

Stile: Christie resisting Tea Party pressure to join lawsuit against health care law

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Governor Christie strode into a patriotic ceremony at the Lawrenceville armory on Wednesday, a confident "commander in chief" clasping a \$141,000 check for struggling families of soldiers.

The New Jersey Air and National Guard members, dressed in battle fatigues and boots, greeted him with a standing ovation.

But Christie is facing flak from another group of self-described patriots who hail from an angry and confused corner of the state's restive conservative base. NJTeaParty.com is pressuring the Christie administration to file a lawsuit to stop the overhaul of the nation's health care law President Obama signed last month. Attorneys general in 14 other states have vowed to take that step, and tea partiers want Christie to order Attorney General Paula Dow to dive into the legal fray.

But so far, the normally bombastic, the same swing-from-the-lip Christie waging war against the powerful unions and state spending, has dialed down to demur status on this issue. He said he wanted his Cabinet to first study it thoroughly before making a

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decision, a position he reaffirmed on Wednesday.

"It would be a significant decision, and I'm not going to jump into it in a knee-jerk way," Christie said after the ceremony. "If people watched me as the U.S. attorney, they came to understand that I have a very deliberative decision-making process."

To Jeffrey Weingarten, the NJTeaParty.com organizer and his allies — "Stay Involved. Stay Angry. Stay Informed" is one of their mottos — Christie's fence-sitting was an infuriating dodge. Thus the lobbying offensive was born. Over the past week, Dow's Trenton office has been flooded with nearly 140 calls a day and scores of e-mails, warning that "Obamacare" is the dawn of an unconstitutional doom in America.

"We in New Jersey cannot afford, nor should we be compelled to purchase a product as demanded by the Federal government or any government for that matter," said one e-mail writer from West Milford. A copy of the e-mail was provided by Dow's office.

It was also time for the conservative-sounding Christie to act like one. Besides, Weingarten noted, Christie owes a debt of

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gratitude to the group. Tea party supporters ignored their doubts about Christie and held a get-out-the-vote rally for him shortly before the election. They came through for him. Now it was time to help them in their time of travail.

"His margin of victory was slim enough that there is should be some recognition that it's we the people, the conservatives and independents, who put him over the top," said Weingarten, a Clifton resident who said that the organization is an umbrella group of some 20 related groups around the state. "We want him to act in our best interest."

But Christie has resisted being boxed in by the Republican Party's right wing, which he battled in last year's bitter primary against former Bogota Mayor Steve Lonegan, who is also baring his anti-Christie fangs again lately. While Christie may be the most conservative governor in modern history and his rhetoric fulminates with tea party rage at times, especially in his street fights with the "bully" NJEA, he is acutely aware that New Jersey still has not redyed its blue roots Republican red.

At its heart, New Jersey is a moderate-Democratic state that is more likely to embrace a left-leaning policy (abolishing the death penalty, family-leave benefits, for starters), than a position from the right (a push to override a veto of the state's assault weapon ban collapsed in the Republican-controlled Senate).

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New Jersey voters gave him a wide berth in the wake of Corzine's managerial malaise. Voters didn't sign up for ideological extremism. Christie acknowledged that last year when he publicly disinvited Sarah Palin from joining him on the campaign trail.

It's also worth noting that, despite their ability to overwhelm the Attorney General's Office, they remain an unpopular, marginalized group in New Jersey — a recent Eagleton Institute of Politics poll found that only 27 percent of New Jerseyans held a favorable view of the tea party movement.

Then there are practical considerations. Obama's health care law may be reviled by some small business owners and there are serious misgivings about the plan's claims to control costs, but the Obama plan could stake New Jersey to increased Medicaid funding, money that any governor managing a cash-starved budget is not likely to casually dismiss.

The law broadens Medicaid eligibility and will allow, for the first time, uninsured adults to enroll. And tea party followers may register anger over federal overreach, the provision prohibiting insurers from denying coverage for preexisting conditions has a broad public

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appeal.

And, then again, there is a strong case to be made that a lawsuit is a long shot and a potential waste of taxpayer time and money.

So Christie is biding his time, refusing to hint what he will do. And patriot Weingarten refuses to say if a Christie betrayal will lead to a backlash.

"We do not want to cede that he will not live up to the hopes of his constituents," he said.

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