

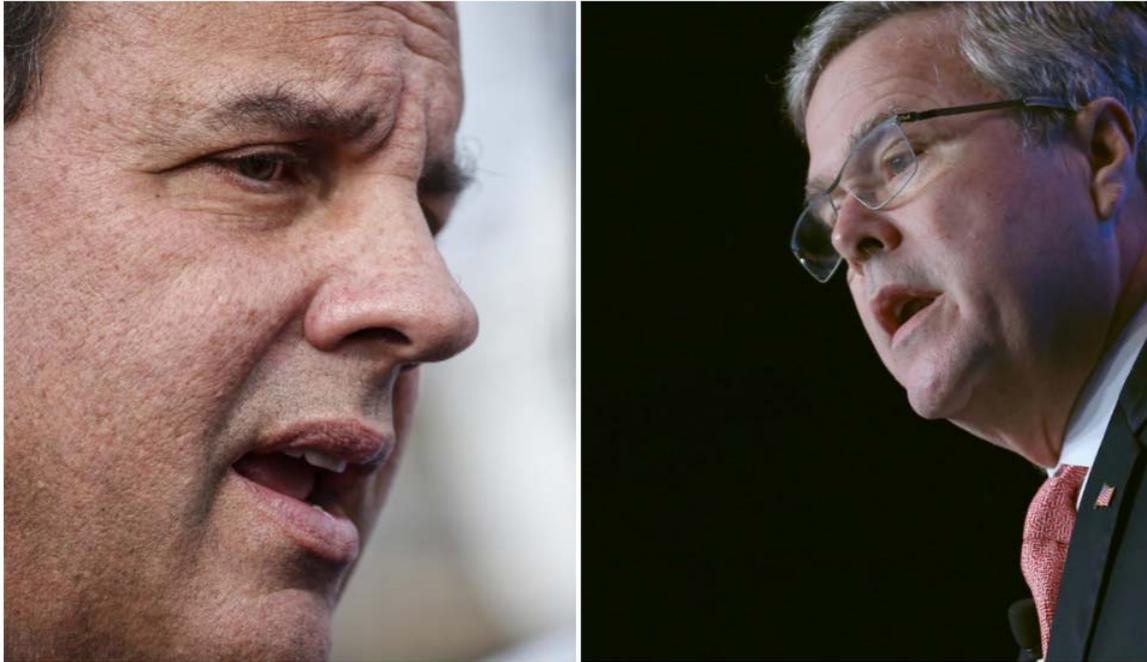
Fight of the Week: Chris Christie v. Jeb Bush

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News

Political experts say Bush could complicate Christie's 2016 plans -- but by how much?



Jeb Bush's [announcement this week](#) that he'll actively explore a run for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination has predictably sent the media and political sphere into a frenzy. One of the primary offshoots of that frenzy, of course, has been the question of how the former Florida governor's early entrance onto the field might impact the chances of that *other* East Coast moderate also mulling a bid: New Jersey's Gov. Chris Christie.

And in the context of Christie's own presidential ambitions, which have been building for some time now, that impact seems decidedly grim. Political experts say a Bush candidacy could severely complicate Christie's plans, making it harder for the incumbent governor to secure establishment support and distinguish himself as the lone moderate in a crowded, more conservative GOP field. The product of a generation-spanning political dynasty, highly respected in many circles, and already the favorite among big donors of the GOP establishment, Bush is likely Christie's most formidable challenger.

But there are other aspects of a primary battle that includes the likes of Bush that could actually bode well for Christie. Insofar as policy positions go, Bush, many political experts say, finds himself even further afield of the rest of the GOP than Christie, whose own moderately conservative positions on big ticket items paint him as a middle-of-the-road kind of guy — and have helped play into part of his appeal all along.

The Set Up

That Jeb Bush would pose the greatest challenge to Chris Christie's bid for the Republican nomination is a fact generally accepted by pundits and observers of the political landscape ahead of 2016. In a field of potential primary candidates whose political leanings and tendencies run the conservative ideological gamut — from Tea Party standard bearers like Texas Senator Ted Cruz to libertarian-minded Republicans like Kentucky Senator Rand Paul — both Bush and Christie are pegged as moderates, Christie the governor of a deep blue New Jersey and Jeb the former governor of a bellwether Florida. That means both occupy the same niche in the party, and thus will likely find themselves battling for the same votes.

Both, moreover, also seem to represent the GOP "establishment", that wing of big donors and Wall Street financiers coveted by any

candidate scoping out a primary run. Christie is supported by the likes of Home Depot billionaire Kevin Langone, who adamantly believes that America is “ready” for the straight-shooting, smooth-talking governor, while Bush is still tapped into the donor base and political strategist teams that his older brother relied on for his own White House run. This too poses a potential point of conflict for the two pols, and it may ultimately convince Christie to compress his timetable for deciding on a run and jump into the race sooner rather than later, in order to secure funding and support from the bigger players before they all fall in line behind one candidate.

“Prior to Bush making this kind of announcement, Christie had positioned himself fairly well as the candidate representing the financial industry and party establishment,” said Ben Dworkin, political director at Rider University’s Rebovich Institute for Politics. “And with Bush in the race he’ll have real competition for that.”

But when it comes to scrutinizing over the pair’s respective personalities and particular policy positions, differences seem to arise. Christie, though moderate, has in recent years hedged closer to the GOP’s conservative base on matters pertaining to gun control and Israel, rejecting legislation that would have reigned in his state’s laws regarding the former earlier this year and taking a more hardline stance on the latter in June. Bush, on the other hand, has been outspoken on immigration and education reform in a way not so appealing to many conservative members of the party — in particular, in his support for Common Core national education standards and undocumented immigrants — and may face the challenge of renegeing on or explaining those positions in a way that makes a Jeb Bush candidacy more palatable to the Republican primary electorate.

The Damage

The differences in policy stances might be minor, but paired with each candidate’s personalities — which Christie lacks in no small degree, and is one of the Republican’s strengths, experts say — as well as political histories, Christie’s chances might not be so crippled by a Bush run. In 2016, in a heated political contest, it’s possible that Bush’s pale red politics could improve Christie’s own position in the field, as the moderate Republican who’s conservative enough to win a dicey GOP primary but not too conservative to lose the general election in 2017.

Dworkin, pointing to some of Bush’s policy positions, said it’s unclear how well Bush would do among conservative voters in a Republican primary.

“There might be enough folks in the Republican primary electorate who simply disagree,” Dworkin said, referring to Bush’s immigration and education reform stances. “And that therefore leaves opportunity for Christie.”

Indeed, [some would say](#) Christie has even actively moved more to the right on many of these hot button issues in order to make himself, a naturally pragmatic politician from the liberal northeast, more appealing to Republican voters in the south and midwest. He’s harshly resisted policies relating to climate change in New Jersey, including withdrawing the state from the cap-and-trade Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative in 2011. More recently, he vetoed a bill, passed twice now by both houses of the legislature, that would ban the use of confining crates on gestating pigs in the state — a move that many saw as politically motivated, meant to send a message to voters in primary battleground states like Iowa, the nation’s largest pork producer, that Christie is keeping their interest in mind.

This sort of keen political maneuvering could give Christie an edge in the primary, concurred Associate Director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

“The conventional wisdom is that he and Christie would appeal to the same parts of the Republican party — or, more accurately, turn off the same parts on the Republican party,” Weingart said, adding that would make Christie’s path harder. “On the other hand, Bush’s policies could be painted as being to the left of Christie’s.”

“The perception of Christie at least is that he is closer to the middle or the right side of the party, and that might end up benefiting him,” he added.

Weingart also points out that Bush’s dynastic background — the product of a wealthy family with an Ivy League background who is both the son and brother of former presidents — could end up hurting him as well. Similar to Hillary Clinton, the expected Democratic frontrunner of 2016 and wife of former president Bill Clinton, Republicans like Christie — who’s focused on maintaining his own self-made, salt-of-the-earth image — could use Bush’s background as ammunition against him.

“One strand of conversation I think gives Christie and all the other Republicans is that it helps them start running against Hillary Clinton sooner because they can talk about family dynasties immediately, and if they’re successful doing that against Jeb Bush they can somewhat seamlessly continue doing it against Hillary Clinton if she gets the Democratic nomination,” said Weingart.

The Verdict

How much these differences in politics will factor into the race and its candidates’ chances is a [matter of debate](#). In the end, personality

and overall message, whether in a primary or general election, will likely trump specific policy stances or political histories. But as 2016 presidential politics continues to heat up, helped along in no small part by Bush's big announcement, it's worth noting that Christie is not the only one who faces challenges as a result.