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Washington Watch: Is Jindal an electable thing, or the real thing?

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Washington — Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal brought a degree of clarity to the confused and chaotic Republican presidential race in his appearance Tuesday in the fourth nationally televised debates of the campaign.

Jindal marked a sharp distinction between his own, classically conservative economic position in favor of limiting government spending and the records of those he called “big government” Republicans — pretty much everyone else in the field. His principal foil was a candidate standing with him on the stage, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

Christie fired back and helped define the divide further.

“You know, the differences between me and Bobby Jindal, we can talk about those, and obviously, Bobby wants to spend a lot of time tonight talking about that,” Christie said.

“I’ll tell you what I want to talk about. I want to talk about what’s going to happen to this country if we have another four years of Barack Obama’s policies.

“And by the way, it will be even worse, because Hillary Clinton is running so far to the left to try to catch up to her socialist opponent, Bernie Sanders, it’s hard to even see her anymore.”

The two governors hammered home their points repeatedly. Christie said job No. 1 for the Republicans is to beat Clinton, the expected Democratic nominee, in the 2016 election — and that he is the candidate to do it, as a proven winner in a Democratic state. Jindal argued that even more important than defeating Clinton is sending a true conservative to the White House — someone like him, the only candidate in the field, he said, with a proven record of cutting government spending.

The choice, then, was plain: ideology vs. electability. It’s the kind of thing that could boost Jindal’s struggling campaign, particularly among true-red conservatives — and his performance did draw praise from some right-wing commentators.

But it’s not that simple.

To begin with, the forum for the exchange was the debate program’s undercard, the happy-hour event for candidates who did not qualify for a prime-time performance, based on national poll

results; for Jindal, that marked the fourth time that his lagging poll numbers relegated him to the kids' table. That meant a much smaller viewing audience Tuesday — 4.7 million, for the 6 p.m. debate, as opposed to 13.5 million for the 8 p.m. feature — and much less attention from the national media. A morning-after story in *The New York Times*, headlined “G.O.P Fight Now a Battle Over What Defines a Conservative,” did not mention Jindal, Christie or their fellow undercarders, former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, at all, instead looking only at the eight candidates on the main stage.

Beyond that, when the mainstream media did write about the undercard debate, the consensus declared Christie the winner.

Jindal's claim, which he repeats often, to be the one and only Republican candidate with a record of cutting government spending also is not indisputable. As evidence, Jindal cites a recent study by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, comparing his performance in Louisiana to that of Christie, Huckabee and three other current or former governors in the field. But the evaluations are complicated, and other researchers have come up with different outcomes, ranking Jindal behind several of his rivals on the budget-cutting scale.

In any event, Jindal's policies as a two-term governor have proven wildly unpopular in Louisiana, despite his boasts of shrinking the government economy to grow the private economy: Just 20 percent of voters approve of the job he's doing, according to a poll released last week by the University of New Orleans.

Jindal's supporters have explained away similarly dismal poll results by saying the numbers reflect that Jindal has made the tough choices necessary to get the state on track. That argument — essentially, that Jindal does things people don't like because he knows better than they do what's good for them — is not exactly a rallying cry for votes (and pretty much parallels what Jindal says is wrong with left-wing elites).

But Jindal's focus is not on Louisiana: It's on Iowa, where the Feb. 1 caucuses kick off the Republican nomination process. He's spent more time campaigning there than anyone except Santorum. Jindal's supporters are spending millions on TV advertising for him. It's doubtful that Republican caucusgoers in Iowa know much about Louisiana beyond what Jindal tells them — and they tilt heavily to the right end of the ideological spectrum.