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**“It disappeared as quickly as it came”****The Democratic Surge and the Republican Comeback in South Dakota Politics, 1970–1980**

South Dakota has long had a reputation as a stronghold for the Republican Party with a decidedly conservative political culture.<sup>1</sup> In an assessment of the state in advance of the 1968 presidential campaign, political advisors to Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, a native son, reported that South Dakota was “generally considered a Republican state” where the chances of the Democratic presidential nominee winning were “slim indeed.”<sup>2</sup> After a close analysis of the state’s politics during the summer of 1968, the *Los Angeles Times* deemed South Dakota a “small, essentially conservative state,” whose political situation was unlikely to change.<sup>3</sup> In 1973, a popular book by *Washington Post* colum-

This article had its inspiration at a conference on the life and times of Senator George S. McGovern at the National Archives in 1995, but various projects delayed it until roughly 2003, when I interviewed several individuals active in South Dakota politics in the 1970s, and again until 2015, when I learned that one of the people I had hoped to interview had died. Feeling a new sense of urgency, I reignited the project. Several of the people I interviewed have passed on, including, most recently, former Congressman Frank E. Denholm, on 7 April 2016. The article also benefits from the availability of political candidates’ polling data, which began in the 1970s and helps to give a clearer picture of political developments during the decade. The title stems from a comment made by former State Senator Grace Mickelson of Rapid City in a 7 October 2015 telephone interview.

1. Jon K. Lauck, John E. Miller, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr., “Introduction: In Search of South Dakota’s Political Culture,” in *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Lauck, Miller, and Simmons (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011), pp. 3–4.

2. Eiler C. Ravnholt and William J. Connell to William L. Shovell, 6 Apr. 1967, Location 150.F.12.10.F, Box 1073, Vice Presidential Political Affairs Files, Hubert H. Humphrey Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul (hereafter cited as Humphrey Papers).

3. *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1968, sec. 1, p. 19.

nist Neal R. Peirce noted a “pattern of normal Republican dominance” in South Dakota politics.<sup>4</sup> That same year, University of South Dakota political scientist Alan L. Clem described the state as a “conservative Republican bastion.”<sup>5</sup> A 1976 poll commissioned by the Democratic National Committee found that over half of South Dakota voters described themselves as “conservative.”<sup>6</sup>

While the assessments noted above are generally true, there have been three significant Democratic challenges to Republican political control of South Dakota. The Democrats’ fusion with the Populists during the 1890s resulted in the election of Governor Andrew E. Lee in 1896 and 1898. During the depths of the Great Depression, Thomas M. Berry won the gubernatorial elections of 1932 and 1934, and Democrats briefly controlled the state legislature.<sup>7</sup> A third Democratic wave in 1970 brought Richard F. Kneip to the governor’s mansion, while Democratic candidates won both South Dakota seats in the United States House of Representatives. Although James G. Abourezk won the United States Senate seat vacated by Karl E. Mundt and Governor Kneip secured a second term in the 1972 election, the Democratic surge began to weaken by 1974 and fizzled out completely in the late 1970s. Neither the factors that fueled the short-lived Democratic resurgence of the 1970s nor the causes of its rapid eclipse have been studied in the depth that they deserve.

4. Neal R. Peirce, *The Great Plains States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Nine Great Plains States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 179.

5. Alan L. Clem, “South Dakota,” in *Explaining the Vote: Presidential Choices in the Nation and the States, 1968; Part II: Presidential Choices in Individual States*, ed. David M. Kovenock (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Institute for Research in Social Science, 1973), p. 253.

6. Cambridge Survey Research, “An Analysis of Political Attitudes in the State of South Dakota,” CSR 704, Oct. 1976, p. 8, Box 428, George S. McGovern Papers, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. (hereafter cited as McGovern Papers). Several polling studies with similar titles prepared at various dates by the same firm are in the McGovern Papers and in the private collection of Theodore R. Muenster of Vermillion, S.Dak. Further citations to this series of reports will reference the Cambridge Survey Research (CSR) document number, with date and location where needed.

7. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), pp. 236–41, 282–83, 285–88, 295–96.

A key Democratic advantage in the early 1970s was the party's ability to harness the economic difficulties in farm country and use them effectively to win elections. The farm factor explains, for example, the strength of Democratic United States Senator George S. McGovern in the late 1960s and the upending of Republican Governor Frank L. Farrar in 1970. Another important advantage for the Democrats was that three Republican members of the South Dakota congressional delegation, including Representative Ellis Yarnall ("E. Y.") Berry, Representative Benjamin Reifel, and Senator Mundt, all left office within a two-year period. Berry and Reifel decided not to seek reelection in 1970, while the effects of a stroke suffered by Senator Mundt in 1969 prevented him from running again in 1972. The resulting leadership vacuum neutralized some previous Republican advantages, while the Democrats benefited from running strong candidates at an opportune moment and using new and effective voter mobilization tactics. The quick reversal of Democratic gains by the mid-to-late 1970s can be traced to the rise of a new generation of Republican candidates, the weakening of Senator McGovern's standing in South Dakota after his failed 1972 presidential run, divisions among the Democrats who had ascended to power in the early 1970s, the increasing nationwide strength of conservative political forces that would ultimately result in the election of Ronald W. Reagan in 1980, and the fading of once-prominent Democratic officeholders. By the late 1970s, even after several remarkable electoral victories earlier in the decade, the Democratic Party in South Dakota was again "in shambles."<sup>8</sup>

Any comprehensive review of South Dakota politics during the post-World War II era quickly reveals the prominence of the "farm problem," or the persistence of low commodity prices that caused many small farms to fail.<sup>9</sup> The economic difficulties facing the rural Midwest and other agricultural regions were most acute in South Dakota, which had a small manufacturing base, and, as George McGov-

8. Telephone interview with Donald V. Barnett, Denver, Colo., 20 Oct. 2015.

9. Jon K. Lauck, *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly: The Political Economy of Grain Belt Farming, 1953-1980* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 2-8.



George McGovern and other South Dakota Democrats began reaching out effectively to agricultural interests in the late 1950s and 1960s. Here, McGovern visits with a hog farmer.

ern was fond of noting, ranked as the “most agricultural state in the nation.”<sup>10</sup> McGovern tapped this agrarian anxiety in 1956 when he won the First Congressional District seat, which then represented all South Dakota counties east of the Missouri River, in the United States House of Representatives. McGovern skillfully attacked Republican farm policies under the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. His success ended an era of near-complete Republican dominance in South Dakota that had extended from the late 1930s.<sup>11</sup> McGovern used

10. *Wall Street Journal*, 22 Mar. 1974, p. 1. A 1968 survey indicated that 67 percent of South Dakotans had been raised on farms, while 41 percent still worked on farms or had retired from farming. Clem, “South Dakota,” pp. 246–47.

11. Jon K. Lauck, “George S. McGovern and the Farmer: South Dakota Politics, 1953–1962,” *South Dakota History* 32 (Winter 2002): 331–53; Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 103–10.



the “farm problem,” Democratic National Committee Chairman Stephen A. Mitchell noted, to “become the first Democratic Congressman [from] South Dakota in twenty years.”<sup>12</sup>

The presence of Democratic presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House greatly reduced the political costs to Republicans stemming from economic stress in farm country from 1961 to 1969. Following the election of Richard M. Nixon in 1968, however, Republicans with rural constituencies again faced severe criticism for the party’s farm policies. The Farmers Union, which dated back over

12. Stephen A. Mitchell to Samuel T. Rayburn, 11 Dec. 1956, Box 14, Stephen A. Mitchell Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, Mo. During the 1960 presidential campaign, Senator John F. Kennedy called farm prices “our number one domestic problem” (James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991], p. 107).



Governor Richard Kneip (center) poses with agricultural journalist Don D. Evashenko of Aberdeen (left) and South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture Robert N. Duxbury (right) after signing a proclamation recognizing National Agriculture Day.

half a century, and the upstart National Farmers Organization, which became active in the late 1950s, both kept steady pressure on South Dakota Republicans during the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>13</sup> The Farmers Union decried the loss of a thousand farms a year in the state and demanded an end to policies that were “snuffing out the farm lights in South Dakota.”<sup>14</sup>

While Democrats in South Dakota were never politically strong during the 1960s, they did benefit from a brief period after World War II when there seemed to be a greater than normal level of support for government programs. Democratic President Lyndon Johnson carried South Dakota in his successful 1964 election campaign, due in large part to Republican nominee Barry M. Goldwater’s opposition to farm programs, and remains the only Democrat to win the state’s Electoral College votes since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. Johnson’s triumph came before Democrats were deeply split by the Vietnam War and racial and cultural conflicts later in the 1960s, which helped to dissipate the atmosphere of consensus.<sup>15</sup>

In South Dakota, the election of President John Kennedy in 1960 inspired several future Democratic leaders to enter politics, including, for example, future Governor Richard Kneip and Lieutenant Governor William J. Dougherty. George McGovern’s election to the United

13. E. Hayes Redmon to William J. Connell, 27 July 1966, Connell to Hubert H. Humphrey, 27 July 1966, and Frank Goldsmith to Connell, 22 July 1966, Location 150.F.11.7.B, Box 1060, Vice Presidential Political Affairs Files, Humphrey Papers; Farmers for Humphrey-Muskie leaflet, Folder “1968 Campaign,” Box 19, Ralph E. Herseth Papers, Richardson Collection, University of South Dakota Archives and Special Collections, I. D. Weeks Library, University of South Dakota (USD), Vermillion (hereafter cited as Herseth Papers); CSR 169, pp. 65–66, 69, 81–84, Aug. 1972, Muenster collection; Lauck, “George S. McGovern and the Farmer,” p. 334. *See also* Steven A. Stofferahn, “The Persistence of Agrarian Activism: The National Farmers Organization in South Dakota,” in *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture*, vol. 2, ed. Lauck, Miller, and Simmons (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), pp. 209–41, and Jon K. Lauck, “The National Farmers Organization and Farmer Bargaining Power,” *Michigan Historical Review* 24 (Fall 1998): 88–127.

14. “Testimony of South Dakota Farmers Union before State Political Party Platform Hearings, 1972,” Box 56, James G. Abourezk Papers 1970–1983, Richardson Collection.

15. Telephone interview with Dan R. Bucks, Milwaukee, Wisc., 28 Sept. 2015; Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon, What Happened and Why* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 67–98.

States Senate in 1962 owed much to critical support from the Kennedy White House. Admiration for the Kennedy family and a desire to overcome anti-Catholic sentiments led many young South Dakota Catholics into politics.<sup>16</sup> During that era the party “was like mass in the precincts,” remembered one prominent Democrat, referencing the strong Catholic representation among its members.<sup>17</sup> More generally, the overall activist atmosphere of the 1960s, skepticism toward the Vietnam War, and support for the civil rights movement caused several younger South Dakotans to become more active in the Democratic Party. This development made it more likely that Democrats would be ready to seize upon an advantageous political moment when it presented itself.<sup>18</sup>

The most direct manifestation of better times for Democrats in South Dakota was the success of George McGovern, who had reorganized the state party during the 1950s and won a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 1956. Democrats lost their short-lived momentum, however, as McGovern failed to unseat incumbent Republican Senator Karl Mundt in the 1960 election. Mundt and fellow South

16. Telephone interview with William E. (“Bill”) Walsh, Deadwood, S.Dak., 20 Feb. 2001; interview with William Dougherty, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 12 Jan. 2004; *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 5 June 1988, 4 July 2010; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 8 Sept. 2009; interview of George S. McGovern, Washington, D.C., by Larry J. Hackman, 16 July 1970, transcript, pp. 6–7, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (hereafter JFK Library), Boston, Mass.; Gerald Lange, “Mundt v. McGovern: The 1960 Senate Election,” *Heritage of the Great Plains* 15 (Fall 1982): 39; Jon K. Lauck, “‘You Can’t Mix Wheat and Potatoes in the Same Bin’: Anti-Catholicism in Early Dakota,” *South Dakota History* 38 (Spring 2008): 1–2. The 1960 Kennedy presidential campaign reportedly “sent several feelers into South Dakota” to assess the candidate’s chances of getting support from the state’s delegates at that year’s Democratic National Convention. *McLaughlin Messenger*, 15 Jan. 1960.

17. Interview with Theodore R. Muenster, Brookings, S.Dak., 13 Nov. 2003. About 32 percent of the state Democratic Party’s membership in 1976 was Catholic. CSR 704, pp. 6, 10.

18. Telephone interviews with James C. Pribyl, Frisco, Colo., 26 Aug. 2015, and Gene N. LeBrun, Rapid City, S.Dak., 29 Sept. 2015. Teachers were another potential source of support for Democrats in 1968 and afterward. Grace Mickelson emerged out of the 1968 Rapid City teachers’ strike and won election to the South Dakota Senate as a Democrat in 1972 and 1974. She also served as president of the South Dakota Education Association in 1973–1974. *Rapid City Journal*, 19 Feb. 1968; telephone interview with Mickelson.

Dakota Republican Francis H. Case were known as two of the most reliably conservative members of the United States Senate. Just before McGovern's election to the Senate in 1962, South Dakota Democrats held no federal or statewide elective offices and few legislative seats. After the newly elected President Kennedy appointed McGovern director of the Food for Peace program in 1961, the former congressman was able to build his agricultural policy bona fides. He then returned home and entered the 1962 Senate race with strong but quiet support from the Kennedy administration.<sup>19</sup>

The sudden death of Senator Case in June 1962 left the Republican Party somewhat disorganized for that year's elections. McGovern did not waste the opportunity. Following a recount, he squeaked out a win by 597 votes over Joseph H. Bottum, Jr., who had secured the Republican senatorial nomination only after twenty rounds of balloting at the state party convention. McGovern focused on farm problems during his first term in the Senate and mounted a formidable reelection bid. The incumbent's popularity in early 1968 led outgoing two-term Republican Governor Nils A. Boe to decide against a Senate run of his own. McGovern's campaign capitalized on a sophisticated get-out-the-vote effort that would benefit his party in the next few election cycles, as well as bring some bright young Democratic operatives into South Dakota politics. He defeated former Governor Archie M. Gubbrud with almost 57 percent of the vote.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of McGovern's personal strength in South Dakota during the mid-1960s, he remained the lone Democrat in the state's congressional

19. *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 22 Apr. 1962; Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 277–78; Peirce, *Great Plains States*, pp. 180–81; John F. Kennedy to McGovern, 18 July 1962, Location FG 11-8-1, Box 117, White House Central Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Papers, JFK Library; *Washington Post*, 19 July 1962, sec. A, p. 12; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 17 Feb. 1960, 12 Aug. 1962. McGovern had supported South Dakota native son Hubert Humphrey early in the contest for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination but was quick to back Kennedy after Humphrey's prospects faded. *Aberdeen American-News*, 1 Oct. 1960.

20. Alan L. Clem, "The 1962 Election in South Dakota," *Public Affairs* 12 (Feb. 1963): 2; telephone interview with Donald V. Barnett, Denver, Colo., 3 Nov. 2015; interview of George S. McGovern, Mitchell, S.Dak., by John E. Miller and Jon K. Lauck, 25 Nov.



delegation. Led by Senator Mundt, who was elected to his fourth term in 1966 with nearly two-thirds of the vote, Republicans organized an impressive campaign apparatus that touted GOP candidates throughout the state during the fall of 1968. The youthful and handsome

2003; *Milbank Review*, 4 Jan. 1968; *Aberdeen American-News*, 22 Feb. 1968; *Watertown Public Opinion*, 12 Nov. 1968; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 10 Mar. 1969; interview of Herbert Cheever, Jr., Brookings, S.Dak., by Steven J. Garry, 23 Oct. 1975; transcript, p. 6, South



three-term Republican Attorney General Frank Farrar, thirty-eight years of age, won the gubernatorial race, while his party took both South Dakota seats in the House of Representatives along with several other statewide offices. In the presidential election, Richard Nixon won the state over Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a South Dakota native. Humphrey took only 42 percent of the vote against Nixon's 53 percent. The vice president likely suffered from his association with President Johnson, who had polled poorly in South Dakota that year.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the 1968 election, Republicans controlled both houses of the South Dakota Legislature, holding over three times as many seats as their Democratic rivals. Six months after the election, Mundt brought President Nixon to the senator's hometown of Madison to dedicate the new Mundt Library and put an exclamation point on Republican dominance in South Dakota. Donald V. Barnett, former Democratic mayor of Rapid City, recalled in a 2015 interview that the "Democratic Party was still very much in the doldrums" and "had nothing but McGovern" at this point.<sup>22</sup> According to Dan R. Bucks, who was executive director of the South Dakota Democratic Party in 1969, party members "felt shut-out" and "deeply alienated," while seeing the state capitol "as a foreign land."<sup>23</sup> Steven M. Davis, an advisor to Governor Richard Kneip during the 1970s, later described Democrats as "weak, divided, ineffective, and leaderless" in the wake of their 1968 defeat.<sup>24</sup>

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Dakota Oral History Center, USD; telephone interview with James C. Pribyl, Frisco, Colo., 19 Aug. 2015. All South Dakota election statistics cited in this article are available online from the office of the South Dakota Secretary of State at <https://sdsos.gov/general-information/blue-book-legislative-manual.aspx>.

21. Republican Victory Headquarters news release, 6 Aug. 1968, Folder "Press Releases," Box 2, Frank L. Farrar Papers, Richardson Collection (hereafter cited as Farrar Papers); *Rapid City Journal*, 9 Dec. 1966; *Watertown Public Opinion*, 15 Feb. 1968; *Omaha World-Herald*, 6 Aug. 1967; *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, 22 Feb. 1968; Charles L. Garrettson III, "Home of the Politics of Joy: Hubert H. Humphrey in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 20 (Fall 1990): 165–84.

22. Telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015.

23. Telephone interview with Bucks.

24. Steven M. Davis, "The 1968 Election," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, 2004, p. 4.



South Dakota native Hubert Humphrey lost the state and the presidency to Richard Nixon in the 1968 election.

In the midst of this Republican success came several major developments that cost the party greatly and boosted the Democratic cause. Perhaps most importantly, Republicans became concerned about the unpopularity of President Nixon's agricultural programs. Even members of the Republican National Committee tried to warn Nixon about the political costs of his farm policies. Nixon and his aides had been slow to shepherd a farm bill through Congress after taking office in 1969. Indeed, the Agriculture Act of 1970 did not reach the president's desk for signature until after that year's congressional elections. The legislation reflected the desires of some administration officials to reduce the cost of federal agricultural subsidies while relaxing controls

on farm production that had been in place during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The American Farm Bureau Federation criticized the bill for not going far enough to curb production controls. The Nixon administration also faced severe criticism for cutting the Rural Electrification Administration's loan programs. During a meeting in Fargo in 1970, Governor Farrar scolded Nixon for advancing agricultural policy proposals that hurt the GOP in farm country.<sup>25</sup>

Nixon's troubles in South Dakota continued into 1971, when a February poll found that the state's farmers and ranchers "particularly maligned" the president. Only 33 percent of respondents rated his job performance as "excellent" or "good," while the remainder gave him a "fair" or "poor" rating.<sup>26</sup> In an August letter to Nixon advisor Harry S. Dent, Sr., Mundt chief of staff Robert L. McCaughey predicted a "dangerous explosion" of political opposition due to Nixon's farm policies.<sup>27</sup> In September, the South Dakota Republican Central Committee adopted a resolution bemoaning "a depressed agricultural economy" and demanding that President Nixon take immediate steps to address the situation.<sup>28</sup> Republican prospects in farm country suffered another setback in late 1971 when Nixon appointed Earl L. Butz, who quickly became an object of derision, as secretary of agriculture.<sup>29</sup>

In a parallel development, South Dakota Republicans took additional heat for a proposal that its opponents described as hurting rural power cooperatives, which had been supported by the federal Rural Electrification Administration (REA) since the 1930s. Early in

25. Robert L. McCaughey to William E. Timmons, Assistant to the President for Congressional Relations, 26 Aug. 1970, Folder 1, Box 1158, Karl E. Mundt Archives, Karl E. Mundt Library, Dakota State University, Madison, S.Dak. (hereafter cited as Mundt Archives); George ("Bun") Stadelman to Nixon, 21 Jan. 1971, Folder 2, *ibid.*; Willard W. Cochrane and Mary E. Ryan, *American Farm Policy, 1948-1973* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 55-61; *East River Guardian* 11 (Feb. 1973): 8-9, 11-12, in Folder "East River Electric," Box 343, Richard F. Kneip Papers, Richardson Collection (hereafter cited as Kneip Papers); *New York Times*, 25 July 1970, p. 1; interview with Rollyn H. Samp, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 28 July 2015.

26. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 24 Feb. 1971.

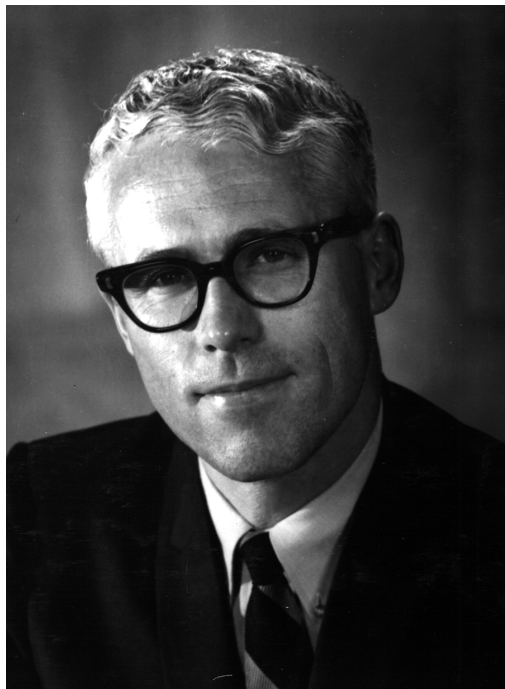
27. McCaughey to Dent, 13 Aug. 1971, Folder 2, Box 1158, Mundt Archives.

28. Resolution of South Dakota Republican Central Committee, 3 Sept. 1971, enclosed in Robert H. Burns to Dent, 24 Sept. 1971, *ibid.*

29. McCaughey to Dent, 2 Dec. 1971, *ibid.*; CSR 169, p. 84.

1969, newly elected Governor Farrar promoted a bill that would have given a new state agency, the Gas and Utilities Consumer Protection Council, authority over rural electric cooperative ratemaking—a role similar to that of the Public Utilities Commission with respect to private power companies. The legislation also would have determined the jurisdictions of municipal, cooperative, and private power providers. Deeply enmeshed in a web of rural and liberal advocacy groups such as the Farmers Union and the National Farmers Organization, the REA-supported cooperatives were highly critical of Farrar's bill, known as House Bill (HB) 548.<sup>30</sup>

30. *Pierre Daily Capital-Journal*, 31 Jan., 4 Feb., 10 Apr. 1969; *Gregory Advocate*, 27 Feb. 1969; *Vermillion Plain Talk*, 27 Feb. 1969; *Pierre Weekly Capital-Journal*, 12 Feb. 1969; *Salem Special*, 20 Feb. 1969; interview with Daniel B. Garry, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 14 Aug. 2015; Davis, "1968 Election," p. 3.



Frank Farrar's reelection bid in 1970 fell short, opening the door to the governor's office to Richard Kneip.

The power cooperatives' opposition to HB 548 was especially effective given the sacrosanct status of the REA among rural South Dakotans, many of whom remembered the very day when power lines first reached their farms in the late 1940s.<sup>31</sup> The cooperatives denounced the measure as "the most dangerous threat in the history of rural electrification in South Dakota."<sup>32</sup> Democratic Party chairman Peder K. Ecker of Sioux Falls attacked HB 548 and characterized the governor's leadership on the issue as "inept and bumbling."<sup>33</sup> Although Farrar's bill became law in 1969, farm groups led a successful effort to refer the legislation to voters, which led the legislature to repeal it the following year. Nevertheless, the damage to Farrar's image had been done.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the costly political setback on the electricity regulation bill, the governor faced a major intraparty rebellion in 1970. State Senator Frank E. ("Rudy") Henderson of Hill City challenged Farrar in a Republican primary that significantly diminished the young chief executive's prospects for reelection. Henderson ran a feisty campaign, charging the governor with becoming a millionaire in public office and using state assets to advance his campaign. In the end, Henderson captured an impressive 42 percent of the primary vote against the sitting governor.<sup>35</sup>

31. Telephone interview with Bucks; telephone interview with Harvey L. Wollman, Doland, S.Dak., 21 Sept. 2015; Brian Q. Cannon, "Power Relations: Western Rural Electric Cooperatives and the New Deal," *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (Summer 2000): 133–34.

32. *Selby Record*, 20 Feb. 1969.

33. *Deadwood Pioneer-Times*, 17 Mar. 1969.

34. *Hayti Enterprise*, 20 Mar. 1969; *Lennox Independent*, 20 Mar. 1969; "Republican Headquarters Bulletin," 24 June 1969, Folder 1, Box 1158, Mundt Archives; Frank L. Farrar to Karl E. Mundt, 19 Jan. 1970, and Farrar to Mundt, 4 Mar. 1970, Folder 7, Box 1065, *ibid.* Farrar's standing with rural South Dakotans had also suffered from a controversy over snow removal during the severe winter of 1968–1969. *Pierre Daily Capital-Journal*, 25 Feb. 1969; *Canton News*, 27 Feb. 1969; *Salem Special*, 20 Feb. 1969; telephone interview with Wollman.

35. Telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015; telephone interview with David Volk, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 23 Sept. 2015; interview with Gordon J. Mydland, Phoenix, Ariz., 26 Jan. 2016; interview with Gary R. Kulm, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 19 Feb. 2016; interview with Robert H. Miller, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 2 Mar. 2016; interview with Samp, 28 July 2015; Theodore R. Muenster, e-mail to author, 29 July 2015; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 19, 21 May 1970; *New York Times*, 3 June 1970, p. 32, 18 Oct. 1970, p. 1; Alan L. Clem, "The



On top of Governor Farrar's political difficulties, Republicans suffered from the debilitating loss of their most popular vote-getters. United States Representatives E. Y. Berry and Ben Reifel announced their retirements before the 1970 elections, leaving the GOP with heavily contested primaries that produced untested nominees with little name recognition or funding. In another great blow to Republican fortunes, party boss Senator Karl Mundt, who was first elected to Congress in 1938, suffered a stroke that left him incapacitated in late 1969.<sup>36</sup> Mundt's many years of successfully pulling the strings in the South Dakota Republican Party led some of his Democratic opponents to dub him "King Karl."<sup>37</sup> After the senator's stroke, political observers on both sides of the aisle noted that the state GOP lacked direction and sorely missed Mundt's fundraising prowess. Instead of bringing strong leadership to Republican campaigns, Mundt became the subject of endless speculation about his true medical condition while members of his own party considered whether they should attempt to remove him from office.<sup>38</sup> In a short time, Mundt fell from "political force to political liability."<sup>39</sup>

The biggest threat to Republican dominance came in the form of Democratic state senator and 1970 gubernatorial nominee Richard Kneip, who had been inspired to enter politics in the early 1960s after Kennedy's election as president and through his own involvement in a Catholic social justice organization. Kneip ran a successful dairy equipment dealership in Salem that made enough money to support his campaigns for the state senate in 1964, 1966, and 1968. Democrats selected

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1970 Election in South Dakota," *Public Affairs* 44 (Feb. 1971): 1, 3; telephone interview with Frank L. Farrar, Britton, S.Dak., 8 Sept. 2015.

36. *Aberdeen American-News*, 15 July 1970; interview with Samp, 28 July 2015; Henry J. Schmidtt to Nixon, 13 Mar. 1970, Folder 1, Box 1158, Mundt Archives.

37. Donald V. Barnett to author, 4 Nov. 2015.

38. Interview of McGovern by Miller and Lauck; interview with Volk; interview with Samp, 28 July 2015; James S. Stockdale to author, 12 Nov. 2003; Davis, "1968 Election," p. 4; *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 27 Apr. 2014; telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015; Ronald Crawford to Robert McCaughey, 19 Aug. 1970, Folder 1, Box 1158, Mundt Archives; *Aberdeen American-News*, 14 Nov. 1970; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 9 Nov. 1970; *Madison Daily Leader*, 13 Nov. 1970; *Worthington Globe*, 23 Nov. 1970; *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 1971, p. 25; telephone interview with Farrar.

39. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 31 Aug. 2014.



Senator Karl Mundt was the long-time leader of the South Dakota Republican Party before suffering a debilitating stroke in 1969.

Kneip as senate minority leader in 1969 to boost his exposure in advance of the 1970 election. An energetic campaigner, Kneip possessed the wit and people skills of a salesman, which contrasted well with the more languid Farrar. Kneip projected moderation to the Republican electorate by opposing a Farmers Union-sponsored income-tax ballot initiative, supporting the state's right-to-work law, and identifying himself as a businessman who had met a payroll.<sup>40</sup>

40. Interview with Garry; William E. ("Bill") Walsh, e-mail to author, 14 Aug. 2015; *Watertown Public Opinion*, 26 June 1978; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 21 Oct. 1970, 23 July 1978; telephone interview with James Stasny, Washington, D.C., 1 Sept. 2015; Daniel B. Garry, "A Personal Experience Report on the Kneip for Governor Campaign," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, Jan. 1971, pp. 45–46; interview of Theodore R. Muenster by Gerald W. Wolff, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 23 Aug. 1978, transcript, p. 21, South Dakota Oral History Center; telephone interview with Bucks; interview with Muenster; Lynwood E. Oyos, *The Family Farmers' Advocate: South Dakota Farmers Union, 1914–2000* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2000), p. 225.

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Kneip welcomes Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray to the Midwestern Governors Conference held in Rapid City in 1973.

Hampered by the continuing fallout over the electricity regulation controversy and Rudy Henderson's bruising primary challenge, Governor Farrar trailed Kneip in the polls by a considerable margin during the summer and fall. Senator McGovern aided Kneip's campaign by sending one of his Washington aides, James Stasny, to manage the final months of the Kneip effort.<sup>41</sup> Stasny, a veteran of the 1968 McGovern reelection effort who would go on to work on the senator's 1972 presidential campaign, recalled that the governor's primary opponent "had beaten up Farrar so badly that Kneip greatly enjoyed the residual benefits," and that in the end "Republicans had just about as bad a candidate as you could have."<sup>42</sup> Kneip campaign aide Daniel B. Garry recalled the feeling that "there was blood in the water" during the fall of 1970 and that Farrar was heading for defeat.<sup>43</sup> A television advertising campaign focused on the clever theme "What is a Kneip?" burnished the Democrat's image, and the Republicans failed to mount any serious attacks against him.<sup>44</sup>

The Farrar campaign tried to address the electricity regulation controversy directly in its own advertisements and also touted the governor's work addressing such issues as drug abuse, drunk drivers, taxes, law and order, government efficiency, and economic development, all under the banner of "Keep Moving Forward with Farrar."<sup>45</sup> By September, however, the Farrar campaign staff was well aware that the incumbent was behind in the polls and that the rural power cooperative controversy was a major reason why. To remedy the problem, media consultant Maurice Paulsen suggested that the governor appear in a special television advertisement and apologize for the electricity reg-

41. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 21, 30 Oct. 1970; telephone interview with Stasny; Garry, "Personal Experience Report," pp. 14, 23–24.

42. Telephone interview with Stasny.

43. Interview with Garry.

44. Telephone interview with Stasny; John Andrews, "What is a Kneip?" *South Dakota Magazine.com*, posted 3 June 2014, <http://www.southdakotamagazine.com/richard-kneip>; Walsh to author, 12 Aug. 2015; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 31 Oct. 1970.

45. Maurice Paulsen, television and radio advertisement scripts, Folder "1970 TV & Radio Campaign Ideas," Box 6, Farrar Papers. See also Garry, "Personal Experience Report," p. 43.

ulation bill.<sup>46</sup> Campaign polling “showed 50% of the *Republican* farmers preferred Kneip” and that these farmers had “been led to believe Frank [Farrar] sold them out.”<sup>47</sup> Farrar’s aides also knew that farmers’ discontent with Nixon’s agricultural policies and a growing image of the governor as distant and out of touch were hurting their efforts.<sup>48</sup>

In the final weeks of the election season, the Farrar campaign took advantage of endorsements from President Nixon and from Senator Mundt’s office. The latter message compared Farrar to Republican governors Ronald Reagan of California and Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew visited South Dakota to campaign for Farrar, and Senator Mundt’s staff worked with the Nixon administration to announce federal projects in South Dakota whose economic benefits might compensate for the governor’s liabilities as a candidate. These initiatives included the Earth Resources Observation and Science (EROS) Data Center near Sioux Falls, funding for the Oahe Irrigation Project, and the hardening of Air Force missile silos located in western South Dakota. The political hole was too deep for Farrar, however. Kneip won with 55 percent of the vote to become only the fourth elected Democratic governor of South Dakota and, at thirty-seven years of age, the youngest governor in the state’s history. Nationwide, Republicans lost thirteen governorships in 1970, leading some political observers to conclude that Nixon had weighed down the ticket.<sup>49</sup> Kneip himself later remarked that his 1970 victory had

46. Maurice Paulsen to Frank [Farrar] and Rolly [Samp], 23 Sept. 1970, Folder “1970 TV & Radio Campaign Ideas,” Box 6, Farrar Papers; telephone interview with Farrar; telephone interview with Volk; interview with Rollyn H. Samp, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 12 Aug. 2015.

47. Paulsen to Frank [Farrar] and Rolly [Samp], 23 Sept. 1970 (emphasis in original).

48. Ibid.; telephone interview with Stasny.

49. “A Message from Sen. Karl Mundt: South Dakota’s Distinguished Statesman Asks You to Join with Him in Keeping South Dakota Proudly Republican by Re-Electing Governor Frank L. Farrar,” and Clifford Gill to Rollyn H. Samp and Joseph L. Floyd, 18 Oct. 1970, Folder “1970 TV & Radio Campaign Ideas,” Box 6, Farrar Papers; *Minneapolis Tribune*, 30 Sept. 1970; Robert McCaughey to Harry Dent, 6 Oct. 1970, Folder 2, Box 1158, Mundt Archives; interview with Samp, 12 Aug. 2015; *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 27 Oct. 1970; interview of Muenster, pp. 30–31; *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1970, sec. 4, p. 1, 16 Dec. 1970, p. 26; Garry, “Personal Experience Report,” p. 43; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 22 July 1978.



been made possible by Farrar's mistakes and favorable circumstances.<sup>50</sup> In 2015, Farrar pointed to the rural power controversy as "the issue that really beat me" in the 1970 election.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to Kneip's victory in the gubernatorial race, Democrats won both South Dakota seats in the United States House of Representatives. In the First Congressional District, Brookings attorney Frank E. Denholm, who had run unsuccessfully for Congress in 1968, took 56 percent of the vote. Denholm defeated former state House Speaker Dexter H. Gunderson, an implement dealer and farmer from Irene who had emerged out of a five-way Republican primary with limited

50. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 6, 20 July 1978.

51. Telephone interview with Farrar.



Democrat Frank Denholm represented eastern South Dakota in Congress from 1971 to 1975.

funds and little statewide name recognition. Denholm helped his own cause by running as a moderate.<sup>52</sup>

In perhaps the greatest surprise of the 1970 South Dakota election, the avowedly liberal Democratic candidate Jim Abourezk won the heavily Republican Second District, which at that time represented the western two-thirds of the state. Abourezk's family had deep ties to the Rosebud Indian Reservation, and the candidate worked hard to organize voters in normally Republican Rapid City. He defeated political newcomer Fred D. Brady, an engineer who had won a close GOP primary contest against Lieutenant Governor E. James Abdnor. Abourezk relied on veterans of McGovern's 1968 Senate campaign, including Peter Stavrianos, who had perfected Democratic get-out-the-vote techniques in that race. Stavrianos remained a key aide to Abourezk until 1978, when he managed Thomas A. Daschle's successful bid for the First District seat in the United States House of Representatives. The Abourezk campaign proved proficient, especially in Rapid City, while the hapless Brady team was vulnerable due to association with Nixon's farm policies and, more famously, for Brady's idea of establishing mandatory boot camps to Americanize the nation's youth—an idea easy for his opponent to criticize.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the Democrat denounced the notion as “contrary to everything America stands for.”<sup>54</sup> Despite facing a ten-percentage-point deficit in polls weeks before the election,

52. *New York Times*, 31 May 1970, p. 32; interview with Samp, 28 July 2015; Clem, “1970 Election in South Dakota,” p. 1; telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015; interviews with Frank E. Denholm, Brookings, S.Dak., 5 Nov. 2003, 8 Sept. 2015.

53. Mark Gruenberg and Susan Perry, *James Abourezk, Democratic Representative from South Dakota* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972), pp. 1–7; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 24 June 2009; telephone interview with Stasny; telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015; interview with Garry; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 30 Oct., 4 Nov. 1970, 24 Nov. 1978; *Chicago Today*, 25 Jan. 1971; Barnett, e-mail to author, 19 Nov. 2015. See also Clem, “1970 Election in South Dakota,” pp. 2–3. Daschle, who won the 1978 congressional race by 139 votes over Leo Thorsness, began his political career as an aide to Abourezk. He would go on to serve in the House until 1987 and as a United States senator from 1987 to 2005. South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1979), pp. 12, 162.

54. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 4 Nov. 1970. Brady's idea stemmed from an incident in Washington, D.C., in which a student protester spat in his face for not opposing the Vietnam War. Afterward, Brady decided to promote citizenship training for American youth. Interview with Kulm.

Abourezk squeaked through with 52 percent of the vote on election day. The *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader* described the Democratic victories in both congressional races as “stunning upsets.”<sup>55</sup>

In addition to Republican mistakes and various forms of political serendipity, Democrats benefited from voters’ exhaustion with the Vietnam War, the emergence of a cadre of young campaign workers, and the assistance of the McGovern operation with its dedication to grassroots organizing and effective fundraising. The senator’s strong relationship with Joe L. Floyd, owner of KELO television in Sioux Falls, also bolstered his influence.<sup>56</sup> Republican strategists hoped to rally support and raise funds by stressing the need to counter “the rising star of Senator McGovern,” who they viewed as the Democrats’ “number one fundraiser.”<sup>57</sup> During a speech in Sioux Falls in September 1970, Vice President Agnew described McGovern as liberalism’s “chief fundraiser today.”<sup>58</sup> McGovern had already held a significant fundraiser in Washington for South Dakota Democratic congressional candidates.<sup>59</sup>

When the smoke cleared after the 1970 elections, Democrats held the governorship and both seats in the House of Representatives, while a rising George McGovern and a crippled Karl Mundt represented South Dakota in the United States Senate. The *Huron Daily Plainsman* compared the 1970 sweep to the Democratic political wave during the Great Depression.<sup>60</sup> Robert McCaughey, Senator Mundt’s top political aide, remarked in the spring of 1971 that the South Dakota Republican Party was “at the lowest ebb I have ever seen,” and described the “Re-

55. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 4 Nov. 1970.

56. Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 10–14; telephone interview with Farrar; William T. Murphy, “Student Power in the 1970 Elections: A Preliminary Assessment,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 4 (Winter 1971): 27; interview of McGovern by Miller and Lauck; interview with Garry; Herbert Cheever, Jr., e-mail to author, 16 Jan. 2001; interview with Samp, 28 July 2015. An August 1972 survey indicated that 34 percent of South Dakotans viewed the Vietnam War as the “most important issue” facing the country. CSR 169, p. 62.

57. Crawford to McCaughey, 19 Aug. 1970.

58. Spiro T. Agnew, remarks at South Dakota Republican luncheon, Sioux Falls, S. Dak., 29 Sept. 1970, Folder 1, Box 1158, Mundt Archives.

59. McGovern fundraiser invitation, 17 Aug. 1970, *ibid.*

60. *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 5 Nov. 1970.

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# ABOUREZK



## U. S. Congress

Abourezk for Congress Committee, Sever Eubank, Chmn.

Box 850, Rapid City, S. D.

James Abourezk won the congressional seat representing central and western South Dakota in 1970 and went on to claim a seat in the United States Senate in 1972.

publican situation candidate-wise in South Dakota [as] bleak, black, and dismal.”<sup>61</sup> Gary R. Kulm, who was executive director of the Republican Party during the 1970 election cycle, recalled in 2016 that “every Republican’s chin was on the table after the [1970] election.”<sup>62</sup> Some Republicans thought they might lose every major contest in 1972, perhaps even the state legislature, which they controlled with a two-thirds majority at the time. Stung by losing most major elective offices in the state, the Republicans chose Robert H. Burns of Vivian as their new party chairman. Burns decided not to replace the party’s outgoing executive director and took on the duties himself to save funds, which the GOP was sorely lacking in the post-Mundt era. Democrats, meanwhile, benefited from a surge of patronage in Pierre and favorable publicity for the new Kneip administration’s various reform efforts.<sup>63</sup>

Democratic political successes continued in 1972. Governor Kneip could point to advances in reorganizing the executive branch and modernizing the state constitution (both of which had started under the Farrar administration) while highlighting new energy and ideas in a Kennedyesque fashion. The executive-branch reorganization consolidated some one hundred fifty state agencies into sixteen cabinet departments. Kneip also bolstered his campaign operations. In contrast to the informal structure of his 1970 campaign, Kneip brought on South Dakota State University political science professor Herbert Cheever, Jr., as his campaign manager for 1972 and deployed four field staffers. Cheever had greatly improved the get-out-the-vote efforts for South Dakota Democrats in 1968 and 1970 by computerizing voter registration lists and by developing a system to identify Democratic voters

61. McCaughey to Stephen Shadegg, 1 Apr. 1971, Folder 2, Box 1158, Mundt Archives.

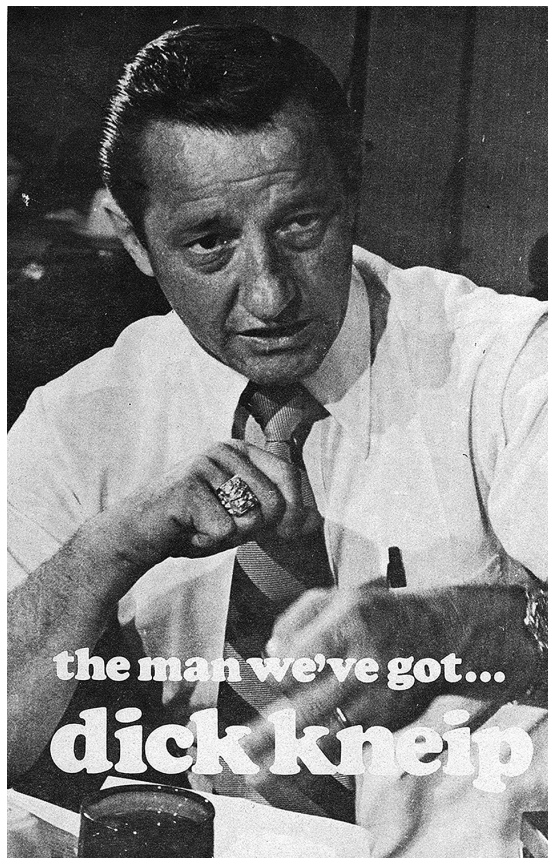
62. Interview with Kulm.

63. Robert McCaughey to Harry Dent, 2 Nov. 1971, Folder 2, Box 1158, Mundt Archives; *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 9 July 1971; Frank D. Brost, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 12 Feb. 1971; Associated Press, “Shuffle in State Jobs Awaited,” undated clipping, ca. 1971, Folder “Kneip,” Box 79, Sigurd Anderson Papers, Richardson Collection (hereafter cited as Anderson Papers); Donald C. Dahlin, e-mail to author, 3 Aug. 2015; interview of Muenster, p. 5; Mary Wallner to Richard F. Kneip, 24 Apr. 1971, Folder “Democratic Party,” Box 165, Kneip Papers; Norma Klinkel to Kneip, 21 Nov. 1970, and Zetah Starr to Kneip, 10 Nov. 1970, Folder “Correspondence November 1970,” Box 100, *ibid.*



to be turned out on election day. Kneip also retained Patrick H. Caddell, who would later become famous as Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign pollster and go on to serve the Carter White House as an advisor.<sup>64</sup>

64. *Pierre Daily Capital-Journal*, 31 Jan. 1969; interview of Muenster, pp. 10–13; Robert V. Burns, e-mail to author, 27 July 2015; John Andrews, "South Dakota during the Administration of Governor Richard F. Kneip, 1971–1978" (master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 2007), pp. 49–68; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 28 Apr. 1978; Kneip to Bertrum E. Ellingson, 23 June 1972, Folder "Democratic Party," Box 219, Kneip Papers; Cheever to author, 16 Jan. 2001; interview with Garry; interview of Cheever by Garry, p. 1; telephone interview with Daniel E. Flynn, Denver, Colo., 10 Nov. 2015; *Brookings*



Kneip's 1972 campaign proved effective, winning him reelection with 60 percent of the vote.

Caddell's polling showed Kneip with a thirty-six-percentage-point lead over little-known state legislator Carveth ("Carv") Thompson of Faith in August 1972. Kneip cruised to reelection with 60 percent of the vote, the largest margin of victory ever for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate in South Dakota. Congressman Denholm retained his seat, defeating Canton native John C. Vickerman, who had headed the South Dakota office of the federal Small Business Administration. Democratic electoral strength even translated into seats in the state legislature, with the party achieving a 35–35 tie in the house and an 18–17 majority in the senate.<sup>65</sup>

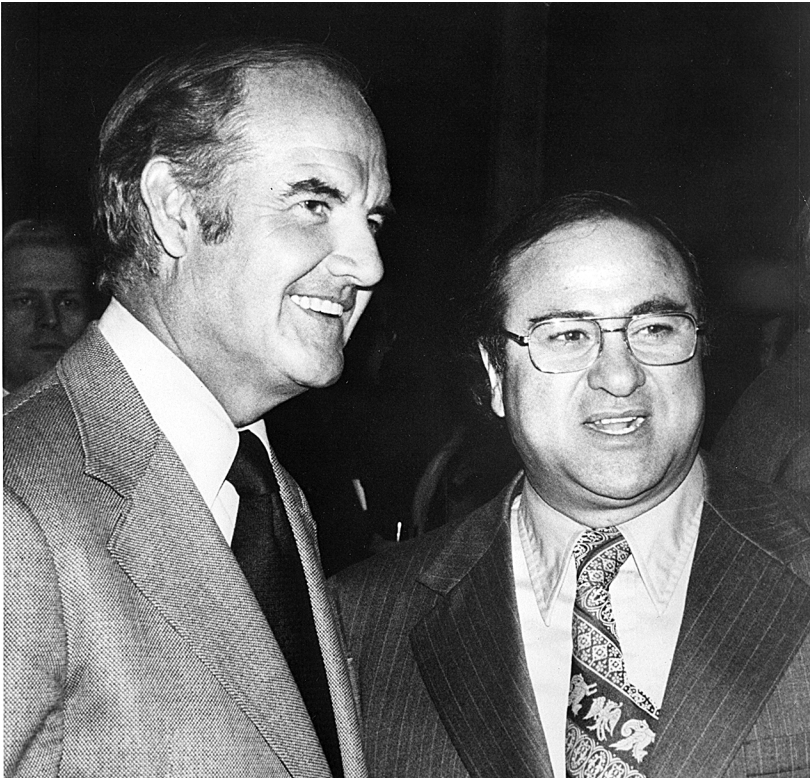
In the biggest surprise of 1972, first-term Congressman Jim Abourezk won Karl Mundt's seat in the United States Senate. With the ailing incumbent unable to run for reelection, several Republican candidates squabbled through a divisive but indecisive primary. Because no candidate received 35 percent of the vote in the Republican primary, a convention was required to determine the party's nominee. State Senator Robert W. Hirsch of Yankton, who was known in Pierre as a sharp-elbowed legislative leader, prevailed at the convention with the support of the Mundt apparatus over two-term Attorney General Gordon J. Mydland, who may have been a stronger general-election candidate. Abourezk reportedly said later that the GOP chose the only candidate he could beat. Furthermore, the newly elected senator believed that he could never have prevailed over a Republican incumbent had Mundt stepped down and a replacement been appointed while Farrar was still governor. Aided by a sizeable financial advantage, Abourezk won with 57 percent of the vote.<sup>66</sup> Due in part to poor decisions by the

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*Register*, 18 Jan. 2016; Garry, "Personal Experience Report," p. 32; telephone interview with Bucks; George V. Cunningham, memorandum, 10 Dec. 1974, loose in Box 428, McGovern Papers; telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015; Cheever, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015; Muenster, e-mail to author, 8 Sept. 2015; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York, HarperCollins: 2008), p. 77.

65. CSR 169, pp. 4, 29; Cheever, e-mail to author, 14 Aug. 2015; telephone interview with Carveth Thompson, Omaha, Nebr., 2 Mar. 2016; *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 9 July 1971.

66. CSR 169, pp. 4, 29, 34, 38, 42, 52; Brost, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015; CSR 225, Feb. 1973, p. 2, Box 428, McGovern Papers; telephone interview with Volk; *Sioux Falls Argus*



From 1973 to 1979, Democrats held both South Dakota seats in the Senate. McGovern and Abourezk are pictured here in early 1973.

GOP, the South Dakota Democratic Party was at its strongest point since the Great Depression. Over thirty years later, Kneip advisor Steven M. Davis recalled 1972 as the “greatest Democratic victory in South Dakota history.”<sup>67</sup> Even Kneip’s reserved chief of staff Theodore R. Muenster recognized “a new atmosphere of confidence in the capacity of the [Democratic] Party.”<sup>68</sup>

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*Leader*, 31 Aug. 2014; Alan L. Clem, “The Submerging Republican Majority: The 1972 Election in South Dakota,” *Public Affairs* 52 (Feb. 1973): 3.

67. Steven M. Davis, e-mail to author, 11 Mar. 2004.

68. Theodore R. Muenster to Chuck Bellman, 24 July 1973, Folder “Democratic Party,” Box 219, Kneip Papers.

As strong as the Democrats were at this stage, however, the seeds of their demise had been sown. The most important development was the transformation of George McGovern's political identity from an agrarian crusader and mild critic of the Vietnam War into a full-fledged liberal icon and symbol of the antiwar and counterculture movements after his 1972 presidential campaign. McGovern's early skepticism toward American entanglements in Vietnam was not especially costly to the senator's standing in South Dakota, which could be grouped with other midwestern states that had embraced isolationist tendencies in the past. As late as 1967, polling indicated that while only 47 percent of South Dakotans approved of McGovern's actual position on the war, 73 percent agreed that he was entitled to express his doubts about the conflict in public. President Johnson, however, reportedly resented the senator's position on the war so strongly that some of Johnson's aides were reluctant to utter McGovern's name in his presence.<sup>69</sup>

As McGovern's opposition to the Vietnam War intensified in the late 1960s, the senator's critics came to regard his statements as shrill and disloyal. Former Lieutenant Governor John F. Lindley, a Democrat who disliked McGovern, wrote to Vice President Hubert Humphrey in 1967 that the senator's words and deeds aided "enemies of law and order both foreign and domestic."<sup>70</sup> In July 1968, the South Dakota Democratic Party convention tabled a resolution expressing support for the antiwar views of Senator McGovern, Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota, and the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, who had fallen victim to an assassin's bullet in June. The

69. Jefferson Cowie, "'Vigorously Left, Right, and Center': The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth L. Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), pp. 89–90; Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 279–81; Herbert S. Parmet, *The Democrats: The Years after FDR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 300–304; Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1972* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1973), pp. 121–22; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 31 May 1967; Harry McPherson to Joseph A. Califano, 23 Feb. 1967, Folder "McGovern, George 1/1/66–12/31/67," Name File, Box 270, White House Central Files, Presidential Papers, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Tex. (hereafter cited as McGovern Folder, LBJ Papers).

70. John F. Lindley to Hubert H. Humphrey, 25 July 1967, McGovern Folder, LBJ Papers.

assembled delegates instead accepted Lindley's suggestion that the state party not endorse any one position on the war issue. Despite a strong in-state campaign effort in 1972, McGovern lost South Dakota in the national presidential contest. A poll taken in January 1973 found that his approval rating in his home state had dropped to 38 percent—a great contrast to Governor Kneip, whose approval rating stood at 84 percent, and President Nixon, who enjoyed 71 percent approval.<sup>71</sup> After the “high-falutin” presidential campaign of 1972, one country editor informed McGovern that he would have to “go around the state and let everybody kick you in the pants at least once” for the liberal positions the senator had taken to win the Democratic presidential nomination.<sup>72</sup>

McGovern's political weaknesses quickly manifested themselves in his 1974 Senate reelection bid. Nixon's humiliating resignation in August of that year and the resulting Democratic electoral wave should have paved the way for an easy McGovern victory, especially since the senator could claim to have been right about Nixon all along. Instead, McGovern barely won reelection. Leo K. Thorsness, a recently retired air force lieutenant colonel who had flown ninety-three combat missions in Vietnam, endured six years as a prisoner of war, and won the Medal of Honor, was McGovern's Republican opponent. Thorsness had defeated Sioux Falls businessman Al Schock, who had the support of the fading Mundt machine, in the GOP primary.<sup>73</sup>

71. McGovern to Bill D. Moyers, 14 Jan. 1966, *ibid.*; Daryl Webb, “Crusade: George McGovern's Opposition to the Vietnam War,” *South Dakota History* 28 (Fall 1998): 168–70, and “‘There is no place in our institutions for radicals’: The Vietnam War on South Dakota Campuses, 1965–1973,” *South Dakota History* 45 (Spring 2015): 1–26; CSR 248, Aug. 1973, pp. 2, 11, 30, Box 428, McGovern Papers; *Pierre Daily Capital-Journal*, 21 Feb. 1969; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 16 Jan. 1968; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 16 July 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1968, sec. 1, p. 19; CSR 169, p. 9; telephone interview with Flynn; CSR 225, p. 22.


72. *Wall Street Journal*, 22 Mar. 1974, p. 1.

73. CSR 277, Feb. 1974, pp. 3–4, Box 428, McGovern Papers; CSR 248, pp. 2, 10, 12, 18, 28, 31, 59; CSR 225, pp. 35, 42; *New York Times*, 30 April 1973, p. 1, 6 May 1973, sec. 6, p. 31, 4 Nov. 1973, sec. 1, p. 23, 22 July 1974, p. 31; Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 77–81; telephone interview with James S. Stockdale, Henderson, Nev., 11 Nov. 2003.



A Heart for America  
A Head for her Problems  
A Hand for her People

**LEO THORSNESS**



FROM THE HEARTLAND  
OF AMERICA ...  
A Man with Heart

**U. S. SENATOR**  
REPUBLICAN

Returning home after six years as a prisoner of war, Leo Thorsness helped to revitalize the state's Republican Party with his challenge to McGovern in 1974.

With the Watergate crisis at its peak in 1974, McGovern attacked Thorsness for his connection to former Nixon aide Franklyn C. (“Lyn”) Nofziger and criticized the Republican contender’s weak support of farm programs. The incumbent senator pivoted sharply from denouncing the Vietnam War in 1972 to stressing the seniority he would have on the Senate Agriculture Committee if reelected. McGovern had a national network of campaign workers from his presidential run and a national fundraising apparatus that allowed him to outspend Thorsness by a wide margin. The incumbent senator became the first candidate for office in South Dakota history to spend over a million dollars on a single campaign. Meanwhile, the inexperienced Thorsness campaign endured a complete turnover of its senior leadership during the summer. On election day, in the wake of Nixon’s resignation and President Gerald R. Ford’s unpopular pardon of his predecessor, McGovern won a third term in the Senate with 53 percent of the vote. Some of his key advisors and supporters had expected McGovern to lose.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to Senator McGovern’s troubles, Governor Kneip’s political standing also started to erode by 1974. Voters had approved an amendment to the state constitution in 1972 that changed the governor’s term of office from two years to four and barred governors from serving more than two consecutive terms. The measure was to take effect with the 1974 election. Kneip sought reelection in 1974, arguing that the clock should start over under the 1972 constitutional amendment and that his previous two terms should not prevent him from running again. Some officials, including Attorney General Kermit A. Sande, a fellow Democrat, disagreed. However, the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled that Kneip could seek a third term. Lieutenant Governor Bill Dougherty, who had already been planning to run for governor, opposed Kneip in the Democratic primary. Kneip’s relations

74. *Aberdeen American-News*, 9 July 1974; interview with Franklyn C. Nofziger, Sacramento, Calif., 13 Nov. 2003; *National Observer* (Washington, D.C.), 2 Nov. 1974; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 11 Aug. 1974, 28 Apr. 1980; *Pierre Times*, 14 Dec. 1979; Cunningham memorandum, 10 Dec. 1974; telephone interview with Flynn; Robert V. Burns, e-mail messages to author, 28 July, 16 Aug. 2015; Muenster, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015. Jim Stasny had returned to graduate school due to his belief that McGovern would be defeated for reelection in 1974. Telephone interview with Stasny.

with Dougherty were already rocky due to the lieutenant governor's earlier refusal to break a tie in the state senate that would have allowed Kneip's long-sought income tax bill to proceed. Although Kneip received 66 percent of the vote in the June 1974 primary, the contest caused some lasting intraparty friction.<sup>75</sup>

The governor's persistent pursuit of an income tax also cost him politically. Voters had already rejected the income tax in a statewide referendum in 1970, with 61 percent of the electorate opposed. Democratic polls in 1972 showed only weak support for such a tax, while 54 percent of persons surveyed preferred reductions in state services to any tax increases. Even so, Kneip pushed hard—without success—to enact an income tax from the beginning of his administration.<sup>76</sup> David Volk, who won the first of his five terms as state treasurer in 1972, recalled in a 2015 interview that the “income tax burden was like the REA thing [had been] for Farrar in terms of hurting” the Democrats.<sup>77</sup> Kneip's extraordinary pursuit of a third term also turned off some voters, nearly half of whom thought he should not run again whether it was legal or not. In November 1974, the incumbent governor won only 54 percent of the vote against largely unknown Republican challenger John E. Olson, and the state house of representatives reverted to GOP control.<sup>78</sup>

If McGovern and Kneip survived the 1974 election cycle, other South Dakota Democrats were not as lucky. In early 1974, young Humboldt native Larry L. Pressler registered as a Republican and filed his

75. “Sande, Mrs. Herseth ask circuit judge to dismiss Kneip's 3rd term court suit,” undated newspaper clipping, ca. 1973, Folder “Kneip,” Box 79, Anderson Papers; Alan L. Clem, “The 1974 Election in South Dakota,” *Public Affairs* 60 (Feb. 1975): 3, 6; telephone interview with Wollman; telephone interview with Flynn; Robert V. Burns, e-mail to author, 28 July 2015; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 22 July 1978; Rodney M. Hall, e-mail to author, 23 Sept. 2015; Andrews, “Administration of Governor Richard F. Kneip,” p. 36; *Black Hills Pioneer*, 16 July 2013; Walsh, e-mail to author, 13 Aug. 2015.

76. CSR 169, pp. 72–73, 76–78; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 28 April, 20, 23 July 1978; *Wartown Public Opinion*, 26 June 1978.

77. Telephone interview with Volk.

78. CSR 277, pp. 5, 53, 56; Clem, “1974 Election in South Dakota,” p. 6. The Kneip campaign sometimes referred to Olson as “John Hanson” purposefully “because he had such poor name recognition for a long time” (Cheever, e-mail to author, 1 Aug. 2015).

petitions to run for the United States House of Representatives seat occupied by Frank Denholm. After a summer and fall of campaigning at small-town fairs and parades and aided by a polished television advertising campaign, Pressler won with 55 percent of the vote. He was the only Republican challenger in the country to unseat a Democratic incumbent congressman during that peak year of the Watergate upheaval.<sup>79</sup>

Attorney General Kermit Sande, who had previously served as executive director of the South Dakota Democratic Party and reportedly had his eye on the governor's office, also lost a reelection bid in 1974. He had made the mistake of hiring a young lawyer named William J.

79. Alan L. Clem, "The Case of the Upstart Republican: The First District of South Dakota," in *The Making of Congressmen: Seven Campaigns of 1974*, ed. Alan L. Clem (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1976), p. 134; Clem, "1974 Election in South Dakota," pp. 6–7.



Larry Pressler was the only Republican challenger in the country to unseat a Democratic incumbent congressman in the 1974 election. He went on to serve three terms in the Senate.

Janklow to prosecute cases emerging from the American Indian Movement protests of 1973. Janklow turned against Sande and was nominated by the 1974 state GOP convention to run for attorney general. Successfully advocating a law-and-order agenda, Janklow swamped the incumbent attorney general with over two-thirds of the vote.<sup>80</sup> Pressler, Janklow, and other young leaders would ultimately come to dominate Republican politics in South Dakota in coming decades and replace the old order that had collapsed when Karl Mundt and his generation suddenly faded from the scene.

As South Dakota Republicans began their resurgence, the state's Democrats suffered from the growing prominence of the abortion issue. In January 1973, the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision invalidating state laws against abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, which catalyzed anti-abortion forces and led to the creation of the South Dakota Right to Life organization. Governor Kneip, a committed Catholic like many other South Dakota Democrats, announced his opposition to abortion and addressed the legislature on the issue. The governor firmly rejected the use of state dollars for abortions. Catholic Bishops Lambert A. Hoch of Sioux Falls and Harold J. Dimmerling of Rapid City thanked Kneip for his pro-life position.<sup>81</sup>

Opponents of abortion were particularly strong in rural and religious South Dakota, where 41 percent of voters in 1973 equated abortion with murder. By 1976, the abortion issue had become entangled in demands for the repeal of South Dakota's 1973 ratification of the federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Some abortion opponents

80. Clem, "1974 Election in South Dakota," pp. 3–6; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 24 Sept., 29 Oct. 1974; Jason A. Heppler, "The American Indian Movement and South Dakota Politics," in *Plains Political Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. Lauck, Miller, and Simmons, p. 276.

81. Telephone interview with Bucks; Cheever, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015; telephone interview with Wollman; Steven M. Davis to author, 11 Mar. 2004; Kneip to Mary Kleinschnitz, 27 Aug. 1974, Folder "Abortion 1974," Box 171, Kneip Papers; Bishop Lambert A. Hoch to Kneip, 21 Feb. 1973, Folder "Sanctity of Life," Box 172, *ibid.*; Bishop Harold J. Dimmerling to Kneip, 11 Mar. 1974, Folder "Abortion March 1974," Box 171, *ibid.* By June 1973, South Dakota Right to Life had organized local chapters in twenty-seven towns and had four thousand volunteers. Ruth M. Karim, "An Organizational History of the South Dakota Right to Life Committee," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, Apr. 1988, p. 1.

argued that if the ERA took effect, it would entrench an unlimited right to abortion in constitutional law.<sup>82</sup> According to James C. Pribyl, who was the party's executive director from 1973 to 1977, the abortion issue "deeply split" Democrats between traditional pro-life Catholics and liberals such as George McGovern, who steadfastly remained pro-choice.<sup>83</sup>

The abortion issue spotlighted other rifts within the Democratic Party in South Dakota. For decades, a division had existed between the rural, agrarian, Protestant, Farmers Union-oriented wing of the party and the urban, Sioux Falls-based, labor-oriented, Irish Catholic wing. This split was perhaps best symbolized by former Governor Ralph E. Herseth, a farmer of Norwegian descent from rural Brown County, in the former camp and Lieutenant Governor Bill Dougherty, an Irish Catholic from Sioux Falls, in the latter. Land-owning rural Democrats tended to support a state income tax, which would reduce their property tax burdens, while urban Democrats were less enthusiastic about such a tax shift.<sup>84</sup>

The abortion and income-tax issues were far from the only fissures that divided South Dakota Democrats. Some conflicts were cultural, such as the friction between Congressman Frank Denholm, a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Senator McGovern, who despised FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and embraced student antiwar protesters. Denholm did not endorse McGovern's

82. CSR 225, p. 76; Ruth M. Karim, "South Dakota Right to Life and the Equal Rights Amendment: A Statement in Support of HJR 510 to the 1976 South Dakota Legislature," Folder "ERA Jan. 76–June 76," Box 178, Kneip Papers; Marjorie J. Spruill, "Gender and America's Right Turn," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 77–79. In the early 1970s, West Virginia was the only state with a higher proportion of its citizens "living in small villages and [on] farms" than South Dakota. Peirce, *Great Plains States*, p. 175.

83. Telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015.

84. Telephone interviews with Pribyl, 19 Aug., 30 Sept. 2015; telephone interview with Flynn; telephone interview with Bucks; John F. Lindley to Ralph E. Herseth, 6 Dec. 1967, and Herseth to Lindley, 26 July 1968, Folder "1968," Box 19, Herseth Papers; CSR 169, pp. 71, 73. While only about 7 percent of the South Dakota electorate was of Irish ancestry in the 1970s, nearly two-thirds of Irish-descent voters in the state were Democrats. CSR 704, p. 10.



presidential candidacy.<sup>85</sup> Some disputes were personal, such as former Lieutenant Governor John Lindley's loathing of McGovern for stepping into the 1962 Senate race after Lindley had declared his own bid for the office and for patronage issues, or the conflict between Dougherty and Kneip over the latter's decision to seek a third term in 1974. Some tensions were new, such as those between older, public-works-oriented Democrats who supported the Oahe Irrigation Project and an upstart coalition of environmentalists and agrarian Democrats who opposed it.<sup>86</sup>

Republicans were also starting to recover from their devastating losses of 1970 and 1972. After making some gains in 1974, including winning back the state attorney general's office and the First District seat in Congress during a difficult national election cycle for the GOP, the party was much better organized for the 1976 election cycle. At the end of the 1976 legislative session, Republican lawmakers coordinated an unsuccessful attempt at a 2 percent across-the-board state budget cut and orchestrated a broader effort to criticize Kneip's taxation and spending policies. A public controversy over the purchase of a new state airplane also bolstered Republican messaging on state spending levels.<sup>87</sup>

85. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 5 June 1968; *Minneapolis Tribune*, 18 Dec. 1967; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 6 Feb. 1968; *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 17 Mar. 1968; *Rapid City Journal*, 10 July 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1968, sec. 1, p. 19; interview of McGovern by Hackman, p. 24; Cheever, e-mail to author, 16 Aug. 2015; telephone interview with Pribyl, 30 Sept. 2015; Scott D. McGregor, e-mail to author, 10 Aug. 2015; Ravnholt and Connell to Shovell, 6 Apr. 1967; interviews with Denholm, 5 Nov. 2003, 8 Sept. 2015; telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015; Barnett, e-mail to author, 2 Nov. 2015; interviews with Samp, 11 Nov. 2003, 28 July, 12 Aug. 2015; *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, 8 Aug. 1970; Clem, "Case of the Upstart Republican," pp. 131, 158, 162.

86. Lindley to Humphrey, 25 July 1967, Marvin Watson to William Connell, 19 Dec. 1967, Lindley to Joseph A. Califano, 7 June 1967, and Califano to Lyndon B. Johnson, 27 May 1967, McGovern Folder, LBJ Papers; Clem, "1962 Election in South Dakota," p. 2; interview of Muenster, pp. 31–32; John Husmann, "Environmentalism in South Dakota: A Grassroots Approach," in *Plains Political Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. Lauck, Miller, and Simmons, pp. 239–47. Lindley reportedly stated that the Kennedy White House had supported McGovern over him for the 1962 Democratic senatorial nomination. *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 22 Apr. 1962.

87. Dan Garry to Political Cabinet, 18 Mar. 1976, and Jim Pribyl and Norma Brick to "All Democratic Legislators," undated (ca. 1976), Folder "Political Cabinet," Box 281,

Sensing the difficulties ahead, the Kneip administration assembled a “political cabinet” to combat the Republican message, lend credibility to state spending programs, and set forth campaign themes for the November 1976 election.<sup>88</sup> That fall, Republicans targeted pro-income-tax Democrats for defeat. The Democratic legislative delegations from Minnehaha and Pennington counties, which included Sioux Falls and Rapid City, suffered catastrophic losses, and Republicans regained control of the state senate. Under the leadership of new and energetic state chairman Leo Thorsness, the GOP had significantly improved its voter identification and get-out-the-vote efforts, which helped neutralize the voter mobilization advantage that South Dakota Democrats had enjoyed since 1968.<sup>89</sup>

The Republican victories of 1976 in South Dakota were associated with an improving ideological climate for the GOP and the corresponding growth of the national conservative movement. The Republican budget-cutting effort of 1976 in Pierre was in tune with the growing strength of Ronald Reagan’s conservatism. In June 1976, Reagan won the South Dakota Republican presidential primary with 51 percent of the vote to President Ford’s 44 percent. Support for the new conservative movement in South Dakota could be seen in Leo Thorsness’s successful bid for the 1974 GOP Senate nomination, his ascendancy to the state party chairmanship, and the growth of the right-to-life movement. The multiple rebuffs to the Kneip administration’s income-tax proposals tracked the growth of the national antitax movement, which rapidly expanded after California voters passed Proposition 13 in June 1978.<sup>90</sup>

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Kneip Papers; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 18 Feb. 1976; telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 22 July 1978; *Rapid City Journal*, 1 May 1976.

88. Dan Bucks to Political Cabinet, 22 Mar. 1976, Dan Garry to Political Cabinet, 28 Mar., 7, 15, 21 Apr., 6 May 1976, and Pribyl and Brick to “All Democratic Legislators,” Folder “Political Cabinet,” Box 281, Kneip Papers.

89. Robert D. Sivertson, “The Rise and Fall of a Democratic Majority in the South Dakota Legislature: A Personal Account,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession, n.d., pp. 7–8; interview of Muenster, p. 58; telephone interview of Barnett, 3 Nov. 2015; McGregor, e-mail to author, 30 July 2015; telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015; interview with Samp, 12 Aug. 2015; Hall, e-mail to author, 23 Sept. 2015.

90. Pribyl and Brick to “All Democratic Legislators”; *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 19 May 1978; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and*

The law-and-order message of conservatives in the late 1960s took on added meaning in South Dakota after the violent protests of the American Indian Movement from 1973 to 1975.<sup>91</sup> Bill Janklow's 1978 gubernatorial campaign emphasized the candidate's stands against "lawlessness" and the "radical politics of violence."<sup>92</sup> A 1973 survey showed evidence of growing conservative strength in the state, with 63 percent of respondents agreeing that gun control would not reduce crime, 69 percent thinking that America had "become a permissive society that allows people too much freedom to disobey," and 88 percent describing welfare as "a national scandal with millions of people getting paid for not working."<sup>93</sup> William E. ("Bill") Walsh, who ran for the Democratic nomination for the Second District seat in Congress in 1978, remarked, "We're seeing a very reactionary, conservative swing in the state."<sup>94</sup>

*Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: De Capo Press, 2002), pp. 205–15; Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened*, pp. 324–25.

91. Heppler, "American Indian Movement," p. 276.

92. *Edgemont Herald-Tribune*, 9 Mar. 1978.

93. CSR 225, pp. 78, 83.

94. *Lead Daily Call*, 7 June 1978.



After four years as South Dakota attorney general, Republican William Janklow won the 1978 gubernatorial election.

A changing situation in world affairs also affected political fortunes in South Dakota after 1973. While the state was generally hostile to anti-Vietnam War protesters and ardently pro-military, these forces were slightly moderated by an older midwestern agrarian, isolationist inclination that resisted foreign entanglements. More intense, however, was a general exhaustion around the country with the war effort. In January 1973, as the war in Vietnam dragged on, 25 percent of South Dakotans surveyed agreed that the nation's most important problem was foreign affairs, but by February 1974, after American troops had left Vietnam, this number dropped to 2 percent.<sup>95</sup> McGovern's 1974 Senate campaign certainly felt this loss of intensity. George V. Cunningham, the senator's chief of staff, noted that with the American armed forces out of the Vietnam War and Nixon ousted from the presidency, the "issue oriented volunteers—chiefly college students—were not available in sufficient numbers" for the campaign. Furthermore, the "absence of an overriding emotional issue" such as the Vietnam War depressed "volunteer interest and availability."<sup>96</sup>

The election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976 deprived South Dakota Democrats of yet another potent issue. With a Democratic president in office, criticisms of the farm policies of Republican administrations lost their effectiveness. Later, Carter's decision to embargo American grain exports to the Soviet Union in retaliation for the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused severe headaches for Democrats in farm country. In a May 1980 memorandum to Senator McGovern, George Cunningham cited "disenchantment with Carter" as a cause of "apathy" among Democrats in the state.<sup>97</sup> The actions of the Carter administration in regard to other policy and political challenges created further dissatisfaction. Indeed, former South Dakota Democratic executive director Jim Pribyl remarked in a 2015 interview "how quickly Carter melted down after being elected."<sup>98</sup> Not surprisingly, Carter lost South Dakota in 1980 to Ronald Reagan, who re-

95. CSR 277, p. 28.

96. Cunningham memorandum, 10 Dec. 1974.

97. Cunningham to McGovern, 29 May 1980, Folder "1980 Senate Reelection Campaign," Box 485, McGovern Papers.

98. Telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015.

ceived 63 percent of the vote. In addition to the incumbent president's weaknesses, the base of small-scale Farmers Union Democrats that had allowed McGovern to revive the South Dakota Democratic Party in the 1950s was shrinking in the late 1970s as there were "fewer farmers and bigger farms."<sup>99</sup>

The growing weaknesses of South Dakota Democrats were on full display during the 1978 election cycle. After he embraced an aggressively liberal agenda during his first term in the United States Senate, Jim Abourezk's prospects for reelection were poor. With polls showing the incumbent senator trailing two-term GOP Congressman Larry Pressler by fifteen percentage points, Abourezk announced in January 1977 that he would not run for a second term. Governor Kneip seriously considered running for Abourezk's Senate seat but faced similar challenges in the polls, trailing Pressler by over forty percentage points. Kneip decided instead to seek a diplomatic appointment with the assistance of former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who had returned to the Senate to represent Minnesota. Kneip resigned effective 24 July 1978 to become United States ambassador to Singapore.<sup>100</sup>

By the time Kneip left the South Dakota governor's mansion, Lieutenant Governor Harvey L. Wollman had already lost the 1978 Democratic gubernatorial primary. Wollman, a Mennonite farmer of German descent from near Doland, faced a challenge from the Sioux Falls-supported Irish Catholic state senator from Alcester, Roger D. McKellips. The primary contest exemplified regional and ideological frictions among South Dakota Democrats. McKellips, who opposed abortion, a state income tax, and the Oahe Irrigation Project, won a

99. Telephone interview with Flynn, 10 Nov. 2015.

100. *Washington Post*, 27 Mar. 1974, sec. E, p. 1, 25 Jan. 1977, sec. A, p. 11; CSR 169, pp. 46, 49; *Aberdeen American-News*, 21 Mar. 1976; *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 9 July 2011; Patrick H. Caddell to Kneip, 8 Mar. 1977, and Kneip to Humphrey, 21 June 1977, Folder "Kneip for Senate," Box 352, Kneip Papers; telephone interview with Barnett, 20 Oct. 2015; *Wartertown Public Opinion*, 21 May 1977, 26 June 1978; interview of Muenster, p. 10; Kneip to Carter, 28 Oct. 1977, File "Presidential Handwriting," Box 48, Office of the Staff Secretary Collection, Presidential Papers, Papers of Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Ga.; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 28, 29 Apr. 1978.



Pictured from left to right in this February 1980 photograph are Kneip, who left the governor's office in 1978; McGovern, who would lose his Senate seat in the 1980 election; and former Governor Harvey Wollman, who had lost the 1978 Democratic gubernatorial primary.

narrow victory with 49 percent of the vote against Wollman's 47 percent in a low-turnout contest.<sup>101</sup>

The Democrats lost the governor's mansion that fall to Republican Attorney General Bill Janklow, who won the general election over McKellips with 57 percent of the vote. Janklow would go on to serve

101. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 24 July 1978; Scott D. McGregor, e-mail messages to author, 10 Aug., 21 Oct. 2015; telephone interviews with Pribyl, 19 Aug., 30 Sept. 2015; Robert V. Burns, e-mail to author, 27 July 2015; Pribyl, e-mail messages to author, 1 Oct. 2015, 4 Feb. 2016; interview of Muenster, pp. 59–64; telephone interview with Michael J. O'Connor, Phoenix, Ariz., 30 Oct. 2015; telephone interview with Wollman; Hall, e-mail to author, 24 Sept. 2015; telephone interview with Flynn.



four terms of four years each, or a total of sixteen years as governor (1979–1987, 1995–2003). Former Rapid City Mayor Don Barnett won the Democratic nomination for the Senate seat vacated by Abourezk after an unexpected primary challenge from Kenneth D. Stofferahn, a National Farmers Organization leader who opposed the Oahe Irrigation Project. Barnett lost the general election to the young and tele-genic Congressman Pressler, who marketed his rural Humboldt roots effectively and won two-thirds of the vote.<sup>102</sup>

Democratic weaknesses and new Republican strengths created enormous political challenges for George McGovern's 1980 Senate re-election bid. As South Dakota was trending more conservative in 1976, McGovern's chief of staff strongly warned the senator against becoming president of the liberal advocacy group Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), because the position would make "it impossible for you to vote—as you sometimes have to—on the basis of South Dakota concerns."<sup>103</sup> McGovern rejected the advice and accepted the ADA presidency. Two years later, he denounced California's Proposition 13 and attacked the "taxpayer revolt" as "nihilism."<sup>104</sup> McGovern also took highly publicized trips to Africa and to Cuba against the advice of his own staff, which considered these travels unwise given the rightward trend in South Dakota politics. The senator considered running for president from the left in both 1976 and in 1980 and was highly critical of the Carter administration, which he saw as too moderate.<sup>105</sup>

By 1980, McGovern's staff expressed strong concerns about the senator's image and pleaded with him to visit South Dakota more often to

102. John Gorman, Cambridge Survey Research, to George McGovern, 15 Aug. 1978, p. 5, loose in Box 428, McGovern Papers; telephone interview with Flynn; Barnett, e-mail to author, 4 Nov. 2015; *Watertown Public Opinion*, 10 Oct. 1977.

103. Cunningham to McGovern, 20 May 1976, Folder "Staff Memos," Box 483, McGovern Papers.

104. *Aberdeen American-News*, 18 June 1978.

105. Staff to McGovern, 12 Nov. 1978, and Cunningham to McGovern, 3 May 1978, Folder "Staff Memos," Box 855, McGovern Papers; John D. Holum to McGovern, 4 June 1976, Folder "Staff Memos," Box 483, *ibid*; McGovern to Robert Samuelson, 27 July 1979, Folder "Political Affairs 1980," Box 323, *ibid*.; *Aberdeen American-News*, 29 Apr., 8 May 1977, 1 June 1978; Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency, 1972–1976* (New York, Viking Press: 1977), pp. 174–81; Schulman, *Seventies*, p. 124.

help repair the damage.<sup>106</sup> Two years earlier, George Cunningham had advised him to choose between a presidential run and a senatorial reelection bid because attempting to do both would ensure his defeat for reelection.<sup>107</sup> When McGovern did decide to run for reelection, Cunningham told him he had to start “getting straight” with South Dakota voters. The senator agreed to send an “abortion letter” to members of the clergy, meet with prominent Catholic leaders and anti-abortion groups, buy property in South Dakota so he could say he had a home in the state, and embrace some “conservative economic and other initiatives,” including tax cuts. Further, Cunningham suggested an effort to “capitalize on opportunities (cosmetic or substantive) to move ‘to the center’ on appropriate issues to help counter the ‘radical-liberal’ image” reflected in McGovern’s own polling.<sup>108</sup>

As the 1980 general election approached, Republicans chose the popular Jim Abdnor, who had recaptured the Second District congressional seat for the GOP in 1972, to run against McGovern. A 1978 poll commissioned by McGovern showed that Abdnor was viewed favorably by 64 percent of South Dakotans surveyed and unfavorably by only 12 percent. A poll published in late 1979 showed Abdnor beating McGovern in a hypothetical Senate election with 50 percent of the vote compared to the incumbent’s 33 percent.<sup>109</sup> By June 1980, even after his efforts to mend fences back home, McGovern’s own polling

106. Randy Fredrikson to Cunningham, 20 Mar. 1980, Campaign Staff to McGovern, 21 Mar. 1980, and Cunningham to McGovern, 24 Mar. 1980, Folder “1980 Senate Reelection Campaign,” Box 485, McGovern Papers. During the fall campaign, McGovern was unable to buy a hunting license because he did not have a South Dakota driver’s license. Alan L. Clem, “The 1980 Election in South Dakota: End of an Era,” *Public Affairs* 80 (Mar. 1981): 3.

107. Cunningham to McGovern, 3 May 1978, Folder “Staff Memos,” Box 855, McGovern Papers.

108. Cunningham to McGovern, 15 Aug. 1979, Folder “South Dakota 1980,” Box 425, *ibid.* One such move was McGovern’s support of the McClure-Volkmer bill, a measure to reduce federal regulations on handguns backed by the National Rifle Association. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 4 Aug. 1980.

109. Gorman to McGovern, 15 Aug. 1978, p. 9; *Pierre Times*, 14 Dec. 1979. Former Rapid City Mayor Don Barnett, the 1978 Democratic senatorial nominee, described Abdnor as the “nicest man in South Dakota” in a 2015 interview. Telephone interview with Barnett, 2 Nov. 2015.

still showed him “behind Abdnor by 15 to 20 points.”<sup>110</sup> On top of this weak poll standing, McGovern faced a primary challenge from Larry L. Schumaker, an abortion opponent who was politically unknown but nevertheless took nearly 38 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the efforts of the senator’s staff to convince McGovern to project moderation and embrace causes that would reduce conserva-

110. Robert D. Squier to McGovern, 3 June 1980, Folder “1980 Senate Reelection Campaign,” Box 485, McGovern Papers.

111. Cunningham to Field Staff, 29 May 1980, *ibid.*; *Aberdeen American-News*, 8 May 1980; *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 18 Apr. 2012; Clem, “1980 Election in South Dakota,” p. 2.



James Abdnor held the Second District congressional seat from 1973 until unseating the three-term incumbent Senator George McGovern in the 1980 election.

tive criticism, he generally refused to “forsake liberalism.”<sup>112</sup> McGovern maintained his pro-choice stance in the face of much resistance and also took criticism for advocating cuts in the defense budget, for supporting higher income and gasoline taxes, and for his trips abroad, especially his visit to Cuba. Newly active national conservative groups spent money in South Dakota highlighting McGovern’s past liberal positions. The race became a clear ideological contest. Abdnor held an American Conservative Union rating of 95 percent, while McGovern stood at 10 percent.<sup>113</sup> McGovern trailed in opinion polls throughout the campaign, and Abdnor won the election with 58 percent of the vote, which constituted a brutal coda to several years of Democratic decline in South Dakota. After the election, McGovern conceded that Abdnor was “more typical of the thinking of South Dakota people than I am” and recognized that “it’s remarkable that as a liberal Democrat I stayed in office as long as I did in what is essentially a conservative state.”<sup>114</sup>

McGovern’s post-election thoughts highlight critical conclusions about the 1970s and South Dakota politics. Although the essential conservatism of South Dakota might seem to be in abeyance at particular moments, it has typically reasserted itself. To defeat this conservatism, it helps the Democrats’ cause to be seen as moderate, as Kneip’s first election as governor indicates, rather than liberal, as McGovern’s electoral demise shows. Democratic success has also correlated strongly with an animated farm vote, as McGovern’s early political success and the rural electric cooperative controversy demonstrate. Finally, the ex-

112. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 25 Dec. 1978.

113. *Ibid.*, 9 Jan. 1979, 28 Apr., 25 June, 13 Aug., 19 Oct. 1980; “Texts of People for an Alternative to McGovern Television Spots,” loose in Box 488, McGovern Papers; *New York Times*, 2 June 1980, sec. B, p. 11; *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, 20 Jan. 1980. The McGovern campaign spent \$2.1 million on the 1980 election, while the Abdnor camp expended \$1.8 million. Clem, “1980 Election in South Dakota,” pp. 2–3.

114. Quoted in Clem, “1980 Election in South Dakota,” p. 4. Conservative organizer Paul M. Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation noted that the Abdnor-McGovern contest of 1980 was one of the first nationally prominent campaigns in which conservative Protestants and Catholics worked together. Interview with Weyrich, Washington, D.C., 30 Jan. 2006.

perience of the 1970s indicates that successful Democratic campaigns have been greatly dependent on GOP mistakes and a fortuitous convergence of helpful forces that have allowed Democrats to break through the normal pattern of Republican dominance.<sup>115</sup> In other words, the particulars of precise moments in history matter greatly.

115. Muenster, e-mail to author, 27 July 2015; telephone interview with Pribyl, 19 Aug. 2015; Dahlin, e-mail to author, 3 Aug. 2015; Robert V. Burns, e-mail to author, 27 July 2015; *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 27 Apr. 2014; Flynn, e-mail to author, 20 Oct. 2015.

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*On the covers:* The popularity of baseball in South Dakota dates back to territorial days. For more than two decades in the mid-1900s, Pheasants baseball was a fixture of summertime entertainment and the local economy in Aberdeen. In this issue, Daryl Webb details the rise and fall of this professional Northern League team.



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