

## Great Plains Politics

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Missouri are not the Great Plains" (5). Strict environmental definitions (and a map from the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*) might be causes to exclude Minnesota and Iowa. The inclusion of Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1978), set in Minneapolis-St. Paul, however, suggests the integral cultural connections between the plains and Minnesota that belie political boundaries. Indeed, the larger grasslands of North America connect western Minnesota and Iowa to Great Plains states and most of the themes discussed. Iowans will find that many of Pratt's interpretations resonate with their state's history and well-known Iowa authors.

*Great Plains Politics*, by Peter J. Longo. Discover the Great Plains Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xvii, 127 pp. Illustrations, map, bibliography, notes, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Karl Brooks, now deputy director of the New Mexico Administrative Office of the Courts, is former associate professor of history at the University of Kansas and former Heartland Regional Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Peter J. Longo views political action on the Great Plains as a praiseworthy form of local activism. His six brief biographies portray political actors: three represented their states in Congress; one served in a legislature; one held elective office in a tribal government; and one dedicated his activities to his community. The subjects remind us that the Great Plains, though today predominantly white, have since the mid-nineteenth century been home to African Americans and were always home to Native peoples. As many plains communities become increasingly Hispanic in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, Longo's book helps situate racial and ethnic tensions within the region's political culture.

Iowans will look in vain for discussion of its state politics or history. The map charting the Great Plains traces its eastern boundary along the Missouri River (xiv). Longo's biographies remain firmly situated west of Iowa, although longtime Nebraska Republican Representative Virginia Smith grew up a Hawkeye before crossing the river for college in Lincoln. Despite this frame, Longo's analysis of plains political culture offers suggestions for understanding Iowa's durable issues of rural depopulation and commodity agriculture's pervasive effects on political thought and action.

Longo argues that plains political culture offers a basically healthy structure for political action. Its thousands of smaller communities are really the places where political conflict and action enable people to

work out their differences. He portrays a local political scene full of cooperative opportunities, where the challenges of living engage nearly everyone with an opinion. Like many studies of midwestern politics, *Great Plains Politics* assumes the centrality of locality and minimizes class tensions that emerge and intensify in declining population areas.

Longo chooses to analyze Plains political culture as an expression of “virtues and values.” His biographies present their subjects engaging in political action as a way of seeking to express personal values in communities that believe their unique places nurture a distinct set of virtues.

Chief among the virtues is plains people’s intimate understanding of the land and its crops. Longo’s assessment of the impact of food on plains politics reminds more than it illuminates. Despite his interest in how his subjects engage with food, Longo could have better developed his analysis of the ways people making a living on and from the land continuously reshape plains “virtues and values” (97). Although most of his subjects were politically active in our lifetime, Longo rarely digs into how agriculture’s transformation after the 1970s—farm and ranch consolidation, high rates of leveraged capitalization, extensive irrigation investment—deepened rural class divisions and accelerated depopulation.

*Great Plains Politics*, by concentrating on local places, diminishes the larger influences of landscape, climate, and the geo-economics of agriculture, the most global American industry, on communities. “Food, its preparation and consumption,” Longo notes, “connects people” (99). Yet those connections have long extended far beyond the plains, making treatments of Kansas Senator Bob Dole and South Dakota Senator George McGovern among Longo’s best efforts to consider how land and economic use shapes the people, not vice versa.

The Great Plains region is more intimately defined by agriculture, capital, and global markets than any other American region. Longo’s book invites further reading about how global pressures determined what political conflicts were deemed “important” and what the contending forces considered “good” political outcomes. The book’s use of “food” as an analytical lens mostly restates its emphasis on community and connection, not division and conflict. The latter drive political action: *Great Plains Politics* raises, but does not deeply consider, why people differed about who should own food production, who should benefit from its manufacture and export, and how the wealth (and poverty) created by agriculture challenges the benign image of cohesive, united communities.

*Great Plains Politics* can be read as another midwestern “resistance” narrative. Longo defends plains people and their ways against the sneers of those claiming to be their cultural betters. This traditional stance will be appreciated by many readers, especially those who believe their “cohesive communities” should defend special, but threatened, midwestern virtues.

*The Fall of Wisconsin: The Conservative Conquest of a Progressive Bastion and the Future of American Politics*, by Dan Kaufman. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018. 319 pp. Notes, index. \$26.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Colin Gordon is the F. Wendell Miller Professor of History at the University of Iowa. He is the author, most recently, of *Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy and Inequality in the St. Louis Suburbs* (forthcoming).

In 2010 the Republican Party captured the “trifecta” of state power in Wisconsin, winning the state senate, the state house, and the governor’s mansion by wide margins. In short order, Scott Walker’s Republicans pressed through “Act 10,” a sweeping attack on the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers. Versions of that playbook had been employed in conservative bastions such as Kansas and North Carolina for years, but Wisconsin marked a turning point. There, the right—both the Wisconsin Republicans and the network of national groups behind them—had successfully flipped a state with a long progressive tradition. Fighting Bob La Follette’s “laboratory of democracy” was now home to a political experiment of a very different kind.

This juxtaposition—between Wisconsin’s progressive past and the eight-year tenure of Scott Walker—is the central theme of Dan Kaufman’s *Fall of Wisconsin*. Kaufman is a Madison-raised, New York-based journalist who covered these events for *The New Yorker* and other outlets. His account relies heavily on anecdotes, observations, and character sketches that stand in for larger patterns or problems. Randy Bryce (the ironworker who ran unsuccessfully for Paul Ryan’s open seat in 2018) embodies the confrontation between Walker and organized labor. Aldo Leopold and Gaylord Nelson are the foils for Walker’s environmental policies. And State Representative Chris Taylor is our guide to the role of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in “teeing up” Walker’s legislative agenda.

But these journalistic devices are also the book’s undoing. The blow-by-blow account (from Walker’s election, to the passage of Bill 10, to the recall elections of 2011 and 2012) seems—by 2018—pretty familiar ground. The stark contrast between the state’s progressive past and its conservative present is, I think, a misleadingly nostalgic reading of