

Christie Faces Gender Gap as New Jersey Governor Steps Onto National Stage

By William Selway and Terrence Dopp - Mar 14, 2011

New Jersey resident Christy Webster said she knows she is in the minority of women who like Governor [Chris Christie's](#) pugilistic style of leadership.

"He's trying to get rid of a whole bunch of trash, and he's like a bulldozer," Webster, 31, said at Christie's March 9 town-hall meeting in Hopatcong, her hometown. "There's a bully perception."

Since taking office in January 2010, Christie has sparred with teachers, slashed spending on schools and sought to diminish government-worker benefits he says the state can't afford. He has emerged as a star among some Republicans, who see him as a model for dealing with the fiscal wreckage of the recession. The Virginia Tea Party named him their top choice for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, a job he has said he could win but won't pursue.

Christie, 48, also has one major weakness, according to state and national polls: He has trouble with women.

The former U.S. prosecutor's support is far higher among men than women, who compose more than half the population and turned out in far greater numbers for recent elections. The divide might prove a stumbling block should Christie seek to advance on a national stage, by aggravating a [gender gap](#) that Republicans have fought for the past three decades.

Judged by Results

"Listen, if I knew how to bridge the gender gap, I probably would have dated more in high school, I suspect," Christie said at a press conference in Wayne on March 11.

"I'm just going to be me," he said. "I see those polls and I read them, but I can't be anything other than me. I think that ultimately, no matter what gender you are, you judge a governor by the results he or she produces for the people of the state. I'm sure that's the way I'll be judged at the end of my term."

Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners and a Democratic pollster who has done surveys in [New Jersey](#) for groups fighting with Christie, disagrees.

"He has a huge gender gap," Lake said in an interview. "There's a fundamental sense among women that his policies and his budget politics just represent the wrong priorities. So there's partisanship that really opened him up, and then there's his personal style that really strikes men and women differently."

A Quinnipiac University poll released March 7, which found that Christie was essentially tied with President [Barack Obama](#) as the "hottest" sitting U.S. politician, also showed his lopsided gender support. The poll asked voters to rate their sentiments 0 to 100 degrees on a "feeling thermometer." While 35 percent of women rated Obama between 81 degrees and 100 degrees, the warmest or most favorable, only 7 percent felt that way about the governor.

46 Percent

Christie's approval rating in his home state also is lower among women. In a Feb. 9 Quinnipiac poll of New Jersey voters, 52 percent approved of Christie, including 58 percent of men and 46 percent of women.

Other polls have registered similar gender gaps. A November 2009 exit poll by [CBS News](#) found that Christie led incumbent Democrat [Jon Corzine](#) among men by a 13 percentage-point margin and among women lagged behind by 5 percentage points. A late [February poll](#) by [Rutgers University's](#) Eagleton Institute of Politics found that 50 percent of women viewed Christie unfavorably, compared with 37 percent for men.

'Tough' Style

"He's got a style that appears to be more appealing to men, that tough, I-am-going-to-say-what-I-want-to-say style," said David Redlawsk, director of polling for Eagleton. "Christie doesn't come across as a consensus sort of guy."

The poll data suggest that there is more than just the partisan rift that typically leaves women supporting Democrats, Redlawsk said.

Republican women were also less favorably disposed to the governor than men of his party, according to a sample from his results he said was too small to be scientific but was nonetheless revealing.

Dena Mottola Jaborska, executive director of Environment New Jersey, a group that has sided with Christie on some issues and clashed on others, said she grew up in Hoboken, accustomed to the brash, aggressive style endemic to the state.

Christie's willingness to engage in bare-knuckle political squabbles offends many women's sensibilities, she said.

'Higher Ground'

"We want them to fight from a higher ground, not to scrap or roll up their sleeves and start throwing punches," she said. "Not all women have children, but a lot of us do. And we're concerned about these cuts and the future of our children and grandchildren."

Running the U.S. state saddled with the highest tax burden, Christie has refused to raise levies, a stance that has endeared him to many voters while forcing him to make unpopular cuts. He slashed \$820 million in school aid in 2010. And he has blamed unions, especially the New Jersey Education Association representing teachers, as a reason for the state's high taxes.

In 2007-2008, 76 percent of public-school teachers were female, [according](#) to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Women have cast 4 million to 7 million more votes than men in recent elections, [according](#) to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers.

'Drug Mules'

Last year, Christie urged voters to reject school budgets in districts where teachers didn't agree to accept wage freezes, and accused educators of using students like "drug mules" to urge parents to support the spending plans, which in New Jersey are subject to yearly referendums. A botched application by his administration cost the state \$400 million in federal education funds.

Christie also cut \$7 million in women's health funding and vetoed a later attempt to restore the money through a Medicaid expansion.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics, said women generally support social-welfare programs because their lower pay and responsibility for children or elderly parents make them more attuned than men to worries about economic security. They also favor incremental change, she said.

"We have a governor who, right now, it appears the philosophy is cut with a machete," she said. "Women are probably more comfortable with someone who is cutting with a scalpel."

Not in 2012

In a March National Review interview, Christie said he has been asked to run for president and knows he could win, though he insisted he won't run in 2012. Christie, who campaigned across the nation for his party's candidates in the November elections, was named policy vice chairman of the [Republican Governors Association](#) last month.

In every presidential election since 1980, women have tended to back Democratic candidates more strongly than do men, and a majority of women hasn't supported a Republican since 1988, according to data compiled by Walsh's center.

Lake, the Democratic pollster, said Christie's personality could be particularly damaging with independent, blue-collar women, a sought-after swing group she dubbed "Waitress Moms."

While that may not affect chances of winning the Republican nomination, she said it could figure into the general election. A November poll by the Pew Research Center found little gender difference in preferences for potential Republican primary contenders, though it didn't ask about Christie.

'Aggressive Fighting'

"It'd be a stumbling block in a general election," Lake said. "It also doesn't fit the mood of the times. People don't want this aggressive fighting."

New Jersey resident JoAnne Yanuzzelli, a Republican stay-at-home mother of five, said she is an avid Christie supporter because of his moves to control the budget. The Sparta resident said most of her female friends disagree with her politics and the Republican booster meetings she attends are dominated by men -- with the women in the crowd generally much older than she.

"Conservative views tend to mean more old-fashioned, and men tend to be more old-fashioned," she said. "People, especially my age, are sometimes taken aback by how strong and aggressive he is."

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