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Barnes, unlike Deal, would take active lead

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Roy Barnes ruled Georgia for four years, and the results were disastrous,” the announcer intones in a Republican TV ad.

However, that’s not the picture that the Barnes campaign likes to paint. In its own ads, the Barnes camp draws a stark contrast between the prosperous, growing Georgia of 10 years ago and the struggling Georgia of today, implying that the main difference is Barnes.

“Roy Barnes created 235,000 jobs,” one ad brags, referring to his previous stint as governor. “He can do it again.”

Not to shock you, but neither version is close to the truth. In fact, it’s hard to say which claim is more ridiculous.

Hardly a disaster, Barnes was a hands-on governor who came into office with an ambitious agenda and got a substantial portion of it accomplished. He governed as a conservative Democrat (many forget that in the 1990 Democratic primary for governor, Barnes ran unsuccessfully as the conservative alternative to Zell Miller.) In 2002, the libertarian Cato Institute praised Barnes as one of the nation’s best governors, saying he “may be the pre-eminent tax-cutting Democrat on the national scene.”

But in his wildest dreams, Barnes did not create, or even play a major role in creating, 235,000 jobs in Georgia. That growth was driven by forces that were well beyond his control.

In fact, the major economic development project championed by Barnes as governor never became reality. The ill-fated Northern Arc, proposed to link I-85 to I-75 across the northern Atlanta suburbs, would have been a major boondoggle for the highway contractors who supported Barnes. It also would have committed the Atlanta region to a sprawling pattern of suburban and exurban growth that high gasoline prices, traffic congestion and the housing bust have since rendered permanently archaic.

In their ads, Republicans do make a valid point when they attack Barnes’ governing style. “King Roy,” as the sobriquet goes, often lacked the patience to sweet-talk or negotiate with opponents when it was quicker and more efficient to bulldoze through them. It’s an approach that he now claims to regret.

In many instances, however, that style was deployed to force through changes in state policy that were necessary, even visionary. For example, Barnes arm-twisted the Legislature into finally changing the state flag and also forced through important transportation and education reforms, including abolishing tenure for newly hired public school teachers.

Overall, Barnes accomplished more in just four years than Sonny Perdue has even attempted in eight. And that in turn raises the most important question facing voters in 2010.

Judging from his resume, history and campaign, Nathan Deal is likely to continue Perdue’s passive approach. In a 17-year career in Congress, most of it as a member of the Republican majority, Deal sponsored no successful legislation of any importance, rose to no leadership position and developed no expertise or focus on any issue. He walked through the halls of Congress while leaving no footprint, and is likely to do the same in the Capitol.

As we’ve learned in recent weeks, Deal’s private business dealings also offer little cause for confidence. To the

contrary, his continued refusal to explain how he paid just \$2,068 in 2007 federal taxes on income of \$205,433 is baffling. Consultants normally advise politicians to be as candid as possible, under the theory that whatever you're keeping secret can't be worse than what people are going to imagine. But maybe that's not true in this case.

But here's the bottom line: If you believe that Georgia government is fundamentally sound and that critical issues are being handled fairly well, Deal offers you another four to eight years under an essentially caretaker governor. If you believe that major issues have been ignored too long and that a more aggressive approach is required, Barnes' record suggests he's your man.

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