraska City or Irish editor-merchants like Mike Meehan (see above, note 16) and the professionals may have been lawyers like those cited by Nugent (note 18, above).

²¹ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1913), III, 740-750; Paolo Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: Political*

Evangelist, 1860-1908 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 99-102.

²² Carl Degler, Walter Dean Burnham, Samuel Hays, and Samuel McSeveney are among recent historians who have noted that the election of 1894 rather than that of 1896 heralded the beginning of a new era in American politics.

²³ Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, pp. 91, 104, 158-159.

²⁴ Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, p. 395. Some contemporary observers believed that the Populist tail was still wagging the Democratic dog in Nebraska. William Poynter, the "Demopop" victor in the gubernatorial race of that year, was a Populist, as was his predecessor, Silas Holcomb. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 769.

²⁵ My findings correspond closely to those of a similar but less comprehensive analysis by Stanley Parsons. He analyzed election data on a precinct basis from Hayes, Scotts Bluff, Hamilton, Howard, Kearney, Cuming, and Colfax counties. Of these, only one county, *viz.* Cuming, was included in the present study. Parsons' selection of counties may be criticized on two counts: first, all but two of the counties are located west of Nebraska's center of population (which at that time was located in Polk County), leaving the southeastern quarter of the state's population unsampled; second, his urban sampling was somewhat inadequate since none of his urban precincts (which number only eight) were located in communities of more than 2,500 inhabitants. In the present study, from 14 to 32 precincts located in nine cities (Nebraska City, Blair, West Point, Norfolk, Columbus, Seward, Fairbury, Grand Island, and Holdrege) were examined. All but three of these communities exceeded 2,500 inhabitants in the 1890's. Nevertheless, the voting patterns revealed by the two studies are remarkably congruent. Differences occur in the mean percentages but not in the essential relationships. See Parsons, "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" pp. 91-93.

²⁶ Trask, "The Politics of Populism," p. 161.