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SAXBY CHAMBLISS NOT EXACTLY A SHOO-IN FOR RE-ELECTION

I haven't seen any polls on the subject, but my gut feeling is that Georgia's senior senator Saxby Chambliss isn't going to have a cakewalk if he chooses to run for a second term next year. Chambliss, who unseated hapless Democrat Max Cleland in 2002, angered Democrats with some of his campaign tactics back then. Since that time, he has angered a lot of Republican voters with his role in immigration reform. If Chambliss has a legion of staunch defenders, I haven't heard from them.

Readers who tell me they are Republicans to the core are still mad for what they perceive as his sellout to agricultural interests in the immigration debate and say they would vote for a viable alternative. Yet, as miffed as many Georgians are with Chambliss, they are loath to send a Democrat to Washington to join the Looney Left majority. That may be the senator's political salvation.

Georgia Democrats, in their infinite wisdom, have offered up little more than cannon fodder thus far: Dale Cardwell, an Atlanta television reporter with no political experience and little name recognition; Rand Knight, an ecologist with no political experience and even less name recognition; and Vernon Jones, CEO of DeKalb County, who no doubt will be busy trying to explain a well-publicized sexual episode in his home in 2004.

Even with this kind of lackluster competition, Chambliss should not rest easy. Not too many years ago, a modest and much-beloved columnist was loudly proclaiming to anyone who would listen that there was no way poorly financed Republican challenger Sonny Perdue could defeat heavily favored incumbent Gov. Roy Barnes. Come Election Day, Perdue rolled Barnes like a cheap cigarette.

Recently, State Sen. Jim Whitehead of Evans was the odds-on favorite to replace the late Charlie Norwood in Georgia's 10th congressional district. Whitehead had the backing of the Republican establishment, including Norwood supporters, and was running against a conservative physician in liberal Athens who was making his fourth try for public office. Guess what? Dr. Paul Broun won, and Jim Whitehead lost.

How do you explain this kind of thing? Barnes' apologists claim that it was disaffected schoolteachers and flaggers who caused his defeat. Not so. Barnes was a victim of a poorly managed campaign and overconfident campaign staff. Whitehead's campaign was a train wreck. He was not helped by his comments that the University of Georgia was run by "a bunch of liberals" and that he wouldn't care if the whole place was bombed except for the football team. Dr. Broun was not hurt by the fact that his father, the late State Sen. Paul Broun, was one of the state's most beloved public officials.

But the explanation for winning and losing goes deeper than poor campaign strategy and foot-in-mouth disease. Despite the modern-day marvels of political consultants, Internet blogs, YouTube and the like, candidates still have to earn our votes. There is no substitute for pressing the flesh with voters and showing them that you are still one of them. We will forgive our politicians a lot of things, but not being high-handed or self-important.

Not long ago, a good friend and major contributor to the Chambliss campaign took his grandson to hear the senator speak, planning on introducing the young man to Chambliss afterward. When the speech was over, Chambliss breezed past them both like a zephyr. Maybe he was on a tight schedule, but first things first. Stiffing a contributor is not good, particularly one with a lot of influence in town. Stiffing his grandson is dumber than dirt. Can a U.S. senator know every voter personally? Of course not. Should a local staffer recognize the influentials on sight and give the senator a heads-up? You betcha. Chambliss can't afford many gaffes like that.

Future polls will likely show Saxby Chambliss favored to win re-election next year, given the quality of his current Democratic opposition. But don't bet the farm on it just yet. I don't know many people who are excited about our senior senator, but I know a lot who aren't. Chambliss and his staff clearly have some kiss-and-make-up to do with Georgia voters if he wants a second term.