

# Bobby Jindal

1971–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2005–2008

REPUBLICAN FROM LOUISIANA

**B**obby Jindal was a fast-rising, intelligent “wunderkind technocrat” in the Republican Party when he won election to a U.S. House seat representing a district outside New Orleans in 2004, becoming the second Indian American elected to the House.<sup>1</sup> The gulf region’s response to and recovery from a crippling 2005 hurricane season defined Jindal’s House career and eventually catapulted him to the Louisiana governor’s mansion. The son of Indian immigrants seeking higher educational opportunities, Jindal became a rallying point for the Indian-American community. “What makes the American system so successful is the fact that immigrants and their children born here can get ahead,” he declared upon his first election to the House. “[They] can do very well, just do hard work.”<sup>2</sup>

Born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on June 10, 1971, Piyush Jindal was the son of Indian immigrants from the Punjab region of northern India. Jindal later insisted on being called “Bobby” after the youngest son in the television show *The Brady Bunch*. His parents had come to the United States so his mother, Raj Gupta Jindal, could pursue graduate work in nuclear physics at Louisiana State University.<sup>3</sup> His father, Amar, was an engineer—the only one of nine siblings to finish high school. Bobby Jindal has a younger brother, Nikesh.<sup>4</sup>

Jindal graduated from Baton Rouge High School in 1988 before earning degrees in biology and public policy from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1991. Jindal was named a Rhodes scholar and studied at Oxford University, earning a master of letters in 1994. Jindal worked briefly for a consulting firm after graduation before taking on the position of president of the University of Louisiana school system in 1999. Bobby Jindal married chemical engineer Supriya Jolly, and they have three children: Selia, Shaan, and Slade.<sup>5</sup>

Jindal’s interest in politics came early. During college, he interned in Louisiana Representative Jim McCrery’s office. The eager Jindal personally asked McCrery what he could do to contribute to the Congressman’s policy initiatives and McCrery shuttled him off to do research on Medicare. Two weeks later, Jindal delivered a thick report that impressed his boss.<sup>6</sup>

Jindal was preparing to attend Harvard Medical School when he was offered a secretary position in the Louisiana cabinet, heading the Department of Health and Hospitals. Jindal served for two years, never pursuing medical training. Thereafter, public service became his calling. “After my daughter was born, I really started thinking about the fact that I wanted her to grow up here in Louisiana like I did,” Jindal recalled. “I realized so many of my friends were leaving home, and I wanted to be a part of turning that around.”<sup>7</sup> Jindal served as executive director of the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare in 1998. In 2001 President George W. Bush appointed him Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Jindal’s first attempt at elected office came when he ran for Louisiana governor in 2003, losing narrowly to Democrat Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, 52 percent to 48 percent. A year later, when Louisiana Representative David Vitter vacated his House seat to run for the U.S. Senate, Jindal launched a campaign for the congressional seat. The district stretched from east of New Orleans, north across Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi border. Made up of primarily white-collar conservatives in the fast-growing New Orleans commuter suburbs, the constituency was 80 percent white.<sup>8</sup> Jindal capitalized on the notoriety he gained in his close gubernatorial loss. “When God closes one door, he opens another,” he said to a crowd of GOP





supporters when he announced his candidacy in January 2004. “I understand there’s a job opening here.”<sup>9</sup> Jindal did not live in the district before running, but his popularity catapulted him to front-runner status.<sup>10</sup> In August, his nearest competitor, then state representative (and future U.S. House Majority Whip) Steve Scalise, withdrew from the race ostensibly because Jindal’s popularity and funding made him a clear favorite. Some observers were already calling Jindal “Congressman.”<sup>11</sup> Jindal raised more money than needed, contributing the excess to other GOP campaigns.<sup>12</sup> He won the general election with a comfortable 78 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Jindal was the first Indian American to win election since the first Asian-American Representative, Dalip Singh (Judge) Saund of California, left office in 1963. But Jindal tended to play down his heritage. “We’ll be eating a lot of turkey over the holidays—with some crawfish on the side,” Jindal told reporters after his election. “(Louisiana) is the life we know. This is our culture. This is our home.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Jindal recognized the significance of being the son of immigrants in Congress. “I am very, very honored by the well wishes and support from the Indian American community. I guess the reason I ran for office in the first place is that I saw my parents [*sic*] experience in this country,” he told an Indian-American newspaper. “I want to make sure that the opportunities that brought our parents here in the first place continue to exist for the second, third and fourth generations as well.”<sup>15</sup>

An effective and prolific fundraiser, Jindal amassed a campaign re-election war chest as a freshman Member that matched those of congressional veterans.<sup>16</sup> He won re-election easily in 2006 with 88 percent of the vote.<sup>17</sup> Jindal initially requested seats on the Energy and Commerce or Ways and Means Committees when he arrived in Congress. He did not receive a seat on either panel, as freshmen rarely get such plum assignments. He instead served on the Education and the Workforce, Homeland Security, and Resources Committees in the 109th Congress (2005–2007). In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), he left Education and the Workforce and remained on the other two panels until he left the House mid-Congress in 2008.

Natural disaster defined Jindal’s House career after Hurricane Katrina struck southern Louisiana on August 29, 2005, just nine months after he came to Congress. The powerful storm surge overwhelmed New Orleans’s levee system resulting in 15- to 20-foot floods which left 80 percent of the city under water.<sup>18</sup> At the time, Katrina was the costliest hurricane in U.S. history and one of the five deadliest, and it was followed less than a month later by Hurricane Rita, prompting large-scale evacuations of already storm-damaged areas. According to *Congressional Quarterly*, nearly two-thirds of the bills Jindal submitted over the next 18 months were related to the storms, their aftermath, and other natural disasters.<sup>19</sup>

Jindal’s first act fell in line with his conservative beliefs. He initially teamed with Senator Vitter to author a law banning local municipalities from confiscating guns from citizens during natural disasters. This followed New Orleans’s confiscation of 700 weapons in the storm’s chaotic aftermath. The city returned the weapons in April 2006 after the National Rifle Association (NRA) threatened a lawsuit.

Jindal introduced the Hurricane Regulatory Relief Act on October 6, 2005; he immediately gained the support of Education and Workforce Committee Chairman (and soon-to-be Republican Leader) John Boehner of Ohio. The bill was aimed at streamlining aid to students, teachers, and displaced workers. It adjusted financial aid awards to students whose circumstances changed because of the storms, allowed teachers credentialed in Louisiana to find employment in the state in which they resided, and allowed affected states to allocate funding to emergency loans and early retirement distributions to displaced workers.<sup>20</sup>

Jindal was frustrated with the pace of government assistance, citing rules and regulations as the source of the delays. “People are starting to come home and businesses are beginning to reopen, critical infrastructure is slowly being rebuilt and we need to facilitate this recovery by ensuring that the state, local and federal governments are made completely user friendly,” Jindal told his colleagues. He emphasized that his bill did not create greater



bureaucracy: “Too often government proves its existence by adding rules and regulations, which can turn the rebuilding process into a vast quicksand, holding back growth. This is a perfect time to clean our regulatory house and make sure Louisiana is a welcoming, supportive state in which to live and work.”<sup>21</sup> Jindal also introduced legislation that created the Louisiana Hurricane and Flood Protection Council, a group charged with overseeing the Army Corps of Engineers in their efforts over the next 20 years to bolster infrastructure against damaging natural disasters.<sup>22</sup>

Post-storm difficulty in Jindal’s district shifted his traditionally pro-business stance when he fought against insurance companies dropping policies and raising premiums in Katrina’s wake. Jindal supported Democratic legislation that compelled insurance companies to share their data on losses, and he requested that the federal flood insurance program be able to borrow additional funds to cover homeowners’ losses.<sup>23</sup> Jindal worked with then Florida Governor Charlie Crist—whose state had faced a damaging 2004 hurricane season—to brainstorm ideas on how to reform the insurance industry in areas at high risk for hurricanes. Jindal showcased the Homeowners’ Defense Act of 2007, sponsored by Florida Representatives that had recently passed the House, as an example of good federal involvement with the insurance industry. The legislation allowed state-sponsored insurance funds to pool catastrophic risk and created a fund for low-interest loans to homeowners affected by natural disasters.<sup>24</sup>

Jindal criticized the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), charged with aiding the immediate aftermath and long-term recovery from the storm. In March 2006, he announced the allocation of more than \$79 million in FEMA grants to parishes in his district.<sup>25</sup> In April 2006, Jindal hosted the Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee for a field hearing at the Louisiana supreme court building in New Orleans. The hearing focused on FEMA waste, fraud, and abuse.<sup>26</sup> Jindal was particularly critical of the high levels of formaldehyde found in FEMA trailers serving as temporary shelters for hurricane victims. (Tests revealed the presence of the poison exceeded Environmental

Protection Agency standards by 83 percent.)<sup>27</sup> He also faulted FEMA for hiring out-of-state contractors to clear debris, distribute supplies, and oversee reconstruction rather than award contracts to local Louisiana businesses.<sup>28</sup> Jindal’s work in disaster relief earned praise from across the political spectrum. A local Democratic sheriff noted that Louisianans were frequently disappointed with the government response “from top to bottom,” but that there were “some people who distinguished themselves, and Bobby Jindal was one of them.”<sup>29</sup>

Jindal also sought increased oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, a potential boon to the southern Louisiana economy that had been crippled by the 2005 hurricanes. In his first term, Jindal helped to pass a law opening 8.3 million acres to drilling in the Gulf of Mexico—according to Jindal, this was the culmination of a long-term fight among Louisiana politicians spanning 50 years.<sup>30</sup> The House-passed bill, enacted as part of a larger tax and trade bill, split drilling revenues evenly between federal and gulf state governments.<sup>31</sup>

Jindal attempted to balance his drilling bill with certain environmental protections, including those benefiting gulf state fishing operations. He offered an amendment to a Department of the Interior and Environment Appropriations Act allocating \$2.5 million to combat “dead zones” in the Gulf of Mexico. In these areas, pollutants were causing algal blooms, which sucked oxygen out of water, making it unsustainable for sea life.<sup>32</sup> With one eye on Louisiana’s fishing industry, Jindal opposed a request to put oysters on the endangered species list in November 2005—“This is a victory for common sense,” he said, when the requester withdrew his petition.<sup>33</sup> Citing its importance for protecting against hurricane storm surge, Jindal introduced legislation adding 3,000 acres to Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve—a series of six sites throughout the southern Louisiana peninsula.<sup>34</sup>

On January 23, 2007, Jindal announced his intention to fulfill a past political ambition to run for Louisiana governor. He resigned from the House nearly a year later, on January 14, 2008, to focus on his gubernatorial campaign.<sup>35</sup> His victory in the governor’s race was embraced



by both the Indian-American community and Republican Party.<sup>36</sup> In 2009 the GOP selected Jindal for the high-profile role of delivering the response to Democratic President Barack Obama's first State of the Union Address. In 2015, after running in a crowded Republican primary field, he suspended his campaign for the GOP nomination for President.<sup>37</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

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## NOTES

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