

commentary

from other pens...

GOP learns Spanish, Dems practice country

By Will Lester Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — While Republicans are learning to speak Spanish, Democrats are polishing up their skills in speaking country.

Democrats lost the rural vote by more than 20 percentage points in the 2000 presidential election, after closing the gap in earlier elections in the 1990s.

Democratic officials are trying to figure out how to overcome rural hostility or indifference to the Democratic Party — a move that could be crucial in deciding critical 2002 races in the South and Midwest.

For their part, Republicans are thinking in Spanish, unveiling new measures to attract Hispanic voters — a group that traditionally has supported Democrats.

The Republican National Committee, meeting in Austin, Texas, announced strategies Thursday that include voter registration drives for newly naturalized citizens and intensive Spanish language lessons for party leaders in key states.

Democrats maintain they have messages that would play well with rural voters, but they can't get their message out.

The national party's stands on issues such as guns and abortion end up drowning out other Democratic positions.

"In some areas in rural Minnesota and other parts of the country, people are afraid to put signs up in their yards and say why they're Democrats," Jerry Samargia, a Minnesota Democratic official, said during a Thursday session at the Democratic National Committee's winter meeting. "We're losing the argument on issues."

Samargia said the Democratic Party includes plenty of people who are anti-abortion, "a lot of Democrats who want sensible gun laws but don't want to take your guns away."

Democrats held focus groups in rural areas this year to learn how Democrats are perceived and how to better communicate their message to a group that made up about a fourth of voters in the 2000 elections.

Democrats dismissed the GOP efforts on Hispanics, saying voters will see through such symbolic attempts and vote on the issues.

Some of the Democratic focus groups in rural areas were run by pollster Mark Mellman. He said Democrats need to learn how to talk more intelligently about controversial issues that alienate rural voters.

Democrats should start a discussion about guns by defending the right to own guns, then talk about the responsibilities of gun ownership, he said.

"When we talk about gun violence, the message some rural gun owners hear is that everybody who owns a gun is violent," and they feel stigmatized, Mellman said.

Democrats need a better way to talk about abortion — emphasizing that laws against the practice are government interference with individual rights, he said.

"That's exactly what these folks are against," he said. "You should talk about a decision to restrict choice as government interference."

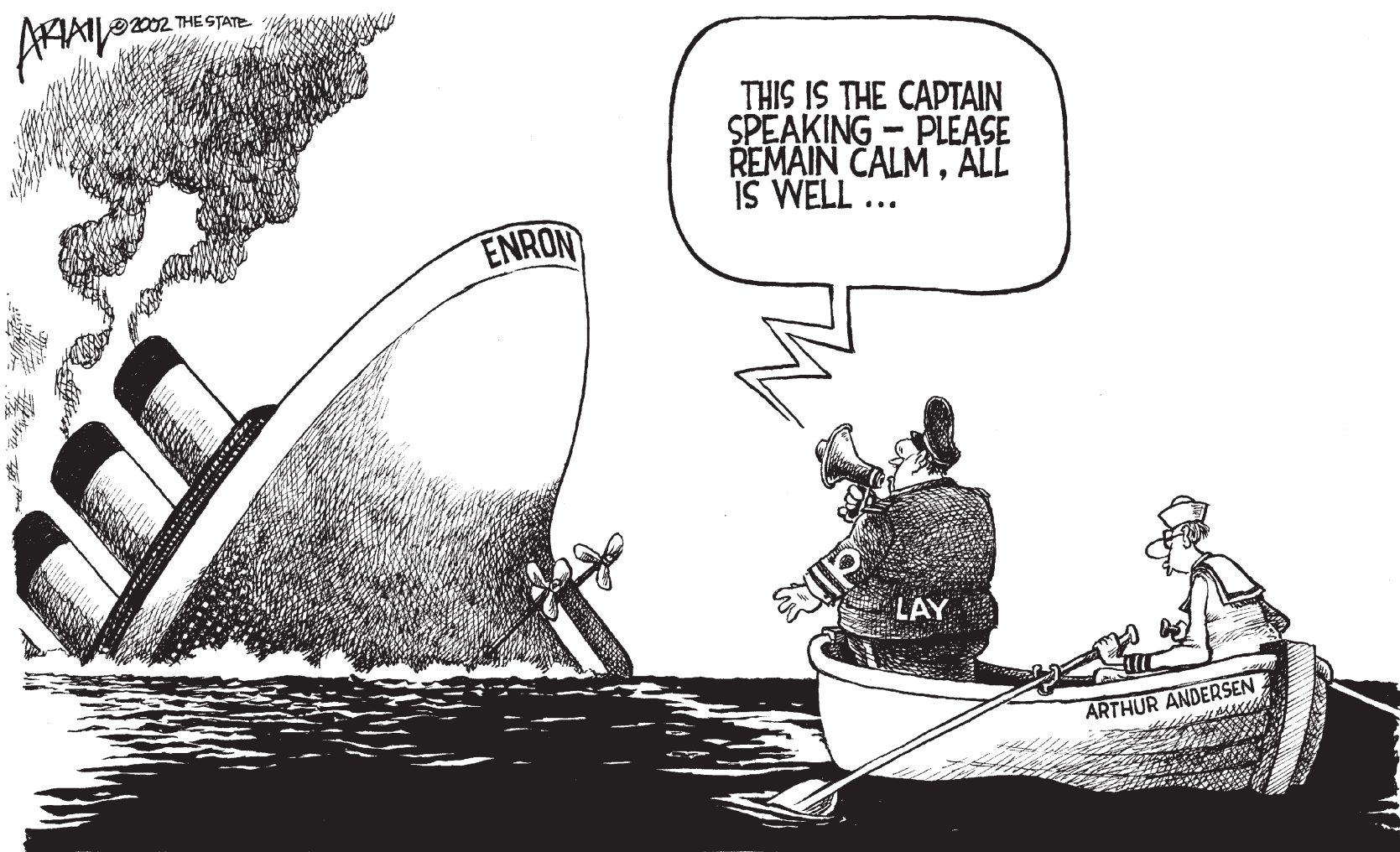
Ironically, one Democratic candidate cited for her effective campaigning in rural areas was Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York. Former President Clinton and his wife are unpopular in some conservative rural areas, but Mrs. Clinton is credited with visiting every county in New York during her campaign.

"It's important the Democratic Party has a face in some of these areas," said Joe Carmichael, state chair in Missouri and a top DNC official. "We have not tended to the flock."

It's also important that the Democrats have a voice, they said. Rural radio stations are often saturated with conservative talk shows that criticize Democrats and their stands, party officials said.

"We feel we are the party that cares about education, jobs, rural and economic development," Samargia said, "but because the air waves are saturated with the conservative mantra, we're not getting past that."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.



Recovering from our son's c-section

The video showed a form stretched out on the table under a blanket. Creatures hovered around her, wearing blue robes and brandishing unfamiliar weapons.

As we watched, the creatures began to get excited, moving more quickly, breathing a little faster. One of the creatures moves to the side and we can see the form under the blanket is a woman. Her abdomen is opened, leaving a gaping, bloody cavity.

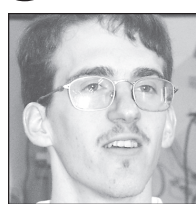
One of the blue forms reaches into the hole, and pulls out a writhing, pulsating mess.

It screams.

"Kind of looks like the scene out of *Alien*," my mother-in-law said when she saw it. It was somewhat reminiscent of the famous scene when the alien burst out of the crewman's stomach.

My wife wasn't amused by the comparison.

I wasn't thrilled about the idea of filming Amanda's c-section. The blood, the mess, the pain, the blood, the scalpels, the blood. It's bad enough I had to actually be in the room; now there would be a video recording of my pale skin, shaking hands and hyperventilation. Worse, I would have to actually watch the video, where before I could have



doug stephens

• wisdom from babes

just closed my eyes and thought about more pleasant things, like walking into a brick wall, or slamming a car door on my fingers.

Our first child, Sunnie, was a c-section baby, and I was in the room then. I had done my time. I had sat and held Amanda's hand while they opened her up. I had seen the bloody rags, the suctioned blood flowing through tubes, and the deadly scalpels glistening with my wife's blood.

It seemed enough to me. I didn't need to see it again. I had gained the experience, and I was perfectly willing to pass this time around.

Amanda and I discussed my reluctance, and it was decided I should be there, I needed to be there, and I wanted to be there. I don't remember who decided, but next thing I know, I'm putting on scrubs and the cute little shower cap doctors and nurses wear, and I'm in the operating room.

Actually, they had to wake me up in the waiting room and tell me to get dressed. Believe me, I heard about it. Here my wife is, groggy from the anesthesia, cut open on the operating table, and what does she ask me when I walk in the room?

"How could you fall asleep at a time like this?" I explained about survival mechanisms designed to reduce stress on the body, and she didn't want me to get an ulcer, did she?

From the look on her face, she wanted me to get something, alright.

I think she held my hand a little tighter than necessary during the operation. My hand doesn't normally turn that shade of white.

My face doesn't normally turn that white, either. It wasn't as bad as I remembered. I only had to hold my hand over my mouth a couple of times.

After a minimal amount of pain, from my crunched hand, and a little bit of groaning, from my poor stomach, our son was born. He was a normal pink, screaming baby. That was three weeks ago, and he's a little less pink now.

Amanda is fully recovered from her ordeal. She's up and around and doing fine.

I hope to recover some time soon, too.

Statistics fly in debate over tax increases

By John Hanna Associated Press Writer

TOPEKA — To hear Gov. Bill Graves explain them in his latest State of the State address, his proposals to increase taxes are modest, even insignificant.

To hear conservatives describe them, the governor's proposed tax increases are so huge that they would cost families a substantial amount of money and undo much of the tax relief that Graves professed to push during the mid-1990s.

Who's right? Both, of course — at the same time. That's the wonder and frustration of state government. Numbers can tell contradictory stories and be correct in their contradictions.

"You've got the basic truth of numbers," said Burdett Loomis, a University of Kansas political scientist. "To a certain extent, you can make numbers say what you want."

Whose version prevails this year has consequences for the thousands of Kansans who depend upon social services, have children in public schools or attend state universities.

Graves and his staff project a \$426 million gap between expected revenues and spending commitments for the state's 2003 fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The bulk of that gap — \$318 million — can be attributed to spending promises made in previous years. Some of them are what his staff and legislators call "automatics," such as covering extra costs associated with medical services and other programs for the needy.

Other commitments aren't as automatic, though they are enshrined in state law.

For example, in 1999, the state reorganized its higher education system and promised universities, community colleges and vocational schools more money. Under that law, the state owes another \$46 million for fiscal 2003.

Republican leaders planned already to look at the 1999 law in hopes of revising it, because the \$46 million is much more than they expected when the law took effect.

Still, legislators generally aren't contesting the seriousness of the state's problems. Their estimates for the size of the gap are only a little different.

The big debate is over how to solve the problems. Senate President Dave Kerr and Ways and Means Chairman Steve Morris have a plan to cut the current budget, then freeze spending for most agencies in fiscal 2003. Kerr, R-Hutchinson, and Morris, R-Hugoton, also would dip into rainy day funds — but they would not increase taxes.

Graves wants to cut some agencies' budgets, but increase taxes \$228 million in fiscal 2003. The state's sales tax would rise a quarter-cent on the dollar; the cigarette tax would increase 65 cents per pack, and motorists would pay a penny more in tax on each gallon of gasoline and 3 percent more to register their vehicles.

In his State of the State address, Graves went out of his way to describe his tax package as modest.



john hanna

• ap news analysis

For example, he said the sales tax increase would cost a household earning \$40,000 a year about 12 cents a day — the "equivalent of one liter of soda per week."

Graves also pointed to the tax relief enacted earlier in his term, when the economy was stronger. His administration puts the cumulative figure at \$4.8 billion — building year after year as tax cuts remain in effect.

On his terms, the tax increases he is proposing do sound modest. Car owners would pay only 75 cents more a year to register their vehicles. A person who fills up a 10-gallon gas tank each week would pay an extra \$5.20 a year. A \$100 cart of groceries would cost an extra 25 cents.

"The Kansans I know are prepared to provide these resources in support of their neighbors, friends and family," Graves told legislators.

Conservatives like Sen. Tim Huelskamp, R-Fowler, say the tax increases amount to about \$350 for a family of four, or \$88 for each of the state's 2.6 million men, women and children.

Some Kansans would pay more than others, most notably the 500,000 or so who smoke. A person who smokes two packages of cigarettes a day would pay \$475 more a year for their cigarettes — almost \$40 a month.

But conservatives like Huelskamp are worried about the cumulative effect of the tax cuts.

Estimates from the Legislative Research Department show that if Graves' in tax proposals were approved, Kansans would pay more than \$1.7 billion additional taxes over seven years. That figure represents roughly 35 percent of the tax relief the governor's administration claims to have provided.

"A little here and a little there, and it all adds up," said Rep. Doug Mays, R-Topeka. "It's the incremental creep."

In fashioning his proposals, Graves picked taxes that Kansans pay out in dribs and drabs, pennies

here and there. Legislators perennially say the sales tax is the most popular tax for that reason.

But he also had to propose increases that raised enough money to make a difference in the budget.

The question for the Legislature is which numbers their constituents pick to assess the governor's proposals.

Correspondent John Hanna has covered the state government and politics since 1987.

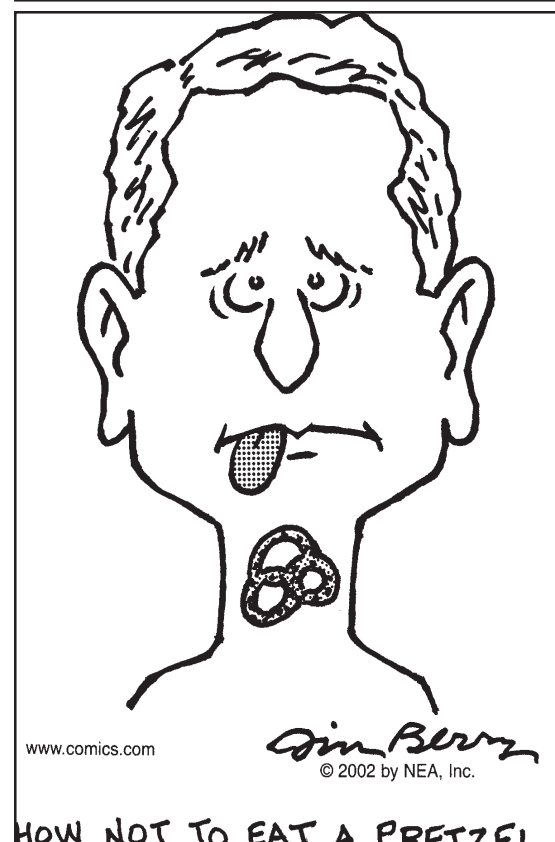
By The Associated Press

GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED TAX INCREASES
(Dollars Raised, in Millions)

YEAR	CIGS	SALES	FUELS	VEH	ALLTAXES
2003	\$111.2	\$94.8	\$17.8	\$4.0	\$227.8
2004	\$120.4	\$98.1	\$18.0	\$4.1	\$240.6
2005	\$120.4	\$101.8	\$18.2	\$4.1	\$244.5
2006	\$120.4	\$105.8	\$18.3	\$4.2	\$248.7
2007	\$120.4	\$110.0	\$18.5	\$4.2	\$253.1
2008	\$120.4	\$114.3	\$18.7	\$4.3	\$257.7
2009	\$120.4	\$118.8	\$18.8	\$4.4	\$262.4
TOTAL	\$833.6	\$743.6	\$128.3	\$29.3	\$1,734.8

The proposals:
 —Increasing the cigarette tax from 65 cents a pack, from 24 cents to 89 cents.
 —Raising the retail sales tax a quarter-cent on the dollar, from 4.9 percent to 5.15 percent.
 —Raising the tax on gasoline by a penny on the gallon, from 21 cents to 22 cents. The tax on diesel fuel also would increase a penny on the gallon, from 23 cents to 24 cents.
 —Increasing vehicle registration fees 3 percent.
 Years are fiscal years, which begin six months before calendar years. Fiscal 2003 begins July 1.
 Source: Kansas Legislative Research Department.

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