

Populist Label Applied To Governor

April 3, 2017 By [Jeremy Alford](#)

Gov. John Bel Edwards doesn't have the ability to grease the skids at the Capitol like his predecessors.

He won't be able to throw around cash during the spring session to help lawmakers with pet projects. And he won't be able to remove disagreeable representatives from influential committees due to Republican rule in the House.

But Edwards, like every governor before him, does have the capacity to craft powerful policy narratives. After all, having the Louisiana press corps listen when you speak is practically an inalienable right of being the state's top elected official.

That's why the governor got a jumpstart over his opponents on setting the tone for the session that convenes on April 10. His message to reporters was clear: Louisiana's most successful companies are not paying their "fair share" in taxes and about 90 percent of individual taxpayers — mom and dad and Aunt Susan — are paying too much.

As a legislator and as a gubernatorial candidate, Edwards was described as a populist on a number of occasions. But it wasn't until last week, when he revealed his session plan and "fair share" message, that the label reemerged with a force and was applied to him as a sitting governor.

Political populism and economic populism have always meant something different in the Bayou State, depending on the context. Huey Long's form of populism, for example, isn't an absolute perfect match for Public Service Commissioner Foster Campbell's approach to populism or even President Donald Trump's.

Edwards, for his part, seems to lack the incendiary rhetoric and brash decision-making that is usually attributed to populist leaders. Coupled with his one year in office, it may be too early to define his style or policy agenda with that single word. For now.

But the governor has most certainly adopted a more pointed approach to dealing with the state's corporate elite — and he's hoping the public reaction creates a wave of support large enough to float his entire agenda.

You can hear it clanging around Baton Rouge's echo chamber. The Advocate newspaper has twice called called the governor a "populist" over the past week, while his harshest critics at the Capitol prefer to compare his plan to political class warfare. Both descriptions probably push the matter a little too far, but it's the narrative that the Edwards Administration launched and that the Louisiana media has clung to so far in its coverage.

Surprisingly enough, the two previous administrations that have the most to show us about where Edwards might be heading revolved around former governors who will be remembered by history for being anything but populists.

For starters, there are many parallels between former Gov. Buddy Roemer's start at the Capitol and the introduction of the Edwards era in this current term.

Roemer, during his time in office, stared down a \$1.3 billion deficit, and he called a special session to address the budget hole. Edwards, meanwhile, had a combined budget shortfall of about \$3 billion waiting on him last year when he took office, and he ended up calling two special sessions as a result. (Plus there's a \$440 million shortfall in the next budget and about \$1.2 billion worth of temporary taxes that come off the books in 2018.)

Voters in 1989 rejected several of Roemer's proposed constitutional tax changes, which were part of a larger reform push. Last year voters also dumped an Edwards proposal on the ballot to do away with a major corporate tax break.

Then there's former Gov. Mike Foster, whose administration explored the idea of taxable gross receipts, which is a concept — replacing a corporate tax on profit with one that targets sales — the Edwards Administration is pushing this year.

By 2000 it became clear to lawmakers and others that Foster was willing to advance pretty much any kind of tax, as long as it would improve Louisiana's revenue picture and help underwrite important government services. On the political side, however, Foster, then term-limited, took a major hit due to that approach and Republicans all around the state abandoned him. The polls released in the months and years that followed showed as much.

Roemer, meanwhile, was forced out of office after his first term. But like Foster, some of the ideas that Roemer advocated for, oftentimes against a strong tide, helped set the stage for future reforms. It's doubtful, though, that Edwards will have the luxury of waiting for such a structural change to arrive in the future. He wants solutions now, and rightly so.

None of this means that Edwards will face the same fates as Roemer and Foster. These historical flashbacks merely show us that this governor has been in many of the same situations as non-populist governors before him. Whether history actually repeats itself will be entirely in the hands of the governor and the Louisiana Legislature, populist labels or not.