



Christie's role as consensus-builder being challenged

By Matt Katz

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TRENTON - When Gov. Christie put out a parody video with Democratic Newark Mayor Cory Booker last month, the Republican governor described it as a quintessentially bipartisan effort - "emblematic of the way I've tried to govern."

"Look at Washington, D.C.," he said at a public town hall the day the video became a YouTube sensation. "They can't get a thing done down there, and everybody's at fault, everybody's to blame. People have to start reaching across the aisle, and start working with each other."

The same day, a pro-Christie group released a \$1.6 million TV ad in which actors portraying Republicans, Democrats, and independents praised the governor and New Jersey "reformers from both sides" for "getting the job done."

Christie's brand as a consensus-builder, which he has sold around the nation and at home, suffered a blow last week when it became apparent he and the Democrats who control the Legislature are headed toward a prolonged stalemate over one of the most significant issues in the state: a short-staffed Supreme Court, now missing two of seven justices.

Could the era of the "Christiecrat" - the nickname for Democrats who have joined with Christie to pursue policy changes - be waning?

The Democratic-controlled Senate Judiciary Committee has turned down two Christie nominees for the Supreme Court: Phillip Kwon in March, and Bruce Harris on Thursday. They are the only gubernatorial nominees to the Supreme Court ever to be blocked by a Legislature under the modern-day constitution, and the first judicial nominees to any state court to be rejected since 1988.

Because Christie - who has stated his desire to remake what he views as a liberal court - has said he will not appoint a Democrat to either seat, the fate of his next Supreme Court nominees would appear equally dim.

"They wanted to wipe this guy out," Christie said Thursday after Harris was defeated. "Now what? If they're waiting for me to appoint a Democrat to the Supreme Court . . . they'll be waiting a long time."

He says that won't stop him from dealing with Democrats on other issues.

There has been heated rhetoric from both sides during Christie's term, including instances of public name-calling and cursing. Democrats have never described their relationship with the governor as fondly as he has.

But Christie has relied on Democrats, particularly in South Jersey. He needed their votes to pass laws capping property taxes and cutting public-employee benefits, and he needs them to approve his proposed income tax cut and merger of Rutgers-Camden and Rowan Universities.

So it was notable that Christie did not criticize Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester) after Thursday's vote. Sweeney is not on the judiciary panel, but he spent much of Thursday circulating through the hearing room, Diet Coke in hand, whispering in the ears of senators and their aides.

Christie said he refused "to be a petulant child who's going to go off and walk into the corner and say, 'Well, now I'm not going to work with you on anything else.' "

Otherwise, he said, "any defeat you have becomes debilitating."

The Harris incident, according to political scientist Brigid Harrison of Montclair State University, is "indicative of the complexity of the relationship [Christie] has with Democrats."

Through deals with Sweeney and Democratic power broker George E. Norcross III (an owner of The Inquirer), Christie has "managed to co-opt the Democrats on at least parts of his agenda," Harrison said.

But Harris' nomination is an example of an issue "where Sweeney decides to dig in his heels," she said. "You can see the intractability of the partisan divide."

The billion-dollar question in Trenton now is whether a partisan divide will affect budget negotiations, which are approaching a July 1 deadline. Christie is pushing an income tax cut to accompany his \$32 billion proposed spending plan. Though Democrats initially offered an alternative tax cut, their enthusiasm has cooled as tax revenue has come in below estimates.

Harrison believes Christie will continue his bipartisan spiel, which may sound more credible to an out-of-town audience.

"He has a notion of the spin that he has to give for his own political career, and that spin he's going to give, facts be damned," she said.

The spin on his judicial-nominee defeats, previewed by the governor Thursday, will be this: If Democrats demanded diverse nominees yet block an openly gay African American (Harris) and a Korean immigrant (Kwon), what more can a bipartisan leader do?

Harrison says the "nuance" of the nominees' defeats - the Kwon family's questionable business dealings, Harris' lack of courtroom experience - "gets lost in the kind of big-picture, 30-second sound bite."

At town hall meetings in New Jersey, Christie's bipartisan self-portrayal is pragmatic. He may run for reelection next year, and the state is largely Democratic.

In front of more conservative national audiences, Christie uses his bipartisan record to go on the offensive, contrasting himself against President Obama, whom he describes as lacking the leadership to deal with intransigent members of Congress from the opposing party.

Delivering the keynote speech to hundreds of libertarians and conservatives at a Cato Institute dinner in Washington last month, Christie described his partnership with Democrats. He called Sweeney a "friend," and boasted about how he was working with Democrats to come up with a tax cut.

"When you have Democrats agreeing with me that it's time to cut taxes after a decade of raising them, then it's official, we have turned Trenton upside-down," Christie said.

"In New Jersey, we've done this because we've put our state's interests above partisan interests. And we've made friends with our Democratic colleagues who are willing to view these things not in a partisan way, but in a commonsense way."

In rejecting Harris, though, Democrats gave "warning signs" that the post-partisan era may be over, said Patrick Murray, a pollster from Monmouth University.

Fortunately for Christie, he said, the public doesn't much care about judicial nominations.

"If he loses on the big-ticket items - the tax cut, the budget - it makes it harder" for him to maintain his coalition-builder image, Murray said.

Yet with a possible 2013 reelection campaign looming, the governor needs his Christiecrats.

"And that's one of the key reasons why the Democrats have become suddenly more reluctant to give Christie what he wants," Murray said.