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## Don't count out Chris Christie this early in the presidential sweepstakes, by John Froonjian

John Froonjian For The Press

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Republican Presidential candidate former and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie demonstrated his prowess as a performer by holding forth for two hours at a New Hampshire town hall Tuesday night launching his campaign, alternating between humor, pointed barbs against Trump and personal stories.

Charles Krupa — staff, AP

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**F**ormer New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has joined the ranks of candidates challenging Donald Trump for the Republican nomination for president. Reaction from the punditocracy has not been glowing. Some point to low poll numbers, others to his lack of a strong voter base.

This may be a contrarian view, but here goes: Do not count Chris Christie out. There's a reason people begged him to run 11 years ago. He is a gifted practitioner of political arts, a natural. If he makes it to the GOP debate stage, he will have the opportunity to reset opinions.

It's true Christie's presidential campaign went nowhere in 2016, when the Bridgegate fiasco was fresh. Few voters likely remember the George Washington Bridge closure or care. It's also true his current poll numbers badly trail those of Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

But much can happen in the eight months before the first primary votes are cast. If we've learned anything, it's that the electorate and political climate are extremely volatile and conventional wisdom is worth as much as a Kasich for President bumper sticker.

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Economic conditions, criminal cases against Trump, war in Ukraine or Trump's own self-destructive tendencies could alter the storyline. Voters on both sides in recent years have sort-of tried on different candidates, giving many a moment in the spotlight. Christie can't beat Trump with the MAGA crowd, but he can compete if enough voters look for an alternative.

Governor DeSantis has stumbled out of the gate and looks unprepared for the rigors of a national election battle. His Twitter campaign launch was a debacle. He has lost ground in polls as Trump belittles him. Why opt for Trump-Lite when MAGA voters can have the real thing?

As more Republicans join the race, they spark legitimate fears that Trump can divide and conquer a large field of bland noncontenders, as in 2016. But Christie is carving a lane out all for himself.

The 2016 campaign showed appeasement doesn't work with Trump. He sees candidates who avoid him as weak, and he eviscerates them. Christie is the only competitor not afraid to mix it up. Like Trump, Christie doesn't back away from conflict. If he can get under Trump's skin, the battle may become engaged. It's hard to imagine Nikki Haley, Mike Pence or Tim Scott similarly forcing voters to pay attention. Christie is conversant in the blunt jawboning that GOP voters have embraced.

Voters looking for an alternative to Trump care about a quality that could give Christie an opening: electability. If he can get voters' attention, the former prosecutor can make the case for why he could beat Joe Biden. Christie maintains the ability and proven chops to score points in a debate.

DeSantis has a prickly relationship with the mainstream news media. Demonizing the press rather than engaging reporters may thrill the hardcore GOP base. But DeSantis is not being vetted to handle tough questions.

Christie excels at give-and-take with the media. He has honed his interview skills as an ABC News analyst. He demonstrated his prowess as a performer by holding forth for two hours at a New Hampshire town hall Tuesday night launching his campaign, alternating between humor, pointed barbs against Trump and personal stories. This is why it is vitally important to his campaign that he make it onstage for the Republican debates, the first scheduled on Aug. 23.

Christie could dominate a debate, especially if Trump doesn't participate and steal all the oxygen. If Trump does participate, Christie would have his chance to take him on directly. Either way, attention would allow the former two-term New Jersey governor to argue why he is the most electable.

And non-MAGA voters will likely consider electability. Joe Biden looks vulnerable to Republicans, and many fear the hard edges of Trumpism give the Democrats an advantage. DeSantis's prohibition of abortion after six weeks, book exclusions and his inexplicable war with Mickey Mouse are mostly negatives in a general election. Christie boasts traditional conservative values and a large personality without the baggage of extremism.

None of this means it will be easy for Christie. He has a lot of ground to make up. But many seem to be applying the dependable expectations of the past to an environment turned upside down. It doesn't make sense to dismiss Christie's chances this early in the game.

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