Poll: NJ Dems' support for Christie dives

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TRENTON — Partisan New Jersey is back.

With Gov. Chris Christie slogging through a scandal that could damage his second-term agenda and ruin his national political ambitions, the Democrats he so carefully courted over the past four years are abandoning the Republican governor, a new poll shows. And, ominously, Christie’s overall favorability rating has dropped below 50 percent.

Overall, the poll shows the scandal is having a negative impact on how the governor is perceived in New Jersey.

Only 46 percent of New Jerseyans surveyed in a new Rutgers-Eagleton Poll give Christie a favorable rating (down from 65 percent in November), while 43 percent view him unfavorably. That decline, the poll indicates, was fueled by a lack of support from Democrats, whose backing of Christie plunged by 26 percentage points.

Christie's approval ratings skyrocketed after Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. Independents and Democrats seemed to agree the Republican was a strong leader who had handled the aftermath of the storm well. Those favorability ratings never dropped significantly, culminating in a Christie landslide in his November 2013 re-election.

The newly emerging scandal over George Washington Bridge access lane closings in September 2013, however, has changed that. A Christie deputy chief of staff knew in advance about the closings, which caused four-hour traffic jams in Fort Lee over a period of four days, and they were carried out by a Christie ally at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

The governor has denied any prior knowledge of the closings and fired Bridget Anne Kelly, the deputy chief of staff whose email in August saying, "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee," brought the scandal into the governor's office.

"The re-emergence of strong partisan differences in believing the governor returns us to a pre-Sandy political environment," said Rutgers-Eagleton polling director David Redlawsk. "Before the storm, Governor Christie's term was defined by sharp splits, with Democrats generally negative and Republicans very positive. Once Christie proved his leadership after Sandy, partisan differences became quite small right through the election in November. But Democrats are once again very unhappy with the governor."

Another poll released this week, by Quinnipiac University, found about one-third of respondents nationwide are less likely to vote for Christie for president since learning his staff may have created the traffic jams.

The Quinipiac poll found the biggest shift among independent voters, who preferred Christie to Democrat Hillary Clinton by 47-32 percent in a survey last month but score the two virtually even now.

Christie sought to revive his fortunes Tuesday, his inauguration day, with an address that focused heavily on unity and bipartisanship. Democrats in the Legislature, however, immediately balked at his agenda. Senate President Stephen Sweeney said the governor’s speech was “long on rhetoric and short on solutions.”

Skepticism about Christie’s handling of the scandal was also evident in the Rutgers-Eagleton poll. More than 50 percent of those surveyed thought the nearly two-hour press conference Christie held to apologize for the behavior of his staff was more an effort to save his national presidential ambitions than it was about the people of New Jersey. And half of those polled also believe the scandal gives insight into how a Christie White House would be run.

Also, more than 70 percent of those surveyed in the poll say Christie’s attitude contributed in some part to the behavior of his staff.

The Rutgers-Eagleton poll has an error margin of up to 3.6 percentage points, and the Quinnipiac survey’s error margin is 3.5 percentage points. It surveyed 1,933 registered voters nationwide, also via landlines and cellphones, from Jan. 15 to 19.

The surveys were mostly taken before new allegations surfaced that Christie’s administration threatened to withhold Hoboken’s Superstorm Sandy recovery aid unless the city’s Democratic mayor signed off on a politically connected building project.