Roemer claims joblessness improved since last spring

By CARL REDMAN
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Gov. Buddy Roemer is using an unconventional way of comparing unemployment statistics to back up his claim that the state's economy has shown marked progress since he took office last spring.

And, Roemer said Tuesday, his administration deserves at least partial credit for the economic growth.

In several recent speeches, Roemer has said that the Louisiana economy saw the creation of 69,000 new jobs during his first nine months in office.

Roemer arrived at that number by comparing Department of Labor employment statistics for February and November 1988. Preliminary unemployment data for December 1988 will not be available until late this month.

Pointing to Labor Department tables, Roemer said total civilian employment — that is, the total number of people with jobs — went from 1,676,500 to 1,745,500 between last February and last November. That’s an increase of 69,000 people with jobs.

A more conventional way of comparing employment growth would be to compare the same two months in different years.

Preliminary Labor Department statistics show that Louisiana had only 3,600 more people with jobs in November 1988 than in November 1987. Total civilian employment was 1,741,900 in November 1987 and 1,745,500 in November 1988.

Labor Department data show that the February through November 1987 period saw an employment pattern that was similar to what Roemer found for 1988 — total civilian employment increased by 62,200 for the 1987 period.

LSU economist James Richardson said comparing February data to November data does not take into account variations such as seasonal hiring patterns.

"The ultimate test," Richardson said, "is February to February. When you get those numbers, that becomes a relevant comparison."

When Roemer was asked about his figures, the governor said he’s chosen as his “baseline” the state as it was when he took office last spring.

"As I said very clearly (in speeches) ... in the last nine months, that’s all I’m responsible for," Roemer said. "I just look at the numbers. ... You can pick any comparison you want. I tell you the one I chose, which I think is fair: when my term started. I guess I could pick any other month."

When asked if he should receive credit for the drop in unemployment from February to November, Roemer said: "In part, for some of the things we did in the Legislature, absolutely. I get that feedback from the numbers and from the business community."

Roemer said changes in Louisiana’s worker’s compensation rules attacked the perception that Louisiana has enormous worker’s compensation rates and held insurance cost increases to a minimum.

In a telephone interview Tuesday evening, Roemer said one of the more interesting trends in the last five years’ worth of employment data is in the size of the civilian work force in the state.

The civilian work force — that is, the total number of people working or looking for work — showed a general decline from about mid-1986 until early this year. But, Roemer said, the civilian work force showed a general increase through most of 1988.

Roemer attributed that, in part, to growth in confidence among Louisiana citizens that things are getting better.