

A governor really good at growing government

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Even John Bel Edwards's harshest critics have to admit the first-term Democratic governor is good at running budget surpluses. We recently learned that, for the third year in a row, Louisiana will have a budget surplus. The first three budgets Edwards signed off on collected a total of \$731 million more than the state needed. The past two year's budgets have produced surpluses in excess of \$300 million.

For those who believe a governor's primary focus should be the health and vitality of government, Edwards is a superstar. Let's call these fans the government-centric types. Others don't see running hundreds of millions in surpluses as such an accomplishment. They view the health and welfare of the private sector as priority one. To this crowd, Edwards is anything but a superstar.

There are only two ways to consistently run sizable surpluses, raise taxes or spend less. No one's accusing Edwards of downsizing government. He's increased spending 25%. Under Edwards, the overall money spent on government in Louisiana went from \$27 billion to \$34 billion. Imagine what the Democratic governor will do with a second term. Government-centric types are falling all over each other in praising Edwards for growing government so fast in such a short period of time and yet still having hundreds of millions of dollars left over each year. They call his doings "sound fiscal policy."

Since Edwards refused to make the state live within her means, he was able to work his surplus magic by convincing just enough legislators to raise taxes to the tune of \$7 billion over the lifetime of the increases. The governor tried to raise twice that but the Republican-controlled Legislature resisted and were harshly ridiculed by government-centric types for doing so. Can you imagine how impressed the government-centric crowd would have been with Edwards if he had been able to raise the extra billions he wanted? Edwards would have been able to bring us stratospheric surpluses.

Some in the Legislature have recommended cutting taxes as a result of the surpluses, thus returning the extra money to taxpayers. The government-centric folks didn't like that one bit.

For those not holding the same worldview as government-centric types, it's difficult to get excited or be impressed with a politician whose main accomplishment is growing government and raising taxes. The real test of a leader is producing a surplus as a result of cutting government. That's hard because each dollar cut typically has a special interest attached to it.

What impresses non-government-centric types is a strong and vibrant private sector economy. But under Edwards' leadership, Louisiana's economy has been dismal, losing more jobs than any other state since the governor took office.

Four thousand fewer people are working in Louisiana since the day Edwards was elected. Forty-six other states have gained jobs during the same time period. It's difficult to imagine Louisiana's private sector doing much worse under Edwards, especially when you consider the red-hot national economy.

The Louisiana economy has suffered so much under Edwards that 10,000 people have voted with their feet and left the state since he took office. They are looking for opportunities elsewhere. Last year, the Cato Institute, a public-policy think tank, graded governors in each state for their taxing and spending policies. Edwards was one of only eight governors to receive a grade of F.

But despite this, many of the people I talk with believe the governor will be reelected. They view his challengers, U.S. Rep Ralph Abraham and businessman Eddie Rispone, both Republicans, as weak and ineffective campaigners. And most polls show Edwards with a lead over both men.

Edwards also has a ton of money thanks in large part to his faithful trial lawyer donors. The governor's staunch support for what The Wall Street Journal described as a shakedown of the oil industry, and his reluctance to pass any tort reform legislation, has made the state's trial lawyers very happy with the incumbent Edwards.

Thus far, the only messages coming out of the Abraham and Rispone camps is that both men are Christians and they very much like President Donald Trump. Election Day is less than two months away.