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Christie's Talk Is Blunt, but Not Always Straight

By **RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA**

New Jersey's public-sector unions routinely pressure the State Legislature to give them what they fail to win in contract talks. Most government workers pay nothing for health insurance. Concessions by school employees would have prevented any cuts in school programs last year.

Statements like those are at the core of Gov. [Chris Christie's](#) campaign to cut state spending by getting tougher on unions. They are not, however, accurate.

In fact, on the occasions when the Legislature granted the unions new benefits, it was for pensions, which were not subject to collective bargaining — and it has not happened in eight years. In reality, state employees have paid 1.5 percent of their salaries toward health insurance since 2007, in addition to co-payments and deductibles, and since last spring, many local government workers, including teachers, do as well. The few dozen school districts where employees agreed to concessions last year still saw layoffs and cuts in academic programs.

“Clearly there has been a pattern of the governor playing fast and loose with the details,” said [Brigid Harrison](#), a political science professor at Montclair State University. “But so far, he's been adept at getting the public to believe what he says.”

Mr. Christie, a Republican who took office in January 2010, would hardly be the first politician to indulge in hyperbole or gloss over facts. But his misstatements, exaggerations and carefully constructed claims belie the national [image he has built as a blunt talker](#) who gives straight answers to hard questions, especially about budgets and labor relations. Candor is central to Mr. Christie's appeal, and a review of his public statements over the past year shows some of them do not hold up to scrutiny.

The governor declined to be interviewed for this article. His aides dismissed the notion that

he had a problem with accuracy, and noted his unusual willingness to face interrogation — if he is not at a town-hall-style forum, it seems, he is on a television chat show.

Mr. Christie's communications director, Maria Comella, said, "If a result of him being engaged directly with the people of New Jersey is a story that splits hairs, we're happy to take that trade-off any day."

Misstatements have been central to Mr. Christie's worst public stumbles — about how the state managed to miss out on a \$400 million education grant last year, for example, and whether he was in touch enough while he was in Florida during the blizzard in December — and his rare admissions that he was wrong. But [Peter J. Woolley](#), a politics professor and polling director at Fairleigh Dickinson University, said there had been no sign, so far, that these issues had much effect on the governor's political standing.

"People prefer directness to detail," Professor Woolley said. "People know it's not unusual for politicians to take the shortcut in public debate, that they're not academics who are going to qualify everything."

Some overstatements have worked their way into the governor's routine public comments, like a claim that he balanced the budget last year without raising taxes; in truth, he cut deeply into tax credits for the elderly and the poor. But inaccuracies also crop up when he is challenged, and his instinct seems to be to turn it into an attack on someone else instead of giving an answer.

When New Jersey narrowly lost \$400 million in the federal Education Department's Race to the Top competition last summer because of missing data in its application, Mr. Christie held a news conference blaming "bureaucrats in Washington" and said state officials had tried to supply the missing numbers at a hearing. It did not take long for the Obama administration to release a recording showing that, in reality, federal officials had requested the information at the hearing, and the New Jersey team had not had it.

Mr. Christie [fired](#) Bret D. Schundler, his education commissioner at the time, accusing him of lying about the hearing. But Mr. Schundler said he had warned the governor before the news conference that what he was about to tell reporters was false.

"His entire point was he likes to be on offense rather than defense," Mr. Schundler [said days later](#). "He wanted to make this all about the Obama administration's picayune rules rather than our error."

A few months later, in November, when the Assembly speaker, Sheila Y. Oliver, a Democrat, and the governor were sparring over pension issues, she said she had requested a meeting with the governor. Mr. Christie called that “a lie.” Ms. Oliver’s office promptly produced text messages from the Assembly staff making the request.

Mr. Christie’s aides said that those messages had been somewhat unclear, and that, in any case, the governor had been unaware of them when he made his remark. But Democrats said the illuminating fact was that the governor, without investigating first, questioned a critic’s integrity.

“Everything is an assault, which makes it hard for adversaries to catch their breath and question the substance of what he’s saying before he moves on to the next thing,” said Assemblyman [John Wisniewski](#), the state Democratic chairman.

“A lot of politicians would react cautiously, but not this governor,” said Professor Harrison, of Montclair State University. “He always wants to stay on the offensive, and he’s not going to say, ‘Let me look into that.’ ”

After the record snowfall in December, Mr. Christie defended his decision to stay on vacation in Florida with his family, saying that he had spoken with the acting governor, Stephen M. Sweeney, [during the storm](#). When Mr. Sweeney, a Democrat and the State Senate president, said they had not talked, the governor attributed his own misstatement to lack of sleep.

Whether he talked with Mr. Sweeney or received a message from Ms. Oliver may be trivial, but Mr. Christie’s very public campaign against the unions has greater consequence. His statements about state workers are critical to his public image and central to his political agenda.

Political analysts, Democrats and even some of his Republican allies say that Mr. Christie could — and sometimes does — make most of his points without resorting to questionable claims. It is beyond dispute that New Jersey is in terrible financial shape, that the governor has made big cuts in spending, that the pension funds are headed for insolvency and that state workers pay little for generous health benefits compared with those in the private sector.

But in going beyond those facts, the governor sometimes wanders into gray areas. In addition to claims about unions circumventing collective bargaining to “get what they want” from the Legislature, he has frequently said that “there are dozens of states in this country”

that do not let public-sector unions bargain collectively (there are, experts said, eight); that New Jersey's last round of union negotiations, under a Democratic governor, were not adversarial (there were heated protests at the State House); and that the vast majority of teachers in the state get free health care (they did until last year).

Professor Woolley, the political scientist and pollster, said that he did not know whether Mr. Christie had embellished any more than other politicians, but that as a Republican in a Democratic-leaning state who promotes himself as a paragon of straight talk, he might need to stick to the truth more than most.

"The blunter you are, the more visible you are, the more you are never without an answer," Professor Woolley said, "the higher your risks."