



The Politics Of Disaster Aid Are Starting To Shift

By: Alan Greenblatt - January 15, 2013

Having already split financial aid for the Northeast into two votes, House leaders are now splitting the second package itself into two, giving conservatives the opportunity to oppose spending provisions they don't like.

Even so, a funding package of about \$50 billion is expected to pass Tuesday. It's proven to be too politically dicey to vote against assistance for regions devastated by disaster.

"Those in coastal districts understand, we need the money and they're going to need the money [after some future disaster]," said an aide to Rep. Jon Runyan, R-N.J.

But the willingness of some House members to vote against aid in the face of a historic disaster has shown that the politics of relief are starting to shift. It might still be impossible to block federal rebuilding assistance, but there's a growing desire to take a different approach to the next set of disasters.

"The ad hoc, blank check approach that we've had for the last few decades is not one that we think is working very well," says Ray Lehmann, a senior fellow with R Street, a conservative think tank.

History Of The Vote

Speaker John Boehner angered Northeastern members of his own caucus by failing to take up a Senate-approved disaster relief package before the previous Congress' term ended early this month.

In response to their protests, Boehner decided to hold separate votes on Sandy relief. The first installment of \$9.7 billion to help pay flood insurance claims came Jan. 4. It passed easily but drew 67 "no" votes from House Republicans, who received a great deal of criticism in the media — and from some of their colleagues.

One of the 67, Rep. Steven Palazzo — who represents a coastal district of Mississippi that was badly damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 — quickly changed course, announcing he would vote for further aid after having toured parts of New Jersey and New York.

He may be joined Tuesday by other switchers. But some will still vote no. The second aid installment will be offered in two parts. One would offer \$17 billion in immediate relief, while the other contains \$33.7 billion for longer-term projects to rebuild the Northeast, as well as considerable spending for other parts of the country.

Some Republicans are planning amendments to offset or cut the total spending on offer, including a proposal to reduce domestic discretionary spending by 1.6 percent across the board.

"I would gladly vote for a bill that would provide aid to Sandy victims, one that offsets the emergency spending, fixes the program and contains no pork," says Kansas Rep. Mike Pompeo, who voted against the Jan. 4 package. "That way, future victims of natural disasters can benefit from a solvent program, and taxpayers won't be on the hook for billions of dollars."

Arguing For Change

The conservative Club for Growth is calling on the House to reject the additional aid packages. In the past couple of years, it has become more common for conservatives to question federal disaster relief.

In the wake of Hurricane Irene and the tornado that devastated Joplin, Mo., both in 2011, some Republicans called for any aid to be offset by spending cuts. That idea went nowhere.

But many have remained skeptical. There is a problem of moral hazard involved with federal disaster relief, says Chris Edwards, director of tax policy for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

"The incentives are all wrong here," Edwards says. "The more the federal government bails out, the more it's going to be expected to bail out in the future."

R Street's Lehmann says it might be better if the federal government offered assistance on a sliding scale to states and localities, based on what steps they had taken individually to prepare, such as tightening building codes or improving emergency communication between first responders.

"We're trying to come up with a new approach that ties any aid to mitigation and smarter building in the future," Lehmann says.

Timing Is Everything

It's not just conservatives who favor a new approach. According to the progressive Center for American Progress, over the past two years the U.S. has experienced at least 21 disasters that caused at least \$1 billion in damage each. This year's drought could push the two-year total to \$174 billion.

Climate change threatens to make the long-standing trend toward greater disaster-related costs that much worse, says Daniel Weiss, the center's director of climate strategy. He favors a federal fund that would help vulnerable communities plan for disasters, so they are more "resilient" in the future.

But it would be difficult in the present fiscal environment to set up a dedicated revenue stream for such a fund. And that points to the problems any group that hopes to overhaul federal strategy toward disasters is likely to encounter.

Right now, the feds do relatively little to help states or local communities to prepare. When disaster strikes, the feds show up, checkbook in hand. Denying aid in such circumstances is seen as mean-spirited. But once the crisis passes, it's hard to get people to talk about better ways to prepare for the next set of disasters.

"Lots of people like these ideas, in theory," says R Street's Lehmann. "The problem becomes, in the immediate wake of a disaster, the political will to stand strong can evaporate pretty quickly."