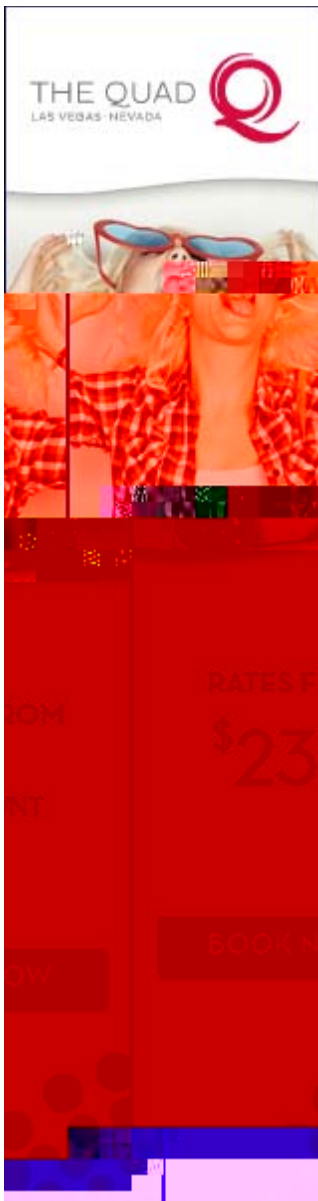

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reelection, ascending to the helm of the Republican Governors Association, and - while he has not announced he's running for president - receiving from polls the mantle of being his party's 2016 front-runner.

But the hard-charging governor, who has defined himself by always going on the offensive, took the biggest hit of his terms as governor Wednesday with the disclosure of 22 pages of e-mail and text messages linking his deputy chief of staff to a series of massive traffic jams in September at the George Washington Bridge.

Perhaps most damaging for Christie, the accusations against his office fuel the biggest criticism his opponents have long pushed, without (until now) much success: that he's a thin-skinned bully, willing to push people around "Jersey-style."

"He's always been a two-sided coin. On one side, you have a tough, no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is politician that people say they want," said Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia. "On the other side is the bully. Which side of the coin does this shine a light on? It's obvious."

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Statehouse Democrats leading the inquiry into the incident said the documents rule out any plausible motive for the orchestrated lane closures other than political retribution by the administration against the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee, who refused to endorse the Republican governor in what would be a 22-point reelection win.

Christie, silent for most of the day, issued a statement by late afternoon denying any knowledge of a plot to close the lanes.

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"What I've seen today for the first time is unacceptable," Christie said. "I am outraged and deeply saddened to learn that not only was I misled by a member of my staff, but this completely inappropriate and unsanctioned conduct was made without my knowledge."

To Democrats and even some Republicans, a combination of elements makes Wednesday's news a bombshell:

It directly implicates his office, after denials and dismissals from Christie that his staff was involved.

With an investigation pending, questions are sure to linger, and more revelations could emerge over weeks or months, creating a constant drip of critical news.

The story instantly went national. It set Twitter afire throughout the day and was the talk of cable news shows in the evening, with the aggrieved mayor of Fort Lee on CNN blasting Christie in an interview with Wolf Blitzer.

In Washington, reporters hounded Republicans from New Jersey for comments, though few wanted to speak.

Cary Covington, a political scientist at the University of Iowa, said that in that state, which hosts the first presidential contest with its caucuses, clean politics matters.

"Iowans care about this stuff," Covington said.

As Democrats in Trenton hammered Christie, national Democrats also plunged into the fray. A story they had tried to draw attention to for months suddenly had new life.

"These revelations are troubling for any public official, but they also indicate what we've come to expect from Gov. Christie - when people oppose him, he exacts retribution," said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D., Fla.), chair of the Democratic National Committee. "When people question him,

he belittles and snidely jokes. And when anyone dares to look into his administration, he bullies and attacks."

Democrats aren't alone in seeing benefit from the controversy.

"I guarantee you that virtually every Republican running against him for president will have this in one or more TV ads. It's irresistible," Sabato said.

Several political observers questioned the point of meddling with the lanes. With Christie eyeing a blowout victory over Democratic State Sen. Barbara Buono, why bother?

"What the hell could the mayor of Fort Lee bring to the table at that point?" said Carl Golden, a former press secretary to Republican Govs. Thomas H. Kean and Christie Whitman, and now a senior contributing analyst at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.

Neil Oxman, a Philadelphia-based Democratic operative who has worked on presidential races, said the scandal does not necessarily disqualify Christie from being president. There is a long time until 2016, and the governor can prove himself with how he handles this test.

Still, Oxman said, the incident raises damaging questions.

"Boy, this was dumb," he said.

The danger for the governor - and the hope for his opponents - is that others emerge claiming they, too, have been victims of political vendettas, said Patrick Murray, a political analyst at Monmouth University.

"If this story continues to roll out . . . it will become death by a thousand cuts," Murray said.

What remains to be seen is how Christie handles the issue and what other stories arise in

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 10:20 PM, 01/08/2014

Quite a Presidential move. What's the GOP going to do now? Cruz/Palin?

— Bobski5000

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1 like this / 0 don't • Posted 7:15 AM, 01/09/2014

Democrats are determined to get to the bottom of this "scandal", Benghazi not so much. Democrats are a bunch of bomb throwing, radical fanatics.

— coniljw

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 8:52 AM, 01/09/2014

No one wants to get to the bottom of this heavy weight scandal.

Staying on top of it would be smarter.

— Seed2

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 9:18 AM, 01/09/2014

Perhaps you have some evidence the rest of us aren't privy to on Benghazi, goober?

— wokmaster

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 10:07 AM, 01/09/2014

Sure it's a petty move and it'll probably hurt Christie's "brand" as a guy who is above petty partisanship.

But...this isn't a big deal. People with power use that power and sometimes they're going to be petty and abuse that power in small ways.

It'll blow over in a few days.

— doctorhim

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 10:24 PM, 01/08/2014

Funny, I always thought this is how politics works in America. I guess I am so used to the democratic machine and their union thugs in Philly bullying anyone who stands in their way!

— dankil13

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 6:00 AM, 01/09/2014

The difference is this really happened and your comment is just a meme from conservative radio.

— jonline

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 7:16 AM, 01/09/2014

Go hear what your idiot liberals on MSNBC have to say on the matter; then have to apologize or step down for those comments. Dunce.

— coniljw

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 8:24 AM, 01/09/2014

This looks like another Republican bridge to nowhere!

— Alotatea

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