

OPINION: DELAY COST ASSEMBLY DEMOCRATS CHANCE TO OVERRIDE CHRISTIE VETO

CARL GOLDEN | DECEMBER 10, 2015

Failed override gave Christie another opportunity to tout his leadership. A second attempt will only yield more of same



Timing, as any successful comedian will attest, is everything. Had Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto paid heed to that truism, the first override of a Gov. Chris Christie veto may well have succeeded.

With 54 votes necessary to follow the Senate's lead and end Christie's shutout streak of veto sustaining votes, Assembly Democrats could muster only 51, including four Republicans who broke ranks and supported the override attempt.

At issue was legislation approved unanimously in June to require law enforcement agencies to be notified if an individual with a history of mental health issues or hospitalization sought to expunge that record in order to qualify for a firearms purchase permit. While its reach was limited, the legislation was widely seen as a straightforward, uncontroversial effort to help keep weapons out of the hands of mentally unstable people.

In what was quickly panned as the governor's pandering to gun rights groups whose support he is actively seeking in his campaign for the presidential nomination, Christie conditionally vetoed the bill and called instead for an extensive overhaul of the system used to identify and treat individuals suffering from mental health difficulties.

The Senate overrode the veto in October, but Prieto, rather than seizing the moment, taking advantage of the intense media focus and building on the momentum produced by the Senate vote, chose to delay Assembly action until December 3.

Not only did the delay rob the momentum, but also it gave the administration and Republican legislative leaders more than a month to marshal their forces and exert pressure on their colleagues to stand with Christie.

The math was clear to all: Democrats needed six Republicans to desert the governor (a number which later rose to seven when a Democratic Assemblyman resigned on the day before the vote).

Put another way, Republican leaders could withstand as many as six defections—18 percent of their total membership—and still emerge as winners. They were, in effect, playing with house money, willing to lose most of it but walking away from the table ahead of the game.

Minority Leader Jon Bramnick rationalized his membership's change of heart earlier this year, i1

It's a tactic the minority has utilized in the past, offering what appears to be a credible and viable alternative to the vetoed legislation while making the case that Democrats were more intere

