
Minnesota

Gerry Sikorski
(D-6th District)



Elected 11/82

Election: Defeated Republican Rep. Arlen Erdahl.
Born: April 26, 1948, Breckenridge, Minn.
Home: Stillwater, Minn.
Education: University of Minnesota, B.A. 1970, J.D. 1973.
Profession: Lawyer.
Family: Wife, Susan Erkel; one child.
Religion: Roman Catholic.
Political Career: Minnesota Senate, 1977-83; unsuccessful Democratic nominee for U.S. House, 1978.

Background: A change of scenery and political climate helped Sikorski unseat Erdahl on his second try. Four years ago, running in a Republican year in a district dominated by rural southern Minnesota, he fell far short. But when redistricting ultimately landed both men in Twin Cities suburban territory for 1982, Sikorski tried again and succeeded.

Elected to the state Senate in 1976 at age 28, Sikorski waited just two years to challenge Erdahl in the old 1st District. A strong GOP showing statewide — Republicans won the governorship and both U.S. Senate seats — and a heavily rural district combined to hold Sikorski to a modest 43 percent of the vote.

Sikorski resumed a furious pace in the state Senate, where his diligence brought him the position of majority whip in 1980, the year of his first re-election. He also became chairman of the Health, Welfare and Corrections Subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee and fought against Republican Gov. Albert Quie's proposed cuts in spending for health and welfare programs.

The court-ordered redistricting of Minnesota in 1982 created a new Democratic-leaning district in the Twin Cities suburbs, and Sikorski was a front-runner from the start. Although he faced opposition from groups leery of his pro-life stand on abortion, he won the party endorsement and was unopposed in the primary.

Meanwhile, Erdahl was having a complicated year. When the remap placed his home in the Democratic 4th District, Erdahl moved into the redrawn 1st, hoping to wrest the endorsement from incumbent GOP Rep. Tom Hagedorn. But Hagedorn withstood the challenge, and party leaders talked Erdahl into settling in the new 6th. Under fire for being a carpetbagger, Erdahl struggled to win the GOP endorsement.

Sikorski, who had launched his campaign the day after the new district lines were handed down in March, thus had a jump on his embattled GOP opponent. He seized on the carpetbagging charge, distributing state maps charting Erdahl's tortuous path to the 6th District and casting Erdahl as an outsider: "It's our district," Sikorski told voters, "it doesn't belong to a sitting congressman who moves up from southeastern Minnesota."

When the two men had opposed each other before, Erdahl had ridiculed Sikorski's efforts to downplay his liberalism and tune in to the conservative mood of 1978. This time, he had to run against a different Sikorski. Facing a new constituency and changed economic circumstances, Sikorski played up his liberal legislative record. In response to charges of being a spendthrift, Sikorski answered that "when I get criticized for being ultra-liberal, to the extent that means caring for people, I accept that." It was a much closer contest than the first one; Sikorski won by fewer than 4,000 votes.

TIMN 357327