



Young: Sandy show's the best role for government

By: Cathy Young - November 5, 2012

Remember the old conventional wisdom that in polite society, one should avoid controversial topics such as politics and stick to safe ones like the weather?

Well, in these post-superstorm Sandy days, weather is political too -- especially on the day of the presidential election. For many liberal Democrats, the storm that ravaged the East Coast was a devastating reminder of the need for a strong federal government, since government's role is indispensable in relief efforts. Many conservatives and libertarians disagree, arguing that government intervention sometimes makes things worse and that giving the federal government the lead role in disaster relief merely encourages politicians to exploit it.

As is often true, each side has good points -- and knee-jerk responses.

Sandy has likely boosted President Barack Obama's re-election chances, not only by showcasing his leadership but by making an activist government message seem more attractive than a self-sufficiency one. As a Jersey Shore resident living a mile away from neighborhoods where many have lost everything, I am more aware than ever that sometimes people cannot fend for themselves, through no fault of theirs.

But does that mean government is the only, or even the best, answer? Critics such as Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute (where I hold an unpaid research associate position), point out that government relief programs are rife with waste and abuse, and that presidents are particularly likely to declare federal disaster areas in election years. Others argue that well-intentioned government meddling can make things worse. Libertarian TV journalist John Stossel has said that federal subsidies for home

insurance in flood-prone areas only encourage people to build and live where they shouldn't, often rewarding affluent owners of beachfront vacation homes. More controversially, libertarians have assailed anti-price-gouging laws, arguing that price controls always breed shortages and that forbidding gasoline station owners to charge higher prices in storm-affected areas removes incentives for suppliers to try extra hard to deliver gas in difficult conditions. After hours spent in a gas line, many of us would have gladly paid double or more for a shortcut.

These points deserve consideration. A better way to make sure gas remains affordable, for instance, could be to replace price controls with "gas stamps" for the poor. Yet, in the real world, economic calculus is complicated by other factors. Ravaged homes in flood-prone areas are not just beachfront properties but family residences further inland; abandoning those neighborhoods may prove economically and socially devastating.

Our current gas shortages are caused not just by a weakened profit motive but by the fact that deliveries to stations were near-impossible; there is little evidence of insufficient effort. Any oil company that could have gotten supplies to its distributors ahead of the competition would have profited handsomely, even without higher prices. And, however un-libertarian it may be, one must consider the societal effects of giving the affluent a visible advantage at a time of tragedy and stress -- such as openly circumventing gas lines by paying an exorbitant price.

Even an individualist should appreciate solidarity in emergencies, when the sense that we're all in this together is important.

Charities play a vital role in disaster aid (though they are not immune from fraud and waste, either). Yet in a large-scale catastrophe, there are clearly things an organized government effort can do best, both on the state and the federal level.

This isn't necessarily an argument for big government in general. By saddling government with too many functions better performed by the private sector, we leave it less able to do the things it most needs to do -- such as protect citizens in a crisis like Sandy. But if there's one lesson to be learned from disasters, it's that ideology of any stripe should never take precedence over reality.

Cathy Young is a regular contributor to Reason magazine and the website RealClearPolitics.