



Political Anatomy 101

By Joseph G. Lehman

Summary

Michigan politicians need to learn how to use their spines as much as their mouths when presenting voters their plans to fix the state's broken economy.

Main Text Word Count: 872

Confidence in government breeds complacency in politics. When people think government is handling things tolerably well, they see no reason to pay much attention to politics. When confidence sinks from low to lower, grassroots political energy spikes upward. That's why people are now leaping off the sidelines and into TEA parties and raucous town hall meetings to protest sky-high taxes, exploding deficits and the government's attempt to take over health care. Smart politicians can seize this opportunity by exercising an oft-neglected part of the political anatomy: the spine.

The mouth is the part of the political body — if I may extend the metaphor — that promises things people want to hear without saying much about things people don't want to hear. The mouth promises only pleasure without reminding constituents there may be tradeoffs. "A chicken in every pot!" "Read my lips: No new taxes!" "Peace in our time!" The mouth says what itching ears want to hear, but may be vague about how the promises will be kept.

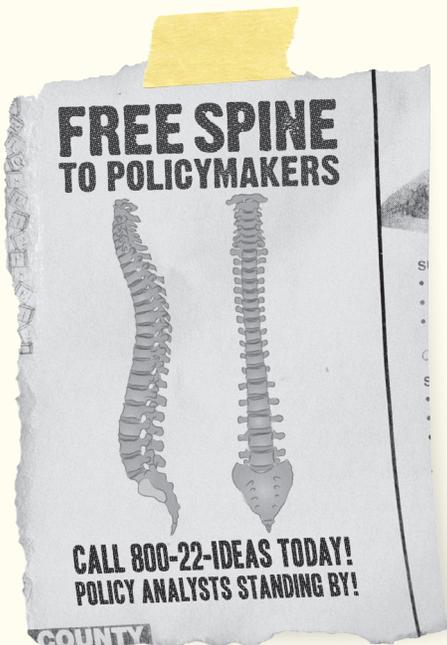
The spine has a different role. It disciplines the mouth. The spine and the mouth working together tell constituents both the promise and the price. And the spine makes sure the politician keeps the promise.

When people are politically complacent, politicians can get away with vague promises emanating from the mouth alone. When constituents are highly politically engaged, they want more than platitudes and promises. They won't give the benefit of the doubt. They have to hear precisely how the politician intends to follow through, because their confidence in government is so low.

"I will lower your taxes" is no longer enough. Neither is "I won't raise your taxes." People want to know exactly what programs will be cut and by how much. "I won't cut essential services" is no longer enough. People want to know which particular taxes will rise, by what amount, or what non-imaginary source of money will fund the government.

I was trying to explain this in a good-natured way recently to a Michigan gubernatorial candidate who had asked the Mackinac Center for policy ideas. He pointed out the practical political danger for a candidate who "over-shares" how much his promises might cost. I could see what he meant: Walter Mondale promised to raise taxes and lost in a landslide to Ronald Reagan in 1984.

But this is not 1984; it's more like 1994. Confidence in government that year was very low for many reasons, including a health care debate. Newt



Gingrich seized the opportunity by tapping into political discontent with more than platitudes. He explained precisely how he would follow through on his promises with a 10-point Contract With America. Enough people appreciated Gingrich's spine to help him sweep Republicans to historic victories in the House, Senate and state legislatures.

Spine has a way of appealing across the political spectrum. On Aug. 30, the Detroit Free Press, usually not a fan of most Republicans or limited government, praised Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, a Republican, for his proposed budget, which is balanced and would raise no taxes. Editorial Page Editor Stephen Henderson said the proposed cuts made him "a little gut sick," but lauded Bishop for producing "the only fiscally responsible option out there" at that time.

Henderson compared Bishop's effort to that of the governor, and wrote of Gov. Granholm, "I've seen mollusks whose spines weren't as gooey." Ouch.

House Speaker Andy Dillon, a Democrat, rose in the estimation of many when his mouth and spine promised a way to save hundreds of millions of dollars a year in benefits costs by combining teachers' insurance with that of other state workers. His price: angering leading Michigan Education Association allies who derive millions of dollars from MESSA, their third-party affiliate that sells health insurance plans to school districts. The Mackinac Center's analysis of Dillon's idea concludes it's a step in the right direction.

In 1987, President Reagan had to fight his own state department to say at the Brandenburg Gate, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" instead of some promise like, "One day all Germany will be united and free!" One reason the wall fell two years later was that everyone from Moscow to Berlin knew Reagan was speaking from the spine, not just the mouth.

Office-seeking friends may chide me, but I have to say I don't see a Newt Gingrich out there on the electoral scene yet. No one seems to know how to tap into the tremendous energy surging through the grass roots right now. And none of Michigan's gubernatorial candidates has yet achieved a breakthrough moment, although any of them is capable of it. Opportunity is ripe, and it is early in the campaign.

Michigan today is a state of political skeptics. I can't shake my conviction that the one who first proposes a bold stroke and clearly articulates not just the promise but the price as well will earn enduring affection from readers of Capitol Confidential as well as other lovers of liberty and limited government. The grass roots are looking for someone to love. The first candidate who shows a lot of spine will have first dibs at the dance.

Link the promise to the price. The mouth and the spine. That's powerful politics.

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Joseph G. Lehman is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

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Please contact:

MICHAEL D. JAHR
Director of Communications
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, Mich. 48640

Phone: 989-631-0900

Fax: 989-631-0964

Jahr@mackinac.org

www.mackinac.org