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Reformism, Radicalism, and Progressivism: The Case of Late 19th Century Colorado Politics

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Abstract

This paper examines the political dynamics of late 19th-century Colorado, focusing on the interplay between reformism, radicalism, and progressivism. The objective of this paper is to integrate classical syntheses that sought to capture the broader conceptual history with the abundant local and regional historical writing. This is done in order to address the limitations of focusing on labels such as reformism, radicalism, and progressivism, as well as the fragmentation of historical research. The careers of Senator Henry M. Teller and Representative John F. Shafroth are central to understanding the juncture of the broader conceptual history and the social history of regions and to ultimately understand the complexities of the era. This study identifies three critical themes in Colorado's political evolution: the struggle over silver coinage, the loosening ties to political parties, and a constructive attitude towards political institutions. By analyzing these developments, the paper argues that Colorado's experience provides valuable insights into the broader currents of American political thought during this transformative period. The roles of Teller and Shafroth underscore the complex relationship between regional interests and national policy, revealing how local actors helped shape the political culture of late 19th-century American Politics through political institutions.

Keywords: Populist, Free Silver, American politics, Colorado, political culture

Introduction

The development of mass movements is a primary focus of historical research on late 19th-century American politics, with especially the Populist often taking center stage.[1] Industrialization, the institutionalization of the Western expansion and the development of a need for broader representation caused a wider set of change in how Americans conceived their political, economic system and their society. This paper tries to highlight the practices of conceptual labeling and the consequences that followed from this practice in historical writing. It offers an alternative perspective by examining the direct correspondence between historical actors and their conceptualization of politics in a manner that focusing on social and discursive (local/regional) contexts. The paper is not an attempt at a general review of

[1] This paper refers to the broad movement that appeared at the end of the century and its politically organized form (People's Party) as Populist(s) with a capital "P" opposed to populism with lowercase "p," which may refer to current debates in political science in connection with the theory of populism

the historiography of Populism, neither an attempt to mark out new research directions on Populism *per se*. This essay argues merely that in order to understand its impact, it is important to examine the effects of the heterogeneous web of reformist culture formed by different organized and informal movements, in line with contemporary research on the era.[2]

The opening section asks questions about reliance on terms such as "radical," "reformist," and "progressive" within normative-dialectic frameworks of much of "classic" 20th-century historiography. These concepts often served as macro-labels of movements and positioned them relative to later political developments like Progressivism at the beginning of the 20th-century and New Deal Democrats later. Alternatively, it defined them in relation to ideologies like modern liberalism and socialism. Later historical writing heterogenized these broad narratives, highlighting both continuities and discontinuities with the aforementioned movements or ideologies and focused more on the regional strains of the movements, thus circumventing the problem that an archetypal Populist had proven impossible to construct. This paper continues on this track by introducing two Colorado Silverite politicians, Henry M. Teller and John F. Shafroth, and tries to connect the individual to their activities as a member of a political group and also to the broader culture of late 19th-century public life via studying the changes in the *political*.

The term *political* as used in this context does not align with Carl Schmitt's definition, but refers to the conceptualization of political action, influenced by Pierre Rosanvallon's theoretical work. As Rosanvallon argued:

> "[i]n speaking of "the political" as a noun, I thus mean as much a modality of existence of life in common as a form of collective action that is implicitly distinct from the functioning of politics. To refer to "the political" rather than to "politics" is to speak of power and law, state and nation, equality and justice, identity and difference, citizenship and civility—in sum, of everything that constitutes political life beyond the immediate field of partisan competition for political power, everyday governmental action, and the ordinary function of institutions."[3]

In this sense, the paper attempts to showcase that by interpreting also the broader political culture through the relationship between individual actors and their outlooks and self-reflection rather than merely positioning them in relation to their predecessors and successors, a more nuanced picture of late 19th-century becomes attainable.

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[2] For an overview on the party system and political culture see: Rachel A Shelden and Erik B Alexander, "Dismantling the Party System: Party Fluidity and the Mechanisms of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Politics," *Journal of American History* 110, no. 3 (2023): 419–48.

[3] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 36.

Conceptual Framing and the Historiography of Late 19th Century American Public Life

The People's Party and its travails and transformations, as well as subsequent third party activities, remain at the center of much of the historical writing on the era.[4] The People's Party was the political party established in the 1890s by the former Farmer Alliances. It rose to prominence as a kind of political rebellion within the agrarian sector, prompted by the farmers' deteriorating credit situation, the decline in crop prices, and the advent of industrial capitalism. The movement spread to the West and Midwest and established itself as a political party advocating for economic reforms (silver coinage, gradual income tax, anti-trust legislation) and also political ones (initiatives and referenda, term limits, direct election of U.S. senators). The dynamics of historical debates was determined by the exchange between critical readings on the Populist, most notably by Richard Hofstadter who reacted to the early work of John D. Hicks who evaluated the Populist as a positive reformist movement, with the work of Lawrence Goodwyn the latter approach prevailed and scholars like Michael Kazin and Charles Postel expanded on it.[5] Their works highlight the mainstream dynamic of the historical debate, which was revolving around the normative evaluation of the movement. Were the Populist agrarian reformers as Hicks or Goodwyn argues or were they backward thinkers like Hofstadter alleges? This entire historical disagreement, however, is based on shaky ground as Southern, Western and Midwestern Populism had different traits. Therefore, recent studies have tended to focus more on a state-by-state analysis of the movement providing context, but blurring the overall national narrative.[6] The question of labeling, how radical or reformist the Populists were, and the continuities and discontinuities in relation to later movements, like Progressives and New

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[4] As this paper selectively handles major works for more encompassing historical works see: Worth Robert Miller, "A Centennial Historiography of American Populism," *Kansas History* 16, no. 1 (1993): 54–69; William F. Holmes, "Populism: In Search of Context," *Agricultural History* 64, no. 4 (1990): 26–58; Ryo Yokoyama, "'Populism' and 'Populism': Aporia of the Historiography of American Populism," *Review of American Studies* 39 (2017): 101–22.

[5] For the individual authors mentioned here see (in order of mention): Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955); K. D. Bicha, "The Conservative Populists: A Hypothesis," *Agricultural History* 47, no. 1 (1973): 9–24; Victor C. Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *The Western Political Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1957): 350–73; Sheldon Hackney, *Populism: The Critical Issues* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); John Donald Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (U of Minnesota Press, 1931); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Rev. ed (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).{\\i{}Populism: The Critical Issues} (Boston: Little Brown, 1971

[6] Holmes, "Populism: In Search of Context," 26–27.

Dealers, was instrumental during the initial debates. For Hicks and especially Goodwyn, the focus fell on how Populist continued the radical republican tradition of American politics. Hofstadter, due to his negative evaluation, delimited the continuity with New Deal progressives. The already existing ample historical work on local and regional organization patterns provided munition to highlight positive and negative traits for either side of the argument as race relations, movement organization, main policy aims, the relations to major parties and political practice in general all differed regionally.

While in 1896 the People's Party practically fused with the Democratic Party, the party practically disappeared at the beginning of the 1900s, the questions of its legacy caused further complications.[7] Continuities with subsequent reformist movements and populist projects could be interpreted as belonging to the tow of the original Populist. Leftist historiography evaluated how the movement possibly showcased socialistic and radical trends and even came to represent itself at times as an alternative to capitalism.[8] Later Norman Pollack revised his work and adjusted his analysis to suggest a reformist capitalist—rather than flat out anti-capital—bent to the movement.[9]

Analytically speaking, these works can be categorized based on the conceptual labels they prefer. Radicalism represents a quick change in the political *status quo*, while reformism takes a more gradual approach. Progressivism is often associated with modern American ideals like New Deal liberalism. For Hicks or Goodwyn, and with a more radical emphasis for Lasch or Pollack, the focus fell on establishing continuity with progressivism (and even explaining how vistas supposedly opened, leading to socialist conviction). In this context, radicalism is portrayed as a direct contradiction to the established norms, while reformism acts as a barrier to Populism's ability to bring about a change in American politics. This notion is best exemplified by Goodwyn's theory of a "shadow movement," which steered agrarian Southern Populist towards free silver advocacy in the Western and Midwestern regions, resulting in the dilution of their more extreme policy suggestions through their alliance with national Democrats. This notion neglects to separate regional specificities and how they interacted with each other, exemplified by how Silverites, Populist and reformists within Democrats and Republicans cooperated during the election of 1896. Lasch and Pollack stretch the positive reading, by tying Populism to socialism, in order to establish a

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[7] R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: Mckinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Daniel Klinghard, *The Nationalization of American Political Parties, 1880–1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[8] Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought*, 2nd printing, A Harvard Paperback (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976).

[9] Norman Pollack, *The Just Polity: Populism, Law, and Human Welfare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

foundation for an American socialism. Lasch defined radicalism as socialism, but he believed that the Populist movement did not fall under the category of being ideologically socialist.[10] For Pollack, the opposing attitude of existing socialist leaders and failing to unite urban and agrarian workers posed an important problem, as earlier mentioned this lead to conceptualize the Populist as radicalism.[11] Here the scholars must have to consider that certain policies needed to be adjusted to accommodate the rural farmer population with urban workers. The best example is the issue of agricultural prices, where irreconcilable positions arose. Accommodating the farmers' demand to raise the price of agricultural products through economic measures would mean a higher cost of living for workers. This reconciliation needed a more pragmatic approach, this is exemplified by the fact that the silver issue was gradually abandoned and the issue of controlling interest rates was solved through the reinstitution of the federal central banking system. Hofstadter's interpretation alludes to progressivism and especially the difference between Populist and New Deal progressives, also reflecting to a different dialectic where his own historical context of McCarthy's radicalism became the inheritor of Populist's "agrarian myth."[12] Hofstadter, by highlighting negative continuities, therefore asserts a discontinuity in possible broader positive effects of the movement ignoring how certain elements of the movement adapted their policy stances and implemented pragmatic measures which in fact affected later movements.

This paper seeks to highlight a few neglected, but insightful cases that have received little attention in discussions about this era. Mostly situated in Western states, the Silverites were active members of the established political parties, with a strong presence in the Republican Party. They advocated for silver coinage, meaning a bimetallic payment system where both gold and silver coins are in circulation. The economic idea was that increasing the money supply would decrease interest rates and improve the credit circumstances of western farmers. Naturally, the subject of silver became a central theme in many mainstream works, yet they were seamlessly incorporated into the wider scope of the Populist movement. They were portrayed mostly as a group that diverted the agrarian movements' attention from their more radical issues (see the "shadow movement" concept) or nativists and anti-Semitic (see in Hofstadter's work). When it came to the key figures, silver was mostly associated with William J. Bryan in the aforementioned work and the election of 1896.

What this paper particularly proposes, in line with studying the *political*, is to examine the contemporary problematization of social life and related reflections; as well as the redefinition of the contour of politics that followed from that. By focusing on these notions,

[10] Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, 7.
[11] Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, 85–102.
[12] Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*, 23–59.

the case of the Silverites provides further clarification regarding how their decisions were determined by historical specifies like rising industrialism, the integration of the American West, and the debates on the role of central government. More importantly, rather than focusing on evaluating their action, this paper explores the relationship between their conception and action when they faced dissonance between the two and they had to readjust and realign. Bradley J. Young captured this well when he studied the Western Republican revolt. According to his argument, three distinct traits can be identified: westernism, Republicanism, and the silver issue.[13] Apart from those three, the most crucial factor is their ambivalent relationship with other parties and their alliance founded on shared values. This can be described as an issue that is limited to a specific region and state, to some extent. However, the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress suggests that representatives who supported the Silverite movement in the early 1900s were inclined to change political parties and regarded the parties as no longer relevant. It appears that before policy issues for either Populist, Silverites and other movements, the most important task was a radical rethinking of representation in the broader sense. The main argument of this paper is that through the reconceptualization of representation, it was mostly the Silverites who served as a conduit for the progressive proposals like the expansion of suffrage and the increase in the role of the federal government in relation to their citizens. Most importantly, they re-conceptualized the role of a representative in relation to the represented and how a politician can affect structural changes. This can be described as a shift in political culture, centered around increased representation of the public and radical transformations in the system through political institutions, policy and political conduct (including the potential abandonment of the two-party structures), inflicted by politicians with a peculiar mix of political acumen and idealism. The central emphasis fell on cultivating values to advance reforms rather than on specific policies which would assume importance only after the change of this broader understanding of the political. The presence of this culture of change (sometimes radical, sometimes reformist) in these third parties and, more importantly, in the major parties until the mid-20th-century was what drove change across the political institutions, and nowhere are these commitments more apparent than in the case of the Silverites.

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[13] Bradley J. Young, "Silver, Discontent, and Conspiracy: The Ideology of the Western Republican Revolt of 1890-1901," *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 2 (1995): 243–65. On Western reformism: Paul Kleppner, "Voters and Parties in the Western States, 1876-1900," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1983): 49–68; Nathalie Massip, "Populism in the American West: An Enduring and Evolving Trend," *IdeAs. Idées d'Amériques*, no. 14 (2019). For an overview of regional studies: Yokoyama, "'Populism' and 'Populism': Aporia of the Historiography of American Populism," 109–11.

All this suggests that the pervasive culture of reform in the economic, social, and political realms demanded a reevaluation of politics at a more comprehensive level. For this undertaking, the priority should lie in the examination and interpretation of the framing and promotion of the issues, rather than the assessment of policies. The late 19th-century American political milieu stands out as an exceptional historical context, marked by profound societal and political shifts owing to the industrial revolution and the changing stature of the United States. The Silverites exemplify the reformist culture that tried to define the changes while also trying to implement change and, to that end, disregarded traditions of party affiliation, representative politics, and offered the practice and conception of a different *political*. Labels of radicalism, reformism, and relativism in subsequent movements become inadequate in this sense, as there are radical elements primarily focused on changing the political system and redefining the perception of political parties, while the Silverites' efforts to implement policy changes through political institutions can also be seen as reformist.

Western Tradition in National Politics: Henry M. Teller and John F. Shafroth

In the late 19th-century, Colorado was an archetypical Western state. Admitted into the union in 1876, it was a full-fledged member of the United States of America. Henry M. Teller was politically active and ultimately elected to the 44th Congress as a senator. John F. Shafroth, 24 years younger than Teller, was a businessman and a city attorney in Denver until he considered national office in the 1890s. Both men were initially Republicans, which was typical in the West during the post-Civil War era. Nevertheless, with the emergence of new challenges in the context of industrialism, the circumstances altered due to factors such as railway companies, Eastern credit, and the conditions of silver mining. Consequently, both men were compelled to adjust accordingly. The sectional nature of the silver issue and the thematization of it as a Western issue is often mentioned. Bradley J. Young, when examining the ideology of the Silverite movement, highlights westernism, Republicanism and silver coinage as an essential component of the movement.[14] This section will further explore Teller's and Shafrot's perspectives on American politics and how these themes influenced their thinking.

Henry Moore Teller and John Shafroth had formal affiliations with both the Democratic and Republican Parties, along with their individual Silverite Republican factions. [15] Teller

[14] Young, "Silver, Discontent, and Conspiracy," 245.

[15] The collections of the History Society of Colorado and the Denver Public Library contain the primary sources related to the contested election. Additional documents are gathered at the University of Colorado in Boulder. The three books later referenced by Ellis Elmer, Smith D. Duane, and Leonard J. Stephen are

ran as a Republican until 1896, then briefly as a Silver Republican, and from 1901 until his resignation as a Democrat. Shafroth was first elected as a Republican in 1894 and re-elected twice as a Silver Republican in 1896 and 1898. He later won as a fusion candidate of the Silver Republican and Democratic Parties in 1900 and then as a Populist with Democratic support in 1901. In 1904 resigned because of election frauds in 1902, then when he reentered Congress (he briefly served as the Governor of Colorado from 1909 to 1913) as a senator in 1912 he run on a Democratic ticket. At first glance, this complex web of changes in affiliations and coalition building for elections seems complicated, but untangling the events, decisions, justifications, and reactions from constituents and colleagues permits us to peek into the dilemmas of the reformist culture at the turn of the century. Studies of individual politicians highlighted how those people faced current political issues and dilemmas and what kinds of political innovations and techniques they applied.[16] The focus on uncovering these shifts in thinking in politics, as mentioned in the previous section, is captured by the way representation was conceptualized.

The central issue for Silverites, especially Teller and Shafroth, was to conduct politics in a way to achieve their goal: silver coinage. What differentiates them from Populist is their tendency to be pragmatic about how to achieve these goals, while maintaining a moral ground for their political practice. First, they rejected party affiliation and implied their commitment to representing the interests of the common people. This was in contrast to the Populist, for whom maintaining an independent third party identity was crucial. For the Populist the matter of fusion, until 1896, was predominantly a regional concern, as observed in states such as North Carolina and South Dakota.[17] Second, silver as an issue was present in the West, especially in the rocky mountain regions, because of regional business interest, mostly silver mining. Nevertheless, Silverites framed the issue of silver coinage in international terms and as an issue serving the people. Third, when Silverites got to political power in congress they ultimately labored through the institutions to implement changes opposed to congressional

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major works that summarize the collections and serve as biographical works on Teller and Shafroth.

[16] In the case of Silverites many individual studies and biographical works exist, some examples: Joel Sipress, "A Narrowing of Vision: Hardy L. Brian and the Fate of Louisiana Populism," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 1 (2008): 43–67; Irving Bernstein, "Samuel Gompers and Free Silver, 1896," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 29, no. 3 (1942): 394–400; Lewis W. Rathgeber, "Joseph C. Sibley, Democratic Presidential Aspirant in 1896," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 37, no. (1954): 107–15 For works treating Silverites as a group see: William L. Hewitt, "The Election of 1896: Two Factions Square Off," *The Colorado Magazine* 54, no. 1 (1977): 44–57; Elmer Ellis, "The Silver Republicans in the Election of 1896," *Journal of American History* 18, no. 4 (1932): 519–34.

[17] Ronnie W. Faulkner, "North Carolina Democrats and Silver Fusion Politics, 1892-1896," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59, no. 3 (1982): 230–51; D. Jerome Tweton, "Considering Why Populism Succeeded in South Dakota and Failed in North Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22, no. 4 (1993): 330–44.

Populist who at the turn of the century disappeared. These main points demonstrate a slightly different, but dissimilar in a seminal way, notion on behalf of the Silverites. The long careers of Teller and Shafroth represent the pinnacle of a pragmatic radical-reformist sentiment that successfully transmitted its values across different political parties and eras.

As the Congressional carrier of both Teller and Shafroth showcases, party affiliation was secondary to achieving political goals. Historical writing often portrays this behavior as potential opportunism. In certain instances, this may indeed be the case, as later demonstrated. Distinguishing between opportunism and political astuteness, however, proves challenging.[18] Nonetheless, a key aspect of this era is a widespread culture that rejected the ruling parties. The summer before the 1896 election and the subsequent Republican, Populist and Democratic primaries demonstrate this notion to parties well. The letters of Teller preceding the convention reflected the support and the bitter dilemmas the silver faction faced; one letter (dated the last day of the Republican convention) says—"Man is a traitor whose principles aren't stronger than political affiliations is […] a traitor […] people are with you."[19] Teller becomes the leader of a Western faction in the Republican Party which first attempts to implement Silverite policies in the party's platform, but as the party will not be receptive, they bolt and form a separate Silverite Republican Party.

In a circulating document, which Teller revised, the sentiment is undoubtable, the Silverite Republicans write:

> "When, as delegates to the St. Louis Republican Convention, we withdrew from that organization, we stated that we could not long- or act with the party which proposed to utterly abandon the bimetallic system, because we believed that such a policy if enacted into law would mean untold distress, and we intended thereby to indicate that we would [for the future] throw our influence to the party which ["party which" is crossed out and rewritten as "candidate who"] should appear most willing and most capable of assisting in the restoration of silver to its rightful place as a money metal. The Democratic Party in its Chicago Convention has taken a position in its platform so pronouncedly favorable to silver and has nominated candidates of such unquestionable convictions in favor of the bimetallic policy and of such high personal character that we have determined to give them ["them" crossed out switched to "those candidates"] our support."[20]

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[18] Shelden and Alexander, "Dismantling the Party System."

[19] P.L. Hatsway to Henry M. Teller, June 18, 1896, MSS622, box 1, folder 16, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

[20] Handout document draft for public distribution, July 18 1896, MSS622, box 4, folder 53, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

The crossing out of any reference to the support of any parties as organizations (here specifically the Democratic Party) stresses the need for Teller to not affiliate with them, but with the issue. Both Shafroth and Teller got broad support, many of the letters that Teller receives attest to a broad support from other Western states and sometimes from more surprising places. 51 Nebraska Republicans approve of his bolting from the party.[21] A man from Chicago sends a telegram immediately during the St. Louis convention disparaging the Republican presidential candidate—"Familys [sic] congratulations people are with you McKinley's name is mud."[22] He got letters even from Ohio encouraging him and most Americans to abandon party affiliation in favor of the silver issue, which would improve the situation of the average person.[23] The picture after the lost election of 1896 (for Democrats and Silver Republicans too) was similarly bleak to the Silver Republicans:

> "Of five congressmen who had taken an active part in the bolt from the Republican Party, only two—Shafroth and Hartman—were returned to the next Congress; of the five senators, one—Teller—was re-elected, one—Dubois—defeated, and the other three—Cannon, Mantle, and Pettigrew—held over for the rest of their terms, but did not secure re-election."[24]

In certain cases, such as Dubois', a Silver Republican lost to a Populist or another coalition-affiliated politician because of disagreements within the organization. Despite the perception of solid support for Bryan in the electoral college, he actually lost California, Oregon, North Dakota, most of the Eastern coast, and the Midwest, including Pennsylvania and Ohio. Colorado was stable for Shafroth and Teller, as the organized Silverites disappeared from the political sphere, the gravitation to the Democratic Party and subsequent Bryan tickets developed in Teller's and Shafroth's mind.

Western senators and representatives besides the issue of silver coinage indirectly tied their choice to bolt from the Republican Party to representing their constituents and people around the US. After the loss of 1896 many Silverites reconsidered their political affiliations. For example, William M. Stewart got re-elected as a Silver Republican senator of Nevada, but later rejoined the Republican Party. He recollects:

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[21] "51 Republicans" to Henry M. Teller, June 20 1896, MSS622, box 2, folder 19, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

[22] Ferd Barndollan to Henry M. Teller, June 18, 1896, MSS622, box 1, folder 14, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

[23] Seven Citizens of Canton, Ohio to Henry M. Teller, June 16 1896, MSS622, box 1, folder 14, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

[24] Elmer Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller, Defender of the West* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1941), 286.

> "After the silver question was eliminated from politics, having been a Republican from the organization of that party, I returned to my natural allegiance, and entered upon the campaign with the Republican Party in 1900. My Republican associates in the Senate understood that I severed my relations with the Republican Party on the silver question, and that my position on that question was unchanged."[25]

The case of Stewart showcases that the Silverite movement was not a homogenous political entity. Teller and Shafroth were confronted with the dilemma of the obsolescence of their individual Silverite Republican Party; nevertheless, they decided to uphold their promise and work towards achieving their political goals in accordance with their principles. For example, when Stephen Leonard writes about Shafroth he describes his position:

> "He consorted with Populists because of their stand on silver, but Congressman Shafroth, attorney and real estate investor, was no radical. His rhetoric simply reflected that he was a Westerner representing Western businessmen against Eastern businessmen, whom Shafroth and many others in the West saw as exploitative, colonial overlords. For him the question was not whether the West would be developed, but rather who would benefit from that development."[26]

Although the influence of business interests cannot be denied, it is worth examining the shift that both Teller and Shafroth underwent in the late 1890s towards an anti-colonialist stance, which was in direct opposition to the Spanish-American War and the Boer Wars. In a similar vein to Stewart, they also recognized the impracticality of pursuing bimetallism. However, unlike Stewart, during the Wilson administration, they made a significant shift towards stricter regulations and the establishment of the federal reserve system. Through this change in approach, they were able to successfully achieve their objective of improve interest rates.[27]

Finally, differently from some of their colleagues who would abandon the political system or revert to past party affiliations, they actively took part in Congressional politics. During the 1900s, they became active members of the Democratic Party. Shafroth's willingness to participate within the system came under test when in 1902 he faced allegations that he got elected due to ballot stuffing and other methods of voter fraud. Although as Shafroth believed

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[25] M. William Stewart, *Reminiscences of Senator William M. Stewart, of Nevada* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908), 319.

[26] J. Stephen Leonard, *Honest John Shafroth: A Colorado Reformer* (Denver Colorado: Colorado Historical Society, 2003), 26.

[27] Ibid., 21–36; Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller, Defender of the West*, 287–334; Duane A. Smith, *Henry M. Teller: Colorado's Grand Old Man* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 196–212.

he got elected legitimately, as one of his letters to Teller's personal secretary exemplifies—"I am confident that I was elected and that there were no 2,792 illegal votes cast, and I feel quite confident that the House will not turn me out. Still, of course, in politics there is no certainty with relation to contested election cases."[28] However, as later during a congressional committee investigation showcased that a group, probably independently from Shafroth's campaign, did conduct voter fraud, faced with this Shafroth resigned and after an unsuccessful run he took a break and later run for the governorship.[29] On the contrast, Joseph Sibley during the 1896 campaign took a different route. Similarly to Teller and Shafroth he bolted the Republican Party, and later attempted a failed run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, despite his support for a Teller nomination for president (which Teller didn't accept and after Silver Democrats were successful in their party he supported the Democrats) he abandoned the party to become a Republican.[30] When it comes to their relationship with the American political system, both Teller and Shafroth can be seen as reformists in this sense. Nonetheless, their advocacy for women's suffrage, silver coinage, and regulation, coupled with their refusal to align with any political party in favor of prioritizing the people's best interests, can be described as radical. This showcases the intricate political culture that can be viewed as the precursor to contemporary American politics.

The role of Teller and Shafroth, in particular, serves as a clear illustration that, unlike movements such as the Populist or their own Silverite Republican Party, they possessed the ability to effectively navigate the American system while also bringing about the essential reforms advocated by the Populist. Teller and Shafroth have demonstrated a willingness to adapt their political approach or even leave their party if the situation calls for it, all while upholding their idealistic beliefs. It is crucial to understand that their persistence and advocacy, which are rooted in their values, do not undermine the efforts of social movements. Instead, they indirectly integrate these movements into the fabric of the American political system.

Conclusion

The political environment in late 19th-century Colorado serves as a symbol of the wider movements of reform, radicalism, and progressivism that permeated the United States

[28] John F. Shafroth to Thomas F. Dawson, June 30, 1896, MSS622, box 2, folder 20, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.
[29] Leonard, *Honest John Shafroth: A Colorado Reformer*, 33–36.
[30] Rathgeber, "Joseph C. Sibley, Democratic Presidential Aspirant in 1896."; Joseph C. Sibley to Henry M. Teller, June 25, 1896, MSS622, box 2, folder 20, Henry Moore Teller Collection, History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

at that time. The era's historical writing often simplifies the historical context by treating different political movements homogeneously under labels such as radical, progressive or reformist; while other work in order to curb this problem reverts to local or regional microanalysis. This paper attempts to reconcile the two notions through analyzing individual politicians' conceptualization of the political. The essential elements of this notion revolve around the influential roles assumed by Senator Henry M. Teller and Representative John F. Shafroth. Their careers embody the shifting political ideologies of the time, as they were willing to forsake party affiliation in favor of relatively radical, though not necessarily sound, political values, all while adhering to the institutional structure of American politics. The political transformation of Colorado during this period can be viewed as a representation of the larger conflict between reformist and radical factions on a national scale. However, the paper argues that it is more accurate to interpret it as the establishment of a political culture that effectively safeguards, transfers, and adapts policies to accomplish political transformation.

The roles of Teller and Shafroth, along with the key issues they supported, illustrate the complexities and contradictions of this transformative era. Their legacies serve as a constant reminder that the ongoing pursuit of reform and progress demands skillfully managing the delicate balance between idealism and pragmatism, while also addressing the intricate challenges of reconciling regional interests with national imperatives, moreover necessitates a radical shift in how politics is conceptualized.

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