

S.C. GOVERNOR'S RACE: THE CANDIDATES

Haley looks to make state electoral history

Lawmaker wants to be first female governor

BY ROBERT BEHRE
The Post and Courier

State Rep. Nikki Haley whisked into the dining room at the Wescott Plantation Golf Club in North Charleston knowing the audience should be a friendly one.

She was speaking to the monthly

meeting of the Jessamine Chapter of the American Business Women's Association, a networking group for Lowcountry businesswomen.

Haley, R-Lexington, is the only woman running for governor.

"There's nothing I love more than getting together with a group of girlfriends," she told the 30 women. "Thank you for getting together and helping each other."

But Haley also made it clear that

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Republican candidate for governor Nikki Haley

About the series

The Post and Courier is profiling the seven candidates for governor. This week we feature the Republicans; next week it's the Democrats' turn. The winner of each party's primary June 8 will face off Nov. 2 in the general election. For more political news, including information on registering to vote, go to postandcourier.com/politics.

REPUBLICANS

Mon.: U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett

Tue.: Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer

Today: State Rep. Nikki Haley

Thurs.: Att. Gen. Henry McMaster

DEMOCRATS

May 3: State Sen. Robert Ford

May 4: State Education Sup. Jim Rex

May 5: State Sen. Vincent Sheheen

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she's not expecting her gender alone to win her many votes.

"People love the idea of a woman governor, but mainly they love the idea of an accountant who understands the value of a dollar," she said, having mentioned earlier that she began doing the books for her family's business at age 13.

"It wasn't until I got to Clemson that I realized that wasn't normal," she joked.

Haley told them about her unusual background, growing up as a daughter of Indian immigrants in the small town of Bamberg.

Working for her family's business taught her a central theme of her campaign: "How hard it is to make a dollar and how easy it is for government to take it."

She explained her fight with fellow Republican lawmakers over getting their votes on the record, a battle she took up after the Legislature approved retirement prerequisites for lawmakers on a voice vote.

"To this day you can't find one legislator who will say they voted themselves a pay raise," she said.

The House leadership fought back by stripping her of positions she had gained through seniority, but there are more votes on record these days. "They were trying to show my colleagues what happens when we step out of line," she said, adding that she has become a believer in term limits.

Shirley Taylor of the Jessamine Chapter said she hasn't decided who she will vote for, and noted that Haley wasn't invited here simply to campaign. "We wanted her to come talk to us about how we, as business owners, can talk to people in state government and get our points across," she said.

Haley obliged, encouraging the women to learn the names of their representatives and senators in Columbia, then find out if they prefer people to communicate with them via e-mail, phone calls or face-to-face.

"If you don't hear back from them, it's a problem," she said, adding that many elected officials are scared of the current voter mood. "And it's a beautiful thing. ... You ride that wave and understand that you're in power."

Haley then talked about one of the biggest issues in the race — South Carolina's 12.2 percent unemployment rate, among the nation's highest.

She said she wants the state to review every tax and fee, and eliminate income taxes for small businesses. While she doesn't criticize the sizable incentive package offered to lure Boeing to North Charleston, she said, "Ninety-five percent of our economy is small business. Let's take care of the small businesses we already have."

Haley appeared at ease with the crowd, and when she finished her brief speech and opened the floor for questions, she cracked a joke when no one instantly raised their hand. "Was I that good?" she asked.

A woman then asked why South Carolina has the fewest women lawmakers of any state, and Haley explained that it's not because so few win, it's because so few run.

She said women offer a lot because they are so balanced, then mentioned a quote from Margaret Thatcher: "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman."

Haley can be considered a long shot, since she trails in fundraising and has a more limited political resume than her opponents.

But she bragged on one point: She snared 83 percent of the vote in her 2008 race, the highest of any GOP state lawmaker

in a contested race that year.

She also is considered the political heir apparent to Gov. Mark Sanford — his ex-wife Jenny has endorsed her — but she doesn't mention the Sanfords on this stop. His revelations of an Argentinian mistress and an extensive ethics probe have eroded his political sway.

If Haley can't expect the women's vote simply because she hopes to become the state's first woman governor, perhaps she can expect it because of what she says.

"That was a wow!" Jessamine Chapter president Kathy Beriman said after Haley finished and left for another event in Goose Creek. "I feel like I have a much better idea of who she is. Gosh, I think it's awesome that she's running."



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