



Is taking a jab at House Speaker politically risky?

By Vincent Pierri | Daily Herald Staff

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As the clock runs down on the primary election season, some candidates are making bold claims or hurling accusations against opponents.

But is taking a jab at one of the state's most powerful politicians a wise move?

Elliott Hartstein, Democratic candidate for state House District 59 and Buffalo Grove village president, took a swipe at fellow Democrat and House Speaker Michael Madigan in a news release earlier this week.

Hartstein's comments came in response to a direct mail piece sent by his Democratic primary opponent, state Rep. Carol Sente, in which she claims he tried to take away free speech rights for people attending zoning hearings.

The ad uses quotes from 2005 newspaper stories about Hartstein's visit to Springfield to lobby for a bill that focused on zoning hearing rules. It concludes by stating, "For Elliott Hartstein, sometimes the First Amendment is just a suggestion, not a right."

Hartstein also was upset by another piece warning voters of his support for a tax increase to bolster the state's budget.

Hartstein said the pair should be embarrassed by their behavior in creating ads he claims distort his views.

Hartstein said he takes issue with Madigan because his supporters are helping finance Sente's campaign.

"She was appointed by party leaders and her political godfather, Mike Madigan, who is bankrolling a good portion of her campaign," Hartstein said in the statement. "They should be ashamed of themselves for their current tactics in the primary races."

Hartstein said he's had some feedback from constituents after making the remarks. Most of it was positive, he said.

"People said they admire me for fighting back. If your record is being distorted you have to let people know."

Hartstein said his words were sincere but also chosen to reverberate among constituents.

"People in this district respect independence," he said. "Most of the people are thoughtful, independent thinkers. Independence resonates in this district."

But political experts say standing up to Madigan can be risky.

Kent Redfield, a former political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said

Democrats who seriously oppose the Speaker won't get far.

"For those who think they are going to be independent, criticizing the Speaker, voting against the Speaker, that would be disastrous for the representative and bad for the district," Redfield explained. "Madigan has a long memory and keeps score when members cross him. It can be isolating and ineffective if you go directly against him."

Widely regarded as a powerful and controlling leader, Madigan is the longest serving House Speaker in Illinois history. He has led the House Democrats continuously since 1983 with the exception of two years in the mid-1990s.

Hartstein's comments were caustic, but probably won't hurt him in the long run, Redfield said.

"If Hartstein is elected and votes for Madigan as Speaker and then doesn't go out of his way to publicly run against him, there probably won't be any long-term impact," Redfield said.

Perhaps imagining himself in the hallowed halls of the General Assembly, Hartstein has softened his opinions in recent days.

"This is politics. I'm not coming out against him or maligning him," Hartstein said. "He's a smart man and a good politician. He wouldn't be where he is if he wasn't smart. The first thing I want to do is sit down and have a candid discussion with him. We will agree on many things and disagree on others. I'm prepared to reflect my disagreements."

Madigan press secretary Steve Brown said the issue is much ado about nothing. He said voters need to focus on the good job Sente is doing now.

"What's really important right now is that she's the best person to continue the legacy of state Rep. Kathy Ryg," Brown said. "We'll see what happens after next Tuesday."

Sente was appointed to replace Ryg, who stepped down last August to run a children's advocacy group.

Sente said she wasn't offended by the Hartstein's comments. It's part of the game, she said.

"I respect his opinion and want to respond with grace," Sente said. "I've been in business a long time and have been in tough situations. I respect his thoughts."

With decades of public service experience, Hartstein said bitterness won't take you very far.

"I don't hold grudges. You can't hold grudges in public life. You have to look forward not back."