

OPINION: FORGET THE PIG-CRATE BILL, CHRISTIE FACES REAL POLICY ISSUES

CARL GOLDEN | DECEMBER 5, 2014

The only thing significant about governor's veto is how it was immediately framed in terms of his undeclared national ambitions



Carl Golden

Any lingering doubts that Gov. Chris Christie's every act from this point forward will be viewed in the context of his national ambitions -- whatever they may be -- were erased by his veto of the so-called pig-crate legislation.

For the second time, Christie rejected a bill to ban the use of cages to hold pigs waiting to deliver a litter of piglets, characterizing the proposal as an attempt to embarrass him politically by forcing what supporters knew full well was a certain veto.

Animal-rights activists and organizations, along with their legislative allies, immediately attacked the governor's action as an effort to curry favor with voters in Iowa, the country's leading pork producer and, not coincidentally, the home of the first in the nation presidential preference caucuses.

There is a certain pot-and-kettle analogy involved in the governor and the legislature swapping accusations of political pandering .

When Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad and the president of that state's hog farmers' organization publicly applauded the veto, Christie's critics pounced immediately on their comments, citing them as proof of political motivation.

For his part, the governor pointed out that the bill would have had no effect on New Jersey since the few pig farmers left didn't utilize the crates and that supporters -- knowing that the legislation was meaningless -- engaged in a cynical charade to force him into a politically awkward situation.

Christie will emerge the victor in this skirmish. Despite the bluster of the bill's supporters that they will succeed in efforts for a legislative override of the veto, it is little more than wishful thinking.

Republicans in the Senate have stood steadfastly

persistent questions about his own future and whether his visits to 39 states was calculated to establish a helpful network of contacts and earn the gratitude of those he helped.

The intense media attention only fueled the speculation, as did Christie's rather coy responses to questions about a presidential candidacy.

"I'm thinking about it," and "I'll decide sometime next year," were his stock replies -- the kind of responses the media is enamored of because it offers free rein for all manner of interpretation and conjecture.

Zippering off to Canada to promote the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline and berate President Barack Obama for opposing it was more of a traditional campaign swing for Christie than any effort to reinforce good relations with the neighbor to the north.

With the turn of the new year only some five weeks off, though, the focus will fall heavily on Christie's response to the major issues facing state government -- restoration of the Transportation Trust Fund, the burgeoning shortfall in the public pension system, stubbornly sluggish economic growth and job creation, and the perennial problem of controlling local property taxes.

Of deepest concern to Christie will be accusations that he has been ineffective in guiding the state out of the economic slump that has bedeviled it for as long as he's been in office.

The unemployment rate has consistently exceeded the national average and, despite minor declines, has remained there. Little more than half the jobs lost in the 2009 downturn have been recovered, a sharp contrast with neighboring states that have experienced employment growth to and above prerecession levels.

The administration's budget difficulties have not entirely disappeared, and Christie has borne the brunt of much criticism for insisting on unrealistic revenue projections that couldn't be met, leading to last-minute scrambling to avoid a deficit.

Democrats, as well as critics in his own party, will call attention to the state's budget travails at every opportunity and raise questions about Christie's ability to deal with overarching economic policy -- the issue that, aside from foreign wars, has always concerned and motivated voters more than any other.

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