

University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth

From the Selected Works of Chad J McGuire

January 25, 2015

Preparing for Disaster: How our voting sends the wrong message

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chad_mcguire/48/

LOCAL VOICES

PREPARING FOR DISASTER

How our voting sends the wrong message

Editor’s Note: This is the third in a four-part series on climate change written by UMass Dartmouth associate professor Chad J. McGuire. Part 1 (Jan. 4) focused on sea-level rise and flood insurance. Part 2 looked at public and private costs of protecting the environment (Jan. 11). Part 3 (today) discusses environmental policy in relation to the voting public. Part 4 explores the role of economics in environmental protection. Look for them in this space over the coming weeks.

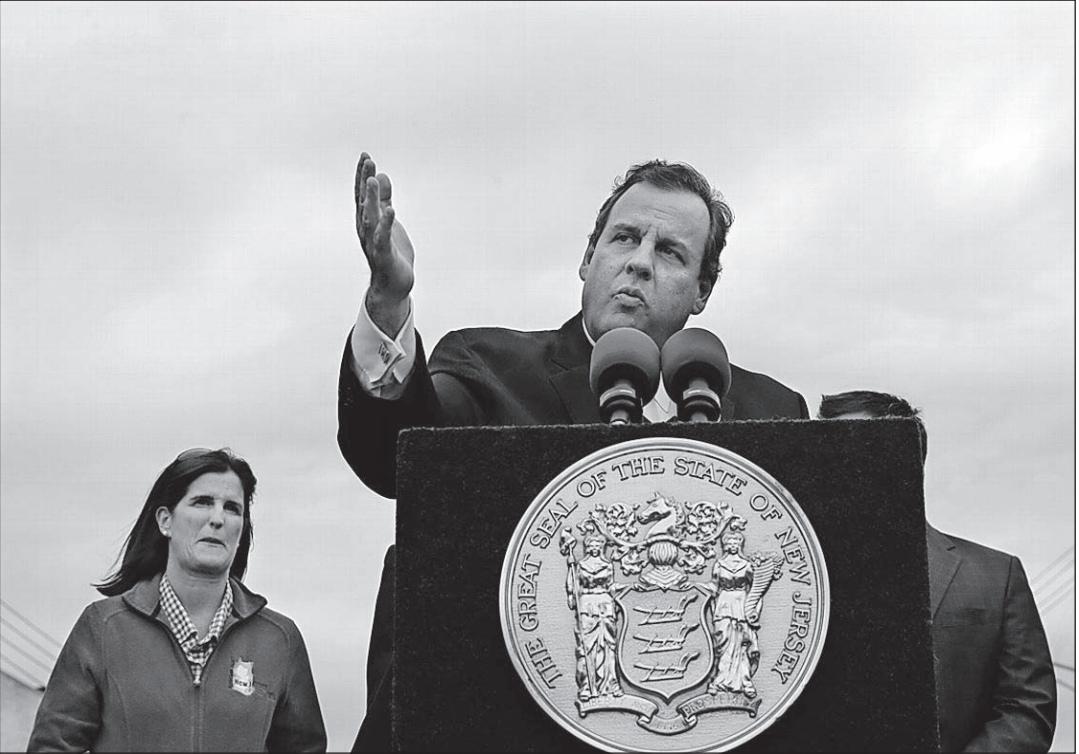
By Chad McGuire

A strong democracy, many believe, is built on the power of the vote. A voting public holds government accountable for its actions, or inaction as the case may be. Elected officials who fail to be good stewards of the public trust will soon find themselves voted out of office. Of course this ideal presumes that we, the voting public, understand the actions of our elected officials. In some cases, this may be absolutely true. Politicians found taking bribes in exchange for votes are widely understood to have violated the public’s trust. But other cases are less clear. For example, do politicians violate the public trust if they follow voting preferences that, ultimately, harm the public good? This is a key question when thinking about government disaster preparedness in an era of climate change. What follows is an attempt to provide context in understanding how voting patterns can affect the ability of government to prepare for future harm. Many of the coastal regions of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are particularly vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise. Communities exist in low-lying seaside areas just a few feet above current sea level. As seas rise, the potential for flooding and storm damage increases. In addition, these areas are subject to intense storms such as hurricanes and nor’easters. If our oceans continue to rise in the future, then the potential for disaster will only increase. It therefore makes sense to spend time today preparing for future harm. Not only does it make

logical sense to prepare for future harm, it also makes financial sense. Recent studies have shown that, on average, every dollar spent on disaster preparedness yields \$15 worth of future damage reduction. Said another way, a dollar of prevention today results in \$15 of benefits tomorrow. The same cannot be said of disaster relief spending. Most studies have actually shown relief spending has no significant impact on future damage: preparedness spending lowers future damage while relief spending does not. Thus there is clear advantage, logically and financially, in the ounce of prevention philosophy. Disaster preparedness makes a lot of sense, particularly when comparing it against disaster relief spending. Unfortunately, actual government spending does not favor preparedness spending over relief spending. From 1985 to 2004, the average damage caused by natural disasters events in the U.S. was \$16.5 billion per year (in 2008 dollars). In that same time frame, the federal government appropriated an average of \$3.05 billion on disaster relief payments and only \$195 million on disaster preparedness per year (again in 2008 dollars). Said another way, for every dollar the federal government spent on disaster preparedness, it spent \$15.64 on disaster relief. And over the immediate last decade, disaster relief spending has increased dramatically. Consider Hurricane Sandy in 2012 alone. Approximately \$17 billion and counting has been allocated from the National Flood Insurance Program, with approximately another \$50 billion in federal disaster relief — for one event. Cumulatively, over \$670 billion of taxpayer money has been paid out nationally over the last decade for disaster relief. Why would our elected officials spend so little money on preparing for disasters when it yields such a high return on investment? A large part of the answer appears to be in the voting patterns of the public. Simply put, the voting public rewards disaster relief with votes, but it does not reward disaster preparedness with



Work continues on the rebuilding of Route 35 on the second anniversary of Superstorm Sandy last October in the Ortle Beach section of Toms River, N.J. Officials and residents in towns throughout coastal areas of New York and New Jersey are taking stock of the recovery from Superstorm Sandy. The October 2012 storm devastated the oceanfront coastline and caused catastrophic flooding in New York and cities in New Jersey. AP PHOTO/MEL EVANS



As wife Mary Pat Christie, left, looks on, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie tells heckler Jim Keady to “sit down and shut up” during a event marking the second anniversary of Superstorm Sandy last October in Belmar, N.J. Keady began heckling Christie about the pace of storm recovery and repeatedly interrupted the governor. After trying to brush the man off, Christie yelled back the man didn’t know what he was talking about and was just showing off for the news cameras. When heckler Keady continued, Christie told him: “Sit down and shut up.” In general, however, voters perceive the politicians who disburse relief funds more favorably than those who ask for prevention funds, despite the 15-to-1 benefit factor prevention provides. AP PHOTO/MEL EVANS

votes. Current evidence identifies the phenomenon, but fails to explain it. There are plausible reasons we can consider. For example, it is likely hard for the voting public to identify how money spent preparing for a disaster has prevented an actual disaster from occurring, or limited the amount of damage. We only see what is before us and it is hard to imagine what might have been. Another plausible reason for preferring disaster relief spending to preparedness spending is that relief money goes directly to the members of the voting public. If you or I are affected by a hurricane and we receive public funds, then we can tangibly identify the benefit of that action: money is in our hands. The connection between the harm and the relief is direct for us because we experienced the harm, and then also

experienced the relief. In addition, the payments made in disaster relief are provided directly to the individual voting member, whereas funds to prepare for disasters are dispersed and not tangible to a single person: No one individual can capture the money spent in preparing for disaster. There are other potential reasons the voting public may reward relief spending. But the fact is, politicians are rewarded with votes for being shortsighted, thinking about the here and now, rather than planning for the future. Going back to the original question, is this kind of shortsighted response by politicians a violation of the public trust? Or are we, the voting public, responsible because of how we vote? The answer to this question is important because it likely will play a significant role in how we deal with the

uncertainty brought on by a changing climate. We may choose to plan. We may choose to respond. We may do both, but the evidence is clear: Planning provides a lot more bang for the buck. I would like to propose that we, the voting public, bear an important responsibility when it comes to our role in providing for the public good. Evidence is clear that in our system of government, elected officials are receptive to how we vote. If we choose to understand and prioritize the benefits of preparing for disaster, it is likely our elected officials will follow our lead. But if we fail to realize the benefits of preparing, then it is more likely politicians will respond to those signals, throwing money at a problem that is not being solved. It is not unprecedented for the public to support investments today

for benefits tomorrow. Public education is a prime example (where the return on investment is about half of the 15:1 ratio identified above for disaster planning). Investing for retirement is another example. There is no guarantee our investments in education or retirement will be fruitful (we could die before we retire). But we do it as a society because we agree the potential rewards are worth the investment made today. Maybe it is time we see investing for natural disasters in the same way. All evidence suggests our politicians are listening: We just need to be clear in our message. —Chad J. McGuire is associate professor of Environmental Policy and chairman, Department of Public Policy, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

YOUR VIEW

Depends on which numbers you use ...

By Lee Nason

When I first read the headlines in the New Bedford Standard Times (and in the New York Times) proclaiming that 2014 was the hottest year on record, I was skeptical and checked the “gold standard” of temperature measurements, the University of Alabama (UAH) satellite data set, which measures temperatures from space (rather than by combining spotty, sometimes non-functioning, and often heat-island contaminated temperatures from a couple thousand land-based monitors). UAH data, which have been available since the late 1970s, show that 2014 was clearly not the hottest year on record and, in fact, wasn’t even close. In subsequent days, the reasons for this discrepancy became clearer. The

NASA-Goddard Institute of Space Studies (GISS) press release stating that 2014 was the hottest year on record was based on the notoriously inaccurate land-based monitoring station data, the temperature differential they reported as fact was miniscule — well below the known margin of error for such an analysis, and Gavin Schmidt, director of NASA’s Goddard Institute of Space Studies, publicly admitted that he was merely about 38 percent sure that his press release information was reliable. In short, NASA had misreported the situation, most likely in their ongoing successful effort to win headlines. In contrast, Washington Post columnist Catherine Rampell, took the false headlines at face value and used their publication as an occasion to smear skeptics and to crow about how skeptics

refuse to accept science-based evidence. Does anyone see any irony in this dichotomy? It is certainly offensive to be called a “denier” — a phrase designed to put climate change skeptics in the same category as Holocaust deniers — or a “truther” — a phrase designed to put climate change skeptics in the same category as conspiracy theorists who think the U.S. government perpetrated the 9/11 murders. It is also offensive for Ms. Rampell to reference other exaggerated or downright untrue evidence. But the reality is most amusing: I, the anti-science skeptic with my entire education and career spent in science and engineering, checked the scientific data before mouthing off and she, the supposedly enlightened scientific thinker with no documented credentials in science and technology,

accepted the untrue theology-driven headlines as fact. It remains true that global climate temperatures have remained flat for about 18 years while emissions of carbon dioxide have continued to soar. This fact does not disprove the equally true fact that greenhouse gasses trap heat. It merely shows that all the models that the “warmists” have been using are inaccurate and have no predictive value. It beats me why anyone with any scientific and technological sense should believe the predictions made by models that are demonstrably inaccurate. I guess it is because so many unknowledgeable people repeat the talking points so endlessly. It all feels like arguing with religious fundamentalists. —Lee Nason lives in New Bedford.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Time to reform local aid

Thank you to economists Yolanda Kodrzycki and Bo Zhao at the Boston Federal Reserve Bank for their recent op-ed highlighting the need to update the distribution of state funding for cities and towns in Massachusetts (“Your View: Time to Reform Local Aid Program,” Jan. 16). As these economists pointed out, the amount of state aid the state transfers to each city or town was randomly determined in the early 1990s and has changed little since then, instead of addressing the difference between a community’s costs and a community’s ability to raise revenue. The Boston Federal Reserve Bank instead proposes that local aid be distributed according to a formula. Specifically, they argue that aid should be distributed according to each community’s need, what they call the “municipal gap,” which is the difference

between a municipality’s costs for providing municipal services — like police, garbage collection and maintaining local infrastructure — and a municipality’s ability to raise revenue — from property taxes and business and parking fees. Cities like New Bedford have large populations with high municipal costs, but lack the ability to independently raise revenue, resulting in a significant municipal gap. For several years, I have filed legislation that would distribute any new local aid according to the Fed’s proposed formula. I refiled the legislation, HD 2177, An Act Regarding Revenue Sharing with Cities and Towns, last Friday and look forward to advocating for the Fed’s proposal. State Rep. Antonio F.D. Cabral House Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets New Bedford