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Populism, Race, and Political Interest in Virginia

This article examines the interests expressed by white Populists and black Republicans regarding political coalition in Virginia. Virginia is interesting because it is generally considered a failed site for the Populist movement and for interracial organizing under it. Such a coalition was untenable statewide, but economic, social, and historical conditions opened a space for it in a cluster of majority-black counties. The failure of the coalition was not due to incompatible interests but to changing calculations of the outcomes. The interests expressed by white Populists and black Republicans converged and then diverged sharply as the meaning of past interracial coalitions changed for both sides.

In March 1890, a Virginia farmer and Farmers' Alliance leader named James Bradshaw Beverley wrote to the *Journal of the Knights of Labor*.¹ Although he was at the time a Democrat and did not want the movement to break with the party, Beverley expressed his support for the early political activity of the Alliance. He also repeated a joke that he had heard from John Jasper, a black Richmond preacher who had become famous for his traveling sermons:

I had a dream the other night. I dreamed I went to heaven and knocked at de door, and St. Peter said, "Who's dar?" Says I, "John Jasper." Says he, "Is you mounted?" Says I, "No." Den he 'lows "Yer can't come in here 'les you are mounted." I walked along back and presen'ly I met General Mahone a-walkin' up de hill. I say, "General, where you gwine?" "Gwine up to heaven." Say I, "You can't get in dar 'les yer mounted—I just tried." He scratched his head a minute, den he says, "John, I jus' thought

how we can both get in. You get down on all fours and I'll ride yer right in." So I got down and de General a-straddled me, and up we went. I felt so good I fairly cantered. We got dar and de General he rapped. Says St. Peter, "Is yer mounted?" General he says, "Yes." "Well," 'lows St. Peter, "tie yer horse to de fence and come on in!" (*JKL*, 6 March 1890)

Although on the surface the joke seems fatalistic, its use on the lecture circuit and in a letter to a progressive journal suggests that it was meant as a call to action. The two different contexts of the joke give an indication of the political discontent that both black Republicans and white Alliancemen felt. In Jasper's telling, the joke summed up the bitter feelings of many blacks toward William Mahone, the white leader of Virginia's "Readjuster" political movement of the early 1880s. The Readjusters drew heavily on the support of black Republican voters, and Mahone's party rode to victory on their backs, as it were. Mahone later became the unofficial leader of the state's Republican Party, and many black voters felt that they had nowhere else to turn for representation. In Beverley's telling, the joke conveyed the frustrations of white Alliancemen working for reform within the Democratic Party. To them, Mahone was simply an incidental (though convenient) butt for the joke.

This article deals with the shifting calculations of interest expressed on both sides about interracial coalition under the Populist movement in Virginia. Less than two years after Beverley wrote the letter, the Alliance openly broke with the Democratic Party and launched a full-scale third party challenge. The new People's Party, like other third party challengers before it, needed to establish interracial support to succeed. For a time it did so. But by 1893, when Beverley himself was the Populist nominee for lieutenant governor, both white Populists and black Republicans had backed away from what had initially seemed a promising marriage of interests. White Populists felt that black voters were still being duped into carrying competing candidates to victory, now Democrats rather than Republicans. Black voters felt that the reform movement had largely forsaken them. To them, Beverley and the other white Populists had become just like Mahone.

This article contributes to existing scholarship in two ways. First, it contributes to recent work on the constitution of interests in political narratives, and the role of those narratives in social change. Rather than focusing on interests as objective and fixed, I examine the shifting constructions of interest employed by both white Populists and black Republicans. Just as Jasper's

joke took on different meanings at different points in time, the calculations of interest on both sides shifted over the course of organizing. What changed was not the potential risks or payoffs of the coalition, but rather the assessment that both parties made of the likely outcome.

Second, this article contributes to substantive work on southern Populism by examining a largely overlooked site. Virginia is important as a “failed” site because it shows the danger of reading historical processes backward from outcomes to causes. The conventional wisdom is that electoral Populism was never viable in Virginia because the political interests of black Republicans and white Populists did not coincide. While Populist candidates were never able to capture statewide support, they were initially a powerful force in a cluster of southeastern counties. By forging a strategic interracial alliance there, the Populists were a potentially serious threat to the Democrats in state and congressional elections. The failure of the interracial movement in Virginia was the result of changing assessments of interest by the potential allies in the coalition.

Interest, Narrative, and Social Change

How do common interests emerge? A great deal of the classic literature, stemming from Tocquevillian and Marxian theory (as well as the more recent work on social movements), is written as if interests are fixed by material or status positions prior to social interaction. Such a view implies that interests are also static rather than continually developing in the process of social interaction. Thus individual or collective actors may be more or less aware of their interests, or they may reveal or conceal their interests. Interests, however, are external to the interaction process itself. What the joke above indicates, and what recent work in the social sciences has begun to consider, is that political interests are instead the product of constant reflexive activity on the part of actors. In this view, the production of interests is a central feature of political activism. Moreover, it is a process that occurs in time.

Briefly, there are two related claims in this argument. First, interests are not simply given by material or political conditions; they are produced in the interaction between those conditions and the reflexive capacity of individual and collective actors to interpret them (see Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1992; Sewell 1992). Second, narrative plays an important part in this process (Steinmetz 1992; Somers 1992; Griffin 1993).² Positions and events become

meaningful when they are placed within ongoing stories that locate actors in relation to other actors within a broader context (see Burke 1969). It is through narrative that actors attempt to square ongoing events with historically conditioned interpretive schemata. Political interests are thus “historically and socially bounded” (Steinberg 1991: 266), related to the material organization of social life, but also to the already experienced history of such organization.

The work of Charles Tilly (2003: esp. chaps. 3, 4, and 5) has been central to this discussion. Tilly maintains that political identities are collective understandings of a we/they boundary. Because the contours of any such boundary are always relational and contingent, Tilly has recently begun to stress the importance of stories that make the boundary meaningful and suggest strategies of action. The formation of political identities thus necessarily involves the production of narratives of interest.

This article adopts this line of thought. The case considered here draws attention to two generally unsettled theoretical issues, however. The first has to do with the creation and maintenance of interests in coalitions. Most of the literature, including the work of Tilly, has examined the relationship between opposing sets of political actors (such as parties), or between actors and institutions (such as movements and the state structures that they mobilize against) (see Hanagan et al. 1998). This article instead focuses on the negotiation of interests that occurs between potential *allies* in contentious political movements. Specifically, the question under consideration is not whether white Populists and black Republicans had common interests, but whether and to what degree they came to express common interests. After I set the stage through historical overviews of the movement and its development in Virginia, I turn my focus to the narratives of interest produced by each side regarding the other.

I draw primarily from two newspaper sources where interest narratives took shape—the *Virginia Sun* and the *Richmond Planet*. These are considered as influential voices rather than as strictly representative ones. The *Virginia Sun* (earlier known as the *Exchange Reporter*) was the central Populist paper in the state. A number of different individuals contributed to the organizational narrative of interest that developed in its pages, but its overall editorial voice flowed far more from the leadership than from the rank-and-file members. The *Richmond Planet*, under the direction of editor John Mitchell, was the most established public voice of Virginia’s black Republicans. Although

the editorial voice of the *Planet* was effectively Mitchell's alone, that voice carried a great deal of weight among black Republicans statewide. Significantly, the Virginia Colored Farmers' Alliance had earlier chosen the paper as its outlet for announcements and news.

The focus of this article is on the changing content of the two developing narratives of interest, rather than on the formal properties of the narratives. Nevertheless, it should be said that these qualify as "narratives" in the formal sense. That is, they are stories in which actors are embedded in sequences of events through their actions and expected actions, and the causal connections (the "plots") are imputed on the basis of motives, interests, or inherent tendencies (see Franzosi 1998). Far from being settled, the ongoing interest narratives of the black Republicans and the white Populists intertwined in a highly contingent process in which the same conditions could seem to favor coalition at one point and disfavor it at another point.

The second unsettled issue has to do with the way narratives are implicated in social change. Here two different arguments have been put forward. On the one hand, it is often claimed that narratives provide an important motor for social stability by drawing upon widely shared and relatively deep cultural schemata through which actors interpret events. In this manner, actors may make sense of novel events by narrating them through the filter of established plotlines (see Somers 1992; Bruner 1987).³ On the other hand, narratives may be central in fostering social change as well. Novel events that do not fit easily into established plotlines can lead to radical change as new narratives are produced to make sense of them (e.g., Sewell 1980, 1996). Thus, "initially localized ruptures always have the potential of bringing about a cascading series of further ruptures that will result in structural transformation—that is, changes in cultural schemas, shifts of resources, and the emergence of new modes of power" (Sewell 1996: 844).

These two claims correspond to different forms of path-dependent sequences. James Mahoney (2000) has termed these "self-reinforcing" and "reactive" sequences, respectively. "Whereas self-reinforcing sequences are characterized by processes of reproduction that *reinforce* early events, reactive sequences are marked by backlash processes that *transform* and perhaps *reverse* early events" (ibid.: 526, emphasis in original). This article considers the possibility that the two images may not be so radically discrepant as they appear. The process of interest formation examined here is a reactive sequence that looked, after the fact, like a self-reinforcing sequence. In Vir-

ginia, the emergence of Populism provided a new way to interpret and act on the already experienced history of economic and political conditions in the state. This provided a potentially momentous novel result for Virginia's agrarian producers: both black Republicans and white Democrats came to see common cause. This narrative realignment of interests was genuine and important, but it did not prove to be the butterfly that changed the world. As problems emerged in organizing, the meaning of the coalition changed for both parties. The very fluidity of meaning inherent in the process of interest formation also worked to absorb its transformative effects.

Race and the Populist Movement

In Virginia and throughout the South, the Populist movement comprised two successive parts: the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party. These were important as class vehicles, speaking for the concerns of southern farmers during the contentious political period of the 1880s and 1890s. At the same time, these organizations were important platforms for interracial coalition. Particularly in politics, race relations were far from settled in most of the South during this period (Woodward 1955; Dailey 2000; Redding 2003), and black voters maintained significant political strength. One result was a series of attempted interracial political coalitions, of which Populism was both the most powerful and the last (Ayers 1992: chaps. 10, 11).

From the beginning, the movement maintained that the class interests of black and white farmers were alike. Yet the Alliance was initially organized as two separate organizations: the white National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union (NFA&IU) and the parallel Colored Farmers' Alliance and Co-operative Union (CFA). The white order eventually claimed 12,000 local chapters (known as "sub-Alliances") with 700,000 members. Realistic figures on the Colored Farmers' Alliance membership do not exist, although the leaders claimed large numbers of adherents in almost every southern state (Saloutos 1960: 77, 80–81). The ties between the two orders were substantial, though informal. After 1889, the organizations held their national conventions in the same cities at the same time and sent delegations to each other's meetings (Humphrey 1975; *NE*, 16 August 1890).

Although political advocacy was always part of the agenda for the white Alliance, the organization initially claimed itself to be nonpartisan, and it steered clear of direct electoral involvement. Eventually, the Alliance

attempted to turn its membership strength into votes. There were two basic periods in electoral Populism throughout the South. Between 1890 and 1891, the Alliance began to challenge Democratic control, even while claiming to be nonpartisan. Initially, the white Populists had simply demanded that Democratic candidates support the Alliance platform in order to receive their votes. By 1890, the Alliance had begun putting forward its own candidates as “Alliance Democrats” with some success. The second period began in 1892, when the Alliance explicitly affiliated itself with the new People’s Party and organized for its first round of electoral challenges. Nominally, the Alliance continued to exist, but it was no longer active as an independent organization.

Translating the movement into a party led to a number of problems, however. As Kent Redding has noted in the case of North Carolina (Redding 2003: chap. 6), NFA&IU membership did carry over to Populist votes, if less perfectly than the leadership hoped. One significant problem that remained was forging a political alliance with black voters. While the CFA had formally been involved in the creation of the People’s Party, the organization was largely moribund by 1892, and even at its peak it never approached the NFA&IU in membership. To succeed in challenging the Democrats, the Populists had to forge an alliance with black Republicans generally.

The challenge that this posed for the Populists can be seen in the way that race was connected to the movement’s central frames of interest.⁴ When black workers were the subjects of discussion, the two most central interest frames for both the Alliance and the People’s Party concerned interracial organizing, on the one hand, and political and social interests, on the other. For both, communications invoking the interracial organizing frame overwhelmingly did so in positive or value-neutral terms, while those invoking political and social interests were primarily concerned with interracial political competition. The difference was that in the Alliance, the interracial organizing frame was the one most commonly adopted, with the political and social interest frame a distant second. In the People’s Party newspaper, the reverse was true.

In short, few if any white Alliancesmen were willing to espouse racial egalitarianism, particularly in social affairs. Yet at the same time, the economic analysis at the center of this frame recognized a common cause that could potentially trump racial interests. The Alliance could avoid some of the implications of interracial cooperation by organizing in separate but parallel orders. The People’s Party had to face the practical implications of its inter-

racial strategy more directly. In moving into independent politics, the Populists moved beyond trying to create a coalition justified in terms of narrow class interests. They asked white and black voters to leave party structures that had become a central element of identity in the post-Reconstruction South.

In the end, the project failed. This static overview provides some context but does not indicate how this appeal worked out in particular locations or how the interests of both white Populists and black Republicans developed over time. The next section details the movement's development in Virginia. The sections following it explore the temporal changes in the narratives.

Populism and Race in Virginia

Virginia is a fascinating case, since it is generally considered a failed site for the interracial coalition. Two factors are commonly cited as reasons for this failure. The first relates to the particular structure of the state's agricultural economy. The second relates to the weakness of the Alliance. In both cases, conditions were actually more favorable to the movement than they have seemed.

One important economic factor that set Virginia apart from many other southern states was that it did not experience the same economic changes that were overwhelming the cotton-producing states. Studies of the agrarian movements have typically pointed to increasing farm debt, the expansion of tenant farming, and falling cotton prices as the grievances that drove masses of southern farmers to the Alliance and provided a platform for the Populist political revolt (Hicks 1931; Schwartz 1976; Goodwyn 1976). An important component in the mobilization of the movements and in the emergence of an interracial appeal was the degree to which these economic changes threatened small independent farmers and tenants. Compared with many states of the Deep South, Virginia's agricultural production was more diverse (see Sheldon 1935) and therefore less reliant on a single cash crop. The agrarian economic structure was also relatively stable from 1880 to 1890.⁵ While many cotton states were experiencing farm concentration and creeping rates of tenancy, Virginia was not. By 1890, 75% of the farms in an average Virginia county were worked by their owners; 16% were sharecropped. Tenants paying cash rents farmed the remaining 9%. Economic conditions more closely approximated those of Populist strongholds in a cluster of majority-black

counties known as the “Southside” region. These southeastern counties had the state’s highest tenancy rates, and they were the most dependent on the production of cash crops, particularly tobacco (see Sheldon 1935: 8–9). It was this region that supplied the backbone of Populist support in Virginia.

The second reason that electoral Populism in Virginia is often overlooked has to do with a perception that the Alliance was relatively weak, leading to a lack of carryover support for the People’s Party. Robert McMath (1975: 120) points out that the Alliance in Virginia was organized at a relatively late date and that it never attained the size or influence that it did in other southern states. Lawrence Goodwyn’s (1976: 340) assessment also rests on organizational weakness. The Virginia Alliance had a “loosely organized state structure, a thin lecturing system, and an absence of thrust among the leadership.” Lacking a solid Alliance base, “the third party simply failed to achieve a genuine statewide political presence” (ibid.: 341). This argument also underestimates the movement’s potential in Virginia. While the membership of the Alliance was appreciably smaller in Virginia than in many states, it was far from anemic. The first white Alliance chapter⁶ was organized in Rockingham County in September 1887, and a county alliance followed two months later (Dunning 1975: 248). From that point, the movement spread quickly across the state. Five counties reported some organization in 1888, 35 by 1889, and by 1890 there was some Alliance presence in all but 4 of Virginia’s 100 counties. The movement’s membership was listed as 33,406 in 1891 (Sheldon 1935: 30–33), by which date the movement had lecturers at work in each of the state’s congressional districts (*ER*, 12 December 1891).

The membership of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance was also smaller in Virginia than in most southern states, and the seminal study of populism in Virginia concluded that it had only “minor significance” (Sheldon 1935: 35). But even here, Virginia was better organized than it might appear. The State Colored Alliance meeting in the fall of 1890 represented 13 counties (*NE*, 6 September 1890). The state CFA president estimated that there were 8,000 members at that time, concentrated in the black-belt counties (*NE*, 24 May 1890).⁷ Of the state’s 19 delegates to the national CFA meeting in 1891 (*RP*, 15 August 1891), 9 were from the Southside, and the others were from one or two counties away. The sole exception was a delegate from a coastal county northeast of the region.⁸ There is also evidence that the Virginia CFA membership had a relatively outspoken and independent black leadership.⁹

Economic conditions and organizational strength were thus more favor-

able for the development of electoral Populism than many observers have claimed. Another important aspect of the local context was the presence of two previous interracial political coalitions. Although the Populists rarely mentioned them explicitly, the joke discussed above indicates that they were considered. However, like the Populist interest frames discussed above, these cases provided decidedly ambiguous lessons.

The first, under Mahone's "Readjusters," lasted from 1879 to 1883. A coalition of disaffected Republicans, Democrats, and independents, the Readjusters had broken with conservative "funders" over issues of state debt. Mahone, himself a former slaveholder and Confederate officer, created an interracial coalition by emphasizing issues of poll taxes and school funding (Wynes 1961; Moore 1975; Morton 1918; Dailey 2000: 33–45). The movement's strength was in urban areas and two key Republican strongholds—the majority-black southeastern counties and the predominantly white western mountain areas (Dailey 2000: 33, 34 map 2). Despite this regional constraint, the Readjusters gained control of the legislature in 1879 by virtue of a coalition with Republicans. The coalition won the gubernatorial election in 1881, and Mahone himself was appointed to the U.S. Senate in the same year (Moore 1975: 178–79; Dailey 2000: 55). The Readjusters' success continued in 1881, but increasingly heated campaigns began to take their toll on the coalition. The 1883 campaign was a turning point. Mahone campaigned for black support openly, while the Democrats chose to campaign on racial solidarity more clearly than in previous campaigns, essentially charging that white supporters of the Readjusters were race traitors and alleging that Readjuster control meant black domination in politics.¹⁰ The Readjusters lost the election by a wide margin, although several counties in the Fourth District retained their black representatives (Morton 1918: 121–22, 122 n. 41; Wynes 1961: 28–31). Although Mahone continued to coordinate state campaigns under the Republican label in 1885 and after, retrenchment continued amid allegations of fraud (Morton 1918: 124–25).

The second case was the Reform Party led by the Knights of Labor. Itself an interracial labor movement, the Knights of Labor moved into politics in 1886, mostly focusing on local elections. The Reform Party candidates running for municipal elections in Richmond were mostly longtime Democrats. The Reform candidates worked out a coalition with black Republicans, however; they would support Republican candidates in the majority-black ward of Richmond in exchange for Republican support in the citywide election

(Fink 1985: 157). The result was a resounding victory for the coalition, which took over the city council and won half the seats on the board of aldermen (Fink 1985: 157; McLaurin 1978: 90–91). The coalition did not hold solid through the congressional elections of 1886, however. The Reform candidate attempted to concentrate on local class issues, but Democrats painted him as a supporter of social equality, while Republican leaders argued that he would take his black support for granted (Fink 1985: 160–61; McLaurin 1978: 87; Rachleff 1984: 180). Convinced that he would not win, the Reform candidate withdrew from the race and threw his support to the Democrat (McLaurin 1978: 88; Fink 1985: 164–66). The Reform Party mobilized one last time for a state legislative election in 1887, with Mahone pledging Republican support for Reform legislators, who would in return send him back to the Senate. Despite a close election, the ticket fell short of victory. Again, the color line was imposed to a much greater degree in Richmond politics after the Reform collapse (Fink 1985: 167–68).

Conditions in Virginia thus allowed for the possibility of a viable interracial coalition, though limited in scope to the Southside district and surrounding counties where the Alliance was best organized and where similar coalitions had some history of success in the past. However, to say that such a coalition was or was not in the interest of each side presumes a priori what should be the question—whether and to what degree both sides came to understand their interests as tied to coalition. Moreover, it misses the fact that such interest narratives change over the course of interaction. The next two sections examine the developing interest claims within the *Exchange Reporter/Virginia Sun* and the *Richmond Planet* over each of the two periods of Populist organizing.

Converging Interests, 1891 to 1892

As in other states, the Alliance began to pressure Democrats in 1890, but it was not until the following year that the challenge began in earnest. On the strength of its membership, the Alliance was able to pledge all of the Democratic congressmen to the Alliance yardstick in 1890 (Sheldon 1935: 64). So long as most white Alliancemen remained Democrats and most Democrats were pledged to the Alliance, no interracial political coalition seemed necessary to the Populists. After the official organization of the People's Party in Cincinnati in May 1891, Virginia's Alliance paper, the *Exchange Reporter*,

announced to its readers that the Alliance and the new party would remain strictly separate. "It should never be forgotten that the Alliance is non-partisan," according to the editorial. "The very fact that our membership is restricted to one class of citizens shows the absurdity of any claim on our part to become a political party" (*ER*, 25 July 1891).

At the same time, the Alliance paper made it plain that the People's Party, not yet endorsed by the Alliance, could provide additional political leverage. "We are proud and thankful that the People's Party has incorporated our demands in its platform, and we advise the Republicans and the Democrats to do the same, if they wish to have an equal claim on our regard. If the mountain will not come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must come to the mountain" (*ER*, 25 July 1891). Two developments during the year nudged the white Alliance toward a more direct challenge of Democratic control and toward a more serious consideration of coalition with black Republicans.

The first was what the Alliance considered a failed meeting between the chairman of the Democratic State Committee, M. Taylor Ellyson, and a representative of the Virginia Farmers' Alliance, A. R. Venable Jr. The Alliance expected that the Democrats would bend to accommodate Alliance demands. Instead, Ellyson warned Venable to back away from using support for a railroad reform bill as a local Alliance "yardstick" for measuring candidates in the upcoming fall election. "If the Democratic party wished to secure the support of the Alliance, the Democratic press must cease its unfriendly policy of never losing an opportunity of slapping at it. . . . That was all the deal that was made [with Ellyson], and we are ready to make the same deal with the Republicans" (*ER*, 25 July 1891).

The second factor was the Democratic fraud and race-baiting that occurred in the course of the 1891 state elections. Alliance attention was drawn to two majority-black southern counties in particular. In Norfolk, the Alliance charged that the regular Democrats, who controlled the election process, had thrown out the votes for one precinct where the Alliance-backed Democratic candidate had won heavily in an otherwise close election (*ER*, 14 November 1891). In Mecklenburg, the racial dimension of the political tension became clear. The Alliance-backed candidate, J. Thomas Goode, won a seat in the General Assembly but was opposed when he attempted to join the Democratic caucus. The Democratic claim was that Goode had clandestinely accepted the Republican nomination. The secretary of the county Alliance wrote in to the *Exchange Reporter* to rebut the charges. To the accusation that

a black organizer and “white man-hater” led Goode’s campaign, the secretary admitted that Ross Hamilton, a black Republican, had indeed spoken for Goode at almost a third of the candidate’s appointments in the county. But he argued that the regular Democrats opposing Goode in the race also “carried around” a black Republican (*ER*, 23 January 1892; *VS*, 13 February 1892).

Until this point, the Alliance had been very quiet about race. The discussion in the Alliance paper made it clear that most Alliancemen were not willing to endorse “social equality” between the races but that strategic alliances were being seriously considered. Indeed, the Alliance interest frames discussed above provided a template for the discussion. Until the 1891 election, however, only hints of the broader discussion were visible in the paper. In August, the *Exchange Reporter* ran a story on the strength of the Virginia CFA, and remarked, “We regard this movement with great interest, because it seems to us to offer us a promising solution of the ‘negro problem’ . . . White Alliancemen should do all in their power to help the colored brother towards his real emancipation—an emancipation from ignorance, laziness, vice and general unthrift—a knocking off the shackles of political bummery” (*ER*, 18 August 1891). The Mecklenburg controversy became one site where the Alliance’s calculations of interest came to the surface. A coalition between the white Alliance and black Republicans began to be considered seriously, although the *Exchange Reporter* was also clear that strict quid pro quo arrangements had been rejected:

It was well known that the colored Republican leaders had offered to the Alliance that if the Alliance would make no nomination for the two commissioners of revenue (two offices that have been filled by negroes for the past eight or ten years) they would give the Alliance all the other county offices. This proposition was thoroughly considered in open Alliance and at first accepted, but the idea of nominating two negroes was never considered by the Alliance nor advocated by Colonel Goode. (*ER*, 23 January 1892)

Between Democratic claims and Alliance counterclaims, the facts of the 1891 arrangement are unclear, but the racial strategy of the Alliance at least became obvious. They were willing to seek black Republican support but were not willing to formally fuse.

The results of the election might have been seen as a victory for the Alliance. Between Alliance-pledged Democrats, Alliance-backed independents,

and sympathetic Republicans, the Alliance could reasonably claim influence over a majority of the state legislature (Sheldon 1935: 70). Significantly, the Alliance did not see it that way. In the early months of 1892, the political discussions in the pages of the *Exchange Reporter* were shaped by the disappointments of the 1891 elections. The Mecklenburg issue became the central point for an editorial titled “Partyism Run Mad,” in which the Democratic Party in general was accused of protecting the party “bosses” at the expense of the rank-and-file (*ER*, 23 January 1892). The issue was divisive, however. An Alliance chapter president from a western Virginia county thought that “Colonel Goode was treated exactly right by the [Democratic] caucus, and we advise him to remember what happens when pitch is touched.” The chapter president did not think that the time was right to abandon the Democrats, “as it is [a year for a] national election.” But even he conceded, “It begins to look like a third party would soon become a necessity” (*VS*, 20 February 1892).

By March, the Alliance’s break with the Democrats was apparent, and a third party challenge was being planned. The paper (now renamed the *Virginia Sun* and also serving as the voice of the People’s Party) listed the members of the General Assembly, labeling them “friend,” “enemy,” or “dodger” (*VS*, 5 March 1892). Twenty counties were reportedly organized by late May, and it was announced that a statewide convention of the People’s Party would be organized for June (*VS*, 25 May 1892). The number of counties reported to be “in line”—that is, at least temporarily organized and expected to be represented at the state convention—expanded quickly. The number stood at 31 in the first week in June, including 15 of the 17 Southside counties. The number grew to 40 in the second week and 46 in the third week.

During this time, the *Richmond Planet* was more optimistic and more vocal about the changes that might come about as a result of the white Alliance’s pressure on the Democratic Party. The well-reported meeting between Venable and Ellyson was a case in point. The white Alliance complained that it did not get the concessions it hoped from the old party. For Mitchell, however, the meeting itself was a sign of the Alliance’s potential. The *Planet*, with obvious glee, quoted a Democratic *Richmond Dispatch* remark about the meeting: “The Alliance is a power in Virginia, and as the Dispatch has frequently asserted, the Democratic party is in full sympathy with most of the objects sought to be accomplished by the organization” (*RP*, 18 July 1891). Below the quote appeared a cartoon drawn by Mitchell himself, reproduced as Figure 1. In the cartoon, a well-dressed Democrat, hat in hand, sits astride

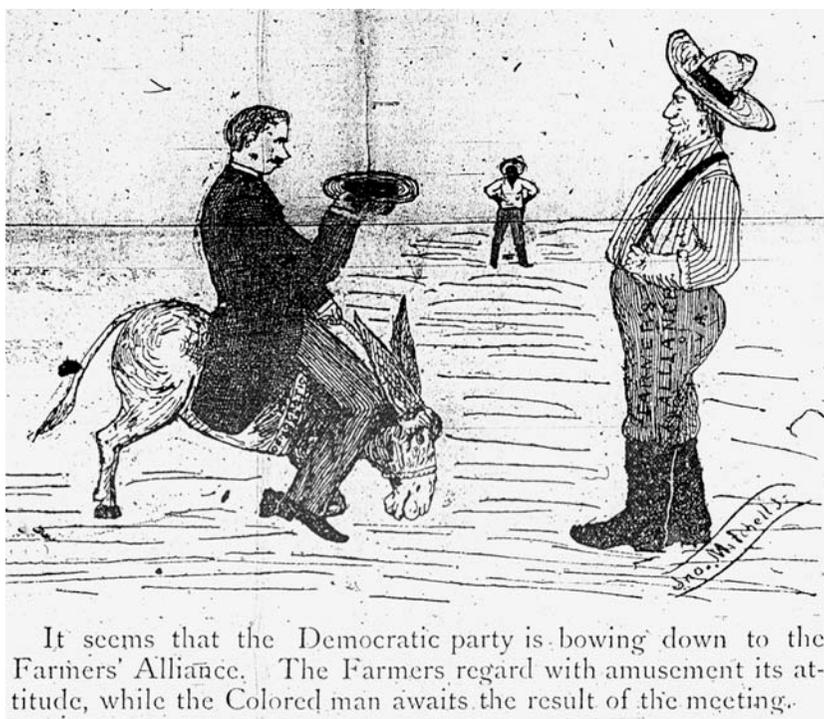


Figure 1 Bowing down to the Farmers' Alliance

Source: *Richmond Planet*, 18 July 1891. Drawing by John Mitchell.

a kneeling donkey identified as “Democratic Party.” The Democrat faces a stout white farmer identified as “Farmer’s Alliance of Va.” In the distance, a black farmer “awaits the result of the meeting” (*RP*, 18 July 1891).

The point was that the Alliance was unlikely to be a savior of the race, but it might be a worthy vehicle for reform. Even as the Alliance denied that the meeting resulted in any kind of favorable deal from the Democrats, the *Planet* remarked, “Colored men, the Farmers’ Alliance is looming up in the distance. Let us watch and wait” (*RP*, 25 July 1891). Although the *Planet* did not approve of the Alliance’s economic demands, many of which ran counter to those of the national Republican platform, Mitchell was pleased by the fact that the Democrats were being put to the test. “The fight which seems imminent between the Farmers’ Alliance and the Democratic Party, places the Afro-American in a position to take sides” (*RP*, 29 August 1891). Mitchell realized that it was unclear whether the Democrats would pledge themselves

to the Alliance demands, and he thought it would be better for black Republicans if they did not.

We shall see what we shall see, but if the Democratic Senators or Congressmen sign pledges in accordance with the above demands, there will be no Alliance political party in the state. If not, its efforts will be felt from one section of this commonwealth to the other.

We see the indications, and in all probability the next legislature in Virginia will be composed of farmers or those who represent their principles. There will be wholesale “cussing” in the Democratic camp, but what cares the farmer? (*RP*, 29 August 1891)

A second Alliance cartoon by Mitchell is presented as Figure 2. Featured again is the stout white farmer (representing the Farmers’ Alliance); standing at a blackboard, he presents the Alliance demands to a donkey-headed man (the Democratic Party) who scratches his head in bewilderment. The party was clearly failing at the Alliance’s “Political College.” The implication was that this was good not only for the goals of the white farmers (not all of which Mitchell endorsed) but that it would also give black voters a decisive role in the political contest (*RP*, 29 August 1891).

Mitchell’s view of the Alliance political activity thus moved from guarded optimism (“let us wait and see”) to enthusiasm as the break between the Alliance and the Democrats became increasingly decisive. Virginia’s most outspokenly radical black paper had seen the political organization of the white farmers’ movement in Virginia as a promising development: “The farmers may have hay-seed in their hair, but they have what they want in their minds. Their next move is to engraft it upon the statute books of this country, both state and national. And what man can hinder?” (*RP*, 29 August 1891).

But Mitchell’s position was illustrative in another way as well. Mitchell never argued that black voters should give up the Republican Party, which remained relatively strong in Virginia. Instead, he thought the split in the Democratic camp would lead to gains for black Republicans. The *Planet* reprinted an editorial from the New York *Mail and Express* to the effect that the Republican Party was gaining sway in the Alliance. “Of course the Farmers’ Alliance votes will go with the Republicans from the moment they see this great truth. . . . Heaven is on the side of peace and plenty, and the Republican party is the agent for disseminating these benefits to the farmers” (*RP*, 19 September 1892).

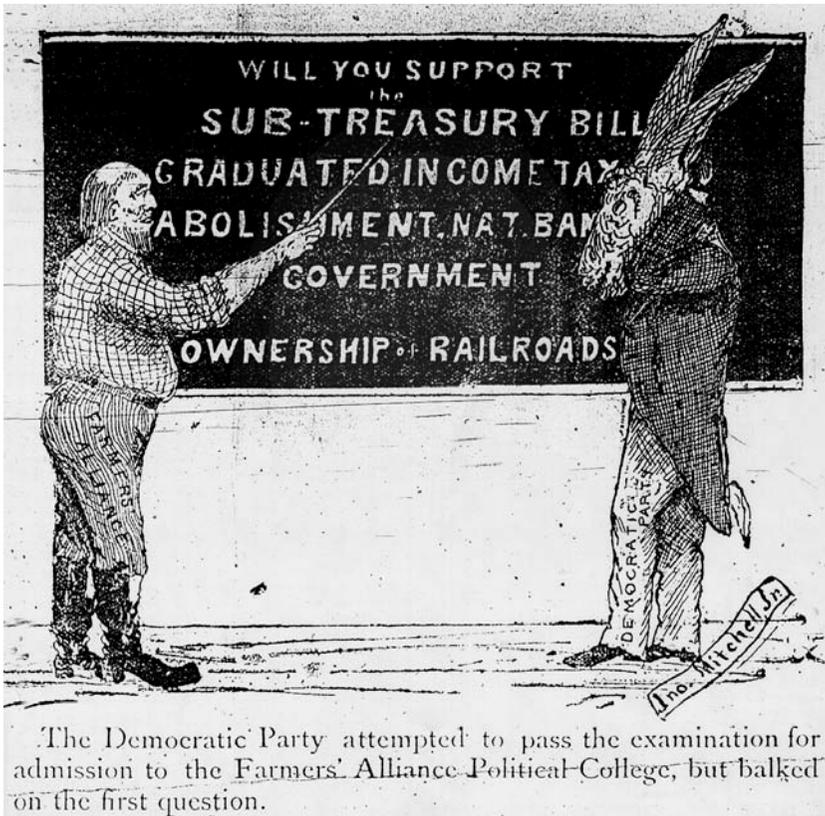


Figure 2 Balked on the first question

Source: *Richmond Planet*, 29 August 1891. Drawing by John Mitchell.

The *Planet* also concurred that the Democrats were stirring up racial troubles. Mitchell remarked that Democratic plans would separate white and black school fund revenues,¹¹ institute Jim Crow cars on the railroads, and restrict the franchise. In doing so, the party “would thereby arouse the worst prejudices, array one race against the other and afford a feast which unscrupulous politicians would enjoy.” As for the interests of black Republicans,

They [Democrats] have already excluded colored men from their primary elections. They have bodily passed laws intended to defraud us of the right to vote, and have caused thousands of us to be denied the rights to exercise the elective franchise. In view of this condition of affairs, it behoves us to leave no stone unturned to encompass the defeat of that

party, causing them to realize that we will do all we can to overthrow those who oppress us. (*RP*, 31 October 1891)

Diverging Interests, 1892 to 1893

The Virginia People's Party was officially launched in the Southside's Amelia County (*VS*, 20 April 1892). The report of the meeting was as interesting for what it did not say as for what it did. In a majority-black county, the new party had to hope for black Republican support. Yet there was no mention of any black involvement in the meeting, and no mention of "fusion" strategy with the Republicans. Subsequent discussions of the third party began to make the appeal more explicit, although it remained subdued. This approach was soon dropped in favor of a more explicit discussion of common interest. The *Virginia Sun* expressed the hope that black voters would support the People's Party "as faithfully as they have followed the Republicans heretofore, seeing they, being by a vast majority laborers, are naturally drawn by their interests to that party" (*VS*, 27 April 1892). Some statements proposed an even grander vision of the outcome:

As long as there are only the two old parties, the colored brother will keep on voting the Republican ticket, though he is even more disgusted with his party than we are with ours. But now that there is a Third party where the reformers of both colors can meet on common ground for the common good, the colored people will flock to it, and the color line will be eliminated from politics. (*VS*, 25 May 1892)

Following these claims, some organizing in the Southside began to target black voters directly. An indication that this often happened through the remaining Alliance organizations is provided in a letter from a Mecklenburg County organizer. "By request I addressed a colored Alliance in this county on Saturday," he wrote in the summer of 1892. "They seemed deeply interested and paid close attention throughout and at the close, without any suggestion from the speaker, a member moved that they endorse the St. Louis platform, and everyone voted in the affirmative, and stated that no one could get their votes who did not stand by the St. Louis platform" (*VS*, 13 July 1892). From Loudoun County in the northernmost part of the state, a Populist wrote to the *Virginia Sun* about the necessity of appealing to black voters and pinned his hopes on the work of W. H. Warwick, the outspoken black

CFA leader who was squarely behind the People's Party. "As most of them cannot read, they must be talked to, which talk, to have any effect, must be done by one of their own color. He therefore hopes that Bro. W. H. Warwick . . . will visit his section and give the colored brethren the light they so much need" (*VS*, 27 July 1892). In central Virginia's Orange County, a white Populist supporter wrote to say that he had organized a black Populist club with 36 members and that he hoped to organize more before the election (*VS*, 14 September 1892). The state chairman's assessment was that "the colored people are . . . pledging their allegiance to the party of reform" (*VS*, 14 September 1892).

Thus, at the beginning of the election campaign of 1892, white and black Populist supporters held out hope for the emergence of an interracial voting bloc. In tension with this hope was the increasing use of charges of "negro supremacy." As the Democrats accused the Populists of promoting social equality and negro supremacy, the white Populists turned the charges back upon the Democrats. For example, one man wrote to report that his Democratic friend had gone to a political rally only to find that at the dinner "whites and negroes were all invited to the same table at the same time, and ate side by side, shoulder to shoulder" (*VS*, 26 October 1892). The man reported that the experience had so disgusted his Democratic friend that he now planned to vote for the People's Party. An editorial in the *Virginia Sun* carried the allegations further:

It is time the Democrats ceased abusing the People's Party as a negro party. Democratic returns from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida and Georgia show that they carried those states by colored votes. . . . The first negro office-holder in Virginia was appointed by a Democratic legislature, and a negro [Frederick Douglass] was the honored guest of Mr. and Mrs. Cleveland at their wedding reception. It begins to look as though the Democratic party is to be the party of the negro, and the People's party the white man's party. (*VS*, 12 October 1892)

The outcome of the election of 1892 did nothing to change the minds of the Populists. The Populist presidential ticket did poorly throughout the state, but the Populist congressional candidates in the Southside region had been expected to win. The Populists claimed that fraudulent vote counts kept them from victories in four election districts. Most disappointing was the loss of J. Thomas Goode in the Fourth Congressional District, which

contained most of the Southside counties. Mecklenburg Populists charged that the Democratic election board threw out returns from Goode's strongest precincts. Similar tactics were reported in Prince George County, while supporters in Amelia reported that money was "used lavishly to buy votes" (*VS*, 16 November 1892). The "bought" votes, by and large, were said to be black ones. The postelection report of the state chairman shifted the identity boundaries of the movement: "It must be remembered that these 10,000 votes [projected for the Populist presidential candidate] are the votes of white men, the colored vote either going for Harrison or bought for Cleveland. These white men stood their ground in the face of calumny, vindictive abuse, intimidation, and social ostracism dictated by bitter [party] prejudice and venomous passion" (*VS*, 16 November 1892).

After this point, the inclusion of black voters into the Populist rhetoric and organizing efforts was sporadic and tepid. Objecting to Democratic calls for restriction of the franchise, a Populist editorial recognized that its "undisguised object is to restrict negro suffrage." Rather than mount a defense of black voting rights, the editorial asked instead what such a measure could accomplish that Virginia election laws did not already grant in practice. "We still cannot see how a constitutional restriction of the suffrage can benefit the party very much, unless it be that it is cheaper to keep the negro from the polls altogether than to buy him after he gets there" (*VS*, 1 February 1893). Another editorial listed charges of election fraud in several counties and then argued that it was leading to *white* disfranchisement. "It is no use to say that these iniquities are practised to 'preserve white civilization,' since "it was white men who were robbed of their votes, and white men who were defrauded of the offices to which they were elected" (*VS*, 14 June 1893). Even when the party rhetoric demanded "honest elections and fair counts" for all, the leadership realized that the black vote in Virginia was not as easily swayed to the Populists as earlier rosy pronouncements had assumed:

No one dares to assert that the negro will control this country or even a small portion of it. It is false to nature for a superior race to be governed by an inferior. All the negro desires is justice at the hands of those in authority, and political suffrage. The grasp of the Republican party is gradually loosening its hold upon him. Its promises have never been fulfilled. Silently the negro looks on to see what inducements the new party offers. (*VS*, 15 February 1893)

Such a state of affairs did not bode well for the state elections in November 1893. The Populists nominated Edmund Cocke for governor and James Bradshaw Beverley for lieutenant governor, both Alliancemen. Although the Populists' strongholds of support continued to be the majority-black counties in the southern part of the state, race was never mentioned in the platform (*VS*, 9 August 1893).

The candidates for statewide office were hampered by the fact that their basis of support was concentrated in one area of the state. Still, the Populists had some hope for victory. Cocke was one of the wealthiest farmers in the area and was descended from a former Democratic governor, and the Virginia Populists hoped that this would lend him an air of legitimacy. The Democrats nominated a congressman, Charles T. O'Ferrall, as their candidate, with Major Robert C. Kent for lieutenant governor. Although Kent was an Alliance man, he was faithful to the party. He also provided the Democratic ticket with a claim to legitimacy on the question of monetary reform—one area where the third party's platform proved widely popular (Sheldon 1935: 97–98).

Even though the Republicans did not run candidates, the Populists did not reach out to black voters in 1893. Cocke won 81,000 votes by the official count, mostly in the Southside, but lost the election.¹² The Populists did elect 10 members to the state assembly from the region. The party continued with minor victories in the legislature over the following three years, but it did not again become a realistic vehicle for interracial coalition. By the time that Mahone worked with the Populists on the issue of election reform in 1895, the chances for such a coalition had passed. Though William Sheldon (1935: 111) argues that cooperation with Mahone left them open to the charge that they had been swallowed up by the Republicans, the Populists had stopped actively seeking black support. By 1894, Populists in Virginia and elsewhere had reconsidered the entire strategy. They began to argue, in fact, that the Democrats too easily manipulated black votes. A cartoon in the widely read *People's Party Paper* (Figure 3) bitterly adopted Jasper's joke by showing a "colored Democratic voter" with a "democratic office seeker" on his back. A fat character (identified as the "Democratic Party") says, "Good Morning, Neighbor; I'm Glad to See You; Just Hitch Your Horse and Come on In."

The campaign of 1892 was thus a crucial turning point for the white Populists, but it was also a turning point for black Republicans. The decisive political break with the Democrats that brought the Alliance Democrats

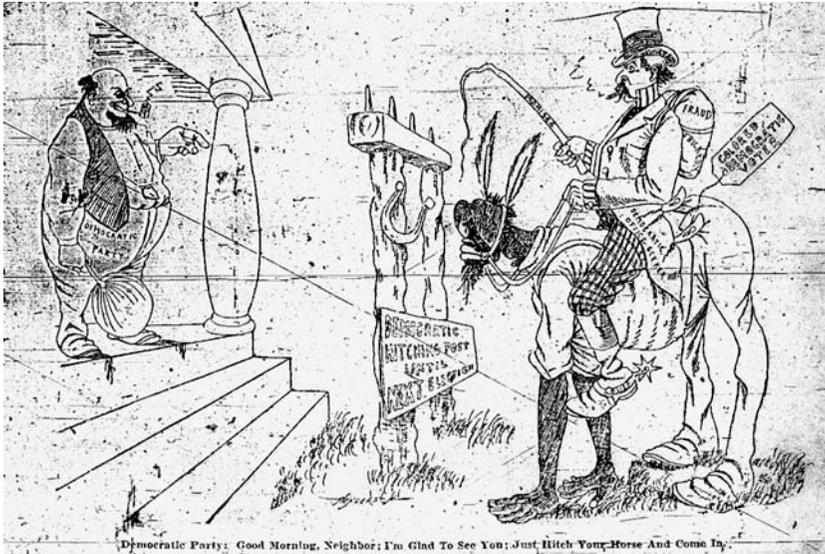


Figure 3 Democratic hitching post
Source: *People's Party Paper*, 24 August 1894.

to the People's Party left Mitchell again optimistic about the possibilities of such a coalition at the state level, even though he continued to support the Republicans for the national ticket. "When the laboring white men of the South sink their prejudices, look at facts and realize that their interests and those of the Negro are identical, then the condition of both will be improved," he argued, echoing Populist language (*RP*, 1 October 1892). Still, Mitchell and other black Republicans throughout the state continued to qualify their support on the basis of a Populist-Republican coalition. "The People's party will need the solid Republican support to win. The disintegration of the Democratic party will hardly be widespread enough to accomplish the result," Mitchell wrote (*RP*, 19, 26 August 1892). Like the Alliance, Mitchell remained interested in the coalition even as he realized that fraud was likely. Commenting on the loss of Alabama's Populist, Reuben Kolb, Mitchell noted that "except in cases where there is an overwhelming revolution in the ranks of the Democratic Party[,] a fair count is out of the question" (*RP*, 13 August 1892).

In general, the *Planet* was quieter about the potential coalition throughout 1892 than it had previously been, apart from the scattered mentions

throughout August. A statement in September confirms that this relative silence corresponded to a general reconsideration of interests by Mitchell. Charlotte Smith, the suffragist and head of the Women's National Industrial League of America, wrote to the paper to inquire about political strategy, among other issues: "I am more than surprised at the indifference manifested in your paper . . . and am surprised to think you do not more closely watch your own interest, and the interest of the colored women. I consider that the time has about arrived when the Negro should by all means ally with the People's Party, and be of the people" (*RP*, 10 September 1892). Mitchell's long response provided an important window onto his own thoughts regarding political interest. After considering the shortcomings of the Republican Party, Mitchell turned to the issue of coalition. Mitchell's comments focused on the presidential ballot, since within the state, Mahone threw Republican support to the Populists. His comments spoke to general strategy, however:

You urge us to ally ourselves with the People's Party. What are we to expect or hope from such an alliance? In the doubtful states such a movement would prove disastrous to the race at large. And why?

It would draw from the Republican Party that element so essential to its success and according to facts not to be ignored, [it] would not result in the elevation of the candidates of the People's Party to the Presidency and Vice-Presidency of the United States.

The logical outcome then is and would be that in voting the national ticket of the People's Party, we indirectly assist in the election of the Democratic nominees.

It is hardly necessary to argue whether or not we could afford to do this or discuss the probable result of the complete possession of the government by the Democrats. (*RP*, 10 September 1892)

Although it was "hardly necessary," Mitchell did go on to discuss the consequences in the next section of the letter. He made special mention of restrictions on black voting rights and of the introduction of Jim Crow railroad cars, which "causes uneasiness whenever the elevation of the Democratic Party to unlimited power is imminent" (*RP*, 10 September 1892). What is important here is that the changing assessment was at least partly driven by the same problem that the white Populists faced. As Mitchell put it, "When the

Democrats of the South have no other issue upon which to rally the white laboring element, they yell ‘Nigger’” (*RP*, 1 October 1892).

By the end of the following election cycle, the paper had soured entirely on the movement. Mitchell was sure that the Populists would not help them and might in fact hinder the progress of the Republican Party. The Populists were themselves less enthusiastic about black support at this point, but equally important was the fact that Republican hopes for a meaningful fusion also were gone. Working for a fusion of black Republicans and white Populists would have been good strategy if the Populists had been willing to make concessions and had been in a position to win. By the end of the 1893 campaign, though, Mitchell began to see this strategy as a mistake. The Republican Party had atrophied when the Populists became the major alternative to the Democrats. The Republicans had not even nominated a state ticket. The Populists were unwilling to make concessions and could count on significant vote fraud to limit their impact. Mitchell’s views in all likelihood reflected those of many black Republicans in the Southside, who were left with an unappealing choice. “This necessarily gives the colored man the alternative of three things: vote the Populists ticket, the Prohibition ticket, or remain at work and give politics the ‘go-by’ this year. We as a people are at the parting of the road. Which way shall we go?” (*RP*, 2 September 1893).

Mitchell left the question unanswered, but it was clear that he viewed the Prohibition ticket as a losing cause and the other two options as equally dismal. The postelection summary is worth quoting, as it marked the end of any hopes for a fruitful union between black Republicans and the mostly white Populists. “The result of the election in Virginia last week was no surprise to us,” Mitchell wrote. “There was no Republican ticket in the field and the Populist campaign was managed just as though there were no colored voters in the state, so far as our observation goes. . . . The Democratic Party of the state had too much at stake to yield easily and members of it would not have stopped short of murder but what a Democratic legislature should be returned” (*RP*, 19 November 1893).

Discussion

This article has shown that the scope of the farmers’ movements was limited in Virginia. Contrary to existing accounts, I have argued that the basic factor limiting the impact of the movements on the statewide level was not

any inherent organizational weakness. Indeed, where the movements gained a foothold, they were quite well organized. Instead, I have argued that the interesting story really lies both in how social narratives of interest enabled a potential political allegiance between black and white agrarians in Virginia and in how the narratives changed in the course of organizing. From the early electoral work of the Farmers' Alliance in 1891 to the Populist campaign of 1892, white Populists and black Republicans saw mutual interest in cooperation, even though both sides expressed some reservations. From the end of the campaign of 1892 through the state elections of 1893, these relations soured as both sides came to view the potential coalition with suspicion. The critical break point in the development of both interest narratives was the election season of 1892 and its aftermath.

The *Virginia Sun* was initially quiet on the matter of interracial coalition, unwilling to risk internal dissent and external race baiting. As the Populists began to move away from the Democrats and toward an independent political challenge, the developing narrative of interest changed from reticence and wariness of coalition, to willingness to use black support in the Southside to further their own ends and relative optimism about the prospects of such a coalition. Although never in favor of "social equality" and always based in strategic reasoning, the Populist narrative began to express an interest in allying with black Republicans as farmers and as people not well served under the existing political system. Although the black Republican narrative was expressed differently, its trajectory was strikingly similar. The *Richmond Planet* moved from initial reticence to an eagerness to use the Populists to its own ends. It too was enthusiastic about the prospects of coalition. While never in favor of abandoning the Republican Party altogether, the *Planet* began to express an interest in allying with the Populists as representatives of working people and as people not well served under the existing political system.

It is worth underlining the fact that both sides supported the coalition for strategic rather than altruistic reasons. The narratives of interest among white Populists initially supported the coalition not to promote "political equality" for blacks—although Populist narratives did generally support this—but to improve their own chances of winning in the majority-black counties where the movement was most viable. Black supporters, coming to the political movement from the increasingly beleaguered Republican Party, supported the coalition for the same reasons. Equally important was the fact that both

sides began to recognize and anticipate the difficulties that would arise in a coalition pursuing a third-party strategy. Most of the problems that the Populists faced in 1892, such as the fraudulent vote counts and the Democratic race-baiting, had also occurred in Virginia's interracial coalitions of the 1880s. Both the *Virginia Sun* and the *Planet* saw these as obstacles. But in 1891, both saw them as reasons to work together. The lesson of the 1880s coalitions at this point was that the Democrats were not invincible and that such a coalition could work.

What happened in 1892? The election was a bruising one, and the hopes of the Populists were dashed. But even before the election, the Virginia Populist narrative began to show signs of a dual orientation. On the one hand, the Populists continued to work toward a coalition and to do so more or less in good faith. On the other hand, they began to adopt a defensive claim about the Democrats' promotion of "negro supremacy," a discourse essentially about interracial political competition. In short, the black Republicans became both the solution and the problem in the Populist narrative. Something similar occurred in the interest narrative produced by the *Planet*. Although the People's Party continued to be identified as a potential ally, the result was seen as ambiguous at best. Fraud would continue to "count out" the Populist votes, and even success might spell the end of the Republican Party as a viable entity in Virginia. Part of this shift had to do with a different understanding of the lessons of the 1880s. The Populists recalled the defeat of Mahone's Readjusters under the same charges of "negro supremacy" that the Democrats were beginning to use against them. Black Republicans came to view their role in the Populist movement as equivalent to that of Mahone's horse—a convenient vehicle for their success, but one that would be left outside when the rider arrived.

What all of this says about the role of social narratives in fostering change is rather interesting. Analysts looking back from a distance, and even Virginia Populists and Republicans looking back from after 1893, could easily see the collapse of the coalition as overdetermined by the divides of race and party identity as deeply embedded ways of making sense of the world. In other words, it looked like a classic case of self-reinforcing path dependence, where initially contingent and potentially transformative events are brought into line with established structural and cultural patterns. Getting closer to the actual narratives reveals much more flexibility. The development of the narratives instead looks much more like what Tilly (2003: v) describes as a

continual process of error and error correction. Not knowing what the outcome would be, both sides began to try to work out their interests, revising as they went along.

The common alternative view, however, does not quite get the process right either. When narratives are not portrayed as promoting stasis, they are often seen as tied to radical breaks, akin to Mahoney's "reactive sequences." At each point in the process, the two narratives of interest took account of past events and tried to gauge the probable reaction of the other side. The Populist moment in Virginia and elsewhere, as many have argued, did have potentially transformative effects. Both narratives held onto established racial and political identities at the same time that they groped toward a new way of understanding political interest. However, this is a case of a reactive sequence that did not concatenate into radical social change. What changed in the process was not the objective conditions so much as the way both sides constructed the meaning of past events and the likelihood of future outcomes.

Notes

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- 1 The Knights of Labor was a national labor movement that reached its peak in the mid-1880s. The Knights were active in the South, organized both white and black workers (albeit in separate assemblies), and also tried to mobilize interracial political support for reform candidates in several southern locales. In this, the Knights provided a model for the efforts of the Populists to organize across the racial divide, as well as for their "separate but equal" rhetoric.
- 2 Although important recent work has begun to reexamine "analytic" narratives (see Kiser 1996 and the review symposium on the book *Analytic Narratives* in *Social Science History* 24 [2000]: 653–96), this discussion is confined to "social" narratives—the meaning-making stories that are produced by actors in particular settings.
- 3 Peter Bearman, Robert Faris, and James Moody (1999) present a rather different argument. For them, stability is maintained by local complexity rather than over-determined narrative forms. In their view, a collection of events emerges as a meaningful historical "case" only when the events are causally connected in many actors' narratives. Treating historical cases as network structures, they note that when many individual narratives of an event combine, the resulting "case" is relatively robust, since the local density of event structures absorbs novelty.

- 4 For a longer exposition of the data presented here on movement interest frames, including a discussion of coding issues, see Gerteis 1999: chap. 6. From the central movement newspapers, I collected and coded every item that jointly mentioned class or political interest and race. The data collection spanned the available run of the papers—early 1889 through early 1893 for the white Alliance’s *National Economist* ($n = 375$) and late 1891 through late 1894 with additional scattered issues in the fall of 1895 and 1896 for the *People’s Party Paper* ($n = 448$). Discussed here are only those communications that referenced black Americans as the relevant racial “others” ($n = 132$ and $n = 315$, respectively).
- 5 The figures presented here are from county-level records in the U.S. Census of 1890 (ICPSR, n.d.).
- 6 The organizational structure of the Alliance was based on the “sub-Alliance” or local chapter. These sub-Alliances were grouped into county- and state-level alliances, which were overseen by a loose central body.
- 7 The president of the Virginia CFA was J. J. Rogers, a white organizer who was close to the CFA’s nominal leader, R. M. Humphrey, who was also white. Rogers also served as the president of the more populous state organization in North Carolina.
- 8 The Southside counties are Amelia, Appomattox, Brunswick, Buckingham, Campbell, Charlotte, Chesterfield, Cumberland, Dinwiddie, Greensville, Halifax, Lunenburg, Mecklenberg, Nottoway, Pittsylvania, Powhatan, and Prince Edward (Sheldon 1935: 1, n. 1). From the CFA meeting, there were delegates from seven of the Southside counties (one each from Brunswick, Buckingham, Cumberland, Lunenburg, Mecklenberg, Powhatan, and two from Dinwiddie). Other delegates were from nearby counties, including Bedford, Charlotte, Fluvana, Hanover, Henrico, King and Queen, Nelson, Prince George, and Southampton (*RP*, 15 August 1891).
- 9 For example, CFA delegates at the 1891 state meeting elected one of their own, W. H. Warwick, as state superintendent to replace J. J. Rogers. Warwick was a rising star in the organization, having been elected as the Virginia representative to the CFA’s national meeting in 1890 (*RP*, 30 August 1890). Although Humphrey overturned the election, Warwick’s prominence grew. He was later a delegate to the multiorganizational St. Louis meeting to consider a third party, where he was elected to the position of assistant secretary for the meeting (*NE*, 5 March 1890). He was the only black delegate to hold an official position at the meeting.
- 10 The strategy worked perhaps better than the Democrats had hoped. Days before the election, a race riot occurred in the black-belt city of Danville. The immediate cause of the riot was a fight that broke out after a white man was “jostled” by a black man who refused to step out of his way on the street. A contributing factor was the “Danville circular,” an anonymous broadside that complained of “negro domination” in Danville (see Wynes 1961: 29–34).
- 11 Apparently forgotten for the moment was the fact that at least one county Alliance in Pittsylvania proposed the same measure (*RP*, 24 October 1891). Earlier the matter of school funding had been a successful campaign issue for the Readjusters.
- 12 Sheldon’s account of the Virginia Populist movement generally discounts the votes of

“ignorant” blacks. Of the 1893 vote, Sheldon (1935: 103) dismisses Cocke’s support: “Probably not 20,000 could be classed as votes of white farmers genuinely interested in the success of Populist principles.” On the other hand, if this is correct, it would mean that 61,000 votes came from black Republicans and sympathetic white Democrats—the very people that the People’s Party needed to win!

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- JKL* *Journal of the Knights of Labor* (1890) Philadelphia. Edited and Published by the Board of Trustees [of the Knights of Labor]. [Microfilm]
- NE* *National Economist* (1890) Washington, DC. Edited by Charles W. Macune. Published by the National Economist Publishing Co. [Microfilm]
- PPP* *People’s Party Paper* (1894) Atlanta. T. E. Watson, ed. Published by the People’s Party Paper Publishing Co. [Microfilm]
- RP* *Richmond Planet* (1890–94) Richmond. John Mitchell, ed. Published by the Planet Publishing Co. [Microfilm]
- VS* *Virginia Sun* (1892–94) Richmond. Published by the Virginia Sun Publishing Co. [Microfilm]

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