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## In Case You Missed It: Christie Calls For GOP Rebranding

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By: Maggie Haberman and Ben Smith  
Politico  
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New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie on Tuesday in an interview with POLITICO outlined a path for the GOP to rebrand as the party keeping "our eye on the cash register," while also praising some Democrats for taking the right approach to tackling major issues like education.

Christie, a darling of conservatives after staring down Democrats over the budget and tax cuts, demonstrated his own distinct brand of conservatism over a breakfast interview.

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The sit-down came hours after the newly-minted governor returned home from passing the Garden State's budget, a plan that mostly reflected what he'd spent months pushing for, but one that also cost him some of his popularity in the polls.

Christie has generally avoided talking about national issues in his first six months in office. But he urged President Barack Obama to take the lead on immigration reform, and said he should keep speaking out on teachers union reforms, an issue that has made the New Jersey governor a controversial figure as he's aggressively fought for changes in his home state.

But he also took positions more closely aligned with some centrist Democrats on issues such as immigration - an issue he said falls victim to "demagoguery" too easily and one that's a national problem.

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"They should be talking about treating people like adults and telling them the truth: we're in huge trouble," he said. "And it's going to mean cutting back on a lot of things that folks either have become used to or in a perfect world would like to have."

He added, "Republicans have to rebrand themselves credibly with the candidates they run, and what they espouse, as the person who will keep an eye on the cash register, who will rein in the spending and the debt."

Christie said that is the path he is pursuing in New Jersey, which is "really a blue state, so I don't understand why it wouldn't appeal all across the country. I mean, nobody's asking my advice, but if they did, that's what I would say to them."

Christie's budget cleared after a legislative battle in which he won the bare minimum of Democratic votes he needed to get it through. Now, he's calling back the legislature to focus on his 2.5 percent property tax cap proposal, which he'd like to see put on the ballot this fall - a move that requires lawmakers' approval.

He was taking something of a victory lap Monday and Tuesday, with a small handful of interviews and a video release about his new-tax-free budget entitled, "They said it couldn't be done."

On the union front, he said, "I think what you see now is that our teachers union is growingly unpopular because they're inflexible and they believe that they're entitled to be shielded completely from the recession."

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But he also suggested he's seeing a "schism," not just within the Democratic Party over this issue, but between public sector and private sector labor groups.

"I think what you see is a divide in the union movement," he said, adding that groups like the New Jersey building trades are struggling with high unemployment rates for their members and equally high property taxes "and they know that the driver for that is the 4 or 5 percent salary (hikes)" for public workers.

"I know it's been a third rail before," he said, but added that if he didn't fight it, the other battles wouldn't be very meaningful.

Like other Republicans nationally, Christie said he views Obama as an "ally" on education reform and in the push to force the teachers' union to make changes. The idea of Christie, a rising GOP star who won despite the White House's best efforts to defeat him in 2009, and Obama as collaborators isn't as incongruous as it seems-many Democrats privately acknowledge that Obama's push for "Race to the Top" funding created a climate in which unions are no longer a protected political class.

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"What I've said to folks is, we're at a unique moment in history where you have conservative Republican governors ...who's never been able to get traction against the teachers union, but now you've got a Democratic president and (his) Secretary of Education" talking the same talk, he said.

On the hot-button topic of immigration reform, he said he has long declined to "demagogue" the issue as a former U.S. Attorney, because "I come from law enforcement and it's not an easy issue."

But he did intimate that he thinks stringent state-by-state laws - such as in Arizona - are the wrong approach, and added, "I think President Obama doesn't do this at his own risk because it's affecting the economy in the country...to me, I think the president's really gotta show the leadership on this."

"This is a federal problem, it's gotta have a federal fix," he said. "I'm not really comfortable with state law enforcement having a big role."

He said that without border security, enforcement of existing laws and a "clear" path to legalization for immigrants, there would never be a fix.

At the heart of Christie's appeal, both within the state and outside its border, is an unfiltered, straightforward approach that is startlingly different from many of his gubernatorial colleagues.

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Despite his obvious interest in national issues, he said he won't be carving out areas on which to speak out- especially because his goal, after being governor, as he put it, is "to make money" and not to run for president, as some Republicans hoped he would.

"No, I've got enough to do in New Jersey," he said. "I think the more you then talk about the [national] stuff, then the more it undercuts the credibility that you don't want to be involved."

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