New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s approval rating fell to 53 percent from 68 percent -- losing support among Republicans, Democrats and independents -- according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released Jan. 22. Photographer: Jeff Zelevansky/Getty Images

Controversies surrounding New Jersey Governor Chris Christie have hurt the Republican’s possible presidential aspirations at a time when he already is viewed skeptically by the party’s base, said Tom Davis, a Republican consultant.

"His numbers are down in New Jersey, number one -- I mean, his whole appeal is, ‘I’m the winner,’” Davis, a former National Republican Congressional Committee chairman from Virginia, said in an interview on Bloomberg Television’s "Political Capital with Al Hunt" airing this weekend.

Christie’s approval rating fell to 53 percent from 68 percent -- losing support among Republicans, Democrats and independents -- according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released Jan. 22. He’s faced inquiries about his office’s spending of Hurricane Sandy aid and its ties to politically motivated traffic congestion at the George Washington Bridge.

“He’s never going to be the darling of the party base,” said Davis, now director of federal government affairs for Deloitte Consulting. “But, you know, they can make a contract with him: If you can win, you can help advance the agenda. But it’s all based on the fact that he can win in a blue state. And when his numbers go down -- if he turns upside-down, for example, in his own state -- I think that takes the patina off him and he becomes more vulnerable.”

Christie, 51, was the first Republican since 1985 to win more than 60 percent of the vote in a New Jersey governor’s race. He was third, behind U.S. Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, in a hypothetical Republican presidential primary match-up, according to a Quinnipiac University poll this week.

**Political Unity**

Republicans can win seats in Congress this year if President Barack Obama continues to focus on divisive issues like income inequality, Davis said. Obama should focus his State of the Union speech next week on trying to unite lawmakers by talking about reducing the deficit, he said.

"He ought to preach unity at this point," Davis said. “Part of his problem right now is you have a very polarized country.”

Davis predicted his party, which has a majority in the House but not the Senate, would pick up seats in the November elections. Still, Republicans face long-term problems, he said, pointing to at least 18 states -- with about 238 electoral votes -- that Democratic presidential candidates have won in six consecutive elections. At least 270 electoral votes are needed to win the White House.

**Democratic Coalition**

“Even if the Republicans pick up the Senate, two years from now it’ll be jeopardized again,” he said. “If you’re Republicans, you have to figure, what part of that Democratic coalition can we pick off? Young people come to mind right away.”

Republican Governors John Kasich of Ohio and Scott Walker of Wisconsin may help the party pick up crucial states in 2016, Davis said, if they win re-election this year and then if either one becomes the Republican presidential nominee. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush might do that, too, he said.
“His biggest plus is, frankly, not that he’s a Bush,” Davis said of former President George W. Bush’s younger brother. “It’s the fact that he was a very good governor and he’s from a very swing state and had a pretty outstanding record.”

Davis, who represented northern Virginia in the House, said there are lessons for his party in the indictment this week of former Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, who was viewed as a possible Republican vice presidential candidate in 2012.

McDonnell and his wife, Maureen, were accused by U.S. prosecutors of using his office to enrich himself and his family in exchange for helping an in-state company’s chief executive promote a dietary supplement.

“It’s a warning shot at this point that you’re in office, if you want to make money, you leave office,” Davis said.

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