Chris Christie's perception as a 'bully' increases amid bridge scandal, poll shows

By Brent Johnson/The Star-Ledger

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TRENTON — A new poll shows that two-thirds of New Jersey voters still see Gov. Chris Christie as a "fighter" amid the George Washington Bridge scandal — but the percentage of those who view him as a "bully" has reached an all-time high.

The Rutgers-Eagleton poll, released today, reveals that 67 percent of voters say the word "fighter" fits the Republican governor very well. Another one in five say it's somewhat fitting, while only 8 percent say they don't see him that way at all.

But the survey — which asked voters to rate Christie on a number of traits — shows that 43 percent say the word "bully" suits him very well. That's a nine-point increase from the group's last poll, in October. Another 21 percent say the word fits somewhat well, while about a third do not see him that way at all.

The poll was conducted about a week after Christie publicly apologized for the GWB controversy.

"Bridgegate has taken a toll on perceptions of Christie," said David Redlawsk, the poll's director and a political science professor at Rutgers University. "Positive views of his leadership buoyed ratings post-Sandy, but negative traits are becoming more prevalent in light of recent events."

Christie was asked during a TV interview last September whether he is a "bully" — a term critics have often used to describe him.

"No, I am not a bully," the governor told "CBS Sunday Morning. "But what I am is a fighter."

As for whether the governor is "trustworthy"? Today's poll shows an all-time low of 27 percent say that term applies very well — a 16-point drop.

"Trust in most politicians has been very low in recent years, but Christie has enjoyed comparatively high trust post-Sandy," Redlawsk said. "That appears to have evaporated outside of the GOP while dropping significantly among Republicans as well."

Sixty-fort percent say "stubborn" fits Christie very well — up 10 percentage points. Half view him as arrogant (a five-point increase) and "self-centered" (an 11-point uptick).

More than half still say "strong leader" suits Christie very well, but that's a 10-point decline. Thirty percent say "fair" fits him, an 11-point drop, while "smart" has fallen five points to 58 percent and "effective" six points to 44 percent.

Meanwhile, pride in and enthusiasm about governor are both down to 35 percent — a double-digit drop in each category. Forty percent are angrier (up 12 percentage points) and 41 percent are more worried (up 10 percentage points) when they think about Christie.

Christie office has come under fire over the unannounced closure of local access lanes to the nation's busiest bridge in Fort Lee last September — a plan that caused days of heavy traffic for thousands of drivers.

Democrats accused the Christie administration of plotting the closures as political payback because Fort Lee's Democratic mayor refused to endorse the governor for re-election.

Earlier this month, e-mails surfaced showing that Bridget Anne Kelly, Christie's deputy chief of staff, apparently knew about the plan in advance, saying "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee" a few weeks before the closures.

Christie fired Kelly and apologized for the issue, but he has repeatedly denied knowing about the plan himself.

A committee of state lawmakers, as well as the U.S. Attorney's office, is investigating the matter.

The statewide poll was conducted over the phone from Jan. 14-19 with 826 New Jersey adults. The margin of error was plus-or-minus 3.6 percentage points.

Nearly two-thirds of the survey was completed before new allegations against Christie's administration emerged: Dawn Zimmer, the Democratic mayor of Hoboken, accused members of the governor's cabinet of threatening to withhold Hurricane Sandy relief funds if she did not support a development project in the city.

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