



OPINION: CHRISTIE'S PLUMMET IN THE POLLS (AND ELSEWHERE) -- IT'S NOT JUST BRIDGEGATE

CARL GOLDEN | MARCH 18, 2014

Governor's flagging popularity reveals deep disappointment in his administration, and every revelation may make the chasm all the deeper



By any standard, the fall from grace has been stunning.

Little more than four months ago, Gov. Chris Christie enjoyed job approval ratings the envy of every other governor in the nation. He was fresh off a landslide 22-point reelection victory, had just been installed as chairman of the Republican Governor's Association, led the field of potential presidential candidates for 2016, and was the only party figure who polls showed could defeat Hillary Clinton.

Today, a part of his administration lies in ruins, reduced to rubble by allegations of abuses of government power in furtherance of a political agenda and accusations of ethical misbehavior and conflicts of interest on a grand scale.

While Christie has not been implicated directly in any of the incidents, the unrelenting, daily barrage of news involving his staff and his high-level appointees has exacted a fearsome toll.

Christie is on the wrong side in every category in every poll -- job performance, trustworthiness, honesty, presidential prospects, sincerity, and leadership qualities. More worrisome, he's suffered a sharp decline in approval among independents, a group invaluable to his legislative successes in his first term.

His national stature has suffered as well and, in some polls, he's fallen into fourth or fifth place in early surveys measuring the strength of possible presidential contenders.

Earlier this month, he delivered a speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) - a national organization that refused to invite him last year. While his comments were well-received, he placed fourth in the organization's straw poll, far behind Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul and trailing Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Dr. Benjamin Carson.

A relatively innocuous event (at least as political scandals go) -- diverting two access lanes to the George Washington Bridge and creating an enormous traffic jam and public safety hazard in Fort Lee -- has grown into a massive web of interrelated acts, including accusations of improper distribution of federal funds meant to assist victims of Hurricane Sandy and the involvement of David Samson, a Christie appointee to chair the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, in actively supporting Authority projects and investments that benefitted clients of Samson's law firm and lobbying arm.

Investigations by a special legislative committee and the U. S. Attorney's office are ongoing and show no signs of winding down anytime soon. A deputy chief of staff who Christie publicly fired and one of his close advisers who served as his campaign manager are embroiled in a court case and have invoked their Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination to avoid complying with subpoenas seeking information on the lane closure episode.

To reestablish control of the discussion, Christie has turned to the familiar and the comfortable -- citizens' town hall forums -- a device that served him exceedingly well in his first term by giving him open, unfettered access to the public without the usual media filter.

He's used the absence of any questions on the scandals and associated issues at his most recent town hall events as proof that voters and taxpayers are most concerned with issues that impact them directly -- property taxes, education reform, government spending, and the like.

He's been accused by critics of prescreening questioners and questions alike, calling only on those whose inquiries play to his strengths and give him a platform to attack his political opponents and reiterate his commitment to concentrate on finding solutions to problems and not be deterred or distracted by scandal-related issues.

Despite being confronted for the first time by hecklers and protesters who sense the governor is now politically vulnerable and can be challenged openly, Christie has achieved some level of success with the town hall strategy.

His appearances continue to draw large audiences who, for the most part, respond in a friendly and respectful manner, expressing their displeasure vocally at the hecklers and cheering on their removal from the hall.

The media coverage of the town halls remains fairly intense as well, and reporters continue to record the governor's words in their accounts, although always referring to the scandals and investigations lurking in the background.

They point out that, even though the governor makes time to plan and participate in the town hall forums, he has not held a news conference to respond to questions since January 9, when he spent two hours in front of a room jammed with state and national reporters, fielding questions about what had come to be called Bridgegate and announcing an "off with their heads" policy for a deputy chief of staff and a political confidante.

Christie's effort to turn the discussion back to governmental, legislative, and policy matters is a recognition that the issue is no longer merely about who ordered the bridge access lanes closed and why.

Rather, it's about an administration preoccupied with constantly striving for greater political

There has been nothing to tie Christie to many of these acts, and there remains a case to be made they were planned and executed by rogue underlings eager to exert power, elevate their own importance, and impress their boss. The governor's detractors argue on the other hand that there existed in his administration a mean-spirited culture that encouraged and celebrated acts of political retribution and it should be no surprise that, in light of such a culture, staffers with little or no political experience would act improperly.

Christie has opted for the only viable strategy open to him to deal with the scandal in all its facets -- change the debate to the extent possible, maintain his distance from those identified as having misbehaved, depend on public reaction focusing on other more pressing issues, and play for time in the hope the scandals lose momentum in the absence of any new developments.

It is, though, difficult to ignore the cumulative impact of Bridgegate and the other allegations it has spawned. Even for as tough-minded and strong a personality as Christie, the weight is crushing.

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