

In sparring with Rand Paul, Christie shows he can fight

In a Fox News Republican debate in Cleveland, sen. Rand Paul and Gov. Chris Christie engage in a heated exchange over Paul's opposition to the NSA's collection of phone records. Bloomberg

(Photo: Mandel Ngan, AFP/Getty Images)

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TRENTON, N.J. — Gov. Chris Christie finally brought his New Jersey voice to the campaign for the GOP presidential nomination.

In the Fox News debate for the top 10 Republican candidates, the governor was loud, brash and in rivals' faces — the Christie that largely has been absent since his campaign launched June 30.



Whether the shift in persona wins over a national audience and turns around his fortunes — Christie was ninth among 17 GOP candidates going into Fox's two GOP debates — isn't yet clear. But the early read is that Christie breathed new life into his long-shot effort.

Donald Trump has been the attention-getting darling of Republicans looking for a brash nominee, but Christie showed a national TV audience that political brawling is his calling card, too.

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With debate under their belt, GOP field looks South

In a series of exchanges, he portrayed himself as another strong, no-nonsense, plain-speaking chief executive — an alternative to the sharper-elbowed, and some say unelectable, Trump.

The governor, who had just 6 minutes of speaking time, was able to squeeze in blasts at rivals for their positions on domestic surveillance and entitlements, topics important to conservatives in key primary states such as New Hampshire and Iowa.

"I think the moderators handed him a gift setting off that exchange with Rand Paul. National security is the No. 1 issue that our polls are showing that Republican voters are concerned about."

Patrick Murray, Monmouth University

The exchanges left a mark.

Data from Twitter and Facebook showed Christie's yelling match with Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky was online's most talked-about moment in the Thursday night debate at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland.

For longtime watchers of the second-term governor, it was vintage Christie, a throwback to frequent YouTube moments that marked his rise in the tough world of New Jersey politics.

"Gov. Christie should be pretty happy with his performance. He got into scrapes with Rand Paul and Mike Huckabee and won them both," said Matthew Hale, a Seton Hall University political science professor.

Christie's campaign hasn't caught fire in polling since he officially entered the race. Nonetheless, he remains confident he has a path forward.

"See you in California," Christie said at the end of a Thursday night interview with Sean Hannity, a reference to the debate slated for Sept. 16 at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, Calif.

Christie accused Paul of blocking attempts to track down terrorists. Paul has pressed to end the government's collection of phone and e-mail records of U.S. citizens.

"We have to give more tools to our folks to be able to do that, not fewer," Christie told Paul.

Republican presidential candidate, Chris Christie speaks Aug. 7, 2015, at the RedState Gathering in Atlanta. (Photo: David Goldman, AP)

Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray said the exchange "gave Christie a chance to shine."

"I think the moderators handed him a gift setting off that exchange with Rand Paul," Murray said. "National security is the No. 1 issue that our polls are showing that Republican voters are concerned about when deciding who their nominee is going to be."

Christie has placed an eggs-in-one-basket bet on doing well in New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary, making 17 campaign trips to the Granite



State, the most of any candidate.

Murray said polling in New Hampshire shows "people there don't like Chris Christie ... but they're looking for a solid national security candidate and that exchange handed Chris Christie a nice little package that he can bring up to New Hampshire to campaign with."

New Hampshire GOP activist Clairia Pirozzi Monier, who hasn't committed support to a candidate, said in a telephone interview that she watched the debate on television and liked what she heard from Christie.

"I thought Christie did fantastic," she said. "He would be my first choice in winning the debate because of how he took on Rand Paul, and he's right on what surveillance our country needs to have."

Christie also punched it out with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.



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Christie has proposed Social Security benefit cuts. Moderator Chris Wallace also asked him if Huckabee was lying when he said the program could be fixed without cuts.

"He is not lying. He is just wrong," Christie said. "I am the only person on this stage who has put out a detailed entitlement reform plan."

GOP presidential hopeful Chris Christie gives an OK sign while speaking Aug. 7, 2015, at the RedState Gathering in Atlanta. (Photo: David Goldman, AP)

Huckabee underscored his contrast with Christie, saying changes should be made in the budget instead of through cuts to benefits to seniors earning more than \$200,000, as Christie has called for.

Until the George Washington Bridge scandal broke in January 2014, Christie had been considered an early frontrunner for his party's 2016 presidential nomination. His stature as a candidate slipped for other reasons as well, including his warm embrace of President Barack Obama after superstorm Sandy.

Many Republicans think he's too moderate. Moreover, his plunging approval ratings in blue state New Jersey aren't in sync with his contention that he can score votes in the general election with independents and disgruntled Democrats.

Can Christie pull off a comeback? It's not clear that one is under way, said David Redlawsk, political science professor at Rutgers University.

"Gov. Christie was solid in the debate, but it was probably not much of a breakthrough," Redlawsk said. "On the other hand, I thought John Kasich was very strong, and it seems like Kasich should be among the last group standing."

"Trump provided entertainment but probably didn't hurt himself," the Rutgers professor said. "In the end though it will matter most who media and pundits are still talking about over the days to come."



Chris Christie took on Mike Huckabee in the first presidential debate, and things got interesting. Video provided by Newsy Newslook





REPUBLICAN'S LIVELY 'PRIME TIME' DEBATE Donald Trump: I have never gone bankrupt | 00:34

Aug. 6 -- In a Fox News Republican debate in Cleveland, billionaire Donald Trump discusses his businesses and bankruptcy. Bloomberg

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REPUBLICAN'S LIVELY 'PRIME TIME' DEBATE Christie and Paul clash over NSA and phone records | 00:39

In a Fox News Republican debate in Cleveland, sen. Rand Pual and Gov. Chris Christie engage in a heated exchange over Paul's opposition to the NSA's collection of phone records. Bloomberg

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REPUBLICAN'S LIVELY 'PRIME TIME' DEBATE Donald Trump can't rule out an Independent run | 00:47

Aug. 6 -- In a Fox News Republican debate, Fox News' Brett Baier asked GOP candidates if there was anyone unwilling to pledge support for the

eventual nominee. Guess who was the only one to answer in the affirmative? Bloomberg

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REPUBLICAN'S LIVELY 'PRIME TIME' DEBATE Which GOP candidates got money from "The Donald?" | 00:31

Aug. 6 -- In a Fox News Republican debate in Cleveland, billionaire Donald Trump claimed that many of his rivals were in his debt. "Most of the people on this stage, I've given to, just so you understand. A lot of money," he said. Bloomberg

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