

 2008 VOTE: MAYOR

Francis cites his 'passion for success'

Message rebranded since '05 campaign

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SAN DIEGO – Businessman Steve Francis has a history of being in the middle of things, so it's no surprise to see him running for mayor again – even if it means alienating the powerful people who supported him the first time around.

Francis was the third of five brothers and later the second name in a three-person advertising firm. In San Diego, he was the force behind a hugely successful public company that made him a wealthy man.

Now he's the main challenge to Mayor Jerry Sanders' re-election bid on June 3.

Francis, 53, traces his “passion for success” to that old sibling rivalry.

“You always wanted to stay up with your older brothers as far as competing with them, and you never wanted your younger brothers to catch up with you,” he said. “So you had this natural tendency to sort of move ahead.”

Francis, whose brothers were born within a span of seven years, remembers an “enormous amount of competition, an enormous amount of fighting” growing up. That nerve is evident on TV each time Francis airs one of the many ads he's financing from his own pocket to criticize Sanders, whom he endorsed in 2005.

It was Mayor Dick Murphy's resignation that year that prompted the special election in which Sanders and Francis, fellow Republicans and first-time candidates, ran to the political right of Councilwoman Donna Frye.

Running on classic conservative themes with a no-tax pledge and the aid of county Republicans, Francis finished third. Two days later, he backed Sanders over Frye.

This year, he kicked off his campaign saying he should have endorsed her.

That was one of many comments he's made leading up to the June election that have irritated some



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Mayoral candidate Steve Francis joked with Charlie Pratt (right) after a news conference in Rose Canyon attended by environmentalists.

business and GOP supporters from the past race.

Republican Craig Benedetto, a lobbyist who worked on Francis' first campaign, believed "he was a different kind of guy, not just your standard-issue politician."

"But this campaign it seems that's the suit he's putting on," Benedetto said.

In 2005, Francis met with labor groups as "a courtesy" and didn't even return a questionnaire from the local Sierra Club chapter. This year, he's rebranded himself as an "independent" and boasts endorsements from the Sierra Club and two unions representing hotel and electrical workers.

Meanwhile, the county GOP, which endorsed Sanders this time, took aim at "the two faces of Steve Francis" in a rare attack mailer against a Republican.

Francis smiles when talking about the pressure applied to try to keep him out of the race.

"I felt that the need to do something was urgent because of the financial condition of the city and the fact that it really wasn't improving and, in fact, may be getting worse," he said. "I just feel that by 2012 we'd be too far gone and I didn't think that I should wait that long."

He admits to "fine-tuning" some positions and "softening" others, including his no-tax stance and his support of a plan to outsource city jobs. "Circumstances change so you have to change with those circumstances," he said.

Francis, whose strategists helped elect the similarly business-minded Mayor Michael Bloomberg in New York City, is banking on that message resonating with voters such as Greg Anthony, a downtown lawyer who voted for Sanders last time.

"They're both heroic," Anthony said of the two. "I just feel that maybe a change is in order. If a baseball manager can't get performance out of his players, then what happens is the ownership starts talking about finding somebody who can."

As part of his rebranding, Francis has tamped down his rhetoric about running the city like a business while talking up his corporate credentials.

Francis can self-finance his campaign because he was so successful in business. A former chief executive and board chairman of AMN Healthcare Inc., a medical staffing company, he cashed out \$52.3 million in stock options in 2006, making him the highest-paid executive among the county's public companies.

In the campaign, Francis often talks about how he and his wife, Gayle, a nurse, came to San Diego in 1987 to build their temporary nursing company. They co-founded it in 1985 in Las Vegas when he was a young state assemblyman.

Francis isn't as forthcoming about his early political experiences, which followed his graduation from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Leery of being lampooned as a "Las Vegas politician," Francis avoids talking about the positions he staked out as a conservative Republican there. He dismisses questions about his voting record by saying "that was 25 years ago," and he rarely talks about his part ownership of an advertising firm with two

men who went on to enjoy success as a lobbyist and a political consultant.

His Democratic counterparts from that time recall Francis for his youth but not his art of politicking, which they say Republicans didn't really need.

“I think we were counting the days when he would start shaving,” joked Democratic state Sen. Bob Coffin, who served in the Assembly with Francis.

Coffin said Republicans back then “didn't reach across party lines because they didn't have to and they didn't care.”

Told about Francis' Sierra Club endorsement, Coffin said: “I'll be darned. Who knows? Maybe they didn't talk to the Nevada chapter.”

Francis' alignment with unions makes developer Doug Manchester bristle, but he hasn't dropped his support. Manchester, a foe of organized labor, was one of Francis' early advocates in 2005 and this year.

He said Francis should be commended for putting so much of his “time, talent and treasury” into the mayor's race.

Francis disputes the allegations of hypocrisy from Sanders and the GOP and dismisses any notion that he's “radically going off the reservation” this campaign.

“I'm still pretty much a fiscal conservative, and I will always be that,” he said.

Francis said pointedly that he doesn't care if his campaign alienates the people who supported him in 2005.

“The kind of money I'm spending on this race, you know, I'm not doing it because I want to belong to a country club somewhere,” he said.

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