

PROFILE: NORTH DAKOTA HOUSE MINORITY LEADER ZAC ISTA



He always wanted to be in public office, and now lives the childhood dream in a legislature where he has found paths to policy success while in the 'super-minority'

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

When he sets foot in the North Dakota Capitol, Zac Ista knows he is exactly where he wants to be, doing what he has long aspired to do.

"I just always remember wanting to be in public office," he says. "A lot of little boys and girls grow up wanting to be a rock star or playing center field for their favorite baseball team. That wasn't me."

Ista says his mom still jokes with him about the assessment that he took for the start of kindergarten. The young Ista easily rattled off the names of the governor (George Sinner) and U.S. president (Ronald Reagan), while showing "no earthly idea about where my thumb was on my hand."

Once in school, he became a voracious reader of the school's weekly magazines that taught him about the nation's elected leaders and political system. While still an undergraduate student at North Dakota State University, in 2006, Ista ran for a seat in the legislature.

"I finished fourth out of four," Ista says about the unsuccessful first election.

Many years went by and life changes occurred for Ista between that first race and when his childhood dream of elective office became a reality. He got married, moved to Washington, D.C., for law school and the start of his legal career, and came home to North Dakota with his wife, Leah, to raise a family.

Then, in 2020, Ista was appointed to fill a vacancy in the House. He won election to that seat two years later, and since April 2023, Ista has served as minority leader.

"I still have that sense of awe of being able to serve," he says, "to be one of only 141 trusted by folks to go to Bismarck and do the people's work."

During an interview with CSG Midwest, Ista reflected on living that dream of public service, on leadership, and on strategies for the minority party. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q You've talked about the privilege of being in public office. Do you have an example of legislative work that exemplifies this opportunity to serve?

A Shortly after I took office, we lost a young police officer by the name of Cody Holte, who was killed in the line of duty. It was such a tragedy. You kind of feel helpless in that situation because we know there is no state policy that we can pass to keep officers safe in all instances.

So I looked around to see what other states had done, and noticed many had a policy that says if an officer is killed in the line of duty, the officer's spouse



North Dakota Rep. Zac Ista discusses a law granting health care coverage to the families of police officers who die in the line of duty. Ista sponsored HB 1435 in response to the death of Grand Forks police officer Cody Holte. Also pictured at this 2021 press conference are Gov. Doug Burgum, then-Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem, Sen. Curt Kreun, and then-Grand Forks Police Chief Mark Nelson.

BIO-SKETCH: NORTH DAKOTA REP. ZAC ISTA

- ✓ became minority leader in April 2023; first appointed to the North Dakota House in 2020 and won election in 2022
- ✓ an attorney who currently serves as legal counsel for a local hospital and who previously worked as an assistant state's attorney for Grand Forks County
- ✓ 2021 graduate of the CSG Midwest Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and 2023 recipient of the CSG 20 Under 40 Leadership Award
- ✓ has a bachelor's degree in education from North Dakota State University and a law degree from American University's Washington College of Law
- ✓ resides in Grand Forks with his wife, Leah, and their two children

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and children can remain on the health insurance plan that the officer was on.

I was able to work with Republicans in my town, Republicans across the state, and we came together and passed a law which now says that for any officers killed tragically in the line of duty, their families aren't going to have to worry about the cost of health insurance. It was incredibly humbling to be a part of that.

Q Of the 141 members of the legislature, only 16 were Democrats this biennium. Is there room to make a difference on policy while in the super-minority?

A Yeah, absolutely. One of the great features of our system in North Dakota is that any bill that is filed by a legislator both gets a committee hearing and an up-or-down vote on the floor of the chamber in which it was introduced. So that really does allow folks, regardless of party or faction, to get a full hearing on the good ideas they might have.

Q What are other ways that you can make a difference while at such a partisan disadvantage?

A First, and most important, our role is to pass good public policy. Sometimes that means partnering across the aisle, sometimes it means bringing your own bills. Just in the 2023 session, over 50 bills and resolutions introduced by Democrats were signed into law.

The second role I think we have is to make what we might think is bad policy a little bit better. It's not as satisfying to

dig into the particulars of a bill that we disagree with, but if you bring your own personal and professional experiences to bear, you can maybe navigate some landmines in that bill to make sure it is implemented in the fairest way possible.

And then the third role is if you're not able to reach consensus or to make a bad bill a little less bad, then you have to stick up for your values and for the folks that you're representing. Compromise without compromising our foundational values.

Q What have you found to be the attributes of effective legislators?

A I think what makes one legislator more successful than another is a willingness to be out in the open, go sit in a different spot in the chamber, go talk to somebody that may have very different views than you. Really work on breaking down on some of those barriers through communication.

That kind of openness helps you enjoy the job more and be more effective at it.

I also think it helps to be mindful of the fact that our votes on issues don't necessarily reflect our personal relationships. So on the one hand, we can't just go along to get along because you develop friendships with people. You were elected to stand up for your values and your community's values. But at the end of the day, that doesn't mean we can't have a cup of coffee together and find out where we do have common ground.

You need to have good relationships if you want to get anything done. And we're also a workplace. You want to have cordial, friendly relationships with your co-workers.

Q What are some examples of how you've seen those relationships be built?

A During my first session, all of the first-year legislators decided to have a regular dinner, and I happened to be the only Democrat that was a freshman. I look back at that as one of my best memories — six, seven, eight of us, from across the political spectrum, would get together. We learned about each other's families, about what motivated us. And you learn there's so much more that brings us together than separates us, and that helps in the heated times of a legislative session.

Q North Dakota recently has joined the list of U.S. states with legislative term limits. What is being done to prepare for this new era?

A We've been doing a lot of work on this. One of the risks is that power goes away from the legislative branch, the people's branch, as the legislature bleeds expertise from members being termed out.

And when you compare North Dakota to state legislatures across the country, we rank as one of the lowest, if not the lowest, staffed legislatures. We need to make sure that we have the necessary, permanent staff resources to help us analyze the policies we've enacted to see if they're working well. We've also been intentional about building up future leaders in terms of committees, and in terms of chamber leadership.