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Christie's Conservatism Is Not Just Economic

By [RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA](#)

In the throes of New Jersey's financial crisis, Gov. [Chris Christie](#) vaulted into office as a strict fiscal conservative. In his first year in the job, he won national attention as a tough-talking manager whose budget-slashing, union-bashing ways seemed to be all about the money.

[The National Review](#) and Rush Limbaugh quoted admiringly from a document far from the usual political red meat: Mr. Christie's 2010 budget address.

But the last few months have revealed a governor whose conservatism is not just economic. In his statements, budget moves and quiet administrative actions, Mr. Christie has taken strong positions on abortion and medical marijuana; while his positions on these issues had been clear, he had said or done little about them. And he has spoken up on matters he had previously not addressed at all, like family planning and global warming — suggesting that human activity may not be causing the planet to heat up.

"He is absolutely the most conservative governor we have had in the modern history of the state," said Ben Dworkin, director of the [Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics](#) at Rider University. "Christie has revealed a number of views that we didn't see before, or barely saw, on things that were not on anybody's radar screen in the 2009 election or his first months in office."

Other recent Republican governors of New Jersey, like Christine Todd Whitman and Thomas H. Kean, have been all-around moderates — like many voters in the Democratic-leaning state — and Mr. Christie's new outspokenness could complicate his political future there.

But his positions could also broaden his appeal to the fiscal conservatives and union opponents who have already given Mr. Christie a national following, and to social conservatives who have had less reason to notice him.

The governor's growing discussion of nonfiscal issues has fueled talk of him as a presidential contender — though he vows in every imaginable way not to run in 2012 — and fed speculation that he is playing to the conservatives around the country who dominate Republican primaries and caucuses.

"I think that that's part of it, that there's some goal beyond New Jersey," even if it is not the White House, said Jennifer E. Duffy, senior editor of [The Cook Political Report](#). "It gives him a more national audience for any issues he wants to raise, and it certainly could help with fund-raising."

The governor's chief political strategist, Michael DuHaime, said any apparent shift in emphasis was not about political calculation, but more about the questions that come Mr. Christie's way.

"He is who he is, and he's been clear about what his issue positions were on anything that anybody asked him about," Mr. DuHaime said. He warned against applying easy labels to Mr. Christie, saying, "He's no doubt conservative on the issues, but he's far from dogmatic."

Mr. Christie had little political experience to define him when he ran for governor in 2009; he had been a lawyer and a lobbyist, a one-term county freeholder and the United States attorney for New Jersey.

During the campaign, the state's deep financial trouble took center stage. Mr. Christie focused on the state's high taxes, played down his opposition to abortion, and aligned himself with President Obama on subjects like education reform and promoting wind and solar energy. And the new governor was a blank slate on some issues, like global warming.

In office, he eliminated the state's Office of Climate Change, cut funding for clean energy programs and eliminated New Jersey's share of financing for a 10-state greenhouse gas cap-and-trade program that is anathema to many conservatives.

But those were billed as pragmatic, budgetary moves. In November, Mr. Christie went further: He revealed that he was skeptical that human activity was responsible for climate change. Responding to a question at a public forum in Toms River, he said, "I think we're going to need more science to prove something one way or the other."

On March 11, he pulled New Jersey out of a multistate lawsuit aimed at curbing greenhouse emissions from power plants, and on March 24, he said he might also withdraw entirely from the cap-and-trade program.

Mr. Christie's opposition to abortion has long been a matter of public record, but he has barely mentioned it unless asked. Then, in January, the governor addressed a large anti-abortion rally in Trenton, saying, "This is an issue whose time has come."

In September, he vetoed state support for family planning clinics, a move strongly backed by anti-abortion groups because some of the clinics performed abortions. In February, after the Democratic-controlled Legislature approved a much smaller appropriation for family planning, backed mostly by federal dollars, he vetoed that, too. Mr. Christie also applied for federal money for abstinence-only education, something that the Democrat he unseated, Gov. Jon S. Corzine, had not done.

In February, Mr. Christie made a splash in the national news media with a speech to the [American Enterprise Institute](#) in Washington, weighing in on issues that are not the usual fare for governors, like changes in Medicare and raising the minimum age for Social Security. He derided President Obama's talk of high-speed rail and electric cars as "the candy of American politics."

Mr. Christie has not added New Jersey to the states that are suing to overturn the federal health care overhaul, but this year he has become more critical of the law.

On some issues, Mr. Christie's general views have long been known, but only with time has it become clear how far he is willing to push them.

He opposed a medical marijuana law passed under Mr. Corzine, and once in office, he delayed its implementation. Then Mr. Christie used regulations to restrict the law's application, including an announcement last month that growing and dispensing the drug would be limited to six locations.

Steven M. Lonegan, who opposed Mr. Christie in the 2009 Republican primary, said the governor's apparent conservatism was more show than substance.

"The multistate greenhouse lawsuit was a moot point because it wasn't going anywhere," said Mr. Lonegan, president of the New Jersey chapter of the conservative group [Americans for Prosperity](#). "He hasn't tried to block Obama's health care law, he hasn't come out in favor of repealing the cap-and-trade program or *Roe v. Wade*, and he hasn't stopped the practice of state borrowing without voter approval."

The governor has parted company with much of the right on immigration when he is asked about it, but he rarely addresses the issue. In 2008, as a federal prosecutor, he declared that "being in this country without proper documentation is not a crime" — a comment that drew fire from conservatives. In an interview last year with Politico, he voiced reservations about Arizona's new immigration law, though he did not oppose it outright.

While he has denied presidential ambitions for 2012, Mr. Christie has also said, "I already know I could win," and he has left the door wide open to 2016 and beyond.

But first, he may run for re-election in 2013, and the same positions that might help in Republican presidential primaries could hurt him at home. A [Rutgers-Eggleton poll](#) of New Jersey registered voters last month found that 31 percent of those surveyed said Mr. Christie's anti-abortion speech in January had lowered their opinion of him, while 14 percent said it had raised theirs.

"Some of these conservative positions aren't going to play that well in New Jersey," said Ms. Duffy of The Cook Political Report. "But he's already done remarkably well in a Democratic state, and he's got some serious political smarts. Don't underestimate him."