

# The Dakota Effect

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*Just a ragged kid in overalls, he  
thumbed a ride one day  
He told me, "anywhere you're going's  
on my way."*

*But as we passed by Big Al's drive-in  
his eyes began to flash  
He was leavin' Rapid City mighty fast.*

*He said, "I hope to God she finds the  
good-bye letter that I wrote her,  
But the mail don't move so fast in  
Rapid City, South Dakota."*

—Kinky Friedman,  
"Rapid City, South Dakota"

If challenged to do so, relatively few Americans could probably find North and South Dakota on a map, let alone correctly name, spell, and pronounce the capitals of the two states. Nor would they be able to recall anything interesting about the Dakotas, whose main tourist attractions, besides Mount Rushmore, are a drug store, a civic arena festooned in corn, and a peace garden. Although one of the Dakotas bills itself as "The Land of Infinite Variety," its sociocultural diversity consists primarily of different synods of Lutherans who engage in endless disputation with one another because they are so similar. Dakotans prefer their food bland—they consider ketchup daringly spicy—and their politicians low-key. When they encounter something new, they call it "different," which they rarely mean as a compliment, and they wait for it to go away—which, because there is so little to hold it in the Dakotas, it probably will do. They keep their opinions to themselves (a typical Dakotan being the fellow from Sioux Falls who loved his wife so much that he almost told her), and they do not like it

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when people make a fuss about themselves or anything else. Thus, when South Dakotans perceived the previously popular Senator George McGovern as having gotten too big for his britches by seeking the presidency in 1972, they saw to it that he would fail to carry his home state, and three decades later they voted long-time Senator Tom Daschle out of office as soon as he repeated McGovern's mistake of seeing a president whenever he gazed into a mirror.

As veritable Rodney Dangerfields of the American states, the Dakotas get little respect from the rest of the country. Tellingly, *Fargo*, the only major motion picture ever named after a city in the Dakotas, was actually set in Minnesota (Coen and Coen 1996). This disrespect tends to irk Dakotans, who are a proud but humble people. (A cynic would say they are humble because they have so much to be humble about.) The most illustrious Dakotans have themselves been a humble lot, to judge by those depicted in Statuary Hall; the fame of these Dakota luminaries—John Burke, Sakakawea, William Beadle, and Joseph Ward—pales in comparison to that of many others—Tom Brokaw, Peggy Lee, Lawrence Welk, and Roger Maris, for example—who got out of the Dakotas as soon as they could.

This tendency to leave the Dakotas is the very phenomenon under consideration here. As a starting point, we note that these two states, which rank seventeenth and nineteenth among the 50 states in land mass, are virtually empty, ranking forty-sixth and forty-seventh in both total population and population density. The prairie dogs and coyotes with which Dakotas' human residents share the frigid tundra easily outnumber them. At first blush, the political implication seems obvious: a lack of clout on the political scene. After all, the Dakotas' combined congressional delegations, which number only six in all, could caucus in an ice-fishing shack. Commanding so few electoral votes and having been safely ensconced in the Republican column in the last 10 presidential elections in any event, the Dakotas are routinely ignored by presidential candidates, who fly over but rarely drop in.

A lack of political clout, at any rate, is the consequence that one might logically

have expected based on the sheer dearth of people living in the Dakotas. Yet, while the rest of the country was paying them little heed,<sup>1</sup> the Dakotas have been successfully pursuing an extra-constitutional strategy for advancing their interests—a strategy of selective out-migration. In addition to sending their own duly allotted congressional delegations to Washington, they have been quietly slotting their native sons and daughters into Congress as members from other states. In what follows, we show that this Dakota Effect is not simply an artifact of the eagerness of those born in the Dakotas to seek greener pastures elsewhere, and that it has policy consequences not just for the Dakotas, but for the nation as well.

The 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, for which the *Congressional Quarterly* noted what it called the "Dakota Connection," contained 15 natives of the Dakotas, including the entire six-person contingent representing the Dakotas themselves, three representing neighboring Minnesota, and six who had fanned out to more distant venues (one each from Florida, Kansas, Oregon, and Virginia, and two from Texas).<sup>2</sup> Table 1 establishes that on a per capita basis the Dakota Connection far exceeds its counterpart in any other state. No other state even comes close to North Dakota's 3.7 exported members of Congress for every 400,000 current residents, nor, for that matter, does any other state even come close to South Dakota's 1.6 exported members per 400,000 current residents. Moreover, as just noted, in both North and South Dakota representation begins at home: every member of the two Dakota delegations was home-grown. Thus, in terms of *all* members of Congress (that is, natives of a state plus exports to other states) rather than just exports, the very same pattern holds: North Dakota, with 5.6 members of Congress per 400,000 residents, and South Dakota, with 3.2, stand out far above the rest.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the profusion of Dakotans in Congress is nothing new, as evidenced by the long and distinguished careers of senators like Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota (born in Wallace, SD) and J.J. Exon of Nebraska (a native of Geddes, SD).

The abundance of congressional Dakotans raises two fundamental questions: Why? And so what?

**Table 1**  
**Members of Congress Born in the State, Per 400,000 Citizens**  
**of the State**

State	Represent Other States	State	Total in Congress
North Dakota	3.737	North Dakota	5.606
South Dakota	1.590	South Dakota	3.179
West Virginia	0.885	West Virginia	1.770
Massachusetts	0.756	Idaho	1.546
Alabama	0.450	Rhode Island	1.526
Arkansas	0.449	Nebraska	1.402
New Mexico	0.440	Massachusetts	1.323
Iowa	0.410	Vermont	1.314
Kentucky	0.396	Alabama	1.259
Rhode Island	0.382	Maine	1.255
New York	0.358	Iowa	1.230
Washington	0.339	Arkansas	1.197
Pennsylvania	0.326	Kentucky	1.089
New Hampshire	0.324	Hawaii	0.990
Idaho	0.309	Ohio	0.916
North Carolina	0.298	Pennsylvania	0.912
Georgia	0.293	South Carolina	0.897
Missouri	0.286	Wisconsin	0.895
Minnesota	0.244	Kansas	0.893
Connecticut	0.235	Montana	0.887
Nebraska	0.234	New Mexico	0.880
Oklahoma	0.232	New York	0.864
Maryland	0.227	Indiana	0.855
Illinois	0.225	Mississippi	0.844
Wisconsin	0.224	Illinois	0.837
Tennessee	0.211	Connecticut	0.822
Ohio	0.211	Washington	0.814
South Carolina	0.199	Wyoming	0.810
New Jersey	0.190	Louisiana	0.806
Colorado	0.186	Montana	0.786
Virginia	0.170	Tennessee	0.773
Arizona	0.156	North Carolina	0.745
Kansas	0.149	Utah	0.716
Indiana	0.132	Oklahoma	0.696
Oregon	0.117	New Jersey	0.666
Texas	0.096	Minnesota	0.650
Louisiana	0.090	New Hampshire	0.647
Michigan	0.080	Georgia	0.635
California	0.071	Maryland	0.604
Alaska	0	Michigan	0.604
Florida	0	Oregon	0.585
Nevada	0	Colorado	0.558
Delaware	0	Texas	0.556
Utah	0	Delaware	0.510
Wyoming	0	Arizona	0.468
Mississippi	0	California	0.413
Montana	0	Nevada	0.400
Hawaii	0	Virginia	0.396
Maine	0	Florida	0.275
Vermont	0	Alaska	0

### Accounting for the Dakota Effect

As to the first question, one possibility that may come to mind is that this is a more general characteristic of small

states rather than a Dakota Effect per se. It has long been recognized that members of Congress are disproportionately likely to hail from rural, small-town America (Matthews 1968; Rieselbach 1970; Spillman 1909). However, Table 1

shows that we can dismiss this notion. Of the five states other than the Dakotas—Alaska, Delaware, Montana, Vermont, and Wyoming—with populations of less than a million, none has exported even a single member of recent sessions of Congress to any other state. Indeed, more often than not these five states have outsourced their own congressional delegations; none of Alaska's three members of Congress was born in Alaska, while only one of Delaware's and Wyoming's and only two of Montana's and Vermont's were born in the states they represent.

Having laid that possibility to rest, we must consider another skeptical claim, namely that the Dakota Effect is probably an artifact of the broader outflow of the Dakota-born that began during the 1930s and has continued ever since. When as many people leave a state as have ditched the Dakotas, some of them are bound to become active in public life in their adopted state and some may therefore end up in Congress. Thus, by the sheer luck of the draw the odds are that some other states' congressional delegations will contain former Dakotans. By contrast, because virtually no one moves *to* the Dakotas, the Dakota delegations should be composed solely of native Dakotans. It follows that if we control statistically for aggregate population trends, the Dakota Effect should vanish.

That sounds fairly convincing, but there are other possibilities as well. One possibility goes a step farther by focusing on the characteristics of those who leave. In recent decades the Dakotas have experienced a brain drain, with many of their best high school students matriculating out of state and many of their college degree-holders seeking career opportunities elsewhere. Importantly, as Dakotans themselves would be too humble (or perhaps too wily) to mention, and as those in the rest of the country would be dumbfounded to learn, students from the Dakotas are the *crème de la crème* nationally: year in and year out the Dakotas, along with Iowa, lead the nation in mean state-by-state SAT college entrance exam scores. In combination with the high rates of out-migration from the Dakotas, this suggests another plausible explanation of the Dakota Effect. This explanation is that it is not simply by the luck of the draw that some of the numerous Dakotans who emigrate end up representing other states in Congress. Rather, because many of the departing Dakotans are smarter than the residents of their adopted states (especially Minnesota), they rise in Darwinian fashion to the top in their chosen fields. It may,

**Table 2**  
**Number of Natives From State**  
**Serving in Congress (per 400,000**  
**citizens)**

Variable	OLS Estimate (Standard Error)
Net Population Change	-0.003** (0.001)
Mean SAT score	0.001 (0.001)
Average Temperature	0.001 (0.007)
Professional Sports Team	-0.243* (0.112)
Dakota	3.250** (0.308)
Intercept	0.454 (1.120)
R <sup>2</sup>	.80
N	50

\*\*p < .01, \*p < .05

then, be competence rather than randomness that accounts for the Dakota Effect.

Nor does this exhaust the range of reasons for supposing that the Dakota Effect may be more apparent than real. Beyond the ideas that it is simply a product of the luck of the draw, given the high rate of out-migration from the Dakotas, or that it reflects the fact that Dakotans are smart enough not only to leave but also to end up in Congress after they do, we should note that the Dakotas offer remarkably few distractions for those who grow up there. There is virtually nothing for them to do. After all, it is too cold for them to go outside and play, and there are no high-profile local sports teams for them to spend time following. Youngsters in the Dakotas, more or less by process of elimination, are likely to devote unusual amounts of time and energy to pursuits that elsewhere would get them labeled as hopeless nerds—pursuits like student government and civic involvement.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it may not be just their intelligence but also the activist orientations that they acquire early in life that turn young Dakotans into members-of-Congress-in-the-making.

We put these possibilities to the test in Table 2, which summarizes a 50-state regression analysis in which the dependent variable is the total number of natives of a state in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress per 400,000 residents (as based on the 2000 census). Reflecting the preceding discussion, the predictors in the model are the 1970–2000 net population change for the state, the 1999 mean SAT score for students from the state, the mean annual temperature in the state, a dummy vari-

able denoting the presence (1) or absence (0) in the state of teams in any of the four major professional sports (baseball, basketball, football, and hockey), and another dummy variable indicating whether the state is one of the two Dakotas (1) or not (0).

The fit of this model is excellent, with the five predictors jointly accounting for 80% of the variance in the number of state natives serving in Congress per 400,000 current state residents. This explanatory power is attributable to the performance of three predictors. As expected, high-growth states like Florida and Texas are less likely to export members of Congress to other states and are more likely to be represented by immigrants from other states. By contrast, low-growth states like the Dakotas are both more likely to be represented by their own natives and to have exported members of Congress to other states. Also as expected, states with no professional sports teams, like the Dakotas, tend to be represented in Congress by their own natives while they are also supplying representatives and senators to other states.

What stands out in Table 2, though, is the persistence of the Dakota Effect even when these factors, along with mean state SAT scores and temperatures, are held constant. Thus, the Dakota Effect is not a mere artifact of the tendencies for the Dakotas to leak population to the rest of the country, or for Dakotans to be smarter than residents of other states, or for there to be so little to do in the Dakotas. Moreover, the magnitude of the Dakota Effect is absolutely gargantuan.<sup>5</sup> Independent of all the other factors we have just been considering, the Dakota Effect is worth more than three extra seats in Congress for every 400,000 state residents. For the Dakotas, with a combined population of approximately 1.4 million, that works out to 11 seats, without even taking into account the extra seats attributable to the significant effects of low population growth and the absence of professional sports teams, both of which work to the Dakotas' advantage.

### The Effect of the Dakota Effect

To say that the Dakota Effect is real—as it unquestionably is—is one thing, but whether it matters is a different question altogether. Perhaps it is simply an obscure, inconsequential factoid,

like the observations that rodeo is the state sport of South Dakota and western wheatgrass is the state grass of North Dakota. The question is whether the extra representation that the Dakotas enjoy in Congress by virtue of providing members to other states, as well as to themselves, pays off in concrete ways. Because they supply far more than their constitutionally prescribed allotment of members of Congress, do they reap disproportionate benefits from Congress?

Congress's provision of pork barrel projects constitutes a clear window through which to watch the Dakota Effect in action. To peer through that window, we replicate and extend a previous analysis of pork barrel legislation, Balla et al.'s (2002) study of congressionally earmarked grants to institutions of higher education during the 104<sup>th</sup> through 106<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1995–2001). They modeled the allocation process via a selection equation for whether a given congressional district received an earmark or not and an outcome equation for the dollar amount allocated to each district that received any earmarks. (See Balla et al. 2002 for a full description of theory, data, and methods.) To probe the Dakota Effect, we have simply re-run the Balla et al. model with one modification, the addition of a dummy variable designating the Dakotas.

Table 3 shows the results. The crucial result is at the bottom of the outcome equation estimates. Despite Balla et al.'s elaborate set of statistical controls, the Dakota Effect is statistically significant, and because the dependent variable is expressed in dollars, its magnitude is easy to gauge. During the period in question, the coefficient for the Dakota Effect was approximately \$2.6 million per congressional district. This means that, with all the other factors that affected earmarks for higher education held constant, an extra \$2.6 million was earmarked for each of the Dakotas' two congressional districts—a tidy \$5.2 million bonus for the Dakotas in all. And of course these were only the funds that Congress earmarked for institutions of higher education—a small slice of Congress' overall discretionary spending pie.

### Conclusion

Having considered and rejected other plausible sources of the overrepresentation of the Dakotas in Congress, we can only speculate about its causal mechanisms. We suspect that the key lies in the distinction between sheer intelligence, on the one hand, and political guile, on the other. Earlier we acknowledged the unpublicized but undeniable



**Table 3**  
**The Dakota Effect on Academic Earmarks**

Variable	Selection Estimate (Robust Std. Error)	Outcome (\$) Estimate (Robust Std. Error)
House Majority Party	-0.045 (0.106)	-278637 (330858)
House Majority × Lagged \$	0.047 (0.230)	0.555** (0.214)
Senate Majority Party	-0.0001 (0.071)	115727.8 (237009.1)
House Appropriations Committee	0.096 (0.131)	675178.7 (639794.4)
Senate Appropriations Committee	0.082 (0.097)	990640.5* (421096.4)
House Appropriations Cardinal	0.781** (0.266)	757610.5 (1456249)
Senate Appropriations Cardinal	0.228 (0.152)	-123407 (589512.9)
House Party Leader	-0.297 (0.335)	221297 (896002.5)
Senate Party Leader	0.349 (0.191)	1108097 (651420.9)
House Seniority	-0.013* (0.006)	40266.98 (26311.96)
Senate Seniority	0.019** (0.007)	75839.09 (39931.68)
Size of State	-0.006 (0.003)	—
District Density	0.000002 (0.000002)	—
Ideology	-0.004 (0.003)	-8032.82 (10369.91)
Margin	-0.163 (0.163)	-20224.87 (631591.3)
Research	0.581** (0.123)	—
Students	12.850** (1.944)	—
Refuse	0.734 (0.530)	—
Lagged \$	1.157** (0.168)	0.3698029* (0.1657826)
104 <sup>th</sup> Congress	-1.530** (0.116)	-2406879** (574258.1)
105 <sup>th</sup> Congress	-0.430** (0.122)	-977648.8 (342815.1)
Dakota	-0.195 (0.676)	2592068** (670958)
Constant	-0.386 (0.216)	2000848 (751918.5)
Number of Observations	1,293, 527 Uncensored	
Arctangent of Rho	-0.321 (.104)**	

\*\*p < .01, \*p < .05 Note: This table replicates Table 1 from Balla et al. (2002, 522) with the addition of the Dakota Effect. See Balla et al. (2002) for theory, methods, and data details.

superior intelligence of Dakotans. Being smart does not necessarily translate into being politically astute, but in the case of Dakotans the two traits seem to have been conjoined. Notwithstanding their image as humble rustics, untutored in the

sophisticated ways of the world east of the Red and Sioux Rivers, the historical record unequivocally establishes that Dakotans are amply endowed with the political virtues of cunning and guile. After all, the “uneducated” Lakota

schooled West Point graduate George Custer in military tactics, and New Yorker Theodore Roosevelt returned from his sojourn in the Dakotas a far sturdier form of presidential timber (Morris 1979). Indeed, the very fact that the erstwhile Dakota Territory entered the Union as two states rather than just one testifies to the political acumen of the wily Dakotans, who instinctively grasped the nuances of the Electoral College and the U.S. Senate.<sup>6</sup> Consider, too, as clear evidence of the political wiles and clout of the Greater Dakota Delegation (that is, members of Congress from the Dakotas themselves and their outposts in other states), that when Franco-phobes raised a hue and cry in the House of Representatives to change the name of french fries to “freedom fries,” no member dared to suggest that South Dakota’s capital be renamed “Peter.”

The Dakota Effect has obvious policy implications. To cite just one example, taking their cue from the results reported here, states should begin providing college tuition support for promising high school seniors who vow to become political science majors at out-of-state schools. To be sure, this could prove costly in the short term, but these costs should be recouped in the medium to long run when the awardees get themselves elected to Congress while retaining their gratitude and deeply ingrained allegiance to their state of origin. To be sure, some states may not boast a critical mass of the wily stock capable of getting elected to Congress as outsiders—but many such states, e.g., Iowa, seem bent in any event on the ill-considered opposite strategy of encouraging their residents to stay at home (Glover and Pitt 2005).

Finally, our results suggest a broad new avenue for future research and theory. A narrow path opening into this avenue involves reconsiderations of findings reported in prior studies. For example, Lee and Oppenheimer’s (1999) argument that small states benefit greatly from Senate malapportionment, upon re-examination, seems likely to turn out to be an artifact of the Dakota Effect. More ambitiously, by taking the present study as their starting point, political scientists may find it possible to reconcile previously antagonistic approaches like area studies and rational choice theory. Accordingly, it seems entirely appropriate to establish an entirely new subdiscipline of Dakota Studies, which should be generously underwritten by federal grants earmarked for institutions in the Dakotas themselves and in states that have the good sense to let themselves be represented in Congress by agents of the Dakota Diaspora.

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## Notes

1. Actually, staffers at *Congressional Quarterly* (Nutting and Stern 2001, 1,130) have been paying attention. However, political scientists seem to have ignored this phenomenon until now. Or, more conspiratorially, we might speculate that news of its existence has been suppressed by the small but immensely powerful band of Dakotans who have controlled the discipline of political science for the past several decades; in the last quarter-century, South Dakota alone has been the birthplace of two APSA presidents, four editors of the top two general-readership political science journals, and many other leading lights of the political science profession.

2. By the end of the recently completed 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, this number had declined slightly with the departures of Reps. Dick Armey

(R-TX, born in Cando, ND) and Karen Thurman of Florida (D-FL, born in Rapid City, SD).

3. In addition, Dakota natives held major institutional positions in recent congresses. Both Dick Armey and Tom Daschle (D-SD, born in Aberdeen, SD) served as majority leader in their respective chambers. Martin Olav Sabo (D-MN, born in Crosby, ND) and Tom Davis (R-VA, born in Minot, ND) have been standing committee chairs in the House.

4. Perhaps as an extreme form of overcompensation for their nerdiness, a clear sign that they watch too much television and film, or both, Dakota youths have taken to brawling in cages (Wilson 2005).

5. On the underutilization of the word “gargantuan” in discourse, see especially Tarantino (2004). Unfortunately, this is often confused

with “fargantuan,” which refers to a resident of Fargo.

6. Or it was simply because Dakota Territory’s southern residents could not stand the northerners and vice versa? The rivalry between the two states lives on. A few years ago, the Greater North Dakota Association hatched a plan to rename their state “Dakota” in an attempt to purvey a more pastoral image and avoid images of the frozen north country. Bemused South Dakotans countered with a proposal, equally unsuccessful, to shorten the name of North Dakota to “North,” which they argued was appropriate because the two states are usually referred to as “North and South Dakota.”

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