

Authenticity matters (or, Why Bobby Jindal Won't Win but Chris Christie Might)

Bobby Jindal just announced (via Facebook) today that he is adding himself to the slew of GOP 2016 presidential hopefuls.

There are lots of reasons why Jindal does not have even a small chance of winning the nomination: Louisiana (the state where he is currently governor) is doing badly, he lacks charisma, and he has made a series of questionable/false/stupid comments recently (Muslim no-go zones, for example).

Currently polling at about one percent, Jindal faces tremendous challenges even getting in to the Fox News GOP candidates debate that will only allow the top ten contenders on stage. It's pretty clear that Jindal is jockeying for a vice presidential nod, but even that is out of reach for him. Why? **He has a huge authenticity problem.**

Jindal, who was named Piyush by his Indian parents, seems to have rejected his background. He converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Bobby. He has even said he doesn't consider himself Indian-American, but just American. The *Washington Post* explores the question about how Jindal views his past in this article published yesterday: From Piyush to Bobby: How Does Jindal Feel About his Family's Past.

This passage from the article (the bolding is mine) is very telling:

Suresh C. Gupta, a Potomac, Md., doctor, gave a fundraiser for Jindal's first gubernatorial bid. But he said Jindal has actively tried to disassociate himself from the Indian American community in recent years.

*“So what if he’s Republican? So what if he’s Christian? I don’t care about those things,” said Gupta, who is a Democrat. **“But you can’t forget about your heritage. You can’t forget about your roots.”***

*When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to the United States last September, a host of politicians attended his rally at Madison Square Garden. Jindal did not. **When Jindal’s name was mentioned, he was booed by the crowd.***

It’s impossible to say what motivated Jindal to embrace being “American” while at the same time downplaying his roots. Perhaps he is embarrassed by his background or perhaps he thinks people can’t relate to an Indian-American. Whatever the reason, it’s clear that potential supporters are turned off by his disassociation with his background.

Although the United States is a melting pot, and most immigrants try to assimilate, many still have pride in their heritage. And there are many politicians who embrace hyphenation, from the first Italian-American mayor of New York City Fiorello LaGuardia to former Congressman David Wu (D-OR), the only Chinese-American serving in the House of Representatives from 1999 to 2011.

An even more negative view of Jindal is given in the *Politico Magazine* article by Alan Greenblatt: “The Stupid Party’s Candidate: Running to the Right is not Working for Bobby Jindal.”

Greenblatt argues that Jindal is pandering to the more conservative base of the Republican Party. He writes:

A governor who reshaped his state by overhauling the education and Medicaid systems now hardly talks substance at all. In fairness, he has released detailed plans on taxes and education, but he routinely spends his time on the stump

throwing red meat to the most conservative parts of his party.

He adds:

His pander approach hasn't worked for him. "He is smart, he is policy knowledgeable," says Henry Olsen, a conservative analyst at the Ethics & Public Policy Center, "but rather than build a public persona around his strengths, he has crafted a public persona around other people's strengths."

This adds up to an authenticity problem. Who is Bobby Jindal and why does he keep changing his stripes? People respond best to what is authentic and can generally spot a fake. Jindal seems to be working hard to be something he can never be. As long as he's trying to be something he isn't, he will continue to lag behind in the polls.

Authenticity matters, especially when you are trying to persuade.

What do you think? If you were Jindal's communications person, what would you advise?