hospital was gone, along with the high school, the bank, and all but one tiny store. Sadly, Van's nurse at the hospital had been killed in an automobile accident two weeks before we came. She had been such a friend to me as a bride in this strange country. We were welcomed at the saloon, now a bar, with drinks and a present of Black Hills gold earrings to match the ring Van had given me on my twenty-fifth birthday. At the restaurant, the couple we almost went to Belle Fourche with that New Year's Day, Verda and Bill Townsend, served us huge steak dinners. We met a rancher who said Van had delivered him. I was probably there, too!

Following his service in Camp Crook, James Van Leuvan would join the United States Army Reserve as a medical officer, working at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Spotsylvania, Virginia. In 1934, he went to Baltimore Presbyterian Hospital and became an eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist. The family then moved to Meriden, Connecticut, where Dr. Van Leuvan was on staff at the Veteran's Memorial Hospital and Meriden Hospital until his death on 8 June 1969. Dorothy Van Leuvan became involved in community and social activities and raising the couple's two children, Alice and Albert. She died in Meriden on 11 December 2000.

Like other states of the Midwest and Great Plains, South Dakota enjoys a moderate republican political culture, rooted in a belief in the equality of individuals and their ability to work together for the greater good. While similarities among these states abound, differences also persist. The political culture of South Dakota is distinct from that of Minnesota, known historically for its liberal leanings, and that of Wyoming, known for its conservatism. The political culture of South Dakota, where Populism originated, is even quite distinct from that of North Dakota, where radical political reforms did not take hold until later. As the editor of the Watertown Public Opinion noted in 1890, the "politics of North Dakota is a product of an entirely different breed of cats." We aim to sketch some of the influences that shape the broad contours of South Dakota's political culture and, therefore, the practice of politics in the state. These contours, like those of a winding streambed, can change in response to events and trends from without but frequently return to form, or what anthropologist Adam Kuper calls "the authentic, local way of being different."

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1. Watertown Public Opinion, 11 July 1890.
South Dakota's political culture might best be described as one of agrarian conservatism. Political scientist Daniel J. Elazar has noted that the plains states exhibit in varying degrees a "combination of populism, conservatism, and progressivism" and strike differing balances between a "marketplace" polity, in which interest groups jostle for power, and a "commonwealth" polity, in which citizens attempt to build a cohesive community. Throughout the Great Plains, this balance can be seen in the extent to which agrarian and republican attitudes limit the machinations of individualism and the free market and thereby protect society from marauding monopolies and other forces that threaten to disrupt the existing social order. Agrarian conservatism supports Republican party candidates who defend traditional cultural institutions, but not if they are too hostile toward preserving the agrarian economic order. Democrats can also prevail with agrarian appeals, but not if their cultural views contradict tradition.

For much of its history, South Dakota has supported the Republican party. After the Civil War, northerners from bastions of pro-Union Republicanism such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, as well as immigrants who traveled through northern ports, converged on the rich agricultural lands of southeastern Dakota Territory. In the late 1860s, 80 percent of residents in the territory's southern half registered as Republicans. The party's dominance in South Dakota has persisted since then, especially in presidential elections (the last two times South Dakotans voted for a Democratic president were in 1936 and 1964, with the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson victories) and gubernatorial contests (the state has elected just four Democratic governors). When George S. McGovern started organizing for the Democratic party in the early 1950s, Republicans outnumbered Democrats in the state legislature 108 to 2. Writing in 1947, journalist John Gunther concluded that South Dakota was as Republican as post-Civil War Alabama was Democratic.

Republican party dominance in South Dakota politics has been challenged frequently, however, especially when the interests of agriculture and the party clash. Moreover, Republican allegiances often prove thin when other important interests and priorities arise, reflecting a pragmatism rooted in agrarian republican sentiment and the challenges of life on the economic and geographic periphery. For example, the state deviated from its Republican party heritage in 1896, voting for the Populist William Jennings Bryan, and in 1912, voting for the Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, both of whom offered hope of restoring economic control to South Dakota farmers.

Such deviations highlight the power of South Dakota's agrarian origins. The state was cut from the vast swath of land—nearly 530 million acres—that Thomas Jefferson bought from Napoleon in 1803, and it bears a heavy Jeffersonian imprint. By the mid-nineteenth century when Dakota Territory was established, Jefferson's vision of an American landscape populated by small farmers had become a dogma of Republican party politics. As the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln chose his neighbor and family doctor, William Jayne of Springfield, Illinois, to be the territory's first governor. The absence during the Civil War of southern lawmakers, who had dominated Congress throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, allowed Lincoln's new Republican party to advance its "free-labor" vision.


throughout the territories. The adoption of the Homestead Act in 1862, which was intended, in part, to give poor but industrious individuals the chance to improve their lot through work, shaped the Great Dakota Boom after the Civil War. Instead of being controlled by land baronies, Dakota Territory became an economic space defined by decentralized, small-scale family farming.

In order for small family farms to survive, farmers needed to be able to sell their bounty on fair terms. In the 1870s and 1880s, many feared the territory was becoming a colony within the empires of railroad barons like James J. Hill, who controlled access to markets and manipulated prices from Saint Paul, Minnesota, with the help of eastern financiers such as J. P. Morgan. In 1885, the territorial legislature responded by establishing a railroad commission to help make the terms of trade more equitable. At the constitutional convention in Sioux Falls in the same year, delegates widely debated what legal scholars came to call the “Dakota Plan,” an effort to circumvent powerful interests that might control the legislature by requiring that state laws of any importance be submitted to a vote of the people. Agrarian-based economic regulation, including restrictions on railroad corporations, was also adopted. One year after South Dakota became a state, Congress adopted the Sherman Antitrust Act in an attempt to halt the collusive practices of railroads and other large corporations.

When these and other measures failed to yield the desired results, reformers in South Dakota formed the nation’s first Populist party, which they called the Independent party, in 1890. Among their demands were government ownership of railroads and a ban on railroad corporations holding excessive amounts of land. South Dakotan Henry L. Loucks chaired the national Populist convention in 1892 from which emerged the famous “Omaha Platform,” calling for government ownership of all transportation and communication, low-interest loans to farmers, and the free coinage of silver to raise farm prices. During the 1890s, South Dakota elected a Populist governor, senator, and congressman and became the first state in the nation to adopt the initiative and referendum. This amalgam of agrarian interests and populist sentiments persists in the state today. In 1998, for example, South Dakotans used the Populist party-inspired initiative process to enact a constitutional amendment outlawing corporate ownership of farms, which many viewed as desecrating the state’s family-farm tradition. The statutory and constitutional prohibitions on corporate farming that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s were consistent with the demands of the Farmers’ Alliance, one of the found-


Henry Loucks defended agrarian interests as a Populist leader on both the state and national scenes.
ing bodies of the Populist party. A century earlier, the alliance had marched under the banner “The Alien Landlord Must Go.”

After the Populist party faded, many farmers returned to the Republican fold, in part because of Progressive Republicans such as Governor Peter Norbeck, who won election in 1916. Norbeck blunted the incursion of the radical Nonpartisan League from North Dakota, which one Redfield man described as “coming down from the north like a swarm of grasshoppers,” by co-opting aspects of its agrarian reform program. While establishing, for example, a state-owned coal mine and cement plant, Norbeck distinguished the agrarian conservatism of the Republicans from the extremism of league members, whom he cast as Socialists and disloyal to the United States during World War I. Republican Congressman Karl E. Mundt similarly co-opted an agrarian antimonopoly platform during the Great Depression while painting the opposition as extremist.

Despite the efforts of Progressive Republicans, the collapse of farm prices after World War I bolstered support for Democrats who vowed to defend the agrarian economic order. Political scientist Michael Paul Rogin concluded that South Dakota’s “modern Democratic party has a heritage in post-World War I agrarian radicalism.” Populist and agrarian sentiments also infused the Farmers Holiday movement of the 1930s and were the reason, along with dissatisfaction over Republican policy proposals that threatened the federal farm program, why George McGovern won election to Congress in 1956. When voters sent Thomas A. Daschle to the Senate for the first time in 1986, one explanation for his success was the unpopularity of President Ronald Reagan’s farm policies and the resurgence of agrarian populism during the depths of the 1980s farm crisis.

The state’s populist, agrarian heritage manifests itself in various ways today. South Dakota political leaders must pay heed to the long-held perception of South Dakota as an economic colony and not appear too closely affiliated with the rich and powerful on the


South Dakota from becoming a completely predictable bastion of conservatism.

The state's populism can, in fact, manifest itself in unpredictable ways, as indicated by the political demise of George McGovern. Many of the South Dakota Populists who called for economic reforms in the late nineteenth century also advocated prohibition and other religiously inspired, culturally conservative reforms designed to protect the social order. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the nature of South Dakota populism became scrambled as economic populists and reformers were viewed increasingly as allied with cultural radicals. George McGovern, who had been elected as a champion of the farmer during the agricultural depression of the 1950s, suffered politically in later years from his widely publicized association with movie stars, Fidel Castro, and the radical Left. As historian Thomas D. Isern has noted, Great Plains residents have long "cringed culturally" to the centers of power represented by Hollywood and eastern cultural elites while at the same time resenting their economic dependency on those centers. McGovern's Senate career ended in 1980 when a new populism, stemming from working-class resistance to what was seen as the excesses of cultural elites and political liberals during the 1960s and 1970s, generated new constituencies to work against him. McGovern then became a prominent critic of this "New Right," which he viewed as being controlled by distant, powerful forces of economic reaction, a position based on the original vision of nineteenth-century Populism. His subsequent defeat underscores the dual nature of South Dakota's agrarian conservatism, which creates political space for Democrats to gain office in order to defend agrarian interests but punishes those who deviate from the conservative social traditions of the state.

The state's agrarian conservatism and, therefore, its politics, are also filtered through its small-town subcultures. Historically, South Dakota has lacked a large city—a Chicago, Indianapolis, or Minneapolis—

In a scene repeated in countless small towns across South Dakota, men gather for conversation at the Bowdle grain elevator in 1942.

To exert a dominating influence on state politics, there have been no equivalents of Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley in South Dakota and no longstanding political machines attached to an agglomeration of voters in a metropolitan area. As a result, South Dakota politicians must travel the state to cultivate support, attending lunches held by various small-town groups such as the Kiwanis Club and others. These gatherings are often attended by conservative—and Republican—small-business owners who believe in hard work, community-building, and Christian charity and who help form the “northern Bible belt.”

Perhaps because of their atmosphere of familiarity and neighborliness, small towns are incubators of political leadership. Main Street restaurants, grain elevators, and wherever else two or more people gather for a cup of coffee are the sites of much political talk amongst friends and neighbors. Personal skills, then, are extremely important for South Dakota politicians, and force of personality explains the success of many office-seekers. Personality politics is further aided by the fact that the major interest groups that wield power over the selection of candidates in other states exert less influence in South Dakota, leaving voters less bound to single issues or ideologies. To the extent that leaders such as Karl Mundt and George McGovern were ideologically strident, they continued to be successful, according to political scholars Robert E. Burns and Herbert E. Cheever, Jr., “through excellent organization and strong personal qualities that compensated for their less moderate views.”

21. Stock, Main Street in Crisis, p. 43.
With his strong public-speaking style, Governor William Janklow demonstrated the power of personality in state politics. Here, he addresses farmers gathered at a protest rally in Pierre in 1985.

ern, explained that his policy was to "support the man—not the party," another indicator that personality trumped ideology. Observers of another prominent politician, former governor William Janklow, have concluded that his riveting public performances and powerful personality, combined with an awareness of the state's populist streak, allowed him to dominate South Dakota politics from the statehouse for four terms. Mundt, McGovern, and Janklow, it should be emphasized, all hailed from small towns, a signal to populist-minded voters that they were, presumably, not part of the moneyed establishment.


The hundreds of small-town newspapers in South Dakota have also played a prominent role in politics by shaping the flow of information to a large segment of the state's residents, many of whom had limited access to competing political views. Among the first buildings constructed in every new town during the Great Dakota Boom was a newspaper office. In 1884, three weekly and two daily newspapers were published in Huron alone. Most of these sheets were highly partisan, and editors competing for readers often traded barbs and denunciations in their columns in an early prairie version of Crossfire, CNN's political debate program.

Many editors, moreover, were staunch Republicans, reinforcing the GOP tendencies of the state. Charles Mitchell in Brookings, the Hipple family in Pierre, and Fred Christopherson in Sioux Falls continually reminded readers that the Republican party was, in their view, superior. Christopherson's Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader was particularly one-sided in its support for the long-serving Republican senator Karl Mundt. Years earlier, the Argus-Leader had launched vicious attacks on the radical Nonpartisan League in an effort to aid Republican governor Peter Norbeck's efforts to co-opt the league's program of agrarian reform. In fact, Norbeck's campaign asked the newspaper to tone down its rhetoric. Democratic-leaning editors, like William R. Ronald of Mitchell who played a prominent role in influencing New Deal farm policy, were distinctly in the minority (the Mitchell newspaper, in contrast to the Argus-Leader, had supported the Nonpartisan League). As recently as 2002, the campaign of gubernatorial candidate M. Michael Rounds targeted the state's small newspapers, many...


26. Elizabeth Evenson Williams, "W. R. Ronald: Prairie Editor and an AAA Architect," South Dakota History 1 (Summer 1971): 272–73. At present, the roles have been reversed—the Mitchell Daily Republic now leans Republican and the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader is more Democratic than in the past.
of them weeklies, in part because the campaign recognized the powerful potential of the state's strong newspaper readership.27

At the same time, the age of newspaper dominance in South Dakota and elsewhere has passed, changing the nature of politics. Whereas politicians at one time could develop a network of friendly newspaper editors to bolster their standing, the advent of radio and television transformed this process.28 Today, many politicians pour advertising money into the Sioux Falls television stations, which dominate the state. Television advertising in national races is also common because strategists find advertising rates in South Dakota relatively inexpensive compared to New York and California. The growth of the television medium in the latter half of the twentieth century also bolstered candidates such as Senators Larry Pressler and Tom Daschle who used mass media to burnish their images.

The state's small-town culture of familiarity and neighborliness also shapes the tenor of its politics. Aggressive partisanship has never been the exclusive or even the most prominent element of politics in South Dakota, where the close personal proximity of candidates and voters alike militates against such an approach. Politically successful Democrats such as George McGovern and Tom Daschle have recognized what might be called the "nice factor" and have cultivated public images of soft-spoken civility. The state's electorate exhibits a low tolerance for negative campaigning, although such campaigns are certainly waged. In the three-way Republican primary for governor in 2002, voters chose Mike Rounds, the least-known candidate with the smallest war chest, in part because he avoided negative campaigning (partly out of financial necessity) while the other two candidates slugged it out with nasty ads.29

The high concentration of community organizations, where individuals cooperate in any number of local efforts, also softens politics and bolsters Daniel Elazar's depiction of South Dakota as a "common-

wealth" polity. Early on, towns fostered commercial clubs, study clubs, lodges, and fraternal organizations, among a wide variety of other civic, religious, and political groups. At one time, the two thousand citizens of Webster supported lodges of the Freemasons, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Woodmen of the World, Rebekah, Knights of Pythias, Catholic Order of Foresters, Royal Neighbors of America, and Ancient Order of United Workmen. Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam has characterized this civic spirit as "social capital," or a measure of the cohesive elements of social life that make communities strong. Putnam points out, for example, that South Dakotans and North Dakotans can boast of attending more club meetings per year than anyone else in the country, an obvious manifestation of the strength of small-town civic culture and community participation. He also notes that a strong indicator of social capital is the presence of a large percentage of citizens of Scandinavian heritage, as in South Dakota. As Francis Fukuyama has explained, political cultures that are "leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community, and trust, which are based in habit rather than rational calculation," promote participation and allow economies to function smoothly. Partisan political campaigns that disrupt this spirit of cooperation often become unpopular.

South Dakota's small-town, commonwealth culture also fosters political pragmatism. Ideologies, which divide the world into good and evil, are incompatible with a communal culture in which most everyone is acquainted. It is difficult to view a person one meets regularly in the church basement or at the local drive-in as evil simply for the opinions he or she might hold on certain issues. The willingness to set aside strict adherence to free-market ideology, for example, allowed South Dakotans to become among the first in the nation to experiment with building a state-owned cement plant in the 1920s. Some observers also view the state's recurring pattern of electing Republican governors (to keep taxes low) and Democratic senators (to collect federal dollars) as evidence of South Dakotans' pragmatism. When voters elected a Democratic governor, Tom Berry, in the 1930s, he cut the state budget and instead sought relief in the form of federal dollars. Among the reasons Berry lost in 1936 was his failure to obtain the state's "fair share" of federal relief funds. During the 2002 Senate election, a British reporter noted, "South Dakotans enjoy having one of their own as a powerful senator, looking to Mr. Daschle to bring home drought relief, farm subsidies and other pork-barrel goodies from Washington." This phenomenon represents another aspect of the mixing and balancing of conservatism and the state's agrarian republican heritage.

The land itself has also shaped the state's political heritage. Comprising seventy-seven thousand square miles, South Dakota is larger than all of New England. Since 1890, the population density has barely doubled, reaching 9.9 people per square mile in the year 2000 for a total population of 755,000. Harding County, with a population density of one-half person per square mile, is considered unoccupied by contemporary standards. Much of South Dakota's population growth occurred before 1920, a demographic fact that has generated concern for decades about stagnation, outmigration, and withering towns. In a recent essay, Michael Lind described these trends as "an
economic death spiral, characterized by an aging population, a shrinking tax base, and contracting public and private investment. South Dakota's sparse, aging population and geographic isolation creates its own brand of political pressures, elevating the importance of issues relating to the elderly and to economic development. As early as the 1950s, the state launched a formal economic development program, and George McGovern's 1962 Senate victory was attributable, in part, to the early politics of Medicare (his opponent had voted against an early form of the program).

As in the past, the state's distance from the nation's financial and industrial centers continues to fuel suspicions of outsider market manipulation and influence politics. The effort of former governor Janklow to wire every school room in the state with Internet service reflects a populist use of state power and a recognition of the importance of connecting to the wider world. Access to hospitals, schools, and emergency services in rural areas remains a chronic problem, an example of what sociologist Carl F. Kraenzel terms the "social cost of space.")

These costs also generate a constituency for congressional representatives who seek federal largesse to help pay for them.

The state's geographic isolation and populist tendencies also shape South Dakotans' views about foreign affairs. Some Populists, for example, criticized what they viewed as American adventurism in the Philippines following the Spanish-American War. South Dakota's largest ethnic group, the Germans, have also been decidedly isolationist. During the 1930s, politicians such as Republican congressman Karl Mundt were in the forefront of the "America First" efforts to keep the United States out of World War II. True to populist ideals, Mundt combined his isolationism with criticism of moneyed interests, arguing as war approached in 1940 that "the chant of the international meddlers and profit seekers is beginning again with its insidious and deadly monotony." In the 1950 Republican primary, Congressman Francis Case used isolationist arguments to defeat incumbent senator Chan Gurney, an internationalist. Isolationist senator Robert Taft also won the 1952 South Dakota presidential primary over the internationalist-leaning Dwight D. Eisenhower. Such sympathies may also arise from the fact that families in the state have sent a disproportionately large number of young people off to war, which may explain why George McGovern was not defeated for his strong stance against the Vietnam War, despite his association with radical elements that were unpopular in South Dakota. Karl Mundt's close ally, the editor of the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, warned Mundt, too, about the dangers of supporting the Vietnam War.

Geographical divisions within the state also influence the outlook of its residents. Although South Dakota is often described as being divided roughly in half by the Missouri River into "East River" and "West River," the state is actually part of three distinct regions of the country. The easternmost portion of the state is part of what geographers call the Agricultural Interior (essentially an extension of the traditional black-dirt Illinois-Iowa Corn Belt). The central and western areas are part of the Great Plains, while the far southwestern portion is a mountainous section, the Black Hills. The simple East River/West River designation obscures several factors important to understanding state politics. The most common perception, for example, is that East River is dominated by farming and West River is dominated by ranching. In reality, the Agricultural Interior section is defined by farming, industry, and commerce; the Great Plains area by ranching.

and government; and the Black Hills by mining, forestry, tourism, gaming, and the military.43

However they are labeled, such geographic divisions shape state politics. The Populist movement attained its greatest strength in the Agricultural Interior section where farmers dominated and began organizing in the 1880s and 1890s. Because much of the non-Indian settlement of South Dakota's Great Plains area took place after the high tide of Populism, its residents do not share the same populist zeal and traditions with their eastern counterparts. It is not happenstance that the Agricultural Interior section produced political liberals such as George McGovern, Tom Daschle, and farmer activist Emil Loriks. It is this area, which political geographers label “increasingly liberal,” that has become a political battleground in close statewide elections.44

Ethnic settlement patterns also reinforce regional differences. Western South Dakota, settled later than the east, tended to attract “Old-American stock,” including people from the American South. Eastern South Dakota, most of which was settled in the 1880s and 1890s, attracted Europeans such as Germans, German-Russians, and Norwegians. Some of these immigrants also came from ethnic enclaves in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa.45 European immigrants in eastern South Dakota, who built small crop farms and small communal churches that preserved their ethnic identity, were more supportive of Populism and, later, reform Democrats. Settlers on the rangelands of western South Dakota tended to be more conservative.


As one travels west across the state today, political conservatism becomes stronger.46 Former senator James Abourezk has noted the existence of a “streak of antiauthoritarian radicalism” and the emergence of Posse Comitatus and John Birch Society chapters in the West. In one instance, he was asked by a rancher “when we were going to get enough gumption to overthrow the federal government.”47 When the state lost a congressional seat after the 1980 census, Republican congressman Clint Roberts, a rancher from the Great Plains section, was pitted against Democratic congressman Tom Daschle from the more liberal Agricultural Interior area. While Roberts carried 66 percent of the vote in sparsely populated ranching areas such as Harding County, Daschle tallied similar totals in more populous counties such as Marshall and Day, which had been settled by Populist-leaning Norwegian immigrants and had longstanding traditions of agrarian radicalism, allowing him to prevail.48

Political liberals from the Agricultural Interior section have also benefited in recent years from strong support among Sioux Indians living on reservations in the Great Plains area. American Indians did not become citizens until the 1920s, and voter participation was low in subsequent decades. Following World War II, the Republican party gained a foothold on the reservations, and Ben Reifel, a Sioux Indian, served as a Republican congressman from 1960 to 1970. Beginning with the civil-rights era in the 1960s, however, the reservation vote increasingly trended Democratic. High-profile clashes between then-attorney-general William Janklow and members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s hastened this trend. The Indian vote was important to Daschle’s success in 1982, and the state’s American Indians have since become a reliable Democratic constituency. In the 2002 senate race, for example, the Democratic candidate won the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation 92 percent to 8 percent. Population growth in Indian communities has also been strong in recent
The wide range of actors and influences—from agrarian populism to geographic space—makes South Dakota’s political culture complex. Although it came into existence under Republican party dominance, the state is not the predictable bastion of conservatism that some assume. Traditional republicanism, agrarian populism, small-town culture, local institutions, personality politics, ethnic settlement patterns, and geographic isolation all form the contours of an agrarian conservatism that combines with national trends to shape the politics of South Dakota at any given moment in its history.