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GOP Rivals Kiss Nikki Haley's Ring

An endorsement from the popular Republican governor could spell the difference in South Carolina's primary.



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With the Republican presidential campaign now decamped for South Carolina, Nikki Haley can enjoy a new title going into the Feb. 20 primary: The Most Important Republican in America.

At least for the next 10 days, the first minority governor in the state's history could give an enormous boost to one of the remaining GOP candidates with an endorsement, potentially changing the course of the race and her own standing as a possible running mate.

Haley could not be reached Wednesday, but a strategist with one of those presidential campaigns confirmed that all are likely working their hardest for her support.

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* last week, Haley said: "Obviously by the time we get to South Carolina, I should do something"—but then added that she also might not endorse anyone.

Both Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush

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have already won important endorsements in the state, including the two sitting United States senators. Tim Scott is backing Rubio, while Lindsey Graham, after dropping his own presidential bid, quickly endorsed Bush.

An endorsement from a sitting governor, though, is generally considered much more valuable. Governors appoint members to boards and commissions, target major state government spending, and, through the executive agencies, employ tens of thousands—all of which translates into a political machine and clout with everyday voters typically unrivaled by any other elected official.

The next question after “if” Haley will endorse is “who.” And that has already led to plenty of speculation in the Palmetto State. Though Haley took advantage of the same tea-party wave that brought Rubio to the Senate in her first election in 2010, she has also enjoyed strong support from the business community and the party establishment.

A year ago, she praised Bush and said she had followed his campaign advice in her first run for governor when things were not going well for her. At the same time, some of her key allies are supporting Rubio. Then again, there is the reported bad blood between her and some of Rubio's top advisers because of their work for one of her 2010 primary opponents.

Haley caused a stir in January when she delivered congressional Republicans' official response to President Obama's final State of the Union address. While she criticized Obama for his policies, she also warned Americans against following the “siren call of the angriest voices”—a reference she confirmed the following day was to GOP front-runner Donald Trump.

The next morning, Haley also pointed out that she has criticized both Bush and Rubio, too. “Jeb Bush passed Common Core and Marco Rubio believes in amnesty which I don't,” she told reporters. (In a subsequent interview, she clarified that Bush supported Common Core but did not pass it, and that Rubio supported the “Gang of Eight” immigration bill but did not support “amnesty.”)

Scott Huffman, a political scientist and pollster at Winthrop University in South Carolina, said he thought Haley might have gone with Rubio prior to his disastrous debate performance last week and subsequent fifth-place finish in New Hampshire. But now, he said, “she could choose not to endorse, claiming the ‘good stateswoman’ role, and keep her VP prospects more viable irrespective of who gets the nod.”

Haley did endorse eventual nominee Mitt Romney ahead of the 2012 GOP presidential primary, but he wound up losing the South Carolina

contest anyway to Newt Gingrich. Her approval rating then, however, was only 47 percent. Four years later, it sits at 80 percent among Republicans, thanks in part to her much-praised handling of a racially inspired mass shooting in Charleston last year, followed by her successful call to remove the Confederate flag from state grounds.

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