

# Christie Roams, and Popularity Suffers at Home

By KATE ZERNIKE

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Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey this month at Mendham Township Middle School, where he said he would decide whether to run for president by early next year. He has been out of the state 40 percent of the time since his second inauguration, in January. Credit Mel Evans/Associated Press

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When the Chris Christie-for-president chatter first started, in 2011, voters in his home state of New Jersey took pride in having a celebrity governor. As Nancy Reagan escorted Mr. Christie to his speech at her husband's presidential library, and hedge fund billionaires, The Weekly Standard and The Wall Street Journal's editorial pages urged him to run, his [approval ratings jumped](#). Voters [told pollsters](#) the national attention made him more effective, and improved their state's long-maligned image.

Four years later, with Governor Christie again considering a run for president, his constituents appear to be tiring of the whole routine.

Polls taken over the last three months reveal a list of home-state complaints: Mr. Christie's favorability is [at its lowest point](#), with more voters [disapproving than approving](#) of his job performance. New Jersey residents think he is making decisions [with an eye on his national standing](#) rather than on what is good for their state. They do not think he should run for president — they are, as the slogan goes, ready for Hillary — but [most expect he will](#), and want him to resign if he does. Political talk in New Jersey centers less on Mr. Christie running for president and more on which one of three Democrats quietly seeking to succeed him will win — even though that election is three years away.

For his part, Mr. Christie has begun living a life that is strikingly apart from the state he governs. As chairman of the Republican Governors Association over the last year, he spent 152 days, or 42 percent of his time, outside New Jersey. He has been out of the state for 137 days, or 40 percent of the time, since his second inauguration in January. If he starts a campaign for the presidency early in 2015, it would ensure a tenure spent more on national pursuits than on, say, Pinelands preservation or taking on public employees over pension reform — the issue that brought him all the national attention in the first place.

This month, Mr. Christie was in Canada, where he gave a speech [endorsing the Keystone XL oil pipeline](#), which is backed by big

Republican donors, but of little interest to New Jersey voters. The governor has remained silent on a pipeline that would run through his state and is opposed by state Republican leaders. Last month, he vetoed a bill banning gestation crates for pigs, legislation popular in New Jersey but unpopular in Iowa, the first caucus state, where Mr. Christie is headed next month for a conference of conservative voters.

He did assert a position on at least one New Jersey issue: In September, he suggested doing away with the requirement that he transfer his powers to the lieutenant governor when he leaves the state. (When a Republican assemblyman followed up two weeks later with a proposal to amend the state Constitution to accomplish this, he was campaigning in Wisconsin and Ohio.)

Mr. Christie is not the only politician who is perceived differently in his home state than he is on the national stage. But he has never sought to be just any politician; he had planned to argue that his broad support in blue-state New Jersey made him a different kind of Republican, and his party's best hope for winning the White House. He made the state and all its stereotypes part of his persona and his appeal: the brash, Bruce Springsteen-loving, "you may not like what I say but I tell it like it is" Jersey guy.

"The kind of support that he's had among nontraditional households is what made him interesting," said Krista Jenkins, the director of the Public Mind Poll at Fairleigh Dickinson University. "That has really shifted."

Just how much is indicated in the polls Ms. Jenkins has conducted over the last two years. As Mr. Christie opened his re-election campaign and basked in the approval of his handling of the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in January 2013, 48 percent of New Jersey voters in a Public Mind Poll said they "liked everything about" him, while just 17 percent said they "disliked everything." (In between, 18 percent said they liked him but disliked his policies, and 12 percent disliked him but liked his policies.)

By October 2014, however, 32 percent said they liked everything about Mr. Christie, and 35 percent said they disliked everything, suggesting that he had become as polarizing as the Washington politicians he disdains.

Mr. Christie has said he will discuss a presidential run with his family over the holidays and make his intentions known early in the new year. But his intentions have been fairly obvious almost since he said no to the entreaties in 2011. He suggested to the audience at the Reagan Library then that it was a matter of gaining experience, and he encouraged his name to be mentioned in discussions about vice-presidential nominees in 2012.



Mr. Christie and his son Andrew, right, with Peter Van Loan, a member of the Canadian Parliament, in Ottawa this month. Credit Chris Wattie/Reuters



Mr. Christie visiting Mexico in September. Most people polled did not believe his explanation that the trip was to build New Jersey's trade relations. Credit Henry Romero/Reuters

While Mr. Christie joked in 2011 that he would have to commit suicide to convince people he was not running, he has spent the last two years declaring himself enormously flattered, and tells people he is "thinking about it." He has begun leaving himself room to say no, indicating that his youngest children are not thrilled about the possibility of moving to Washington. But he also sent Christmas cards to Republican voters in Iowa for the second year in a row, and tells interviewers that he will need a job when this one is over. (Among those interviewers were middle school students; Mr. Christie told them he could not believe it took them until the fourth question to ask whether he was running.)

Asked about Mr. Christie's relationship with New Jersey, his press secretary responded with a list of what he said were the governor's bipartisan accomplishments over the past year: extending a cap on arbitration awards in local police and fire contracts; permitting judges more discretion to allow or deny bail; working with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, a Democrat, to set up a quarantine policy for health workers exposed to Ebola patients in Africa; and convening two conferences to address the future of Atlantic City.

Mr. Christie's aides argue that the strongest indication of his popularity is the 22-point margin by which he won re-election in November 2013. And, his defenders argue, it is hardly surprising that his poll numbers would suffer this year, given that it opened with coverage of leaked emails that revealed the role of administration officials in shutting down access lanes to the George Washington Bridge, apparently to punish a mayor who had declined to endorse his re-election bid.

But pollsters say the scandal does not fully explain the decline. While most New Jersey residents continue to say Mr. Christie has not been honest about what he knew of the lane closings, they also **do not seem to care**. His approval rating dropped after the initial revelations, **but stabilized** within a couple of months.

Instead, analysts point to other news: Ratings agencies have downgraded New Jersey's credit rating eight times under Mr. Christie, more than under any other governor. The state has recovered barely half the jobs it lost during the recession, even as the nation has made up for its losses and more. A third of Atlantic City casinos closed this year, four years into the governor's five-year plan to save the town. And he broke the pension agreement that had been his signature issue, saying the state could not afford to make payments required by legislation he signed early in his tenure. Polls **began to show a new decline** shortly after.

**"There's no obvious wind for him in the state," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute poll. "There's nothing to make people say, 'Hey, he's really doing something.' Voters in New Jersey know that the guy's got other things on his mind."**

In the month since he finished leading the Republicans governors' group, Mr. Christie has kept a limited public schedule in New Jersey. He greeted President Obama at Fort Dix (and dined at least twice with Henry Kissinger in New York). He attended the swearing-in of a high school friend whom he had named a judge, and a ceremony held to congratulate an award-winning middle school in his town. But the job of attending most events has fallen to his lieutenant governor.

Pollsters say that distance — metaphoric or physical — may end up hurting him more than the bridge scandal. The Monmouth University poll, for instance, found his approval dropping in late September, after holding steady for six months after the scandal. The only shift that seemed to explain it was an increase in the percentage of people who believed he was running for president. "There was a group of people who went from, 'I kind of approve' to 'I'm not sure. All this time out of state makes me wonder if his mind is in the game,'" said Patrick Murray, the director of the poll.

Most voters **did not believe** Mr. Christie's explanation that **a trip to Mexico** that month was meant to build New Jersey's trade relations; even Republicans were more likely to believe it was to help him run for president.

Mr. Christie has said he has no intention of resigning from the governorship if he runs for president. His friends say he likes the job too much.

### **Correction: January 4, 2015**

An article last Sunday about a drop in Gov. Chris Christie's popularity in New Jersey as he considers a run for president misidentified, in some copies, the type of fuel that the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which Mr. Christie endorsed, is intended to carry. It is oil, not natural gas.