

Michigan GOP chairman relishes the game of politics

BY DAWSON BELL • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • February 19, 2008

Saul Anuzis, the effervescent chairman of the Michigan Republican Party, knows how to do modern politics.

He blogs, he texts, he podcasts and micro-targets. But he also knows there is a timeless and nontechnical side to politics -- fun.

It was an early lesson, learned on the campus of the University of Michigan-Dearborn in the 1970s, where he discovered that a surefire way to interest college students in politics was the same tactic used to interest college students in anything else -- offer free beer.

Thirty years later, his methods may be more sophisticated (at least a little), but Anuzis still appears to be having a good time.

Clearly, he loves the attention. Anuzis, now in his fourth year as chairman, never ducks an interview or a question. He can wisecrack nonstop. And he is almost unflappable, even when assailed from both sides.

For someone who presided over a Republican bloodbath in 2006 and faces the prospect of another in 2008, a good sense of humor is indispensable.

Anuzis -- the son of Lithuanian immigrants who learned English as a second language -- never graduated from college and was a successful entrepreneur before returning to professional politics. Good humor seems to be part of his makeup.

He is a completely partisan Republican, who grew up in a working-class family in Detroit, was a member of the Teamsters in college and assumed his political identity when he realized Ted Kennedy might win the Democratic nomination for president in 1980.

He considers himself a classic Reagan Republican, an ideological movement conservative who happens to be working in a job most often filled by a technocrat. Anuzis said last week that his most difficult moments as chairman have come not in confrontations with Democrats but with fellow Republicans.

"A lot of people didn't like it too much when I started linking stories on my blog about Congress spending like drunken sailors," he said, "because it was our congressmen."

Anuzis also made some Republicans uncomfortable in 2007 when he was a relentless critic of proposals from Gov. Jennifer Granholm and other Democrats to fix the state government budget by raising taxes -- especially Republican lawmakers who were thinking about voting with the Democrats.

He says he understands. The role of the party chairman is different when the governor's office is occupied by a member of the opposing party, Anuzis says. Everybody in the governor's party agrees with her, he said. But when the governor is of the other party, the out-of-power chairman's job is to disagree with the governor.

It also makes the job pretty simple.

"Every day you get to get out of bed trying to figure out ways to beat Democrats," he said. "I really like that."

But back to the politics of beer. It didn't involve beating Democrats, just the people then in power in student government at U-M Dearborn. Anuzis and his colleagues in a tri-partisan (Republican, Democrat & Socialist) group called Students for Students set up a keg outside the polling station and offered free samples. Police removed the keg after a couple of hours, but Anuzis and his slate swept into office.

Later, he used beer again to attract the crowd necessary to clog the main campus thoroughfare in protest over the installation of speed bumps.

"We tried it without beer, and only three people showed up," he said.

Anuzis is still fond of gimmicks. He has been parading a Granholm Tax Hike Clock around the state, trying to remind voters how much \$1.4 billion (the size of the tax increase) costs per minute.

Maybe not quite as much fun as beer. But you can be reasonably sure Anuzis is still having a good time.

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PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

Saul Anuzis writes That's Saul, Folks, a blog on www.migop.org.



Saul Anuzis



Photos by PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

Saul Anuzis, 48, chairman of the Michigan Republican Party, works in the Secchia-Weiser Republican Center in Lansing. "Every day you get to get out of bed trying to figure out ways to beat Democrats," he says. The sign at top hangs above his office door.



SAULIUS ANUZIS (A NEW ZIS)

Who: Chairman, Michigan Republican Party, since 2005; member, executive committee, Republican National Committee

Home: Eaton County

Born: March 6, 1959, Detroit

Background: On leave of absence as chairman from Quick Connect USA, a broadband provider in Michigan; former Teamster; worked through the 1980s for Republican Party and then Senate Majority Leader Dick Posthumus.

Claim to fame: Youngest delegate at 1980 Republican National Convention in Detroit.

Ever vote for a Democrat?: Possibly for former state legislator Burton Leland in 1980.

Personal: Married to Lina Alksninis Anuzis for 21 years; sons Matas, Tadas, Vytis and Marius.