

Stile: Christie counts on his bipartisan past



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Governor Christie at a campaign stop Wednesday at East Coast Lumber in East Hampstead, N.H.

The bedlam that broke out last week over who will become the next speaker of the House of Representatives was a made-to-order moment for Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie.

It gave him the chance to vent his disgust with Washington dysfunction and cast himself as the experienced outsider who can fix it.

“Listen, I’ve dealt with a Democratic Legislature in New Jersey for every minute of my six years as governor and I’ve never used it as an excuse not to get things done,” Christie told Fox News on Friday. “So I’m tired of hearing them make excuses. Get in a room and get things done.”

Yet there hasn’t been much that has gotten done under the State House dome these days — especially the “big things” that Christie targeted as priorities.

No agreement is likely on finding a way to pay for fixing the state’s crumbling roads, bridges and rail lines. Nor is there any likelihood of a deal to overhaul New Jersey’s cash-strapped pension system — the “unprecedented accord” with the state’s powerful teachers union that Christie touted in February quickly collapsed amid finger pointing and acrimony.

And Christie’s decision to also cut a legally required payment to the pension system spurred a bitter court battle and widened the chasm between Christie and the Democratic Legislature.

There are other signs of Jersey gridlock.

As of Oct. 1, 47 judgeships requiring a gubernatorial nomination and state Senate approval remain vacant, including a Supreme Court seat. That’s higher than the normal rate of 30 vacancies. And Christie now has five departments that are being led by officials in an acting capacity.

Christie is running on the bipartisan record of his first term, when he brokered breakthrough agreements on pension and health benefits, teacher-tenure rules and property-tax limits. It quickly turned him into a rising Republican star and landed him the coveted role of keynote speaker at the Republican National Convention in 2012.

"He's running on the early days, when he masterfully exploited divisions within the Democratic Party to get players on board," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute poll who is tracking the Iowa caucuses this year as part of a fellowship at Drake University in Des Moines.

But since the high-water mark of 2012 — the same year Christie enacted the historic realignment of the state's higher education system — the bipartisan accords have become a rare exception.

The spirit of compromise was replaced with the more traditional partisan warfare. His administration's awarding of contracts to politically connected firms for Superstorm Sandy cleanup ignited a prolonged and bitter confrontation with the Legislature in 2013.

And instead of brokering deals in 2014, the Legislature was investigating the Christie administration's role in the George Washington Bridge lane-closing scandal.

Christie's pursuit of the presidency compounded the paralysis. Candidate Christie has pivoted sharply to the right at times, casting himself as an anti-tax warrior and boasting of his pledge never to raise taxes if elected.

While that might play well among grass-roots conservatives in Iowa and New Hampshire, that posture has paralyzed negotiations over raising revenue for the Transportation Trust Fund.

Most proposals call for some increase in the state's gasoline tax, but Christie won't even consider it unless New Jersey's estate tax is eliminated. Most observers don't expect that idea to be taken seriously until after the Assembly elections in November — and until Christie ends his quest for the presidency.

The early jockeying among Democrats eyeing a run for governor in 2017 also has made compromise untenable.

Senate President Stephen Sweeney, who has been moving to repair relations with public employee unions after brokering benefit reforms with Christie, refuses to even consider discussing more benefit reforms unless Christie restores the pension payments he cut over the past two years — a condition that Christie is not likely to agree to.

But will the logjam politics in Trenton undermine Christie's sales pitch on the stump as the bipartisan conciliator?

Some argue that those details will not matter much in this early phase of the race, when candidates are honing their style and themes.

Ben Dworkin, a political analyst at the David Rebovich Institute for Politics at Rider University, says successful presidential candidates articulate a compelling plan for governing the future instead of dwelling on past accomplishments.

"In the end, it doesn't mean you don't talk about your record," Dworkin said. "But people are not going to vote for, or against, Chris Christie based on whether he cut a deal on pensions. It's whether he's got the skills." Christie's first-term achievements give him some measure of credibility, Dworkin said.

Redlawsk said he sees more fundamental problems with Christie's compromise message. It's out of sync with "red meat" conservatives in Iowa who want "to burn down government, rather than save it," he said.

Christie campaign officials, however, said they believe that compromise is part of a broader Christie branding that will propel him back into contention.

Mike DuHaime, Christie's chief political adviser, stressed in a memo to campaign donors and supporters last week that Christie's ability to govern in a Democratic bastion and endure the scrutiny of two major media markets, groomed him to be the "battle tested" standout in the GOP field.

Without mentioning them by name, DuHaime's point is that Christie is better prepared for the general election than Ohio Gov. John Kasich, who worked with a Republican-controlled Legislature, or former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who hasn't held office in eight years.

"Republicans don't want a candidate of Washington, D.C., nor will they reach back to yesterday to battle the Democrats' candidate of yesterday," DuHaime wrote, referring to a possible Bush matchup with Hillary Clinton, the Democratic front-runner. "We thirst for an authentic outsider, but one who is a doer, not just a talker."

But as he continues to hit the town halls and the TV talk shows, Christie is reaching back to yesterday to make his case. It's easy to see why. There's not much about the present to talk about.

Email: stile@northjersey.com