

Chris Christie launches his campaign for president tonight. Can he actually win?

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Chris Christie in 2016 when he announced his first presidential run. NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

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Chris Christie on Tuesday night plans to enter a crowded primary for the Republican nomination for president in which much of the attention is focused on the unpredictable and often unshakable force of another contender: Donald Trump.

Sound familiar?

The first time Christie ran for the White House, in 2016, the then-New Jersey governor dropped out after a lackluster showing in New Hampshire and Trump went on to win both the nomination and the general election.

Now, he is about to launch a second bid, and questions hang over his candidacy: Does he actually have a path to victory this time? Or will he be seen as the candidate whose main job is to take down Trump?

Political experts say it will be difficult but not impossible for the former governor, who so far has barely registered in polling. Even Christie's inner circle concedes he's a long shot.

The former New Jersey governor plans to make his announcement at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire, and he'll reprise his 2016 campaign slogan of "Telling It Like It Is." He is expected to spend lots of time focusing on New Hampshire, which next February holds the first Republican primary, even though he finished sixth there in 2016.

Stephen Duprey, a former Republican National Committee member and longtime prominent figure in New Hampshire Republican politics, argued that Christie did a “great job” in the Granite State the first time out.

“People want to get to know you as a candidate and town halls are great for that,” Duprey said. “People like that. It was a crowded field then. I think he’ll get more attention this time because people know him. They liked his direct approach.”

He insisted that despite Trump’s “substantial lead” in the polls right now, “this is a wide open race” and one asset Christie has is he will be talking about broad issues and not “woke politics” or “which books to ban” at a time when politics have been consumed by culture wars.

“Just talking directly about issues will give him an opportunity to see if he can break through,” Duprey said.

He also noted the late U.S. Sen. John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, hosted 108 town hall meetings from July 1 to Jan. 8. People, Duprey said, went from thinking McCain was nuts for spending so much time in New Hampshire to thinking “that’s why we admire this guy.” Christie, he suggested, could follow a similar path.

Julian Zelizer, a political science professor and historian at Princeton University, noted primaries can “take unexpected turns” and that Trump, though a “very formidable” frontrunner, also faces legal troubles. But, Zelizer emphasized, there are other candidates — namely Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis — who could be tough to jump over.

“It’s a very difficult lane,” Zelizer said. “Christie thinks there’s room for a guy who succeeded in a blue state. I don’t think he has much of a chance.”

While other candidates tip-toe around Trump, Christie is attacking the former president head on, calling him, among other things, “a loser” who “can’t win.”

Christie, of course, was once a close friend and ally of the one-time Atlantic City casino magnate. After ending his own campaign, he was the first major Republican to endorse Trump’s 2016 campaign and later served as a close adviser.

But Christie broke from Trump after the Jan. 6 riot and now appears to be banking his chances on being Trump’s fiercest critics in the primary.

“Christie has been trying to brand himself as a different brand of Republican,” said Ashley Koning, director of Rutgers University’s Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling.

Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, said the big problem is Trump and DeSantis are already “eating up all the oxygen” and the more candidates jump into the race, “the stronger Trump becomes because the anti-Trump vote is spread even thinner.”

“The first task before going after Trump is to clear the field of all the other non-Trump contenders,” Murray said. “And it’s not clear Christie or anybody else could make that happen. It’s not something specific to him right now.”

With the addition of Christie and former Vice President Mike Pence, who is expected to announce a run on Wednesday, the GOP field will grow to nine.

“Chris Christie has to run as an anti-Trump candidate,” Murray said. “That makes him different than a lot of candidates. But it also backs him into a corner.”

The pollster explains that DeSantis may be able to pick up voters who like Trump but “may be convinced it’s time to try a new face.”

“Chris Christie can’t make inroads with that group,” Murray said.

There is also the thought Christie could be a “stalking horse” who is in the race simply to chop down Trump (and maybe DeSantis) even if it’s to the benefit of another candidate.

Carl Golden, who was press secretary for Republican former New Jersey Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman, said he believes Christie will spend the next few months “just kneecapping Donald Trump at every opportunity.”

“I think he’s a designated hitter. He’s got the bat,” said Golden, now a senior contributing analyst with the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“Who benefits from that? That’s a good question.”

Early on, Golden said, it would appear to benefit DeSantis, who ranks second to Trump in most polls, with everybody else — including Christie — gaining little traction.

“Christie’s a smart guy. He can read polls,” Golden said. “His role is going to be the guy who is out there just bringing down the frontrunner and at least sending the message to himself and other people of like mind: If we want to win this thing against an incumbent who is vulnerable, we can’t have 10 people up there. We’ve got to get behind one person, and that one person should not be Donald Trump.”

Others disagree.

“I don’t think he’s just there to stalk somebody else,” said Ben Dworkin, director of Rowan University’s Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship. “People are dismissing him because of his current standing in the polls. The critical thing for Chris Christie is whether he can find a message that is going to resonate with the Republican Party of 2023. It’s a different party than it was in 2012, when he was at the height of his popularity.”

A [Monmouth poll released last week](#) found Christie is the most unpopular of Republican hopefuls among the party’s voters. The survey found 21% of Republican and Republican-leaning voters in the U.S. have a favorable opinion of Christie, while 47% have an unfavorable view.

A [Fairleigh Dickinson University survey](#) from earlier this month found Republicans in Christie’s native New Jersey are [much more likely to support Trump](#) over him for the GOP nod, though Trump’s legal woes could give Christie — a former federal prosecutor — a boost. The survey, though, shows that could help other candidates, too.

Christie also comes with the baggage of the [Bridgegate](#) scandal, as well as any lingering memory of [his warm greeting of](#) President Barack Obama after Hurricane Sandy and just before the 2012 presidential election, something that drew the wrath of many Republicans. And some may only know Christie as the guy who was [photographed on a state beach](#) he’d shut down during a state budget crisis. He left office in 2018 with [historically low approval ratings](#).

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, has a different take on it all — that we shouldn’t count Christie out.

He said the governor didn’t gain traction in 2016 in part because Bridgegate was “still fresh.”

“But few voters remember or care about that today and 2024 is a different world than 2016,” Froomjian said.

He argued that DeSantis has “stumbled out of the gate and looks unprepared for the rigors of a national campaign” and MAGA voters may not “opt for Trump-Lite when they can have the real thing.”

“I think there is time for voters to try out different Trump alternatives,” Froomjian said, adding that Christie is “a gifted natural politician” who “excels at give-and-take with the media” and has “the conservative bonafides and pugnacious personality.”

“Christie is carving out a lane all to himself,” he added. “If 2016 showed anything, it’s that appeasement doesn’t work with Trump. He sees candidates who ignore him as weak and he eviscerates them. Christie is willing to take on Trump directly, which could make for fascinating exchanges if Trump does debate.”

Froomjian also notes Trump is right now “ignoring Christie because DeSantis is higher in the polls.”

“But if DeSantis keeps losing ground and voters look for a different alternative, Trump could give the former governor of New Jersey the oxygen his campaign needs,” he said. “And the poll numbers will follow.”

Meanwhile, New Jersey’s current governor, Phil Murphy, says he’s intrigued by a Christie candidacy.

“I’m not surprised,” said the Democrat who replaced Christie. “Let’s lay to the side that he and I don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things. I think he’s sort of trying to develop this lane where he’s saying: Wait a minute. We have to go forward and not go backward. I think that’s an interesting lane.

“On the other hand, the more folks that get into this, with the rock-solid core President Trump supporters, you wonder whether you might be looking more like 2016 again, with a stage full of candidates and the person who’s got 30% ultimately ends up winning. It’ll be fascinating to see how this plays out.”

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