

# The Washington Post

## Chris Christie's claim he vetoed more tax hikes than 'any governor in American history'

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*"Americans for Tax Reform came out with a report six weeks ago and said I vetoed more tax increases than any governor in American history. I will do exactly the same thing as president of the United States."*

**—New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R-N.J.), Republican debate on Fox Business News, Nov. 10, 2015**

Christie likes to tout this designation by Americans for Tax Reform, the anti-tax lobbying group founded by Grover Norquist. After the GOP debate on Fox Business News, Norquist praised Christie again on Twitter, and added: "The man knows how to veto Democrat tax hikes."

We at The Fact Checker place the burden of proof on the speaker, and in this case, the speaker is directly citing the designation by Americans for Tax Reform. Yet Americans for Tax Reform did not provide specific data points supporting the claim that Christie has "vetoed more tax increases than any other governor in modern American history." (The same claim on his campaign Web site includes the "modern American history" distinction. At the debate, he just generally said "American history.") Christie's campaign pointed to Americans for Tax Reform as the source.

In this case, Americans for Tax Reform essentially placed the burden of proof on us. We are not going to go back through the annals of governors' tax-hike vetoes in every state to prove Americans for Tax Reform was correct or incorrect; that is the group's responsibility to do so when it dubs Christie with this title.

Instead, we explored how Christie compared to other governors in similar situations — meaning, working with a state legislature controlled by the opposite party — to see whether there is any merit to the title.

### **The Facts**

The Philadelphia Inquirer asked Americans for Tax Reform about this issue in August, and found that the group's research process, in part, was based on a Google search:

How did Americans for Tax Reform arrive at the conclusion that Christie has "vetoed more tax hikes than any governor in American history"? In part, an Internet search, the group said.

"Look at the number of budgets with tax hikes he has vetoed: all of them," said Paul Blair, state affairs manager for Americans for Tax Reform.

“Then you get the number of times Garden State Dems succeeded in screwing taxpayers with a greater tax burden: zero,” Blair said. “Then use Google to examine what other governor in modern history has saved their state from as much crap as Trenton Dems have demanded instead of government reform: zero.”

The group said it stands by the statement it gave to the Inquirer, and offered us another statement by Blair: “Chris Christie has protected taxpayers from billions of dollars in higher taxes. Chris Christie and his veto pen are the only thing standing in the way of Democrats screwing families and small businesses in the Garden State.” We asked for underlying data, but received no response.

We checked with various national organizations that maintain data on governors and state legislatures, but none kept data in the way that Americans for Tax Reform described it.

Even without the particular designation that Americans for Tax Reform has given him, Christie does have a strong record on vetoing tax hikes.

In the past, Christie has said that he has vetoed more bills than his recent predecessors. He has vetoed nearly 400 bills, and has fended off the 52 attempts to override his vetoes. Christie has vetoed more bills than his four immediate predecessors, according to a Wall Street Journal [analysis](#).

Christie has received a [B grade](#) from the libertarian Cato Institute’s 2014 Fiscal Policy Report Card on America’s Governors. Christie took office in 2010 promising lower taxes, and the Cato Institute commended him for keeping his promise by repeatedly vetoing tax hikes on higher earners, through bills passed by the Democratic-controlled legislature. In 2011, Christie signed business tax cuts into law. In 2012, he proposed a 10 percent across-the-board income tax cut.

Christie “has tried to bring some fiscal sanity to Trenton, although he scores better on taxes than spending,” according to the report card. Christie, like many governors, “has a weakness for handing out narrow tax breaks and subsidies to businesses,” it says. But it also noted the budget problems the state may face in the future because Christie approved Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act.

The majority of Christie’s vetoes were not related to tax hikes, the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services database shows. But Christie did wield his veto power against some big-ticket tax-hike proposals that landed at his desk, according to data from Chris Edwards, Cato Institute’s director of tax policy studies. One, in particular, was a 2012 veto of a tax hike on high earners, which saved those taxpayers \$800 million a year. In 2011, he signed a large package of business tax cuts, valued at about \$350 million a year.

“Of course, Christie is in a bit of a unique situation where he is a conservative and I think his whole tenure the legislature was the opposite persuasion,” said Edwards, who authored the Cato Institute’s Fiscal Policy Report Card and runs [DownsizingGovernment.org](#).

This is an interesting distinction. With a legislature controlled by the opposite party, Christie naturally is set up to oppose — and veto — more legislation than other governors working with a legislature of the same party. Christie consistently has battled with state Democratic lawmakers, and notes this on the campaign trail.

A more apples-to-apples look at how Christie's vetoes is to compare him to governors in similar situations. (To see how his economic record compares to other governors running for the 2016 presidential nomination, check out this [interactive analysis](#) by our Wonkblog colleagues.)

Some readers may recall Mitt Romney also faced a Democrat-controlled legislature. Romney issued about 800 vetoes on pieces of legislation or line items. The legislature, with a veto-proof majority, overrode nearly all of them.

The National Conference of State Legislatures and MultiState Associates Inc., a state and local government relations services firm based in Alexandria, Va., maintains information on party breakdowns of the governor and legislative chambers in each state. Between 2010 and 2015, the years Christie has been governor, there were between seven and 16 governors who faced legislatures controlled by the opposing party. Only a handful of other states had this set-up for the majority of those six years: Nevada, Missouri, New Mexico and Montana.

Christie and Gov. Jay Nixon (D-Mo.) were the only two in this situation all six years. The Missouri Governor's Office Web site shows he vetoed about 50 bills throughout his time as governor, nowhere near Christie's approximately 400 vetoes.

### **The Pinocchio Test**

There are endless ways governors can tout their record on taxes. Christie, for example, focuses on the 400 vetoes against bills passed by the Democrat-controlled legislature, including proposals to raise taxes. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush, on the other hand, touts that he vetoed 2,500 separate line items – so much so that he was nicknamed "[Veto Corleone](#)."

The larger point is that Christie consistently has fought off efforts by state Democrats to raise taxes. In that sense, the facts are on Christie's side. He vetoed more bills than his four immediate predecessors, and his most of his major tax actions as governor are vetoes of legislation proposing tax increases.

Americans for Tax Reform has dubbed Christie as the governor who has "vetoed more tax increases than any other governor in modern American history." Americans for Tax Reform should do more than some Google searches to back this up, and define what "modern American history" means. Christie has taken and run with this designation, often without the "modern" part of "modern American history," as he did during the debate. That earns him at least One Pinocchio.

We wavered between One and Two Pinocchios, but this claim lacks context. As the Republican governor working with a Democrat-controlled legislature throughout his tenure, Christie is in a unique circumstance that only one other governor has been in over the six years (and that governor is a Democrat). Given this setup, he has more opportunities to strike down bills using his veto power. Christie successfully has fended off veto overrides, as Democrats never held a veto-proof majority since he took office. This tipped us to Two Pinocchios.

### **Two Pinocchios**