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Brian Calle: Put the blame on Boxer

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"How are things going?" California's senior U.S. senator, Dianne Feinstein, was asked that by a reporter at a campaign event Monday for California's other Democratic U.S. senator, Barbara Boxer.

"Bad," Feinstein said.

It's unclear whether Feinstein was referring to Boxer's campaign for a fourth term or the broader political climate, in which numerous Democrats in the House and Senate are expected to be voted out Tuesday. What is clear is that Boxer has been facing her toughest reelection fight from Carly Fiorina, forcing Boxer and Democrats to invest more effort and

more resources in California than Democrats had expected in such a blue state. Voters in the Golden State are becoming frustrated with "bad" policies imposed by the Democratic-controlled legislatures in Sacramento and Washington.

"Bad" is an understatement when examining Boxer's campaign tactics and tenure in the Senate. Abysmal might be more apt.

If Boxer pulls out a victory, it won't be because of legislative accomplishments, her aptitude for governance or skillful policymaking. It will be because Boxer is vicious on the campaign trail, bringing in powerful Democrats and demonizing her opponents as "extreme."

Californians deserve better, and voters should fully scrutinize Boxer's record rather than allow her another term in Washington based on her campaign tactics. After all, Boxer's first election to the Senate, when she defeated Republican nominee Bruce Herschensohn in 1992, was credited in part to a dirty, last-minute campaign hit piece attacking Herschensohn's personal life a few days before the election.

If the debate focuses on the issues most necessary for moving California forward instead of campaign rhetoric, it would show Boxer has built one of the worst records in Congress on jobs and the economy.

- Boxer supported debt-driving, tax-laden policies like the Obama health care overhaul, which imposes a new tax on homeowners and on businesses in the biotech industry. She supported the stimulus plan, which has done little for private-sector jobs. Such votes are hallmark of Boxer's tenure. Unlike her colleague Feinstein, Boxer voted against the Bush tax cuts – one of the few positive policy initiatives from the Bush administration – and she opposed eliminating inheritance taxes.

- As for her stance of private-sector job growth and business, she receives failing marks. In 2008 Boxer received an "F" grade on her voting record from the National Taxpayers Union. In 2009 the NTU gave her a rating of 5 percent out of 100 percent. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce gave Boxer a lifetime rating of 30 percent out of 100 through 2008.

- Manufacturing is an issue critical to California's recovery but Sen. Boxer and the National Association of Manufacturers ranked her a dismal 17 of 100 percent. .

- Another important component of improving the country and the state's economic outlook is trade. As a senator, Boxer has voted against free trade, including a 2005 vote against a bill that would have established a

free-trade zone between the United States, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The libertarian Cato Institute has rated her low in their trade rankings. The Alliance for Worker Freedom, a nonpartisan organization that works to protect workers' rights and advocate for freer and more transparent economic systems, gave Boxer a zero ranking.

•Most disturbing for Californians, she stood by as parts of California's Central Valley have been turned into something of a modern-day Dust Bowl since water supplies for human use were sharply curtailed after a 2007 district court decision in favor of protecting the Delta smelt. Only this year did a court ruling begin to tilt the other way. The Contra Costa Times reported in 2009 that "Fiorina blames Boxer for voting against an amendment by South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint in September that would have removed limits on Delta pumps to help fish populations, and for putting the needs of 'a small fish ahead of the livelihoods of California's farmers and farmworkers,' according to her website."

When it comes to labor union rankings, though, Boxer scores high marks all around. The AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union gave Boxer 100 percent rankings in 2009. If toeing the line for labor unions were a qualification for another six-year term in the Senate, Boxer would be a shoo-in. But there are bigger economic issues at stake for the state and country, and Boxer's record on those issues falls too short to entrust her with a vote for California, especially now.

Over the past two weeks Boxer has enlisted some major firepower. President Barack Obama held a campaign rally for Boxer at the University of Southern California; Vice President Joe Biden came out West to raise funds for the embattled senator; and first lady Michelle Obama keynoted a campaign fundraiser in West Los Angeles for Boxer. Boxer also has a number of negative campaign ads hitting the airwaves.

For most Californians the issues of the day are jobs and the economy, but Boxer is making the campaign about more divisive, less substantial issues.

It's ironic that the mantra of Democrats and their leader, President Obama, the past couple of years has been to "change politics as usual" and condemning, as Obama terms it "the politics of fear." Yet the Boxer campaign's prominent themes do not engage her opponent on ideas, they instead conjure images of class warfare, exploit unemployment fears with economic protectionism or attack Fiorina as an extremist on social issues.

While things in both the state and nation's capitals are bad now, leaving politicians in place with the wrong priorities will only turn things from bad to worse.

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