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Chris Christie, the Republican Bill Clinton

By: Reihan Salam – May 15, 2013

Chris Christie, the Republican governor of New Jersey, has a lot to be happy about. The recent revelation that he had lap-band surgery to gain control of his weight went about as well as could be expected. A less well-liked public figure might have been mocked for taking an extreme step, but Christie's self-deprecating wit and what at least seems like unrehearsed genuineness and warmth have served as a shield. Like Bill Clinton in his prime, Christie has a mix of great appetite and great energy that Americans find strangely compelling.

And because there are only two gubernatorial elections in 2013, Christie's bid for re-election is attracting a good deal of national attention, almost all of which has been positive. A new NBC News/Marist poll, ^[2] released on Wednesday of last week found that Christie has a 69 percent approval rating, and that he leads his most likely Democratic challenger, State Senator Barbara Buono, by 60 percent to 28 percent among registered voters. Among likely voters, Christie's support increases to 62 percent while Buono's stays the same.

Christie still has to overcome the fact that the New Jersey electorate skews left, as demonstrated by Barack Obama's crushing 58to-40 percent victory over Mitt Romney in last year's presidential election. One can imagine Democrats and left-of-center independents deciding they can't back a self-described conservative for governor, no matter how much they like him personally. Mindful of this danger, Christie has been keen to emphasize his willingness to work across the aisle. In a new campaign advertisement ^[3], a narrator with a soothing baritone voice praises the New Jersey governor for "working with Democrats and Republicans, believing that as long as you stick to your principles, compromise isn't a dirty word."

To state the obvious, this is a message that doesn't just resonate in New Jersey. Christie, having emerged on the national political scene as a bruiser best known for his heated confrontations at town hall meetings across the Garden State, has lately positioned himself as a bipartisan problem solver. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, he lashed out at congressional Republicans for, in his view, putting party politics ahead of the interests of his constituents. He famously stood shoulder to shoulder with President Obama just days before the 2012 presidential election as they surveyed the devastation Sandy had left behind, praising the same man he had campaigned against on Mitt Romney's behalf for his capable response to the disaster. Many Republicans who had admired Christie were troubled by what they saw as his betrayal of the GOP. Cynics suggested that Christie recognized that his best path to a victory in a heavily Democratic state was to cozy up to a Democratic administration, and so he had no compunction about putting political ambition above political loyalty. Another interpretation, of course,

is that Christie had put the interests of New Jerseyans first, an interpretation that had the added benefit of endearing him to voters in his state and beyond.

In light of his gravity-defying popularity, it is hardly surprising that Christie is seen as presidential timber. Naturally, Christie and his re-election team insist that they are focused on his re-election bid, and so they refuse to entertain questions about his presidential ambitions. Yet it is no secret that a number of influential Republican donors and activists had hoped he would enter the presidential race in 2012. And despite his supposed betrayals, Christie continues to command considerable respect among the Republican rank and file. Christie's greatest success is that, like Obama at the height of his powers, he strikes many voters as somehow above politics. But whereas Obama was seen as cool, stylish and cerebral, Christie is seen as an unpretentious everyman who cares only about getting things done. This image has proven enormously beneficial to Christie's fund-raising efforts, including among some California-based technology entrepreneurs and investors who haven't backed GOP candidates in the past. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and chief executive officer of Facebook, famously co-hosted a Christie fundraiser with his wife, Priscilla Chan, motivated in part by his work with Christie and Newark Mayor Cory Booker, another rising star, on education reform in New Jersey's largest city.

It is certainly possible that Christie's centrist gestures will alienate conservative presidential primary voters and activists. Earlier this year the Conservative Political Action Committee pointedly refused to invite him to address their annual conference, which has become a who's who of GOP presidential contenders. It is worth noting, however, that unlike many other Northeast Republicans, Christie is opposed to abortion and same-sex marriage, though he only rarely discusses the former and has called for a statewide referendum on the latter - a referendum his fellow opponents of same-sex marriage may well lose. He rolled back a 2004 increase in New Jersey's top state income tax bracket, despite its popularity. More recently he backed a 10 percent across-the-board income tax cut. Although spending reductions haven't gone as far as some conservatives might like, Christie has trimmed state government employment and canceled a Hudson River rail tunnel on the grounds that its costs were likely to spiral out of control, a record that led the tough graders at the libertarian Cato Institute to give him a respectable B in its last *Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors*^[4]. His central legislative achievement - reforming pension and health benefits for public employees - has earned him the lasting enmity of the state's mighty public-sector unions, yet it also demonstrated his political prowess, as he successfully wooed some of New Jersey's most powerful Democratic machine politicians to get his way.

Christie brings a number of other strengths to the table as well. His recent emphasis on criminal justice reform and education reform suggest that he has learned the right lessons from Bush's compassionate conservatism, which will make it difficult for Democrats to caricature him as a heartless friend of the plutocracy. He also has the potential to reach constituencies other Republicans have left cold. As Jamelle Bouie of ^[5]*The American Prospect* ^[5] has argued, the Republican failure to match George W. Bush's performance among African-American voters in the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 contributed to the party's defeat in states like Florida, Virginia and Ohio. A recent Quinnipiac survey ^[6] found that Christie's approval rating among black voters in New Jersey was 31 percent, less than half of his 65 percent approval rating among white voters but a decent result for a Republican all the same. Moreover, his

popularity in New Jersey might give a Christie-led GOP ticket a boost in neighboring Pennsylvania, a state Republican presidential candidates have been losing since 1988.

And Christie's outsider status as a governor will give him much-needed distance from the Republican leadership in Congress, which according to a Pew survey released last week ^[7] has only a 22 percent approval rating. At a time when middle-income voters remain deeply skeptical that Republicans care about their economic interests, Christie's distinctive profile creates an enormous opportunity. His political celebrity means that voters, including all-important swing voters, will be willing to give him a hearing even when they wouldn't extend the same courtesy to a more conventional Republican.

The biggest question that remains is whether Christie is capable of crafting a serious reform agenda that can match the challenges of sluggish growth, a dysfunctional public sector, rising health and education costs, and a global security environment rife with danger. We won't know the answer to this question for a long time. But given his considerable strengths, Christie would be foolish not to at least try.