

Newsweek

The Professor and the Prosecutor

Gov. Chris Christie has mastered the politics of austerity. Can Obama learn from his success?

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John O'Boyle / The Star-Ledger-Corbis

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has made enemies and gained presidential buzz.

You wouldn't know it from looking at them, or hearing them talk, or hearing people talk about them, but Barack Obama and Chris Christie, the Republican governor of New Jersey, have a lot in common. Both were elected in the midst of the Great Recession. Both inherited a post-apocalyptic mess from a predecessor of the opposing party. Both sold themselves to voters as truth-telling change agents. And both plan to spend 2011 tackling the same thorny issues: education reform, public-pension stabilization, and long-term debt reduction. During the 2009 campaign, one Christie commercial even showed his supporters cheering and waving signs as a stirring Obama speech played on the soundtrack.

Yet with economic growth in a near stall, unemployment approaching 10 percent, and experts warning of a double-dip recession, Obama is struggling to recover from the worst midterm rout in 65 years—while Christie, 48, is more popular than ever. A November Quinnipiac poll shows that 51 percent of New Jerseyites approve of the governor's performance, compared with only 38 percent who don't—a spread that has grown 12 points since June. Videos of Christie dressing down critics have captivated the conservative blogosphere. Glenn Beck has compared him to “common-sense porn.” And Rush Limbaugh recently pondered whether it was “wrong to love another man, because I

love Chris Christie.” Even the mainstream media have begun to fall for the hefty governor. Last week he scored an East Coast–elite hat trick: a big story in *New York* magazine, a guest spot on *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, and (full disclosure) a NEWSWEEK correspondent at his town-hall event in Hackettstown, N.J., to report a profile. In contrast, the president’s disapproval rating (49 percent) now exceeds his approval (45 percent).

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There are many reasons Christie is outpacing Obama. In the Garden State, a governor can pass his agenda without a Senate supermajority, and he doesn’t have to endure the same radioactive levels of scrutiny and vitriol as the commander in chief. But Christie’s success isn’t solely circumstantial. As his time in Trenton has proved, and as last week’s event in Hackettstown confirmed, it’s also the product of his distinctive approach to governing.

The easiest way to understand why Christie has flourished and why Obama has faltered is to look at the jobs they held before entering politics. From January 2002 to December 2008, Christie served as New Jersey’s top federal prosecutor; earlier, Obama spent 12 years as a constitutional-law professor at the University of Chicago. Today, Christie leads like the prosecutor he once was, identifying the crime, fingering the culprit, and methodically building a case designed to convince a jury of his peers. “Christie is who he is,” says Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. “If you spend years exercising your biceps, those are muscles you’re going to have.” Obama, meanwhile, leads like a professor, examining all angles of an issue and seeking evolutionary change by consensus. There are strengths and weaknesses in both approaches. But in an age of anger and austerity, Obama may have more to learn from Christie than the other way around.

Video muted: click volume for sound Mark Fiore's 'Economic Fun Fair' The cartoonist on continued joblessness.

The first lesson of Christie’s success: keep it simple. Within minutes of lumbering into Hackettstown’s American Legion Blue Ridge Post 164, Christie has managed to sum up his agenda in less than 140 characters. “We’re spending too much, borrowing too much, and taxing too much,” he says. “We need to spend less, borrow less, and tax less.” The capacity crowd applauds. It’s an easy message to grasp. After all, who’s to say Trenton shouldn’t respond to the fiscal crisis the same way families do?

Of course, the policy reality is more complex; most economists agree, for example, that government should spend more during a recession, not less. But Christie's rhetoric creates a neat frame around his entire agenda: capping property-tax growth at 2 percent a year; slashing \$820 million in education spending; demanding that state employees contribute to their pension and health-insurance programs. "People understand why Christie is doing what he's doing, even if they don't always agree with every detail," Mandel says. "That's a valuable thing." Obama boasts about the size and scope of his accomplishments and refuses to reduce complex challenges to catchy soundbites. But in Hackettstown, Christie shows that he's comfortable with strategic simplicity, mocking Trenton lawmakers for obsessing over bills about "foreign dentures" while the "hard issues" go unaddressed. At a time when voters are wary of government overreach, it may be the savvier approach.

Christie is also a connoisseur of the symbolic gesture. Shortly after taking office last January, for example, he began to nullify the decisions of many of New Jersey's public authorities and commissions by vetoing the minutes of their meetings. The problem, according to the governor, was that groups like the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners were burning through too much taxpayer cash; a veto, he said, would prevent them from executing new contracts or issuing bonds. In the end, the maneuver didn't save all that much money. But that was never the point. "The vetoes helped Christie establish a reputation for protecting the state's fiscal health," says Brigid Harrison, a politics professor at Montclair State University. "His goal was to earn public trust early on, so voters would give him the benefit of the doubt when he made more controversial changes." (A similar dynamic was at work in October when Christie, citing potential cost overruns, canceled a long-planned train tunnel between North Jersey and Manhattan.) Obama spent his early days in office administering CPR to the economy, so his options were limited. But he has since acknowledged missed opportunities and admitted that "leadership isn't just legislation. It's a matter of persuading people." A few populist gestures—say, removing earmarks from the stimulus package or restricting Wall Street bonuses—may have provided some insulation as public opinion began to cool.

Like any good prosecutor, however, the real engine of Christie's success has been his calculated pursuit of enemies. While Obama takes pains to acknowledge the validity of his critics' concerns in an effort to find common ground, Christie's strategy is to use the power of the bully pulpit to make his opponents look foolish. They are the villains; he is the hero. In Hackettstown, the governor recounts some of his greatest hits for the audience's amusement. When some teachers refused to accept pay freezes and contribute to their own health insurance to compensate for cuts in state aid, he accused them of "using children for political purposes." When the state Senate president, a Democrat, tried to "trick" him into signing a bill that raised taxes on Garden Staters making more than \$1 million a year ("The Fairness and Justice for All Act, or something like that"), he invited the state

senator into his office and delivered “the fastest veto on record in New Jersey history.” He mocks overpaid superintendents (“Imagine the arrogance!”). He characterizes state legislators as “drunks” who require “adult supervision.” And he accuses previous governors of “closing their eyes and hoping it will all go away.”

With Christie, someone always deserves the blame—a conviction his aggrieved constituents seem, for now, to share. As the governor peels off his suit jacket and begins to take questions, he warns the crowd that he might “get involved in some spirited exchanges.” “We love you for it!” a woman shouts from the back of the room. Nearby, a member of Christie’s new-media team, the first in state history, is videotaping the proceedings. The goal is for the governor to have what his staff now refers to as a “moment”: a particularly “spirited” exchange that will serve as suitable fodder for Christie’s YouTube page and (fingers crossed) go viral. It’s hard to imagine the professorial Obama pursuing or promoting smackdowns with as much gusto as the Garden State governor—especially now, with a GOP House forcing him to moderate his agenda. But in the weeks and months ahead, Republicans will undoubtedly indulge in a little hypocrisy—by calling for tax cuts estimated to add \$700 billion to the deficit over 10 years, for example, then refusing to raise the debt ceiling. The president shouldn’t be afraid to isolate, ridicule, and conquer.

When it comes to policy specifics, Christie is, again, more like Obama—that is, more pragmatic—than he might seem. In blue New Jersey, conservative activists complain that the governor isn’t conservative at all. He balanced the budget only by eliminating property-tax relief, they say—and his new 2 percent cap is riddled with loopholes. On his watch, spending has risen by 6 percent, and he has yet to lay off a single state employee. He has refused to challenge the constitutionality of “Obamacare” or campaign for candidates like Christine O’Donnell and Sharron Angle. He’s soft on cap-and-trade, and illegal immigrants, and so on. The left, of course, likes to take similar shots at Obama. But while Christie has framed the debate for maximum maneuverability—like his tough-talking but eminently practical hero, Ronald Reagan, who has been canonized by conservatives even though he raised taxes 12 times as president—Obama has received little credit for even his most impressive accomplishments. If the professor in chief is going to address America’s most profound fiscal problems in the weeks and months ahead—and emerge with his political capital intact—he should work to sharpen his prosecutorial skills. Otherwise, the verdict that voters deliver in 2012 may sting.