Populist Senator William A. “Whiskers” Peffer and Congressman Jeremiah “Sockless Jerry” Simpson of Kansas appeared regularly in the pages of the pro-Republican magazine Judge throughout the 1890s in caricatures like the one above. Drawn by Victor Gillam and published in October 1891, this cartoon depicts Peffer and Simpson pushing a boulder labeled “Farmers Alliance” beneath the wheels of a wagon, representing the Democratic Party. Five congressmen, each with his own personal, diverse cause, squabble over control as a donkey dubbed “Democracy” strains to advance. The banner on the left reads “A Grand Straddle on Every Issue.”

Peffer and Simpson took office in 1891, having been elected on the People’s Party platform after years of low crop prices, drought, and economic collapse. Sockless Jerry Simpson secured his nickname on the campaign trail when he maligned his opponent’s fine silk stockings. Mocked in turn for his poor finances, Simpson and his political ally Mary Elizabeth Lease turned an insult about his socklessness into a badge of honor, and Simpson won the election by a wide margin. William “Whiskers” Peffer received his moniker due to his distinctive beard, which was frequently caricatured in political cartoons of the day.

Like Simpson and Peffer, fellow Kansan and Populist Mason S. Peters swiftly earned a nickname of his own. Peters took office in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1897 on the heels of Peffer’s departure. Simpson had lost his reelection bid two years before but recaptured the seat in 1896 and returned to Congress with Peters. As Peters entered the House chamber for the first time, two young congressional pages pondered to which party he might belong. Spying his beard, they speculated — no doubt thanks in part to caricatures like “The Poor Donkey” — that he might be a Populist. A foolproof way to find out? “Give him a push,” one page said. “If a jackrabbit jumps out of his whiskers he’s a Populist.” Peters embraced the title of “the Jackrabbit Statesman.” His efforts to subsidize postal services for the blind in a contentious political climate are the subject of one of this issue’s feature articles.
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