

# The Real Chris Christie Scandal



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JOHN ATLAS AND PETER DREIER – JANUARY 15, 2014, 12:00 PM EST

During last fall's New Jersey gubernatorial contest, which Gov. Chris Christie used as a rehearsal for a 2016 presidential bid, the media were so mesmerized by his outsize personality that they paid little attention to his track record as governor. Contrary to his carefully-crafted image, Christie has not been a can-do bipartisan pragmatist but a hard-line conservative. When he plays the no-nonsense tough guy, it is usually aimed at the most vulnerable people in society. But he gets all warm and fuzzy when it comes to the rich and powerful.

Given the media's proclivity to view politics through the lens of personality over policy, it should come as no surprise that Christie's current troubles, perhaps even his political downfall, is based not his record on issues, but instead on his personal characteristics as an arrogant bully who closed lanes to the George Washington Bridge, the world's busiest, causing a massive four-day traffic jam, in order to exact revenge on his Democratic opponents in Fort Lee. Of course, we've seen this side of Christie before. When he's been seen on camera verbally abusing school

teachers or humiliating ordinary citizens at public events, he revealed an unpleasant aspect of his character. Until now, however, these questionable personality traits haven't undermined his political credibility.

Even now, with Christie at the center of a major controversy, the national media have invested plenty of resources and space looking into "bridge-gate," but put little effort reporting on his administration's impact on New Jersey's economy, environment, and families. Late-night comics like the Daily Show's Jon Stewart ridicule Christie about his political arrogance, but ignore his performance as New Jersey's chief executive.

If Christie survives the current scandal - by shifting blame to his staff and political cronies - pundits and voters will have a chance to take a closer look at Christie's record in office. If so, they'll find that Christie has more in common with Tea Party Republicans than with his state's long tradition of GOP moderates, such as former Senator Clifford Case and former Governors Christine Todd Whitman and Tom Kean. Christie is a hard-line anti-government, social, and big-business conservative in the same mold as Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. The major difference is that Christie had to contend with a Democratic state legislature, which has acted as a constraint on his right-wing initiatives. For example, New Jersey's Senate President Stephen Sweeney said that Christie "got lucky" because the hurricane Sandy distracted voters from the bad economy. Christie "prayed a lot and a storm came," Sweeney observed.

Indeed, Christie's public image got a make-over after Hurricane Sandy destroyed much of New Jersey's coast, and Christie was seen touring the area with President Obama and warmly praising the president for his help in providing federal funds for post-Sandy recovery. Conservatives within the GOP found his embrace of Obama distasteful, but many media pundits used that incident to cast Christie as a bipartisan pragmatist primarily interested in making life better for ordinary Jerseyans. This was exactly the image that Christie wanted and it served him well, helping him win a landslide victory in November and strengthening his claim as a contender for the GOP presidential nomination as a centrist Republican in a blue state.

But Christie's policies since taking office in 2010 have been a disaster for a majority of New Jersey's families.

**Wounding the economy:** New Jersey has the nation's seventh highest unemployment rate and the second highest percentage of mortgage loans in foreclosure. New Jersey's credit rating has dropped on Christie's watch. Even when compared with neighboring states, New Jersey is an economic basket case, with many families struggling to make ends meet.

**Hurting the poor and middle class:** Christie reduced the earned-income tax credit, a popular program that helps lift the working poor out of poverty - in other words, he raised taxes on the poor. Christie vetoed a minimum wage hike that the legislature had passed, calling it "stupid" and "truly ridiculous." So the legislature put the issue before the voters, who supported it in November by a 61 percent margin, larger than Christie's own victory.

Meanwhile, Christie allowed property taxes to skyrocket by about 20 percent, falling hardest of the state's middle class homeowners.

**Enriching the rich and big business:** While stiffing New Jersey's poor and its middle class, Christie has handed big corporations more than \$2 billion in tax breaks that has had little impact on job creation. For example, the state gave Prudential Insurance a quarter-billion simply to move its headquarters a few blocks in Newark. While New Jersey desperately needs to invest in infrastructure and education, Christie three times vetoed an income tax hike for New Jersey's millionaires. He warned that it would trigger a massive exodus of rich people even though research reveals that it would have no such impact.

**Wasting tax money to boost his political career:** Christie siphoned off millions in federal relief funds intended for Hurricane Sandy victims in order to pay for television ads that promoted himself, prompting a call for a federal investigation. After U.S. Senator Frank Lautenberg died in June, Christie opted to hold a special election to fill the seat in October rather than in November, when Christie was up for re-election. This entirely political calculation - Christie wanted to avoid a large voter turnout by Democrats in November - cost New Jersey taxpayers some \$25 million.

**Opposing women's equality and rights:** By cutting \$7.4 billion targeted for Planned Parenthood, Christie shut down six family planning clinics that provide cancer screenings, contraception, and other essential women's health services. He vetoed a bill to prevent gender wage discrimination in public contracts, calling it "senseless bureaucracy."

**Opposing same-sex marriage:** Christie vetoed a bill to give equal rights to gay couples; it took a court ruling to legalize same-sex marriage in New Jersey.

**Damaging the environment:** Christie defeated a push by 180 environmental organizations to let New Jerseyans vote on a ballot measure to increase parks, and other open spaces. He also pulled the state out of a regional agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 10 percent by 2018. He plans to divert \$40 million from a recent settlement with Passaic River polluters intended to restore the blighted waterway to balance the state budget.

**Opposing affordable health care:** New Jerseyans trying to enroll for Obamacare face difficulties not encountered by New York residents because unlike Governor Cuomo, Christie refused to create a state health insurance exchange. This left millions of federal dollars on the table aimed at educating families about how to sign up for the program.

**Attacking public education and public employees:** Like Wisconsin's Gov. Walker, he has used the state's public employee unions as a political punching bag. He cut health and pension benefits for public sector workers, including cops and teachers. Christie has called the state's teachers union "political thugs" and has attacked individual teachers when they question him at public events - for example, challenging his support for private school vouchers and charter schools, which diverts funds away from public schools. In his first year as governor, Christie slashed \$1.2 billion from the state's public schools - cuts that the state Supreme Court said violated students' rights. He killed a DREAM Act bill that would provide in-state tuition at state colleges for the children of immigrants who graduate from New Jersey high schools. Meanwhile, he cut funding for higher education by 15 percent.

**Opposing affordable housing:** Despite a severe shortage of low and moderate-income housing, Christie tried to divert funds earmarked for affordable housing until the courts blocked him from doing so.

**Compromising civil rights and criminal justice:** Christie declined to renominate Associate Justice John E. Wallace Jr, the only African-American on the New Jersey Supreme Court, and left vacant over 50 seats on New Jersey courts, effectively denying the right to a fair and speedy trial. Christie pushed out the State's Public Defender, the only high-ranking African-American policy official in his administration.

If, by shifting blame to his top staff and cronies, Christie can persuade voters that he had no direct involvement in the bridgegate scandal, he may still survive to run for president. If so, it won't be too late for the media do its job and scrutinize Christie's track record as governor. What they'll discover is that Christie is a reckless right-winger with a huge mean streak.

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