

Bridgegate casts continuing shadow on Chris Christie's campaign

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TRENTON — The trial is set to begin this fall.

But the high-profile criminal case known as Bridgegate — which nearly derailed Gov. [Chris Christie's](#) presidential campaign before it even began — is likely to play out in the heat of the Republican primary battle, court records now indicate.

"That can't be a good thing, no matter what," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll. "His name is going to come up a lot."

Bridgegate grew of the governor's 2013 re-election campaign and led to federal charges that [allies of the governor](#) engineered a series of lane closings at the George Washington Bridge as part of a vendetta to punish the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee for failing to endorsing Christie.

While Christie has never been implicated in the scandal, the case continues to weigh heavily on his presidential aspirations as he [launches his bid for national office](#), and the timing of the trial could not be worse for a candidate trying to leave it all behind, said Redlawsk.

"Unlike most scandals, this one is fairly easy to understand — the idea that the governor's staff appears to have retaliated in a really Jersey sort of way," he remarked.

Charged in the case were Bill Baroni, the former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, along with Bridget Anne Kelly, a former deputy chief of staff to the governor. Both were indicted May 1 on nine counts of conspiracy, fraud and related charges, in connection with the abrupt shutdown of local access lanes at the George Washington Bridge in September 2013.

David Wildstein, another former Port Authority executive and a former schoolmate of Christie at Livingston High School — where the governor on June 30 made his official entry into the presidential race — has already pleaded guilty to his role, implicating both Baroni and Kelly in the political payback scheme.

BRIDGEGATE'S FALLOUT

According to court filings, the trial is set to commence on November 16 before U.S. District Judge Susan D. Wigenton in Newark. Attorneys for both Baroni and Kelly declined to discuss the matter. But with [more than 1.5 million documents](#) cited by federal prosecutors, as well as expectations of a long series of motions, no one believes the trial will begin on that date.

"I wouldn't expect this to go to trial before the middle of 2016 at the earliest," said veteran New Jersey criminal defense attorney Gerald Krovatin, who is not involved in the case.

Matthew Hale, a political science professor at Seton Hall University, said Bridgegate was always going to be part of the narrative of a Christie presidential campaign.

"Every story about him will always mention it," he said. "Whatever happened is irrelevant. It's so linked to Gov. Christie and it will always part of the discussion from here on out. But if the trial slips back into February, the last thing Gov. Christie wants to be doing to answering questions about this at a town hall meeting three days before the New Hampshire primary."

Without the fallout of Bridgegate, he said Christie would likely have been the Republican frontrunner. But in the wake of the scandal, the governor's poll numbers nosedived and never recovered.

"He has emerged with the image of a petty mean-spirited political hack and a bully—none of which are calling cards for the presidency," said Hale.

But Assemblyman Jon M. Bramnick (R-Union), a member of the campaign's New Jersey finance team, does not see Bridgegate as a major stumbling block as the governor begins his quest for the White House.

"The issues in this country are so great, the last think people care about is what happened at a bridge," he said.

DOES ANYONE CARE?

Brigid Harrison, professor of political science and law at Montclair State University, agreed that Bridgegate as it stands now is a non-starter for people outside New Jersey.

"It simply doesn't matter to them," she remarked.

More troubling, she said, are the litany of other allegations involving the Christie administration — including questions about the allocations of Sandy funds, a family weekend the governor took that was paid for in part by [King Abdullah of Jordan](#), and the ongoing federal investigation into David Samson, the former Port Authority chairman and a close Christie advisor — which all have the potential to further damage his candidacy.



"If he was coming from a different place, it wouldn't matter as much. If it were Texas or Georgia, would these allegations be so damaging?," asked Harrison. "But a corrupt politician from Jersey, unfortunately, is not a contradictory stereotype for most Americans."

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