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Michigan's new GOP chief as appealing as his message

LANSING, Mich. - As he tells it, Saul Anuzis, Michigan's new Republican state chairman, was inspired to get into politics by Ted Kennedy. Not, however, in the way you might think.

He was sitting in the student cafeteria with his pals at the University of Michigan-Dearborn back in 1979 when he saw someone trying to start a "Ted Kennedy for President" club. Up to then, Saul, the son of working-class immigrants from Lithuania, hadn't been very political.

But that did it. The thought of the Massachusetts senator as president made his skin crawl.

"Ted Kennedy was a symbol of everything we didn't like - politically, morally, and all we knew politically was that we were something else."

So his buddies and he founded the school's first-ever College Republican club, and Mr. Anuzis, now 46, the tall, friendly son of Lithuanian immigrants who had dodged the Nazis and fled the Communists, really got into it. He was the nation's youngest delegate to the GOP convention in Detroit the next summer.

When his hero, Ronald Reagan was elected, that was it. Somehow he never quite finished his economics degree. He spent years working for Dick Posthumus, who became Senate majority leader and later lieutenant governor, before ditching politics to start a couple of telecommunications firms.

Like a proper Lithuanian boy, he married a nice Lithuanian girl and began raising four sons, and thought his political career was probably behind him. Then last winter, the Michigan GOP was in need of a chairman and deeply split over which of the usual suspects it should be. So someone called Saul.

"You've been on the phone two hours. You are up to something," his wife, Lina, said.

"They talked me into it," he says with an infectious grin.

They probably didn't have to push very hard. In many ways, Mr. Anuzis seems to be sort of an ideal chairman for the Michigan Republicans, a party which in many ways has problems which mirror those of the national Democrats.

In an national era of GOP dominance, Michigan Republicans have been losing most of the big ones. Thanks to inspired redistricting when they still had the governorship, they hold majorities in the legislature and in the congressional delegation. But their presidential candidates have lost the state four times in a row, and Democrats seem to own both seats in the U.S. Senate.

Saul Anuzis sees winning back the governorship and a Senate seat as job one. Tall, good-looking, affable and funny, Mr. Anuzis is a different breed from the world of narrow, bitter partisans and policy wonks, and he is light-years removed from the country club set who once ran Michigan's Republican Party.

Instead of playing golf, he - and his wife - ride his big Harley 120 motorcycle for fun. He is, in short, exactly the kind of voter his party needs to attract.

"I am a Republican because the Republican Party is the party of opportunity," he says. "Government has a role, and an important role in society. But when people work pretty hard for the money, they want to keep more of it. We think we maybe should do things with a little less government."

That's an appealing message.

He also has a knack for skewering the records of his main Democratic targets next year, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, without sounding nasty or hateful.

Yet he is less convincing when touting his party's potential candidates.

"If Dick DeVos [the Amway heir and likely gubernatorial candidate] can connect with voters one-on-one, he can win," he says. The polls show that's a big if.

The new chairman also, in a performance worthy of a sales award, argues that Jane Abraham, the wife of former U.S. Sen. Spencer Abraham, a howling charisma failure, and The Rev. Keith Butler, a preacher and a one-time Detroit city council candidate, are worthy "first-tier" opponents for Debbie Stabenow.

Polls show that both Democratic incumbents are likely to win in a walk, which may explain why none of the up-and-coming GOP congressmen or state officeholders are willing to challenge them. Mr. Anuzis explains this by saying they are all in line for important committee chairmanships in the House.

Still, one gets the impression that despite what he says, the new chairman may try to twist a few more prominent arms to widen the field.

Meanwhile, he is a man in motion, on the road six or seven days a week. Does he have political ambitions of his own? "No," he laughs heartily.

"I ran twice for the state legislature from Eaton County," a suburban area outside Lansing. "My opponents said I was a Jewish kid [not true] from Detroit [true] and I got beaten in the primary." That got the bug out of his system, "and I love what I'm doing now."

He expects, he says, to serve only one two-year term as chairman.

"The tradition is that the governor then picks their own party chair, and I doubt whoever it is will want me."

Somehow, I'd lay odds that, win or lose in 2006, Saul Anuzis will be running the Republicans a good bit longer than that.

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