

## O'Brien: Why men love Gov. Christie but women not so much

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**Kathleen O'Brien/The Star-Ledger**  
By

**TRENTON** — Is it the message — or the messenger?

Is it about style — or substance?

Whatever the cause, pollsters picking through the latest round of surveys on Gov. Chris Christie have noticed strikingly different opinions from men and women:

- While Christie overcame a 10 percent gender gap — fairly standard for a Republican candidate — to win election, that gap has now grown to 17 percent in the most recent poll released by the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University.
- That's wider than it was for the two previous Republican governors at the same point in their terms. (Thomas Kean's was 8 percent, while Christie Whitman's was 7 percent.)
- In some polls, the gap shows up even between Republican men and Republican women.

"In a word, it's style," says Maurice Carroll, whose Quinnipiac University poll turned up a similar gap. "Men get a kick of his 'Jersey guy' stuff. Women don't like it."

Over at Eagleton, however, they beg to differ. Poll director David Redlawsk notes when women are asked if there is anything they dislike about Christie, 51 percent mention his policies.

The most common area of complaint is education.

"Education and teachers ... that is certainly seen historically as a 'woman's domain,'" Redlawsk said.

Republican candidates have long trailed Democrats in attracting women voters. That's because women are more likely to worry they may someday need government's help — whether in the form of Social Security, a pension or the Family and Medical Leave Act, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers.

That means anyone cutting government services risks the ire of women. In addition, public employees are disproportionately female, so any talk of cuts in those jobs gets women's attention.

"Even if there's concern about the messenger's style, everything about the message itself signals there's going to be a gender gap here," Walsh said of the governor. "But if he did it without the vitriol and the finger-pointing, would it be any different? Is it because of what he's doing ... or how he's doing it?"

"Without a doubt, women are more offended by belligerent language," said Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. "Guys might be more likely to pay less attention to it. They'd say, 'Aw, it's just words.'"

Christie's fiery style probably makes him even more appealing to men, who are more likely than women to use "play-fighting" as a means of settling disputes, said Tannen, author of "You Just Don't Understand," a best-seller on the different communication styles of men and women. On the playground, this shows up when boys punch each other in the arm, or try to put their friend in a headlock.

In general, men, unlike women, enjoy watching fights as well, which could be a factor in the enthusiasm expressed by Christie's male supporters.

"Maybe it's kind of like cheering your team in a fight," said Tannen. "Even if it's a bit of a show, it's an enjoyable show."

This may explain the pronounced enthusiasm Republican and independent men have had for Christie. By big margins, these two groups have told pollsters they strongly approve of their governor.

Yet the latest Eagleton poll also shows Christie's style may be getting new scrutiny among his male fans. They still approve of his job performance by a 52 percent to 48 percent split — and their approval has been rising over the months.



Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

Gov. Chris Christie speaks during an April 13 press conference in his office at the Statehouse.

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Yet when asked to name a trait they associate with Christie, nearly half mention both a good trait and a bad one.

"Where men gave us a negative statement, they were much more likely to cite something about what we call his 'authoritarian' leadership style," said Redlawsk.

When poll respondents were given the chance to name a trait they liked about Christie, there was no gender gap, said Redlawsk. Both genders cited leadership.

For now, however, men are willing to overlook their growing concern over the Christie bombast and continue to give him high marks for job performance.

To be sure, there are plenty of women who are huge fans of the governor as well. Sparta attorney Debra Nicholson made headlines at a recent town hall meeting when she told Christie she found his perseverance "hot and sexy."

"I find his directness to be very endearing, because he's just not doing the happy talk," she explained last week. "He's willing to put his foot down, like the head of a household, and say, 'We just need to pull back here,'" she said.

She doesn't mind his blunt comments, even if they sometimes contain violent imagery, such as his recent suggestion that journalists "take the bat out" on Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen) for actions he viewed as hypocritical.

"Those are fighting words, and a fight's a fight," Nicholson said, laughing at the brouhaha. "It tells me he's not backing down."

Even a slight drop-off in appeal to women could register at the voting booth, for women now constitute a majority of the electorate. After women got the vote in 1920, it took them 60 years to match men in voter turnout. Since the 1980 presidential election, however, their level of participation has consistently exceeded that of men. On top of that, there simply are more eligible female than male voters.

Yet Christie's sheer enthusiasm should help at the ballot box, Redlawsk said, for experts in the field of political psychology believe it is enthusiasm that drives people to vote. An equally strong negative emotion doesn't have the same effect. Even if voters despise a candidate, there still has to be an attractive alternative to draw them to the polls, he said. Otherwise, they'll just stay home.

Might the poll results trigger a switch to a kinder, gentler Christie? Don't count on it, says one pollster.

There is little to be gained for an office-holder to try to change personality mid-stream, noted Carroll, of the Quinnipiac poll. "He polarizes people ... but he also interests people. My guess is he has no intention — ever — of toning down his style," he said. "I think Christie gets a kick out of being Christie."

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