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# Is J.D. Vance a populist?

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## Part 1: Populists fought the ruling class



HOW TO LIFT THE BURDEN FROM LABOR

Populists saw their party as a tool for bringing relief to the laboring masses.

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Since Trump announced Ohio Senator J.D. Vance as his running mate, many in the media have rushed to call Vance a "populist," as they have also done with Trump.

Here are a couple of such headlines: “J.D. Vance’s Populist Pitch” (Time Magazine); “Vance Honed Populist Views in the Senate, Auditioning for Trump” (New York Times).

Others are more skeptical: “The Fakkest Populism You Ever Saw” (The Atlantic); “J.D. Vance’s Phony Populism Thrilled the RNC. The Rest of Us Shouldn’t Be Fooled” (The Nation).

So, which is it? Is millionaire Vance a populist or a fake populist? And, for that matter, what is populism?

### **Populism and monopoly capitalism**

Historically, the populist movement in the U.S. was a progressive, left-wing movement. It was centered around the People’s Party in the 1890s and had traction into the first few years of the 20th Century. It was biggest in the South and West, in areas thought to be intractably right-wing nowadays. Based among small farm owners, it was a movement that fought against the rising power of big corporations and banks.

According to Vladimir Lenin’s [1916 analysis](#) in “[Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism](#),” this was the period when capitalism went from its “free competition” phase (characterized by competition among small and medium-sized capitalist enterprises) to one in which huge trusts, monopolies, and giant banks dominated the scene.

This was the era of the “titans of industry,” such as John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil and financial magnate J.P. Morgan. We are living in their wake. Think about how, today, so much of the economy and our lives are dominated by a handful of corporations like Amazon, and banks like JPMorgan Chase.

Lenin called this phase of capitalism both monopoly capitalism and imperialism; the term imperialism, here, does include what is conventionally meant by this word because the rise of monopolies forces capitalist governments to conquer new lands and markets — through war if necessary — to secure the monopoly capitalists' profits.

Populism, then, was very much a movement of its time, where an alliance of small farm owners, shopkeepers, tenant farmers, and industrial workers could emerge and also take on the challenge posed by the rising monopoly class. They attempted to build a coalition between the industrial laborers of the Northeast and Midwest and the farmers of the South and West. This was a truly radical movement against the super-rich like Morgan and Rockefeller.

Unfortunately, the social basis of this coalition no longer exists. According to [the USDA, in 2022](#), farm work represented only 1.2% of U.S. employment. [In 1920](#), 30.2% of the population lived on farms. The age of the small farmer, as well as the small shopkeeper, is over. Nevertheless, there are vital lessons to learn from the era of populism. We can draw inspiration from the populists — and avoid certain pitfalls — as we build today's movement against the rich and rising fascism.

### **Populists fought the bosses**

Writing during the 1972 presidential election and the Democratic Party primary campaign between liberal Democrat George McGovern and arch-segregationist George Wallace, U.S. Marxist leader Vince Copeland wrote:

“In their time, the Populists elected state legislators and governors, and in one Congressional session during the 1880s, with a total of about 350 members in the House, there were over 50 Representatives with generally Populist leanings. In the election of 1892, they elected some state governors, five U.S. Senators, and 10 Representatives directly and frightened the Wall Street rulers considerably thereby.

...

"The legendary Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois, although not in the People's Party, was deeply committed to Populist principles. He refused to call Federal troops during the Pullman strike in Chicago (1894) and openly condemned President Grover Cleveland for doing so. It was he who defied every corporation in the country and sacrificed his political career by pardoning the survivors of the original May Day (1886) frameups - the so-called anarchists who fought so magnificently for the eight-hour day.

"Governor Davis H. Waite of Colorado, who *was* a representative of the People's Party, sent that state's militia to *protect* striking miners at Cripple Creek in 1894 on perhaps the only such occasion in the history of the United States." ([Southern Populism & Black Labor](#))

Copeland was inspired to write about populism at that time because the press was calling both McGovern and Wallace populists. He argued that this was wrong for many different reasons. Neither of these politicians was willing or able to fight the ruling class, as did those who were elected to office on the backs of the populist movement. It is difficult to imagine McGovern and almost impossible to imagine Wallace calling in a state militia to protect striking workers! It is equally absurd to imagine Trump and Vance, or Harris and Biden, standing up for militant strikers.

### **Populism was anti-racist**

One of the biggest contradictions in calling Wallace a populist is that the populist movement was anti-racist. When Wallace was inaugurated as governor of Alabama in 1963, he gave a speech saying, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," and he meant it. In September of that year, he sent the state police to the towns of Birmingham, Tuskegee, Huntsville, and Mobile to prevent public schools from opening after federal courts ordered Alabama schools to

desegregate. The violence that ensued forced President Kennedy to exert federal control over the Alabama National Guard to open the schools.

Today's far-right governors like Ron DeSantis (Florida) and Jeff Landry (Louisiana) follow in Wallace's footsteps. Trump and Vance, who scapegoat immigrants and use anti-Black dog whistles (woke, DEI), do as well. Trump's rallies are modern-day Klan rallies.

The politics of Alabama during the populist period were rather different. Copeland writes:

"On June 24, 1880, a large delegation of white workers and white farmers met in Montgomery, Alabama, at the state's Greenback Labor Party Convention and took a position firmly opposed to school segregation (74 years before the Supreme Court's 'historic' decision!). ...

"And at the height of Populism, in the same city of Montgomery, when the Alabama People's Party held its convention there in 1892 just before getting 46% of the statewide vote, the new party platform declared:

"We favor the protection of the colored race in their legal rights and should afford them encouragement and aid in the attainment of a higher civilization and citizenship, that through the means of kindness, fair treatment and just regard for them, a better understanding and more satisfactory condition may exist between the races."

There is no doubt that the anti-racist politics of the populist movement were progressive for their day, and even in our own time, when many of the gains of the Civil Rights and other movements have been reversed by the capitalist class' political onslaught. In the populist movement, it was widely understood that the pitting of Black and white workers against each other benefitted bosses, not

workers.

Unfortunately, the populist movement was ultimately unable to build a coalition solidly linking Black and white workers, especially with Black tenant farmers who organized with the Communist Party in Southern states in the 1930s. The populist movement remained a largely white movement, and this was a tremendous weakness.

Had they solved this problem, their power might have been far greater. They could have become a much more serious threat to both Wall Street and the racist ruling class that had reasserted itself in the South through the Klan-led terrorism that overturned Reconstruction. This mass terrorism of the old planters and their supporters was, not incidentally, a forerunner of fascism – fascism *avant la lettre*.

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### **J.D. Vance, which side are you on?**

Part 2: Populism or fascism?

