



## PROFILE: SOUTH DAKOTA SENATOR CASEY CRABTREE

‘Addition, not subtraction’: His views on legislating are grounded in a belief that common goals are best met if individual lawmakers know their voices are heard

by Jon Davis ([jdavis@csg.org](mailto:jdavis@csg.org))

“What’s best for the team?”

**A**s a young athlete and, ultimately, college football player, Casey Crabtree says he learned the value of continually asking that question — and living by it.

He also believes it can be used to frame effective legislative leadership.

“Politics is a game of addition, not subtraction,” he says. “It’s working together with everybody to achieve a common goal.”

The work needs to be done quickly every year in South Dakota, where legislators must get all the people’s work, including a new state budget, done in 40 days or less.

Crabtree himself had a bit of a crash course on legislative leadership.

He joined the state Senate in 2020, and only one year later, caucus colleagues selected him as one of four majority whips, as well as chair of the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee. In advance of the 2023 legislative session, he was chosen majority leader.

There have been some unique institutional and legislative challenges during Crabtree’s time in office and leadership. In 2022, the Senate voted to remove the state’s attorney general. It marked the first such impeachment and removal of a state elected official in South Dakota history.

This past year, led in part by Crabtree, the Legislature took on one of the state’s most controversial issues: a proposed pipeline that would go through many South Dakota communities, transporting liquefied carbon dioxide gas from ethanol plants to an underground storage site. The proposal has raised thorny political questions about state vs. local control and landowner rights.

The Legislature passed a set of new pipeline laws and regulations in 2024; an attempt at a citizen veto of one of the laws, via a referendum on this year’s fall ballot, soon ensued. That veto referendum prevailed in November.

In an interview with CSG Midwest, Crabtree shared his perspective on legislating during turbulent times. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

**Q** How have you applied that question of “What’s best for the team?” to your work in the Legislature and as a leader?

**A** It’s really knowing that when you’re working with folks, it’s about listening to them a lot more than



### BIO-SKETCH: SOUTH DAKOTA SEN. CASEY CRABTREE

- ✓ was selected majority leader in late 2022 and served in this position in 2023 and 2024; previously was a majority whip for the Senate Republican Caucus
- ✓ has been a member of the South Dakota Senate since 2020
- ✓ serves as the director of economic development for Heartland Energy, a South Dakota-based, nonprofit public power company
- ✓ is a graduate of Northern State University in South Dakota, where he played football
- ✓ lives in the southeast South Dakota town of Madison with his wife, Ashley, and their two children: Casyn and Callan

“It’s not just listening. It’s working hard to understand exactly where your colleagues are coming from and what they want to achieve, and then pulling that together into a collective goal.”

you pushing your agenda. I’ll tell you flat out, too, it is not just listening. It’s working hard to understand exactly where your colleagues are coming from and what they want to achieve, and then pulling that together into a collective goal.

**Q** You led a supermajority caucus: 31 of 35 members of the Senate in 2024. What were some of the challenges in maintaining that collective or team goal with so many members and, seemingly, so much control?

**A** It’s not necessarily about agreeing on 100 percent of things, right? I lean on the Ronald Reagan quote quite a bit — the person who agrees with you 80 percent of the time is a friend, not a 20 percent traitor. So you’ve got to communicate that quite a bit, and communicate that we’ve got a common set of values. Then work toward our goals from there.

**Q** In terms of political leadership, who have been your role models, and why?

**A** Historically, South Dakota has had some fantastic governors to learn from. Gov. [George] Mickelson is one that sticks out to me. Gov. Mickelson died in a plane crash when I was fairly young. *[Editor’s note: Mickelson and other officials died in 1993 on their way home from Cincinnati in an effort to prevent a meat-packing plant from closing.]* He was really skilled at bringing all

people together. I’ve read a lot on him, talked to a lot of folks that had served with him and worked with him over the years. He’s one that sticks out in my mind.

**Q** You ascended quickly in leadership. How did your style evolve over this short period of time, from when you were majority whip in 2021 and 2022 to majority leader in 2023 and 2024?

**A** I’m probably quicker today to have a more direct conversation with somebody. We have 40 days in South Dakota to balance our budget, and every introduced bill gets a hearing in South Dakota. In this upcoming session, we’ll handle all that work in 38 days. So I’ve learned to probably be more direct in those conversations because I think that helps those other legislators who are working to meet our deadlines. But I try to do that while being conscientious of building our team and trying to keep everybody rolling toward a common agenda.

**Q** What did you learn about the legislative institution and your fellow legislators during the 2022 impeachment and removal of the state’s then attorney general?

**A** [It] was something that had never happened in our state’s history before. That’s one that you wish you didn’t have to go through,

but you’re elected to make a decision in those situations and I’m extremely confident that everybody did what was right. I’m proud of my colleagues for the way they handled themselves during that whole period.

They didn’t run right to the news and say all kinds of things; they studied the situation, they listened carefully, and then they made the decision that was best for the state of South Dakota and its people. *[Editor’s note: The attorney general was removed from office as the result of his actions related to a fatal car accident in which he was the driver.]*

**Q** This year, the Legislature passed bills to address a particularly contentious issue: the regulation of carbon pipelines. How would you describe your approach to policymaking on a high-profile topic like this one?

**A** The issue itself is somewhat emotional for folks, and I think my leadership style was much like this: Put emotions to the side and really deal with the facts of the situation. I think that’s a challenge, but if you want to lead, you’ve got to separate facts from emotion. By doing that, as you’re listening to every possible stakeholder, you can study the situation.

So we worked hard through something that’s a controversial and emotional subject. ...

It would have been very easy just to say, well, we’ll just do nothing and let turmoil continue to happen. My colleagues all came to the table, and we worked hard to try to find the best possible solution in a tough situation.