

## PROFILE OF DFL CHALLENGER MIKE HATCH

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Attorney General Mike Hatch juggled three cell phones one sunny afternoon last week as his campaign bus rolled across northeastern Minnesota.

On one phone, the Democratic candidate for governor heard reports from campaign aides about a news conference that Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty held to criticize Hatch's latest television commercial. On another phone, Hatch talked to aides and DFL allies about how to respond to the governor's criticism. On the third, he contacted more than a dozen reporters with his response.

Running neck and neck with the incumbent, Hatch was delighted that his strategy to get under Pawlenty's skin seemed to be working.

The day before, Pawlenty launched a TV ad criticizing Hatch on an immigration issue. Within hours, Hatch aired his own.

"Ever since he made an issue out of immigration four years ago, we knew he'd do it again," Hatch said. And we were ready. We've had our ad in the can since last summer."

It was a classic Hatch tactic: Wait for your opponent to throw a punch, then blast him with a counterpunch.

"He's whining; he can't take an upper cut," he chuckled, after hearing about Pawlenty's news conference.

His combative style is unusual for a Democrat. In recent years, most Democrats have played defense while Republicans attacked them. Not Hatch. When Republicans take shots at him, he shoots back -- enthusiastically.

"I'm having way too much fun," a grinning Hatch said.

Hatch is a tough-talking, blue-collar advocate for the "little guy" and sometimes short-tempered. He campaigns on meat-and-potatoes

economic issues, such as more funding for K--12 schools, reversing the soaring costs of college tuition, holding down property taxes and -- closest to his heart -- making health care more affordable and accessible. He tries to avoid talking about such divisive social issues as abortion, gay marriage and gun control.

Pawlenty calls him a "street fighter." Hatch, who keeps a pair of boyhood boxing gloves in his office, accepts that label, but with a proviso. He contends he's a fighter for average, middle-class Minnesotans, battling to protect them from HMOs, banks, insurance and utility companies and other powerful institutions when they try to roll over consumers.

Business leaders say he's too confrontational. Some have called him a bully.

"He seems to lead swinging," said Minnesota Chamber of Commerce President David Olson. Hatch tends to publicly attack a company before trying to resolve an issue, *he* said. The Chamber would rather he work quietly with a business "before bringing out the hammer."

But Hatch's populist style has played well with voters. In 2002, he received more votes than any previous DFL candidate, and he is his party's highest-ranking state official.

He took a bumpy road to get there.

## **FIGHTER FINDS HIS FOCUS**

Hatch, 57, of Burnsville, has a long history as a brawler.

He grew up in Duluth, a poor student and troublemaker. He managed to get into the University of Minnesota-Duluth, but quickly dropped out to join the rugged merchant marine.

He plied the Great Lakes on an ore boat for the next two years. He got into fights, got beat up and robbed, and lived his days with a nose full of putrid Lake Erie in Cleveland. He saw the aftermath of riots in Chicago and Detroit, and was repulsed by the racist attitudes of his all-white, predominantly Southern fellow crewmen.

"That's when I became a Democrat," he said.

Then one night in Ashtabula, Ohio, he decided he had had enough.

"I was ready to do something with my life," he said. He hopped on a bus back to UMD, where he worked hard, got good grades and graduated with honors in 1970.

Three years later, he earned a law degree from the University of Minnesota Law School.

He converted his street-fighter instincts to political drive.

In 1976, he tried and failed to launch his political career by running for mayor of Wayzata.

He dived into DFL Party politics and was elected state party chairman in 1980. While he supports abortion rights, he persuaded DFL activists that he could strike a balance between the party's warring "pro-life" and "pro-choice" factions. He ran the party with a sharp focus on winning elections and an intense dislike of its internal squabbles.

He helped the DFL win the governor's office in 1982 when he persuaded party leaders to back Rudy Perpich after the Iron Ranger upset their endorsed candidate in a primary. A month after the election, Perpich appointed Hatch to commerce commissioner, a job where he honed his populist style of regulating powerful industries that he would later perfect as attorney general.

For Hatch, at that time, political friendships were just that -- political.

After seven years in Perpich's Cabinet, he ran against his boss in the 1990 DFL primary for governor and lost. Perpich said his challenge was "almost like a knife in the back." Hatch now says the run was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life.'

After two failed runs for the governor's office, he switched sights to the attorney general's office in 1998 and won. He easily won a second term in 2002.

As the state's top lawyer, Hatch's political personality coalesced. Friends see him as a passionate, tireless crusader for social and economic justice.

He's most at home with farm and blue-collar crowds, as was evident as his bus --owned and driven by his former DFL rival, Kelly Doran -- pulled up outside Goodfellas bar in the Iron Range city of Eveleth.

Instead of his signature conservative blue suit and crisp white shirt, he arrived at the bar wearing a blaze orange and tan deer hunting shirt, though he acknowledged he prefers pheasant hunting.

He was accompanied by a dozen Twin Cities construction union members, decked out in orange "Sportsmen for Hatch" T-shirts and caps, who had followed his bus in a caravan of pickups and a big black carpenters union truck. The subtle message was Hatch is no liberal gun-control proponent.

When he walked into the bar, about 30 steelworkers, members of other unions and local DFL activists gave him a boisterous cheer.

He is as beloved on the staunchly Democratic Iron Range as he is scorned in many Twin Cities corporate boardrooms.

## **A SKILLED CAMPAIGNER**

Friends and foes alike credit Hatch with running a surprisingly good campaign.

Former DFL Gov. Wendell Anderson jokingly called Hatch the "Lone Ranger" because he has almost single-handedly guided his race. He hasn't spent money on polls or high-priced consultants, relying instead on his political instincts.

He has raised more money, \$2.3 million, than any previous Democratic gubernatorial candidate. He hired a bare-bones staff and has run a frugal operation, hoarding his money for television advertising in the final weeks of the race.

Most of all, he hasn't screwed up. He hasn't lost his renowned temper, much to the chagrin of Republican Party leaders who have tried to portray him as an "angry liberal."

Hatch has avoided letting Pawlenty pin him down on wedge issues, such as illegal immigrants.

He also hasn't given his opponents many specific proposals to attack. He has steered clear of saying exactly how he would provide more money for K-12 education or property tax relief. Pawlenty hasn't been any more specific. That vagueness has deprived voters of an honest debate over how the two front-runners would reach their goals.

But in his 30 years in politics, Hatch has given strong signs of what direction his administration would go.

He has been passionate about overhauling the health care system by squeezing down costs and providing more services.

The husband of a third-grade teacher and the father of three, he has consistently championed both K-12 and higher education.

In disputes between labor and management, he comes down on the side of working people. But he's also eager to help create good-paying jobs.

He says he opposes tax increases, but Republicans point out that he has supported numerous tax-hike proposals over his 15-year public career.

Most of all, he's an old-fashioned pot who's more interested in providing basic public services than winning a philosophical debate or saving the world.