The 1952 Republican Presidential Primary

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The South Dakota Republican presidential primary was scheduled for 3 June 1952. Because this was the last primary contest before the 1952 Republican National Convention, the event attracted nationwide attention. Dominating the ballot were two opposing slates of candidates for delegates to the convention. One slate, led by former State Supreme Court Justice Charles R. Hayes of Deadwood, was committed to the nomination of Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio; while the rival group, headed by ex-Governor George T. Mickelson of Sioux Falls, favored the candidacy of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. Most of the major newspapers in the country commented on the outcome of this primary. A majority believed that Taft's prospects had been harmed by the results, while some concluded that neither candidate had benefited. In spite of the widespread comments, not a single newspaper predicted who would actually win the Republican presidential nomination.

Eisenhower, one of the nation's most illustrious military heroes, had never before aspired to public office. In fact, the general, remaining at his military assignment in France, had firmly declined to issue a formal announcement of his presidential candidacy. Eisenhower's name was not even listed on the South Dakota ballot, although it was generally understood that he commanded the loyalty of the Mickelson slate. Depicted

as an internationalist on foreign policy matters and a moderate on domestic issues, most of Eisenhower's enthusiastic supporters were liberal Republicans from the East. These individuals included Governors Thomas E. Dewey of New York and Alfred E. Driscoll of New Jersey and Senators Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and James H. Duff of Pennsylvania. Dewey, the Republican presidential nominee both in 1944 and 1948, had for many years been Taft's principal rival within the Republican party.

Taft, unlike Eisenhower, had been active in politics for three decades. Serving his third term, the Ohioan was chairman of the Republican Policy Committee of the Senate. He had previously sought his party's presidential nomination both in 1940 and 1948. An isolationist in foreign affairs and an avowed conservative on most economic and social issues, he was especially popular among his congressional colleagues from the Midwest. Some of the prominent midwesterners who supported Taft's candidacy were Senators John W. Bricker of Ohio, Homer E. Capehart of Indiana, Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, and Hugh A. Butler of Nebraska.

Between 11 March and 16 May primaries had been held in ten states. Eisenhower had decisively defeated Taft in New Hampshire (11 March), New Jersey (15 April), Pennsylvania (22 April), Massachusetts (29 April), and Oregon (16 May). Moreover, the general had polled over one hundred thousand write-in votes in the Minnesota primary (8 March), whereas the senator had received less than one-fourth as many such ballots in the same contest. Taft had triumphed over Eisenhower in Nebraska (1 April) and Illinois (18 April), and had also won primary victories in Wisconsin (1 April) and West Virginia (13 May), two states that the general's supporters had not contested.¹

Most political analysts assumed that Taft was the favorite in South Dakota. First, he benefited by having his name appear conspicuously at the top of the ballot. Second, South Dakota was regarded as one of the nation's most conservative and isolationist states. Finally, while Eisenhower was still in duty in

^{1.} Eagleton Institute of Politics, Source Book of American Presidential Campaign and Election Statistics, 1948-1968 (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 10-11.

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Europe, the senator waged an intensive five-day campaign in South Dakota during the latter part of May.

Notwithstanding the apparent advantages enjoyed by Taft, Eisenhower had secured the endorsement of the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader and the Aberdeen American News, two of South Dakota's most influencial newspapers. The Rapid City Journal, South Dakota's third major newspaper, had scrupulously refrained from supporting either candidate. Also, Eisenhower's supporters were encouraged by the fact that virtually all of the state's incumbent political leaders had maintained a position of strict neutrality in the primary contest. Although Senators Karl E. Mundt and Francis Case had compiled voting records almost identical to Taft's, both South Dakotans remained neutral in the presidential primary. Governor Sigurd Anderson and Congressmen Harold O. Lovre and E. Y. Berry were likewise neutral.²

Throughout the latter stages of the South Dakota campaign, Taft repeatedly cited his voting record in Congress, stressing that he had always manifested a keen understanding of the problems of South Dakota and other predominantly agricultural states. Enhancing the senator's prospects were the endorsements of South Dakota's three major farm organizations, the Farm Bureau, Grange, and Farmer's Union. Taft, also basing his campaign largely on his longstanding advocacy of isolationism and his many years of loyal service to the Republican party, constantly implied that Eisenhower had never expressed himself on a host of vital national issues.³

Eisenhower's partisans in South Dakota, minimizing political ideology, portrayed their candidate as a leader of international stature and an individual with broad appeal to millions of independent voters. As evidence of the general's popularity,

^{2.} Unlike Senators Homer E. Capehart of Indiana, Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, Edward Thye of Minnesota, Hugh A. Butler of Nebraska, and Frank Carlson of Kansas, South Dakota's principal politicians refrained from endorsing either Taft or Eisenhower. Senators Mundt and Case and Congressmen Lovre and Berry remained in Washington during the primary campaign, while Governor Anderson merely expressed the hope that the Taft-Eisenhower contest in South Dakota would be conducted with a minimum of rancor.

^{3.} New York Times, 23 May, p. 12; 24 May, p. 14; 26 May, p. 14; 1 June 1952, pp. 1, 34; New York Herald Tribune, 1 June 1952.





Above right, ex-Governor George T. Mickelson headed the slate of candidates for delegates favoring General Dwight D. Eisenhower and left, Colonel Joe Foss, a celebrated World War II Marine pilot, publicly endorsed the general; below right, former State Supreme Court Justice Charles R. Hayes led the slate committed to the nomination of Senator Robert A. Taft and left, ex-Governor Leslie Jensen announced his support of the senator.





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his supporters frequently alluded to a 2 May Gallup Poll indicating that independent voters favored Eisenhower over Taft by a margin of 52 percent to 14 percent.⁴ The general's supporters argued that, inasmuch as Taft had been so long identified as a fervent Republican conservative, his chances of attracting independents and disenchanted Democrats in a national election were slight.

During the days immediately prior to the primary voting, both the Taft and Eisenhower supporters relied heavily on political endorsements of their respective candidates. On 1 June General of the Army Douglas MacArthur urged South Dakotans to cast their votes for Taft, thereby prompting former Governor Leslie Jensen of Hot Springs to announce his support of the senator. The Eisenhower forces countered the following day by publicizing an endorsement of the general by Colonel Joe Foss of Sioux Falls, a celebrated World War II Marine pilot and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor. ⁵

On 3 June some one hundred twenty-nine thousand South Dakota Republicans went to the polls. The first election returns indicated the likelihood of an extremely close race. By the following morning it appeared that Taft had defeated Eisenhower by a few hundred votes. It was not until several days later, however, before the official statewide canvass was completed. The final vote was: Taft Slate 64,695 (50.3%); Eisenhower Slate 63,879 (49.7%).6

Taft's narrow triumph over Eisenhower received prime news coverage. Moreover, approximately one-third of the nation's major newspapers printed editorials on the outcome of the South Dakota primary. Almost without exception these publications attempted to determine the probable effect of the

George H. Gallup, The Gallop Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1972), 2:1060.

^{5.} New York Times, 2 June, pp. 1, 15, 16; 3 June 1952, p. 18; Washington Post, 2 June 1952.

^{6.} Eisenhower carried Minnehaha, Pennington, Brown, and Codington counties, four of South Dakota's major population centers. The aggregate vote in these counties was: Eisenhower 18,857 (57.5%); Taft 13,948 (42.5%). The remaining vote, primarily from rural areas, was as follows: Taft 50,743 (53.0%); Eisenhower 45,022 (47.0%) (South Dakota Manual, 1955 [Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1955], p. 354).

primary on the political fortunes of the rival candidates. A majority of the newspapers commenting on the South Dakota primary agreed that Taft's presidential prospects had been harmed. Alleging that the senator had been expected to attract a large percentage of the vote in South Dakota, these publications held that Eisenhower had fared remarkably well in the primary.

The New York Times, noting that Taft's strategists had been highly optimistic about the senator's chances in South Dakota, described the primary result there as a stand-off. Stressing that Taft had conducted an aggressive campaign in South Dakota while Eisenhower's name had not even been listed on the ballot, Charles Merz, the editor of the Times stated: "All circumstances considered, Eisenhower made a good showing against odds among an electorate in which he might expect to have heavy sledding. Senator Taft, in a state where the going should be pretty easy, got enough votes to claim 'victory' and to prove that the Republican nomination is still a horse race."

Insisting that Eisenhower's supporters had little reason to be discouraged by the South Dakota returns, the *Washington Post* was gratified by the substantial vote cast for the general in such a traditionally isolationist state. The *Post* editor, H. B. Elliston, believing that the South Dakota primary disproved that Taft was the overwhelming choice among midwestern voters, concluded that Eisenhower had manifested considerable political appeal "even when up against formidable opposition." 8

The Louisville Courier-Journal reminded its readers that Taft had been expected to win easily in South Dakota and also that the state was distinctly conservative and isolationist in its political complexion. After examining the primary election statistics, the Courier-Journal asserted that the result could be "reasoned as a victory for EISENHOWER." Notwithstanding the general's popularity in South Dakota and other states, however, the Louisville publication felt that Eisenhower was behind Taft in the quest for convention delegates. 9

Surprised by the "incredibly slender margin" of Taft's

^{7.} New York Times, 5 June 1952, p. 28.

^{8.} Washington Post, 6 June 1952.

^{9.} Louisville Courier-Journal, Barry Bingham, ed., 5 June 1952.

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victory in South Dakota, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* argued that the primary contest, "in terms of candidate prestige acquired, may be said to have ended in a dead heat." The *Tribune*, emphasizing that South Dakota was predominantly rural and strongly isolationist, was impressed that Eisenhower had "demonstrated extraordinary strength in a state which had been widely regarded as Taft territory." ¹⁰

The editor of the *Denver Post*, Palmer Hoyt, quipped that Taft's hope of scoring a sizeable victory in South Dakota "fizzled like a damp skyrocket at a rained out Fourth of July celebration." Pointing out that South Dakota had appeared to have been one of the foremost opportunities for the senator's presidential drive, Hoyt contended that his very slight margin "has not added to his prestige as a vote-getter and does not augur well for his chances to achieve the nomination." ¹¹

^{10.} Minneapolis Morning Tribune, G. D. Seymour, ed., 5 June 1952.

^{11.} Denver Post, 5 June 1952.

Certain that the South Dakota primary had a significance far greater than the fourteen delegate votes at stake, the *Portland Oregonian* viewed the outcome as evidence that the Midwest was not solidly behind Taft. The *Oregonian*, calling attention to the senator's vigorous campaign as well as to the rural and isolationist character of South Dakota, concluded that the primary result reflected the "great public popularity of General Eisenhower even in territory that has been rated heavily favorable to Taft." ¹²

Among the other newspapers that were convinced that the South Dakota primary had been detrimental to Taft were the Hartford Courant, New York Herald-Tribune, Washington Evening Star, Richmond Times-Dispatch, Birmingham News, and Chattanooga Daily Times. The Courant commented that it was valid to construe Eisenhower's showing as a "moral victory." 13 Ascertaining that the general's supporters in South Dakota had transformed an anticipated heavy Taft majority into the narrowest of margins, the Herald-Tribune hailed Eisenhower's primary showing as a "solid and undeniable plus," 14 The Evening Star, recalling that most informed observers had predicted that Taft would win handily in South Dakota, surmised that Eisenhower's performance justified the assumption that he was a candidate of "strong appeal to the rural population."15 Explaining that South Dakota had been considered distinctly favorable to Taft, Virginius Dabney, editor of the Times-Dispatch, stated that the "strong run made by GENERAL EISENHOWER is impressive."16 The News, accentuating the belief that South Dakota had been reputed to be Taft territory, declared, "That Eisenhower did so well may be claimed as one of those moral victories that politicians talk about."17 Affirming that Taft should have attracted overwhelming popular support in South Dakota, the Daily Times maintained that the senator could "find small comfort" in his narrow margin over Eisenhower. 18

- 12. Portland Oregonian, 5 June 1952.
- 13. Hartford (Conn.) Courant, Herbert Brucker, ed., 7 June 1952.
- 14. New York Herald Tribune, Whitelaw Reid, ed., 6 June 1952.
- 15. Washington Evening Star, B. M. McKelway, ed., 6 June 1952.
- 16. Richmond Times-Dispatch, 5 June 1952.
- 17. Birmingham News, C. B. Hanson, Jr., ed., 6 June 1952.
- 18. Chattanooga Daily Times, A. D. Mynders, ed., 5 June 1952.

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A substantial minority of the newspaper editorials on the South Dakota primary felt that the result had benefited neither candidate. Pointing to the relatively few votes separating Taft and Eisenhower, these newspapers assessed the primary results as largely meaningless. Noting that the South Dakota contest had been widely publicized as a crucial test of popularity between Taft and Eisenhower, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* dismissed the result as "inconclusive." The *Inquirer* simply declared that neither Taft nor Eisenhower supporters could "draw firm conclusions about the candidates' relative appeal to the public." ¹⁹

In an editorial entitled "Nobody Wins in South Dakota," the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* stated that the primary had produced "none of the bandwagon prestige which had expected to accrue to the victor." Suspecting that both Taft and Eisenhower supporters would be disappointed by the outcome of their respective campaigns, the *Plain Dealer* offered the following analysis of the South Dakota contest, "With the vote so close, however, neither side can claim very much."²⁰

Citing the South Dakota result as "one of the narrowest margins of decision in primary history," Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, asserted that the primary clash had "played a dramatic part in the politics of 1952, all the more dramatic because it is so inconclusive." Proclaiming that it would have been "impossible to set the stage more strikingly for the battle that will now be waged," Pulitzer concluded:

There may be a lesson in this photo-finish for both General Eisenhower and Senator Taft. The lesson for the General could well be that the Republicans are not ready to present him with the nomination on a silver platter. And the Taft lesson could be that the more Senator Taft himself campaigns, in his present frame of mind, the less good he does his candidacy.²¹

There was a consensus among several other major newspapers that the South Dakota primary had not enhanced the presidential prospects of either Taft or Eisenhower. According to the *Newark Sunday News*, the "photo-finish" in South Dakota confirmed that it was futile to predict whether Taft or

^{19.} Philadelphia Inquirer, Walter H. Annenberg, ed., 5 June 1952.

^{20.} Cleveland Plain Dealer, 5 June 1952.

^{21.} Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 4 June 1952.

Eisenhower would secure the 1952 Republican nomination.²² The Detroit News, alluding to the narrow margin by which Eisenhower was defeated, commented, "If anything was remarkable about the South Dakota voting, it was how closely it affirmed the existing relation of Taft and Ike in the national index of pledged delegate strength."23 Because of the "hairline outcome" in South Dakota, the Wichita Morning Eagle believed that the Taft-Eisenhower contest was "as close as anything America ever saw."24 The Salt Lake Tribune, describing the primary as a "real thriller," surmised that both Taft and Eisenhower were quite popular with the citizens of South Dakota.²⁵ After reviewing the primary tabulation, the Albuquerque Journal predicted that during the remaining month prior to the Republican National Convention the "contest for delegates will be about as close as was the vote in South Dakota."26

The only prominent publication to minimize Eisenhower's showing in the South Dakota primary was the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. The *Tribune*, the largest circulating newspaper in the Midwest and perhaps the nation's most fervently isolationist organ, acknowledged that the South Dakota result was "almost a dead heat." While strongly praising Taft, editor Robert R. McCormick noted that the primary outcome proved that there was "no special magic in the Eisenhower name." In a disparaging reference to the general, McCormick concluded that the primary should serve as a warning "against selecting a candidate on the assumption that he has so captivated the hearts of the people that he is a sure winner."²⁷

A slight majority of the newspapers commenting on the South Dakota primary voiced the opinion that the outcome had improved Eisenhower's presidential prospects. By contrast, a substantial minority of the publications felt that the candidacies of neither Eisenhower nor Taft had been materially affected by the South Dakota results.

- 22. Newark Sunday News, Edward W. Scudder, ed., 8 June 1952.
- 23. Detroit News, W. S. Gilmore, ed., 5 June 1952.
- 24. Wichita Morning Eagle, M. M. Murdock, ed., 5 June 1952.
- 25. Salt Lake (City) Tribune, 6 June 1952.
- 26. Albuquerque Journal, H. P. Pickrell, ed., 6 June 1952.
- 27. Chicago Daily Tribune, 7 June 1952.

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Inasmuch as the rival candidates were separated by such a surprisingly few number of votes, the minority interpretation seems somewhat more plausible. If Taft had won the primary by a comfortable margin, his candidacy definitely would have received a considerable boost. Conversely, if Eisenhower had upset the senator in South Dakota, his campaign certainly would have gained added momentum. In terms of electoral statistics, however, the South Dakota primary was obviously less decisive than such contests in several other states.

During the days immediately following the 3 June primary, not a single newspaper ventured to predict whether the general or the senator would actually win the Republican presidential nomination.²⁸ Although intrigued by the South Dakota primary, these publications had valid reasons for hesitating to make definitive political forecasts at this time. First, Eisenhower did not formally launch his presidential campaign until the day after the South Dakota primary, and consequently, many newspapers preferred to wait before evaluating his effectiveness as an active candidate.²⁹ Had Eisenhower returned from Europe and directly participated in the South Dakota contest, some newspapers might have been tempted to speculate on whether the primary results would have a significant bearing on the ultimate disposition of the Republican presidential contest. Indeed, an analysis of Eisenhower's impressive record as a political candidate subsequent to 3 June 1952 warrants the conjecture that Taft might have been defeated had the general personally campaigned in South Dakota. 30

^{28.} Prior to the South Dakota primary, the two major news services had agreed that Taft was ahead of Eisenhower in the quest for convention delegates. According to the United Press tabulation, Taft led the general 412-397. The Associated Press estimated that the senator led Eisenhower 420-387. Neither survey included the approximately four hundred uncommitted delegates (New York Times, 2 June 1952, p. 16).

^{29.} Eisenhower retired from the United States Army on 3 June 1952, and on the following evening delivered his maiden political speech in his hometown of Abilene, Kansas. The entire text of the general's Abilene address can be found in Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Responsible Citizenship: Evils Can Throttle Free Government," Vital Speeches of the Day 18, no. 17 (15 June 1952): 514-17.

^{30.} In 1952 Eisenhower polled 33,936,234 votes and carried all the states in the Midwest. In 1956 he received 35,590,472 votes and won all the midwestern states

Second, notwithstanding the intensity of the primary campaign in South Dakota, the editors of these newspapers knew that the state would be allotted less than 2 percent of the delegates due to participate in the forthcoming Republican National Convention. ³¹ Thus, only extraordinarily dramatic primary results would have prompted them to suggest that the success or failure of either Taft or Eisenhower had been dictated by the outcome of the South Dakota contest.

Finally, these editors undoubtedly realized that relatively few convention delegates were to be chosen in primaries, ³² and that large uncommitted blocs of votes would be influenced by political leaders in such populous states as California, Michigan, and Minnesota. ³³ If there had not been such an excessive concentration of power among the political leaders of a few of the larger states, South Dakota and other small states would probably have been accorded greater recognition in the editorial columns.

except Missouri. His percentages in the electoral college were as follows: 1952 (79.5%), 1956 (86.6%) (Svend Petersen, *A Statistical History of the American Presidential Elections* [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963], pp. 106-11).

^{31.} Altogether twelve hundred six delegates were scheduled to attend the 1952 Republican National Convention. South Dakota's fourteen delegates were to account for only 1.2% of this total (Official Report of the Proceedings of the Republican National Convention, 1952 [Washington, D.C.: Judd and Detweiler, Inc., 1952], p. 259).

^{32.} In 1952 only eleven of the forty-eight states scheduled presidential primaries, in eight of which Taft and Eisenhower were competing against one another. Oregon and South Dakota were the only states where the primary results were actually binding on the delegates (Source Book of American Presidential Campaign, pp. 10-11).

^{33.} The numbers of delegates allotted to these states were: California, 70; Michigan, 46; and Minnesota, 28. The California delegation was technically committed to Governor Earl Warren, a favorite son candidate. A substantial majority of the Michigan delegation was loyal to Republican National Committeeman Arthur E. Summerfield. The Minnesota delegation nominally supported the candidacy of former Governor Harold E. Stassen. On the first ballot Michigan cast 35 of its 46 votes for Eisenhower, while Minnesota, after casting 19 complimentary votes for Stassen, switched all 28 of its votes to the general. Also, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maryland, and Washington, all of which had delegations strongly favoring the general, cast an aggregate total of 274 votes. The balloting from these six states was: Eisenhower 235; Taft 37 (Report of the Proceedings of the Republican National Convention, pp. 388-99).

The 3 June 1952 South Dakota presidential primary ranks as one of the most highly publicized such contests in recent political history. For Senator Taft and General Eisenhower it foreshadowed a closely divided convention, culminating in the nomination of the latter.³⁴ The outcome of the primary was certainly worthy of editorial comment. Indeed, those publications printing editorials on the result of the South Dakota contest were reacting to an exciting political episode at a crucial juncture in the election year of 1952.³⁵

34. On 11 July Eisenhower received the Republican nomination on the first ballot. The initial tabulation was as follows: Eisenhower 595; Taft 500; Warren 81; Stassen 20. Before the closing of the ballot, however, many delegates switched their votes. The official roll call was: Eisenhower 845; Taft 280; Warren 77 (Ibid., pp. 388-406).

35. On 4 November Eisenhower was elected president of the United States. He easily defeated his Democratic opponent, Governor Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois, carrying thirty-nine of the forty-eight states. Interestingly, the general's highest winning percentage was recorded in South Dakota. The final vote there was: Eisenhower 203,857 (69.9%); Stevenson 90,426 (30.1%) (Statistical History of American Presidential Elections, pp. 106-8).

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