

THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE

Bobby Jindal forceful in latest undercard debate Tuesday, goes after Chris Christie

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November 10, 2015

Gov. Bobby Jindal stood out as a forceful performer Tuesday in a nationally televised undercard debate among lower-polling Republican presidential candidates that was dramatically shaped by vigorous exchanges between him and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

“We need a conservative — not a big-government Republican in Washington, D.C.,” Jindal said.

In the “happy hour” debate on the Fox Business Network, Jindal repeatedly attacked Christie and his record in New Jersey that Jindal said is characterized by spending increases and credit-rating downgrades. By contrast, Jindal said, he is the only governor in the large Republican field who actually cut government spending in his state — a feat singled out by the conservative Cato Institute — while realizing credit-rating upgrades.

“Are we willing to cut the government economy so we can grow the American economy?” Jindal asked. “That is the most fundamental question. We are on the path to socialism.”

None of that is new for Jindal — nor was his assertion that Republicans need to nominate a true conservative, and avoid being “cheaper versions” of Democrats — but his points were sharpened in the exchanges with Christie, who repeatedly focused on the need to defeat likely Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Christie said his record of election victories in a Democratic state show he’s the man for that job.

Iowa poll puts Bobby Jindal ahead of prime-time debaters Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina

“Chris, I’ll give you a ribbon for participation and a juice box,” Jindal said. “But in the real world, it’s about results.”

But a third candidate on the undercard stage, former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, of Pennsylvania, capped the back-and-forth when he said, “Chris says we need someone who can win in a blue state, and Bobby says we need a real conservative” — and then paused, smiled, and spread his arms wide. Santorum went on to talk about his electoral successes in blue Pennsylvania and his conservative record in Congress.

Jindal fielded a challenging question early in the debate, when he was asked about his pro-energy policies and the unemployment rate in Louisiana, which exceeds the national average.

Jindal pivoted to another set of statistics: “We have more people working in Louisiana than ever before, earning a higher income than ever before,” he said. “We are growing Louisiana’s economy.”

In his closing remarks, Jindal returned to his dominant theme: “It’s not enough to elect just any Republican; we’ve seen that,” he said. “We’ve got to elect a Republican who is willing to take on the establishment in both parties.”

For the fourth time in four tries, Jindal fell short of qualifying for the prime-time event in a nationally televised Republican debate program — and thus, again, he was relegated to the second tier with other also-rans. They took to the stage at 6 p.m. Tuesday for the hour-long warm-up debate in Milwaukee on the Fox Business Network.

But there were some new faces alongside Jindal at the “kids’ table” this time: former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, both of whom had made the cut for the featured event in the three previous debates. FBN awarded slots in its two-hour, 8 p.m. debate to candidates scoring 2.5 percent or higher in an average of the four most recent national polls conducted through Nov. 4, and neither Huckabee nor Christie passed the test.

Jindal, along with former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, of Pennsylvania, returned to the undercard for the fourth time. But two other candidates who had appeared alongside them in the three previous debates — U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, and former New York Gov. George Pataki — watched at home, failing to meet the bare-minimum standard of a 1 percent or better showing in any of the four polls. Jindal struck out in three of the polls, but scored 2 percent in the fourth.

Each of the three previous debates — on Fox News Aug. 6, on CNN Sept. 16 and on CNBC Oct. 28 — divided the field into two flights. Although the criteria varied somewhat, all used national poll results for the seedings. Jindal’s supporters have argued that that’s unfair, and have pressed instead for the use of poll results in Iowa, which hosts the Feb. 1 caucuses that initiate the formal Republican nomination process. Jindal has put in more time in Iowa than any candidate except Santorum and his supporters have spent millions on television advertising touting his candidacy, and he has polled better there than nationally.

Like the CNBC debate, the FBN debate was keyed to economic themes.

Qualifying for prime-time stage were real-estate developer and reality-TV celebrity Donald Trump, of New York; retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, of Maryland; U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, of Florida; U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, of Texas; former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush; former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, of California; Ohio Gov. John Kasich; and U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, of Kentucky.

The first two debates drew record numbers of viewers for the cable networks televising the events: around 24 million for each of the prime-time debates. The first two undercard debates each were watched by about 6 million people. Those numbers fell off with the CNBC debate, to 14 million for the featured event and 1.6 million for the undercard.

But the liveliest debate controversy heading into Tuesday concerned not who appeared when or whether that mattered; instead, it erupted in reaction to the prime-time CNBC debate, widely panned as a disaster. Candidates complained of “gotcha” questions and efforts by the moderators to generate conflict. Representatives of most of the campaigns met a few days after the CNBC debate to discuss common grievances and try to come up with suggested changes, but any attempt at unity quickly collapsed amid the candidates’ competing interests.

Jindal, at 44 the youngest in the Republican field, is nearing the end of his second term as governor. State law bars him from seeking re-election.

Apart from lagging poll numbers, his campaign has been dogged by fundraising difficulties. And despite his boasts about his record as governor, he’s widely unpopular in his home state, which does nothing to lift his presidential prospects.