

EDITORIAL

A Storm of Our Own

Comparing the politics of Louisiana with Oregon probably isn't a perfect fit because, to put it delicately, Louisiana's political history is a bit more colorful than Oregon's. After all, Louisiana is the state where two-time governor Edwin Edwards, a convicted felon, ran against the racist David Duke and won on the strength of his bumpersticker, "Vote for the Crook, It's Important."

It's also the home state of Huey Long, the populist depression leader immortalized in Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "All the King's Men."

And of course, there was Huey's brother Earl Long, of whom Huey once said, "Earl is my brother, but he's crooked. If you live long enough, he will double cross you."

Earl Long once got elected to the governor's office while residing in a mental institution. About the state's chronic corruption, he warned that one day the voters would elect good government, and they wouldn't like it.

On Oct. 20, the voters of Louisiana decided to test Earl Long's aphorism by choosing good government, sending 36-year-old Republican Bobby Jindal to the governor's office. Jindal's dramatic first ballot total of more than 50 percent gave him outright victory without the traditional runoff of the top two candidates two weeks later.

Jindal was born to Punjabi Indian immigrants in Baton Rouge. Educated at Brown and Oxford, the Louisiana congressman is the first person of color to be elected to statewide office. A few years ago, Jindal, who was raised Hindu, converted to Catholicism — perhaps he surmised that being Indian, Republican and Hindu might be too much even for Bayou state residents.

The liberal national press may have tried to bury the Bobby Jindal political miracle, but the public and voters have noticed. Jindal's election last month in the southern state most resistant to Nixon's southern GOP realignment strategy has given Republicans a shot in the arm nationally. Jindal, with his Obama-like charisma, was recently described by James Taranto in the *Wall Street Journal* as "an affable policy wonk with a quick mind and a fascination with the details of governance."

So how did a child of Indian immigrants get elected governor of Louisiana? Katrina.

Losing half the population of the state's biggest city, New Orleans, seems to be enough to finally prod voters to change. In Taranto's pre-election *Wall Street Journal* profile, he writes that Jindal faulted his home state's Katrina response: "Congress has allocated tens of billions of dollars, [Jindal] says, but a 'very small percentage' has reached struggling citizens and businesses."

Jindal said, “The federal government’s got its own complicated set of paperwork. But then after you finally navigate that, for the first time ever, the state created its own additional bureaucracy on top of that — they created it after Katrina — and so a lot of these projects, their funding’s been approved ... and that money is getting caught up in Baton Rouge.”

In 2003, at the age of 32, Jindal lost a close contest to Gov. Kathleen Blanco in his first attempt at statewide office. In the aftermath of Katrina, the government’s poor response and the weak leadership of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Blanco forced voters to reexamine the choice they made in the 2003 gubernatorial election. They were ready last month to make a correction.

What is the comparison between Louisiana’s appetite for change and Oregon’s political landscape? Are Oregon voters tired of an outdated, corrupt, heavy-handed ruling political establishment? Can they afford it? Well, thankfully Oregon hasn’t had a Katrina to shake up the masses. But Oregon has had the state’s leading political figure, Neil Goldschmidt, shamed in public for raping a 14-year-old girl. Oregon’s current governor, Ted Kulongoski, continues to deny that he knew anything about Goldschmidt’s crimes, even though the governor’s accuser, Fred Leonhart, signed a sworn affidavit stating otherwise and passed a lie detector test conducted by the Oregon State Police. Leonhart’s affidavit states that he informed Kulongoski on numerous occasions about Goldschmidt’s transgressions.

Oregon voters have also witnessed city and state government waste millions of dollars in unproductive investments, such as OHSU’s South Waterfront neighborhood. And Oregonians have seen very few medium- or high-wage jobs created in recent years. Add to that bad schools, terrible transportation, an ineffective tax system, and a real estate recession looming. And Oregon is perhaps the most public employee union-dominated state in the country. This unhealthy — and growing — storm of controversies may be our own unique Katrina.

Most importantly, Oregon, like Louisiana, sees its influence in the surrounding region decreasing, as neighboring states boast a healthier economic climate. Per capita income in both states is also declining. Writes the *WSJ* about the Bayou state, “...while Louisiana has never had a reputation for good government, neither has it always been known as a failed state.”

“Decades ago,” Jindal told the *WSJ*, “Louisiana was ahead of the South ... If you go back to the early ’60s — if you’d gone back then and said Atlanta’s going to be the capital of the New South, they would have laughed at you ... New Orleans was bigger than Miami. It wasn’t that long ago that we were the gateway to Latin and Central America.”

The newly-elected governor says the state got caught up in a boom-and-bust cycle. “The state had all these surpluses,” he told the *WSJ*, “had all this oil and gas revenue, so there wasn’t the fiscal constraint, there wasn’t the fiscal discipline ... We’ve used these dollars and created cycles for instant gratification.” So, said Jindal, “Even before Katrina, as a

state, we were 50th in health outcomes. We were 50th in *Forbes* as a place to do business.” (*Forbes* ranks Oregon 40th in economic climate.)

A generation ago, the first Arab-American governor, Vic Atiyeh, set out to turn Oregon’s economy around. “You have to work just as hard to keep businesses in the state as you do to get them,” he told *BrainstormNW* in a previous interview. “My program was always to help Oregon’s existing businesses. I also believed that whatever I did to encourage businesses had to be universal. If it was good for big business, then it had to be good for small business as well.”

Now in Louisiana, the first Punjabi Indian-American governor will try to accomplish much the same in the Bayou state: Jindal is determined to alter Louisiana’s direction, from failure to success.

In Louisiana it took Katrina to open voters’ minds. Is outright catastrophe all that can jolt Oregonians out of their apathetic acceptance of awful behavior and abysmal results? Or will Oregon’s storms of controversy be enough to make voters seek a new direction? We may already be on our way. Just ask those politicians who keep walking out in a huff when asked to answer questions about their performance or behavior: Portland Mayor Tom Potter and Gov. Kulongoski.

And if you get the chance, keep asking the tough questions.