

Guide to the Donald O. Peterson Papers, 1947-1980

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Summary Information

Title: Donald O. Peterson Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1947-1980 (bulk 1967-1972)

Creator: Peterson, Donald O., 1925-

Call Number: Eau Claire Mss BB; M90-285; M2006-119

Quantity: 4.0 c.f. (4 record center cartons) and 1 reel of microfilm (35 mm)

Repository: This collection is managed jointly by the Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division and the Eau Claire Area Research Center.

Archival Locations: UW-Eau Claire McIntyre Library / Eau Claire Area Research Ctr.

Abstract: Papers, mainly 1967-1972, of Donald O. Peterson, a liberal leader of the Wisconsin Democratic Party. The papers document Peterson's work in state and national Democratic party politics and reform initiatives. Major subjects include Peterson's leadership of Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign in Wisconsin (available only on microfilm); his participation in the New Democratic Coalition (1968-1973), the Commission on Rules of the Democratic National Committee (1969-1972), and the Democratic Charter Commission (1973-1974); and his unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign in 1970. Also of interest is material on Peterson's involvement with George McGovern's 1962 senatorial campaign and Edmund Muskie's 1972 presidential campaign.

Note: Portions of this collection are available only on microfilm.

Language: English

Search Terms/Subject Terms

- McCarthy, Eugene J., 1916-2005
- McGovern, George S. (George Stanley), 1922-
- Democratic Party (U.S.)
- Democratic Party (Wis.)
- New Democratic Coalition (U.S.)
- Elections—Wisconsin—1970

- Presidents—United States--Election—1968 Presidents—United States—Election—1972
- United States—Politics and government
- Wisconsin—Politics and government

Biography/History

Donald Oliver Peterson, a liberal leader of the anti-Vietnam War faction of the Wisconsin Democratic Party during the late 1960s and early 1970s, was born in Renville, Minnesota, on March 9, 1925. He graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 1943, and served in the South Pacific during World War II as a navigator with the Army Air Force. After the war, he attended the University of Minnesota from 1946 to 1947 with a major in engineering and then spent an additional year studying economics at Macalester College. In 1948, he left school to go into the petroleum trucking business with his father. When the business was sold in 1954, Peterson became a salesman with the Standard Oil Company in Minnesota. From 1957 through 1962, he was a sales representative with the Foster-Bell Company of Aberdeen, South Dakota. In 1963 he moved to Wisconsin as a law book salesman. Later he began working in the food products industry, becoming general sales manager and executive vice president of Black River Dairy Products, Inc. and eventually vice president of Dadco Food Products of Eau Claire.

Although a prominent businessman, Peterson is best known for his activities within the Democratic Party. He began his political life while in his twenties as a member of the Young Democrats and as a precinct committeeman in the Minnesota Democratic Farm Labor Party. In 1962, he managed George McGovern's senatorial campaign in South Dakota. After moving to Wisconsin, Peterson continued his political activity in the Americans for Democratic Action, of which he was Wisconsin chairman and national board member. From 1967 to 1968, he was chairman of the 10th District Democratic organization. During the late 1960s, Peterson emerged as a leader of the state Democrats opposed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and in 1967, he helped to organize

Concerned Wisconsin Democrats that eventually grew into the National Conference of Concerned Democrats. In this capacity, Peterson was instrumental in persuading Senator Eugene McCarthy to enter the 1968 presidential race. As co-chair of the Wisconsin McCarthy for President Committee and chairman of the Wisconsin delegation to the national convention, Peterson gained national recognition as a leader of the protest against the more conservative members of the party organization. In addition, Peterson spoke out on the floor of the National Convention against the actions of the Chicago police in regard to peace demonstrations that took place during the convention, and he led a dramatic march by members of the delegation to protest the police actions. After McCarthy lost the presidential nomination, Peterson declined the suggestion by some McCarthy supporters that his own name be placed in nomination for the vice-presidency.

Peterson remained extremely active in politics on both the local and national level for the next six years. He was co-founder, co-chair, and national steering committee member of the New Democratic Coalition, a national organization formed after the 1968 convention by dissatisfied members of the party who were committed to making it more responsive to its members. Peterson also worked for reform as a member of two special commissions of the national organization. From 1969 to 1972, he was a member of the Commission on Rules (also known as the O'Hara Commission), which was organized to evaluate the party's convention rules and recommend changes to the National Committee prior to the 1972 convention. From 1973 to 1974, Peterson worked as a member of the Charter Commission (also known as the Sanford Commission), a group authorized by the 1972 convention to formulate a national constitution for the party.

Maintaining no personal interest in elective office, Peterson declined to run for lieutenant governor on the Democratic ticket in 1968. However, two years later, he ran unsuccessfully for the gubernatorial nomination against Patrick J. Lucey. The two men differed little on issues, and the race was considered a contest between the long-time party activists and the newcomers. From 1971 through 1976, Peterson was national committeeman for Wisconsin. For reasons arising from his work in the 1962 senatorial campaign, Peterson did not support McGovern in the 1972 presidential primary, instead working as Midwest coordinator for Edmund Muskie. In 1974, Peterson was a delegate to the Conference on Democratic Party Organization and Policy.

Arrangement of the Materials

This collection was received in multiple parts from the donor(s) and is organized into 3 major parts. These materials have not been physically interfiled and researchers might need to consult more than one part to locate similar materials.

- Part 1 (Eau Claire Mss BB): Original Collection, 1960-1974
- Part 2 (M90-285): Additions, 1947-1980 (Located in Madison)
- Part 3 (M2006-119): Additions, 1968-1970 (Located in Madison)

Administrative/Restriction Information

Acquisition Information

Presented by Donald O. Peterson, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1969-2006. Accession Number: M69-235, M73-397, M75-354, M90-285, M2006-119

Processing Information

Original Collection processed by Kathy Oggins (archives intern) and Carolyn J. Mattern, 1986.

Contents List

Part 1 (Eau Claire Mss BB): Original Collection, 1960-1974 Physical Description: 4.0 c.f. (4 record center cartons) and 1 reel of microfilm (35 mm) Scope and Content Note The papers consist of correspondence, memoranda, policy papers and drafts, minutes, clippings, and other informational material documenting Peterson's political activities from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Except for occasional references, there is no material on
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his business career. The collection, which is arranged as an alphabetical subject file, contains extensive documentation on Peterson's activities as chairman of the Wisconsin McCarthy for President Campaign, his work for reform within the national party organization, and his unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign. The Wisconsin McCarthy for President file, loaned for microfilming by Peterson in 1969, includes campaign and administrative materials such as position papers, campaign literature, and delegate correspondence. There are also two large files of letters from the general public received by Peterson after the events of the national convention in Chicago. This microfilm complements the Wisconsin McCarthy for President collection donated to the Archives by co-chair Michael Bleicher. Peterson's work for organizational reform is documented in the files on the New Democratic Coalition, which are comprised primarily of correspondence and memoranda, as well as in the files on each of the reform commissions on which he worked. While primarily containing correspondence and memoranda, the files from the Commission on Rules also include records of hearings, as well as drafts and material on proposed rules. Similarly, the Charter Commission files contain correspondence, memoranda, papers from national meetings and state conferences, and charter drafts. Also in the collection are files relating to the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, ranging from Peterson's tenure as 10th District chairman and national committeeman for Wisconsin, to his 1970 gubernatorial campaign. Material on the latter is extensive and includes speeches, position papers and background information; press releases; and a large file of newspaper clippings. Of special interest is a small-file of correspondence with George McGovern, which provides interesting sidelights on Peterson's early break with the senator, and material on his leadership of the Midwestern campaign for Edmund Muskie in 1972. Photographs received with the collection have been filed in the name files of the Visual Materials Archive.

Eau Claire
Mss BB

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	Americans for Democratic Action
Box/Folder 1/2	Correspondence and memoranda, 1968-1972
	Wisconsin
Box/Folder 1/3	1965-1968
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	Charter (Sanford) Commission
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Box/Folder 1/11-12	State conferences, 1973-1974
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Box/Folder 1/22	Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (McGovern-Fraser Commission), 1969-1973
	Commission on Rules of the Democratic National Committee (O'Hara Commission)
Box/Folder 1/23-27	Correspondence, 1969-1972
Box/Folder 1/28-32	Hearings material, 1969-1970
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Box/Folder	Joint meeting of O'Hara and Fraser commission, 1971
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	Conference on Democratic Party Organization and Policy (Democratic Midterm Conference), 1974
	Arrangements Committee
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Box/Folder	Miscellany
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Box/Folder 2/34	Democratic National Committee
Box/Folder 3/1-6	Correspondence and memoranda, 1969-1972
Box/Folder 3/7	Executive Committee meeting, 1971 October
Box/Folder 3/8-9	Democratic National Committeeman campaign, 1971-1972
	Democratic National Convention
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	Democratic Party of Wisconsin
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	Tenth Congressional District
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Box/Folder	Fort Howard Paper Company (pollution suit), 1970-1971

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3/29		Gubernatorial campaign, 1969-1970
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		Clippings
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3/33	Box/Folder	Labor
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Eau Claire Micro 23/Micro 433	McCarthy for President, 1967-1968 (filmed without counter)
Reel 1	Committee correspondence
Reel 1	Delegates and related correspondence
Reel 1	Finances
Reel 1	Media budget

Reel 1	Literature and campaign material
Reel 1	Local Wisconsin headquarters
Reel 1	National staff
Reel 1	Position papers, The Record, et cetera
	Post-convention correspondence
Reel 1	Pro
Reel 1	Con
Reel 1	Primary results
Reel 1	Releases
Reel 1	State organizations
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