Comparison: Populism and Progressivism

Reasons for Similarities:

Reasons for Differences:
Defining the Period: Progressive Era

Start Date / Event: ____

Why?

End Date / Event: ____

Why?

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

CONTRADICTORY CHARACTERISTICS

DP13
Interpretation: Populists

A: For a generation after the Civil War, a time of great economic exploitation and waste, grave social corruption and ugliness, the dominant note in American political life was complacency. Although dissenting minorities were always present, they were submerged by the overwhelming realities of industrial growth and continental settlement. The agitation of the Populists, which brought back to American public life a capacity for effective political indignation, marks the beginning of the end of this epoch. In the short run the Populists did not get what they wanted, but they released the flow of protest and criticism that swept through American political affairs from the 1890’s to the beginning of the first World War.—Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, 1955

B: The remarkable strength the Populists manifested in the Lower South was gained against far more formidable obstacles than any ever encountered in the West. For there they daily faced the implacable dogmas of racism, white solidarity, white supremacy, and the bloody shirt. . . . They had to contend regularly with foreclosure of mortgages, discharge from jobs, eviction as tenants, exclusion from church, withholding of credit, boycott, social ostracism, and the endlessly reiterated charge of racial disloyalty and sectional disloyalty. . . . Having waged their revolt at such great cost, the Southern Populists were far less willing to compromise their principles than were their Western brethren. It was the Western Populists who planned and led the movement to sell out the party to the Silverites, and the Southern Populists who fought and resisted the drift to quasi-Populism. The Southerners were consistently more radical, more insistent upon their economic reforms, and more stubbornly unwilling to lose their party identity in the watered down quasi-Populism of Bryan than were the Westerners. . . . Whatever their concern the farmers might have had for their status was overwhelmed by desperate and immediate economic anxieties. While their legislative program may have often been naïve and inadequate, it was almost obsessively economic and, as political platforms go, little more irrational than the run-of-the-mill.—C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History, 1960

Explain the differences between Interpretation A and Interpretation B:

Specific Historical Evidence to Support A (not mentioned in passage):

Specific Historical Evidence to Support B (not mentioned in passage):
Interpretation: The Progressives

A: Populism had been overwhelmingly rural and provincial. The ferment of the Progressive era was urban, middle-class, and nation-wide. Above all, Progressivism differed from Populism in the fact that the middle classes of the cities not only joined the trend toward protest but took over its leadership. While Bryan’s old followers still kept their interest in certain reforms, they now found themselves in the company of large numbers who had hitherto violently opposed them. As the demand for reform spread from the farmers to the middle class and from the Populist Party into the major parties, it became more powerful and more highly regarded. It had been possible for their enemies to brand the Populists as wild anarchists, especially since there were millions of Americans who had never laid eyes on either a Populist or an anarchist. But it was impossible to popularize such a distorted image of the Progressives, who flourished in every section of the country, everywhere visibly, palpably, almost pathetically respectable.—Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R., 1955

B: [The] national legislative fruits of the Progressive Era had their unmistakable origins in the agrarian movements of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. Given the indisputable facts of suffrage restriction and resurgent racism, how can we explain the apparent afterlife of populism? . . . There were, in particular, four factors that sustained the agrarian reform program in national politics after 1896: a new wave of farmer organization; the direct primary; the national Democratic Party leadership of William Jennings Bryan; and most fundamentally, regional political economy.—Elizabeth Sanders, Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and The American State, 1877–1917, 1999

Explain the differences between Interpretation A and Interpretation B:

Specific Historical Evidence to Support A (not mentioned in passage):

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