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October 4, 2011

With Christie Out, Republican Race Begins for Real

By JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — Memorandum to Republican activists, voters and donors: Your presidential field is set. It's time to start sizing up the candidates, learning to love at least one of them and preparing to head toward the voting booth.

The decision by Gov. **Chris Christie** of New Jersey to join the long procession of Republicans who have turned down flattering and persuasive invitations to jump into the presidential race all but closes the door to the prospect of a new candidate breezing onto the scene. The party's nominee will almost certainly be chosen from the contenders already on stage.

Even before Mr. Christie stepped before the cameras on Tuesday in Trenton and said he was not ready to leave New Jersey, the leading Republican candidates were offering themselves as a Plan B to his admirers.

Mitt Romney, seeing an opportunity to consolidate support from establishment constituencies like Wall Street and big business, scrambled to recruit the contributors who had their sights set on Mr. Christie, while Gov. Rick Perry of Texas tried to re-establish his role as a credible alternative.

Most of all, though, the candidates and other leading Republicans were eager to keep the field from

expanding.

“I think there is plenty of talent in the race,” Gov. Terry E. Branstad of Iowa said in an interview. “I don’t think there’s anybody that’s perfect, but we just need to focus on whoever can be the strongest candidate to win the White House.”

With three months before the first voting begins, Mr. Romney and his aides worked aggressively to turn Mr. Christie’s decision into their advantage, seeking to position him as the strongest challenger to President Obama. The Romney team signed up top financiers, including Kenneth Langone, the founder of Home Depot, who led the effort to draw Mr. Christie into the race.

As Mr. Romney campaigned in Florida on Tuesday, he encountered a woman who had moved from New Jersey. He practically gushed, saying: “Chris Christie country! He’s a great governor.”

For his part, Mr. Christie said he had no immediate plans to endorse a candidate.

While Mr. Romney sought to seize on the moment, supporters of Mr. Perry played down the urgency of picking sides. They argued that Mr. Perry could far better replicate the brash and populist appeal that Mr. Christie had with voters than Mr. Romney could. A Republican businessman from Iowa, Gary Kirke, who had traveled to New Jersey to urge Mr. Christie to run, said he would support Mr. Perry, citing a “conviction we need to be victorious.”

The rest of the Republican candidates, particularly former Gov. Jon M. Huntsman Jr. of Utah, hoped the moment would provide a new opening for their own candidacies. Two debates in the next two weeks could offer more clarity on the fluid nominating fight.

The courtship of Mr. Christie, who had spent months brushing aside efforts to recruit him, provided as much of a window into the dissatisfaction with the current field — including Mr. Romney and Mr. Perry — as it did on a belief that Mr. Christie was ready for the White House after two years as governor.

But Republican leaders in Washington and in state capitals across the country said it was time for the party to stop searching for a new candidate and to focus on trying to find the strongest contender to take on Mr. Obama, whose political vulnerability has grown throughout the year. The only prominent Republican who is still flirting publicly with a run is Sarah Palin, but few party leaders see her as an especially strong candidate.

“I’m not convinced right now that there isn’t the right nominee already in the field,” Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin said in an interview. “What we have to do is look at the field and spend more time trying to get the people who are already candidates to nail down exactly what they plan on doing as the next president and spend less time beating up on any of the individual candidates on a small issue here or there that we don’t necessarily agree with.”

The party establishment has expressed palpable concern with the trajectory of Mr. Perry, whose rapid ascent has leveled off. (A Washington Post/ABC News poll this week showed that his support had dropped in half nationally in the last month.) For Mr. Romney, the decision by Mr. Christie offers another opportunity for him to win over skeptical conservatives.

This year, the Republican nominating contest has been driven by a recurring series of high-profile courtships of governors and party luminaries that have ended in rejection. The fretting over the existing field — and the persistent pursuit of a fresh face — highlights the fact that the presidential campaign is also a fight for the soul and the direction of the Republican Party.

In April, Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi **said he lacked** the “absolute fire in the belly” to be a candidate. In May, Gov. Mitch Daniels of Indiana conceded that he wanted to run, but he **could not overrule** his family’s objections. Two former governors, Mike Huckabee of Arkansas and Jeb Bush of Florida, also declined to become candidates, as did Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin and Senator John Thune of South Dakota.

Alex Castellanos, a Republican strategist who advised Mr. Romney’s presidential bid four years ago and is not aligned with a candidate in this campaign, said Republicans needed to stop looking for a

“Superman — somebody with a cape to fly in and beat Barack Obama and solve all the nation’s problems.”

“We are so scared that we want a perfect, superhuman candidate to beat Obama and save the country,” Mr. Castellanos said in an interview Tuesday. “No one can beat those expectations. There is no such thing as Superman.”

The latest round of recruiting Mr. Christie was driven by Republican contributors in New York and New Jersey, along with longtime party elders like Henry A. Kissinger and Nancy Reagan. While the Romney campaign was placing a full-court press on the donors to join his team, Mr. Christie provided no signals of his own endorsement intentions.

“As I’ve said before, I’m not a halfway kind of guy,” Mr. Christie said. “If I feel like there’s someone in the field who gives us the best chance to defeat the president, I’ll endorse that person and I’ll work hard for that person. But I’m not in a position today to make that judgment.”



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