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Blanco-Jindal: How was the race won and lost?

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Congratulations are in order to the governor-elect Kathleen Blanco and candidate Bobby Jindal, and the people of Louisiana for an issues-based and scandal-free gubernatorial elections last Saturday.

History would have been made with the election of either Kathleen Blanco (the first woman to be elected as the governor) or Bobby Jindal (the first non-white to be elected as the governor in the modern times), and history was made. Louisiana can be and should be proud.

However, it is instructive for us to understand the dynamics and the outcome of the election. The following are the summary facts of the two campaigns.

Bobby Jindal was leading in the polls by about 5-8 points with about a week to go; the polls showed Jindal to be in a statistical tie or with a very small lead as Louisiana headed to the polls.

Both Kathleen Blanco and Bobby Jindal ran credible campaigns. Blanco projected a 'gentle and competent' persona, and Jindal projected a 'problem solver' persona.

Blanco's final-week advertisement sharply attacking the record of Jindal as the Health Secretary in mid-1990s was tough, and Jindal chose not to respond that advertisement.

Blanco secured about 52% of the vote, and Jindal 48% of the vote in the election. The overall electoral turnout was about 51% -- just about what was expected. The turnout of the African-American vote was about 46% and the white vote was about 55% - - numbers very similar to those in the earlier run-off elections.

Jindal secured about 9-10% of the African-American vote --- double the percentage of the African-American vote earned by the victorious Republican candidates in the recent elections. The final tally of the African-American vote for Jindal was about the same as the pre-election poll projections.

However, Jindal got slightly less than 50% of the white vote in almost the entire state except in one or two areas such as Baton Rouge. This mediocre performance was a surprise, and very much unlike the other victorious Republican candidates who have secured at least about 55% to 60% of the white vote. The final tally of the white vote for Jindal was clearly about 6% - 8% lower than the pre-elections poll projections.

This is what many poll analysts have found time and again: When two candidates for an elected office are equally matched and there is parity or near-parity on all the factors, the pre-election polls overstate the preference for the non-majority candidate by about 5%-10%. This is called the Bradley effect in electoral politics.

So the pollsters have to adjust for this phenomenon. If we had done that, then Jindal would have been trailing in the polls in the final weeks of the campaign, and not leading.

The Bradley effect was first observed in the California gubernatorial elections in 1981. Tom Bradley, the highly regarded Mayor of Los Angeles and a political centrist, was the Democratic Party candidate. Bradley also happened to be African-American. George Dukemejian, a well regarded administrator, was the Republican party candidate. Dukemejian happened to be White.

Both Bradley and Dukemejian ran well-matched campaigns. The polls on the eve of the election showed Bradley leading Dukemejian by about 4%. However, Bradley lost the elections by about 5%.

We have observed such phenomenon in other situations including where a non-black candidate contests in a black-majority congressional district.

There are several possible explanations for the Bradley effect. The most common argument appears to be that the non-majority candidate has to demonstrate his/her values are consistently and firmly. It is the question of “empathy and understanding.”

In the Blanco-Jindal race, Jindal let doubts about his “empathy and understanding” grow and settle by not responding to the sharp attacks on his health care record. Hence, Jindal will have to wait for another opportunity to serve.