

Folks: An update on this article: Haley was elected governor of South Carolina in 2010. Jindal was reelected governor of Louisiana in 2011.

SOURCE: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/05/21/bobby-jindals-masterful-job-on-the-gulf-coast-oil-spill-boosts-his-political-prospects.html>

Nikki Haley and the New Racial Face of the South

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Nikki Haley is poised to join Bobby Jindal as conservative Indian Americans running Deep South states. Tunku Varadarajan on how they're exploding racial attitudes—and why the Dems don't get it.



Bobby Jindal & Nikki Haley (AP Photo 2)

Nikki Haley, née Nimrata Randhawa, is almost assured of the Republican nomination for governor of the state of South Carolina. And if she does win her runoff on June 22, she is almost certain to be elected governor in November, which would give rise to the remarkable fact that two deeply conservative Southern states—South Carolina and Louisiana—will be home to governors of Indian descent, one the son of Hindu immigrants, the other the daughter of Sikhs.

What explains the success of Jindal and Haley in their respective states? In posing this question, I hint, of course, at the South's lingering reputation for racial intolerance; and who can deny that the two states in question have not always been at the forefront of America's historical striving for racial amity?

Could it be that since Democrats put more of an emphasis on identity politics, an Indian-American Democrat would have to contend with other ethnic constituencies that might think that it's "their turn" first?

One answer is that these two politicians are consummate conservatives in a milieu that rewards political conservatism, and that their success is a validation of their ideology and intelligence. Their ethnicity, in other words, is an irrelevance. This view was expressed, in effect, by a friend—a law professor in Tennessee—when I asked him why he thought Indian-American conservatives were doing so well in some Southern states: "There are lots of Indians in the South, and they work hard and do well. Why wouldn't people like 'em, especially when they work hard at politics and espouse conservative, capitalist, pro-family views?"

Naturally, it is unwise to make any generalizations based on the emergence of Jindal and Haley alone, but their success is striking, given that Indian Americans comprise barely 1 percent of the U.S. population, and are not found in overly large numbers in either Louisiana or South Carolina. A generalized observation that we can make, however, is that the GOP—being a relatively new establishment party in the South—has fewer institutional barriers to fresh faces. There are no GOP "machines" there, in the manner of the Democratic ones in New York or Illinois, and there aren't, also, the massive expenditure hurdles of the kind that exist in California.

Another explanation for Jindal/Haley could be that it's a myth, or an outdated perception, that the South is inimical to racial minorities. Conventional wisdom has it that Southern whites vote Republican because the Democrats are the party of civil rights. That may have been true in 1964, but has been much less so since. (James Taranto wrote a terrific [op-ed](#) on this subject in The Wall Street Journal in 2004, and his points all hold true today.) It is more accurate to say that blacks vote Democratic (both in the South and elsewhere) because they perceive the Republican Party to be racist, and that today's white Southerners vote for the GOP because they are conservative on other matters such as religion, abortion, guns, the size of government, and national defense. This does, however, give rise to an appearance of a racially polarized electorate, which, in turn, keeps alive the stereotype of Southern intolerance.

One could make a different argument, too: In desperate times such as these, conservatives—who are, in any case, more serious about their conservatism in the South than in the North—are inclined to embrace anyone who is an effective representative of their core views, regardless of race. In other words, even if one were to take the view that Southern whites are racially prejudiced, when the price of

indulging a prejudice means having to give up an opportunity for the advancement of core values, then racism falls by the wayside and a purer, more merit-based standard for judgment becomes possible. Jindal and Haley, then, would be proof of this judgment.

I do wonder, sometimes, whether America's toxic black-white history and its legacy create a need for a "third way"—for emblems of the Other that are not part of the toxic mix, especially in the South. Indians, here, offer a great political convenience. They have an irrefutable profile as strivers and self-starters. The worst you hear of them in demotic conversation are the "Quickie Mart" jokes of the *Simpsons* variety (remember Joe Biden and his 7-Eleven quip?) And what does that mean? That there is an immigrant who owns his own family business in America within a generation, and whose kid just won the spelling bee en route to Chapel Hill, or Harvard.

One does have to wonder, of course, if Jindal and Haley would do as well had they not both been converts to Christianity. In fact, in the run-up to the primary, a malodorous dimwit called Jake Knotts—a Republican state senator who was backing an opponent of Haley—sought to besmirch her reputation by accusing her of being a crypto-Hindu. (He also called her a "raghead"—and President Obama, too, for good measure—but this slur was unlikely to make national news in a week when another malodorous dimwit recommended that Israelis be "sent home" to Germany.)

I will close with another question: Why has no Indian-American liberal risen as high in the Democratic ranks as Jindal and Haley have done in the GOP? Could it be that because Democrats put more of an emphasis on identity politics, an Indian-American Democrat would have to contend with other ethnic constituencies that might think that it's "their turn" first? And once you go down the "identity" route, your success as a politician tends to rest more on the weight of numbers—the size of your ethnic constituency, or your racial voting bloc—than on the weight of your ideas. The most striking thing about Jindal and Haley's success is not that they are Indian-American politicians who have triumphed in conservative Southern states, but that they are conservative Southern politicians who just happen to be Indian American.

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