
Historical Musings

Comments on "The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture"

Editors' note: The Summer 2004 issue of *South Dakota History* (Volume 34, number 2) featured a "Historical Musings" essay by Jon Lauck, John E. Miller, and Edward Hogan entitled "The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture." In their essay, the authors explored the influences that have shaped what they call the "moderate republican political culture" of the state and set it apart from its neighbors (p. 157). The essay generated considerable discussion among readers. In the interest of further dialogue, Lauck, Miller, and Hogan invited five respondents to formulate their comments for a panel discussion at the thirty-seventh annual Dakota Conference on Northern Plains History, Literature, Art, and Archaeology held at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on 23 April 2005. The comments of three of the panel participants appeared in the Summer 2006 issue of *South Dakota History*; the essays of the two remaining participants are presented here.

The Politics of Pragmatism

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Let me start by saying that I do not pretend to walk in the shoes of a scholar. The comments that follow are simply my observations as a lifelong South Dakotan now sitting in the journalist's chair.

I found "The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture" interesting to read and mostly on target. I have always believed that South Dakota will not prosper as a monopolitical state. Its population is too spread out and too ethnically diverse to rally, long-term, behind any political party. Certainly, the state is conservative. But to call it Republican, Democrat, or Libertarian is to sell the people short. It appears to me that Jon Lauck, John E. Miller, and Edward Hogan have found that fact to be true, as well.

Take the example of former governor William J. Janklow, for instance. This Republican bought a railroad, embarked upon a massive wiring project to connect South Dakota's schools to the Internet, and, over the protests of the private sector, started what amounted to a state construction company to build houses at the South Dakota Penitentiary. These actions do not represent Republican ideals. They did, however, fit the immediate needs of a dispersed population struggling to get by. There is a lesson in Bill Janklow, both instructive and cautionary, for any South Dakotan reaching for public office.

I see South Dakota as a kind of confederation of beliefs. The Lauck, Miller, and Hogan essay analyzes the state's geopolitical differences in terms of three separate entities: the black-dirt east, the plains, and the mountain west. I submit that the landscape is more like a quilt of ethnic and philosophical pockets allowed to grow in relative isolation. South Dakotans come together in biannual elections and spring basketball tournaments only because they have to, and not because they feel any great affinity for the folks who live down the road. The Czechs of Tabor, the Germans of Freeman, and even my Irish ancestors in Montrose went to the polls driven by self-interest rather than any great political affiliation. I suspect that a successful politician in the first century of South Dakota's existence faced some of the same challenges as an urban alderman seeking a seat on an eastern city council. Any candidate hoping to build a statewide majority in South Dakota needed to appeal to a coalition of these ethnic factions.

The common thread in nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Dakota, of course, was agriculture. In dealing with the marginal growing conditions of the Great Plains, the state's settlers railed against the things that were presumably pulling them down. Since they could not change the bad soil and unpredictable weather, they campaigned against the railroad barons and bankers of the day, who prospered while farmers struggled and failed. This state of affairs, it seems to me, held true throughout the twentieth century and formed a common thread in the careers of the most successful politicians of recent times, including Janklow, who served four terms as governor (1979–1987 and 1995–2003) and one year in Congress (2003–2004), and Thomas A. Daschle, who served four terms in Congress (1979–1987)

and three terms in the United States Senate (1987–2005). It was that “South Dakota first” outlook when it came to grain and livestock prices, ethanol production, opening foreign markets, and protecting against subsidized imports that propelled these men and remains a prerequisite for long-term political success in the state.

South Dakota is changing with the twenty-first century, however. I base this statement partly on census figures and partly on observations from my life in Sioux Falls. A growing percentage of people living in the city and the surrounding area did not grow up in South Dakota, in contrast to past decades. As of the 2000 United States census, there were about three thousand of each of three major racial and ethnic minorities—blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics—living in Sioux Falls.¹ That was a half-decade ago. Today, the total of those minority groups is likely well beyond the ten thousand mark, a figure more than the populations of most towns in the state. As they invest in the community, these newcomers, like the long-time residents, will demand their own voice in the system. Another significant growth sector in Sioux Falls is the suburban family, which has already become a significant influence in South Dakota politics.

There will come a time in the not-too-distant future, probably within the next two decades, when the urban elements of the Sioux Falls metropolitan area will assert an influence that the rural interests of the state cannot overwhelm. This is not to say that the city will assert a disproportionate influence; rather, it will become an equal partner in the coalition-building of South Dakota politics. I submit as evidence the 2004 election and the role of the suburban voters. Much has been made of John Thune’s victory over the incumbent senator, Tom Daschle. I will not rehash the strategies or events that may have influenced that election, but it should be noted that in such a tight race, Thune’s advantage in the developing suburban ring of Sioux Falls cannot be discounted. In these large precincts—again with more votes than most towns in the state—Thune won substantial margins, partic-

1. A breakdown of the population figures for Sioux Falls in 2000 can be found by accessing the U.S. Census Bureau Web site at <http://factfinder.census.gov> and following the “Fact Sheet” link.

ularly in the “U”-shaped area around the southern edge of the city.²

I saw these folks on the ground during the election. They were loyal, active, and represented the “common man” of 2004. But the suburban vote is fickle. The politics of tax cuts, day care, and abortion is a volatile brew that can quickly overwhelm the pot. The successful politician must appeal to the “family values” that attract the thirty-something parent with a two-car, two-child, two-income family, as well as the farmers and ranchers who built the traditional power-block in South Dakota.

Uniting such diverse interests today, as in the past, is an “us against the world” outlook. Janklow, Daschle, Peter Norbeck, and George McGovern all used it to advantage in one form or another. In the early statehood period, the successful politician railed against the trusts. Later on, he demanded that we keep the troops at home. Recently, politicians have seen fit to attack international trade and the government itself. The unifying principle is that we are stuck with each other in a land that leaves little margin for error.

Janklow was fond of saying that there are more people in twelve square blocks of Philadelphia than there are in the entire state of South Dakota. The statement was an oversimplification, of course, but the message was clear: nobody will stick up for you if you fail to stick up for yourself. South Dakota does not have enough people to allow citizens the luxury of spending time quibbling over who is a Democrat and who is a Republican. The voters seem to get that fact.

Janklow sought solutions to problems of immediate concern to voters. At times, he stepped outside the bounds of paint-by-numbers politics to get things done. He made enemies, and he circumvented some principles of democratic government along the way. Had a fatal car accident in Moody County one summer day not changed Janklow’s political fortunes, the people of South Dakota likely would have voted him into office as many times as he chose to run.

Simply put, South Dakota politicians must retain a populist appeal. The populist impulse runs through all of us, whether we live in Lem-

2. See *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 4 Nov. 2004.

at cross currents. While older citizens tend to vote more often, the attention of candidates will focus on the population centers, where the younger generation resides. Will the more urban areas become the province of the Democratic party, as they are nationally, while the Republican party remains strongest in rural America?³

The pursuit of economic opportunity may be the primary driver of demographic changes. Migrating and commuting from smaller to larger towns causes citizens to spend less time in their "home" communities. Labor markets efficiently match employers with employees at mutually agreeable wages and living conditions. Rural areas, however, are having trouble matching willing employers with willing employees, resulting in labor migration from rural to more urban counties.⁴ Increasingly, younger and better-educated citizens are moving away from smaller towns, while others commute to larger communities in order to pursue economic opportunities. This commuter labor force increases the economic wage multiplier in the larger community while causing a vicious cycle of decline in the home communities. When workers live in one town but earn their income and spend their money in another, fewer economic opportunities are created at home. Fewer economic opportunities at home lead to decreasing property values and a shrunken tax base. The time spent commuting, moreover, leaves individuals less time and energy to devote to civic activities in their home community. The deterioration becomes even more pronounced when small-town residents actually migrate to the larger city.

These changes profoundly affect the civic culture. Lauck, Miller, and Hogan point to large numbers of community organizations, in which individuals cooperate to accomplish community goals, as a primary determinant of South Dakota's agrarian, conservative political culture. Political scientist Robert D. Putnam describes this community spirit

3. The 2006 Democratic gubernatorial primary demonstrates this trend. Jack Billion received nearly enough votes from the state's fifteen largest counties to win the Democratic primary. Billion needed only 2,901 votes from the other fifty-one (rural) counties. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 7 June 2006.

4. "Workers on the Move: A Look at Labor Migration," *South Dakota Labor Bulletin* (Jan. 2003): 1.

as “social capital,” basing his conclusions on voter turnout, the strength of community organizational life, volunteerism, informed sociability, public-meeting attendance, and a strong social trust.⁵ By contrast, Thomas Patterson’s *Vanishing Voter* project ranked South Dakota forty-seventh out of the fifty states in voter involvement, based on electoral activity in 2002. Patterson assessed individuals’ levels of interest, including thinking, reading, or talking about the election, reactions to campaigns, and awareness of candidates’ positions on the issues. Nearly one-third (about thirty) of the candidates for South Dakota’s legislative seats have run unopposed in the last two elections.⁶ Local government elections fare little better. Of the forty-five school and municipal governments in Lincoln, Minnehaha, McCook, and Turner counties, twenty-three did not hold elections in 2005 because candidates were unopposed.⁷ How many citizens will continue active service-club activity, the lifeblood of Putnam’s social capital theory? If one component of community life decreases, so does another, making citizen involvement less likely.

Shifting populations are apt, as well, to change the state’s tradition of political pragmatism. Lauck, Miller, and Hogan note that “ideologies, which divide the world into good and evil, are incompatible with a communal culture in which most everyone is acquainted” (p. 172). The authors hold that it is more difficult to portray someone you know as “evil” than it is to do the same for a stranger. The national political debate, however, seems to be more ideologically driven. This phenomenon may also affect the same issues (i.e., abortion and gun control) locally. Intellectuals in many fields have long argued that, as the distance between people increases, the possibility of genuine empathy between them decreases. As South Dakota’s rural areas decline in population and as the urban areas grow, citizens become less likely to know the candidates. Will the political debate become more ideologi-

5. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), pp. 292–94.

6. See Thomas Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Knopf, 2002), and Michael Card and Matthew Moen, “Term Limits in the South Dakota Legislature,” paper presented at the Great Plains Political Science and Public Administration Conference, Kearney, Nebr., 5 Mar. 2005.

7. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 4 Apr. 2005.

cal, as we see within the Republican party? How does this current of change interact with the demographic changes previously examined?

In their essay, the authors assert that personalities are important in South Dakota politics and that major interest groups exert less influence here than elsewhere. Will South Dakotans rebel against the financial influence of outside interests? Certainly, South Dakotans are not immune to such influences, but will candidates create the impression that they, too, disdain out-of-state money? Technological change in the form of the centralization of media in Sioux Falls and Rapid City, as well as the introduction of political “blogs” (Web logs), may change the authors’ assertion.

Increasingly, South Dakotans get their news from Sioux Falls or Rapid City. In addition, younger citizens have become more dependent on television news, lessening the impact of local, small-town newspapers. Further, some suggest that South Dakota is a rather cheap political “buy.” Out-of-state interests can influence South Dakota elections through both the centralization of television news and the relatively inexpensive nature of media in the state. The Center for Responsible Politics maintains that South Dakota’s candidates for Congress in 2004 received \$3.8 million from within the state but more than \$8.8 million from California, New York, Texas, Florida, and the District of Columbia.⁸

South Dakota has lost a handful of weekly newspapers since 1970 (down from 145 to 138).⁹ This seemingly small change, however, masks another major economic and social shift. Weeklies are still largely “mom-and-pop” operations, but most now own several weekly newspapers. Meanwhile, corporations like Gannett (owners of the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*) and Lee Enterprises (owner of the *Rapid City Journal*) are buying up weeklies in their immediate regions. If the niche of the weekly newspaper is local or community news, who will report on issues concerning South Dakota as a whole? This shift reduces civic discussion of statewide issues. Parochialism is the likely

8. Center for Responsible Politics, <http://www.opensecrets.org/states/summary.asp?cycle=2004&State=SD>, accessed 3 Apr. 2005.

9. Telephone interview with David Bordewyk, General Manager, South Dakota Newspaper Association, Brookings, S.Dak., 13 June 2006.

result, as citizens will know only how issues affect them at the local level, not regionally, statewide, or nationally.

Political blogs, where character attacks often go unchallenged by the canons of a democratic media, can provide an outlet for an increasing number of citizens, thereby reducing the effects of outside money. However, the politics of polarization seems to govern blog activity. We read the blogs of those whose opinions we support and ignore the blogs of those whose views we discount. Little real conversation occurs. The seemingly contradictory effects of blogging on the political culture of South Dakota are still unmeasured.

One area of political culture that remains unmapped is tribal politics. Traditionally, tribal members show high levels of participation in tribal elections and relatively low levels of participation in state and local elections. American Indian turnout in national elections varies between 20 and 40 percent, below the national average of 50 percent. Turnout for tribal elections, however, often runs as high as 70 percent. The United States Senate elections of 2002 and 2004 saw much interest and effort focused on registration of tribal voters. Members of the 559 federally recognized tribes in the United States—South Dakota's nine tribes among them—have historically registered and voted primarily Democratic, dating back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, when tribes regained a degree of sovereignty.¹⁰

Until the 2004 election, Republicans tended to view canvassing the heavily Democratic reservations as futile. In that year, Republican Senate candidate John Thune played basketball with the Pine Ridge High School team, talked to tribal leaders, hosted a benefit basketball game to raise money for a housing project, and participated in question-and-answer sessions. These efforts appear to have paid off, for Thune's support in counties where American Indian voters comprise at least 50 percent of the population (Bennett, Buffalo, Corson, Dewey, and Ziebach) increased by between 5 and 18 percent over his showing in the 2002 Senate election. In Todd County, Thune saw gains of 67 percent over the previous election, and in Shannon County, his

10. D. Mark, "A New Swing Vote," *Campaigns & Elections* 23 (2002): 6, 9.

numbers increased by 127 percent.¹¹ Active canvassing and a strong tribal chairman candidate on the Pine Ridge tribal ballot helped to mobilize the local Republican party. Two South Dakota tribal governments, Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River, conduct tribal elections on the same date as state elections, further increasing voter turnout and providing opportunities for tribal members to have more influence on state elections.

Since tribal policy is largely affected by the federal government, events in Washington, D.C., play an important role in reservation politics. Recent Republican attempts to balance the federal budget have suggested reductions in federal treaty obligation payments.¹² How will these reductions affect tribal voting? How will increased tribal voting affect state politics, and vice versa? We have seen more legal action forcing compliance with the Voting Rights Act. What other political activities will occur? This portion of South Dakota's political culture remains largely unexplored and unmapped.

The contours of South Dakota's political culture are shifting from rural to urban, from small-town elderly to city youth, from homogenous to multiracial populations, and from pragmatic to ideological debates. The currents running through the "Land of Infinite Variety" continue to change. As South Dakota political scientist Alan L. Clem notes, "In spite of its mistakes and limitations, government by the people thrives. It thrives in part because it is resilient and tends toward moderation and self-correction, and in part because the people, because of their participation in political affairs, feel that they have both a stake and a role in the survival of the political system."¹³ I look forward to examining how South Dakotans exercise their resilience in adjusting to the shifting contours of our population, economy, and political culture.

11. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 11 July 2004. Percentage increases for 2004 calculated by the author from South Dakota Secretary of State, http://www.sdsos.gov/elections/voteregistration/pastelections_electioninfo04_GEsenatereturns.shtml, and for 2002 from http://www.sdsos.gov/elections/voteregistration/pastelections_electioninfo02_USsenateofficialret.shtml

12. United States Commission on Civil Rights, "A Quiet Crisis: Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country," <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/nao703/nao204.pdf>, accessed 15 Apr. 2005.

13. Clem, *Government by the People?: South Dakota Politics in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Chiesman Foundation for Democracy, 2002), p. 167.

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