

CONGRESSIONAL POLITICS IN THE GILDED AGE

You are a United States senator from the Northeast dealing with the major issues confronting the country in the late 1800s. Read through the following historical summaries concerning four important regional issues during this period and then read the four pieces of legislation that the Senate must consider. Look at the points that you can receive for passing or defeating each bill and then start negotiating to get what you want.

REGIONAL ISSUES

Protective tariffs were an important issue for manufacturers in the Northeast who had great influence over senators from their region and many citizens throughout the country supported high tariffs as a means of promoting economic development. Southerners were strongly opposed to high tariffs because foreign countries usually retaliated by placing their own tariffs on the large volume of cotton and tobacco exports from the Southeast. Reformers throughout the country as well as most Westerners were generally opposed to high tariffs but it was not as important as other issues. Efforts to lower tariff rates were unsuccessful during the 1880s and in 1890 the McKinley Tariff adjusted them even higher. Success in the 1892 election enabled the Democratic party to lower the rates in the Wilson-Gorman Tariff of 1894 but Republican victories in 1896 resulted in the Dingley Tariff of 1897 which raised rates to new highs.

Railroad regulation was of great concern particularly for Westerners and for farmers and small business owners in the other regions. Opponents of railroad regulation included most business leaders who were concentrated in the Northeast. Citizens unaffected by the issue tended to oppose government regulation as an infringement of the property rights of the business owner. A variety of regulations had been passed in farming states during the 1870s as a result of the influence of the Grange and the Farmer's Alliance, but these were overturned by the Supreme Court in the 1880s due to the interstate nature of most railroads. After several unsuccessful attempts, congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 which outlawed collusion between railroads, banned some methods of price discrimination and provided for federal regulation of the railroads.

The United States experienced 30 years of deflation between 1865 and 1895. The falling prices for agricultural products made it increasingly more difficult for farm owners to make the fixed payments on their debts or for

sharecroppers and tenant farmers to ever acquire their own land. Farmers supported the coinage of silver to increase the money supply as a means of stimulating inflation (or at least reducing the deflation) and their political clout was greatest in the West and Southeast. Those involved in the silver mining industry were also interested in the increased coinage of silver. Business leaders and many others were opposed to the coinage of silver because they believed that it would undermine the public's faith in the value of money and precipitate an economic depression. The political efforts of farmers and the silver mining industry resulted in the Bland-Allison Act of 1878 and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 as well as the emergence of the Populist Party and the Silverite Party in the early 1890s.

The major political arenas for civil rights during this period was in the state legislatures where Jim Crow laws were being passed and in the local communities where lynching was becoming more frequent as a means of intimidating black citizens. (The highest number reported during one year was 135 in 1894.) At the federal level, the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional in 1883 and provided the legal basis for segregation in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896. Republicans in the Northeast and West had historic and political reasons for supporting African-American civil rights but the issue had a low priority as a result of prevailing racial attitudes and the frustrations experienced during Reconstruction. This limited support contrasted with the adamant opposition of the Southeast (as well as some northern Democrats) to federal involvement with this issue. As a result, congress was most notable for its inaction on civil rights during this period. The Lodge Bill in 1891 would have authorized federal officials to decide the qualifications of voters and to place their ballots in the ballot box over the objections of local officials. It passed the House of Representatives by a narrow margin (155-149) but was killed by a southern filibuster in the Senate. In 1894, congress repealed the 1870 Enforcement Act which provided federal marshals and election supervisors to see that election practices in local communities do not violate African American's right to vote.