Governor

Larry Rhoden became governor in 2025 when Kristi Noem joined the Trump administration, and won a July 2026 GOP runoff. Rated Solid or Safe Republican by most forecasters.



Dan Ahlers

DEMOCRAT · CHALLENGER

Former state legislator and small-business owner.



Larry Rhoden

REPUBLICAN · INCUMBENT

Governor since January 2025; former lieutenant governor, state legislator and rancher.

Where the candidates stand on the issues Pope Leo XIV has raised, in their own words and votes. Bracketed numbers link to sources. We do not rate, score, or endorse candidates.

WAR & PEACE

POPE LEO XIV *Leo invited citizens of every country involved in the war with Iran to contact their leaders and members of Congress "to work for peace and to reject war and violence."* Remarks at Castel Gandolfo, Apr. 7, 2026 (Vatican News via The Good Newsroom)

DAN AHLERS

No public position found.

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

AI & THE DIGNITY OF WORK

POPE LEO XIV *"No one can be reduced to productivity, to cognitive performance, or to mere data."* Magnifica Humanitas presentation, May 25, 2026

DAN AHLERS

Pledges to "fight for wages that let hardworking South Dakotans get ahead" and to work with unions on workforce training.

[1] Ahlers campaign: Priorities

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

THE POOR & THE SAFETY NET

POPE LEO XIV *The preferential choice for the poor is "a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society."* Dilexi Te, Oct. 4, 2025

DAN AHLERS

Opposes the ballot measure to roll back Medicaid expansion — "everyone has access to it, we all do better" — and would fight to keep rural hospitals open.

[1] South Dakota Searchlight: State Fair governor debate
[2] Ahlers campaign: Priorities

LARRY RHODEN

Opposes Medicaid expansion, warning that with "$40 trillion in debt" the federal government will shift costs to states.

[1] South Dakota Searchlight: State Fair governor debate

ELECTIONS & CIVIC LIFE

POPE LEO XIV *Authentic democracy, "far from being a mere procedure," "recognizes the dignity of every person and calls each citizen to participate responsibly in the pursuit of the common good."* Message to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Apr. 9, 2026

DAN AHLERS

Says the Legislature tried to undo voter-approved Medicaid expansion and the governor worked with law enforcement to "undo the will of the people" on a voter-approved marijuana measure.

[1] KOTA: Rhoden, Ahlers first debate

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

LIFE OF THE UNBORN

POPE LEO XIV *Abortion "cuts short a growing life and refuses to welcome the gift of life."* Address to the Diplomatic Corps, Jan. 9, 2026

DAN AHLERS

No public position found.

LARRY RHODEN

Urged lawmakers to "stop abortion pills from coming into South Dakota," calling mailed pills the "biggest threat to unborn lives."

[1] South Dakota Searchlight: Rhoden on abortion pills

THE DEATH PENALTY

POPE LEO XIV *Someone who opposes abortion but favors the death penalty "is not really pro-life."* AP via PBS NewsHour, Sept. 30, 2025

DAN AHLERS

No public position found.

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

IMMIGRANTS & REFUGEES

POPE LEO XIV *"Defending human life also includes welcoming, protecting and assisting immigrants."* Letter on the 250th Anniversary of the United States, June 25, 2026

DAN AHLERS

No public position found.

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY & EDUCATION

POPE LEO XIV *Religious freedom is "the right of every person to worship according to conscience."* Letter on the 250th Anniversary of the United States, June 25, 2026

DAN AHLERS

No public position found.

LARRY RHODEN

No public position found.

CARE FOR CREATION

POPE LEO XIV *"We cannot love God, whom we cannot see, while despising his creatures."* AP, Oct. 1, 2025

DAN AHLERS

Would restore a standalone Department of Agriculture rather than one merged with environmental regulation.

[1] South Dakota Searchlight: State Fair governor debate

LARRY RHODEN

Signed the 2025 ban on eminent domain for carbon dioxide pipelines; defends merging the agriculture and environment departments.

[1] SDPB: Rhoden signs carbon pipeline eminent domain ban
[2] South Dakota Searchlight: State Fair governor debate

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