

Jindal's Exit: Who's Going to Benefit Most?

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal's exit from the Republican presidential primary race was simultaneously surprising and expected.

Jindal's late entry into the crowded GOP field, coinciding with the sudden rise of front-runners Donald Trump and Dr. Ben Carson, frustrated efforts to gain the public's attention through earned media. That, in turn, hampered fundraising efforts.

As a result, he languished near the bottom of national polling averages – his Real Clear Politics (RCP) national polling average was 0.3 percent – and faced increased pressure to drop out. On Oct. 1, his campaign had just \$261,000 cash on hand remaining, having spent more than three times that amount during the second quarter of 2015.

And while a fraction of a percentage point nationally seems insignificant, Jindal had become a serious player in Iowa in the final days of his campaign. His Iowa polling average, over the past month leading up to his exit, was 3 percent and trending upward.

If the polls are anywhere close to accurate and the Iowa Caucus were held Tuesday, that would've been good enough for anywhere from fifth to seventh place. The last two Iowa winners, former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, were both trailing Jindal in Iowa by more than a full percentage point.

Earlier this month, Christian conservative bloggers and radio host Shane Vander Hart and Brian Myers of Caffeinated Thoughts gave their endorsement to Jindal. While not one of the most coveted endorsements, they have a large audience within the

biggest traditional Iowa Republican Caucus voting bloc.

U.S. Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), who is one of those “must have” endorsements and represents Iowa’s Fourth Congressional District – arguably the state’s most conservative – threw his weight behind U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. The timing of Jindal’s suspension isn’t likely to be coincidental.

Jindal had visited the third-most of Iowa’s 99 counties behind Santorum and Huckabee, respectively, and had expended considerable time and resources attempting to sway voters in the northwest Iowa district. Without King’s support, it would be very difficult to win in that district.

Wednesday morning, Vander Hart took to his website to say he was disappointed to see Jindal drop out, but he understood why.

“I don’t regret my decision to endorse Governor Jindal. He was one of the best qualified candidates in terms of policy, principles and accomplishment,” he wrote. “I knew he was going to be a long shot, but I did feel Iowa was a possibility and that he would stay in the race until then. He said as much, but I understand that circumstances change and he was in a spot where he could not move on and he had to make a decision. I’m disappointed, but I can respect that.”

There was indeed a lot of reason to be optimistic about a governor with solid conservative Christian credentials, in spite of poor polling numbers. Recent history certainly suggests Christian conservative candidates substantially outperform their 90-day polling averages.

Four years ago, with about 90 days to go before the Iowa Republican Caucus, Santorum was stuck in seventh place in an eight-candidate field, polling at 4.3 percent. In fact, the day before the caucus, he was projected to finish a distant third to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and U.S. Rep. Ron Paul, having soared to 15.5 percent.

He won with 24.6 percent of the vote.

Four years before that, again 90 days before the Iowa Republican Caucus, Huckabee was polling at 8.0 percent, showing in fifth place in a six-candidate race. The day before Iowans went to caucus, he had finally emerged as a front-runner at 29.0 percent to Romney's 28.3 percent.

He won with 34.4 percent of the vote.

While it's highly unlikely a quarter to a third of caucus voters were backing Jindal, it's not unreasonable to think there is more than 3 percent. Even if it is just 3 percent, that could be a huge boost to one of the other conservatives in the race.

So, who benefits?

Ideologically, Jindal aligns best with Cruz, Huckabee, and Santorum, so the overwhelming majority of Jindal's supporters will gravitate toward those candidates. In recent polling, Jindal supporters have said they liked the combination of his principles with his executive experience.

Of the three, Huckabee has the most executive experience, but Santorum has the most legislative leadership experience. Conventional wisdom says Huckabee benefits most, but Vander Hart isn't so sure.

"I have a feeling Santorum may benefit the most, then Huckabee and Cruz," he said. "I'm thinking ... Huckabee has some baggage, and some are not comfortable with a one-term senator (Cruz)."

Santorum's campaign, in many ways, is much worse condition than Jindal's. He's currently operating on almost \$700,000 in loans, having received less than \$60,000 in donations over the course of the campaign.

He entered the fourth quarter with about \$13,000 cash on hand. His current RCP national polling average is 0.7 percent. In

Iowa, his 30-day polling average is just 1.1 percent.

“Santorum has never been relevant in this process,” Iowa-based nationally syndicated talk radio host Steve Deace said. “I don’t think Huckabee and Santorum will be in much longer, and they’re not really in now ... If [The Family Leader president Bob] Vander Plaats doesn’t endorse those guys, they’re done the next day.”

An endorsement from The Family Leader, Bob Vander Plaats, or both is the other major “must have” for a conservative candidate in Iowa. A major factor in that endorsement process will be Friday’s presidential candidate forum hosted by The Family Leader in Des Moines.

Vander Plaats has said he will not make an endorsement until after that event. According to The Family Leader, that endorsement likely won’t come until after Thanksgiving, perhaps as late as early December.