
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

The deserving versus the undeserving

Original Reporting | By Erik Kroh | Government services, Role of government

May 11, 2011 — Since the Texas winter wildfire season began last November, some 2.4 million acres have charred. State officials, including Gov. Rick Perry, have said the devastation is unprecedented. Unseasonably high temperatures, low humidity, and high winds have combined to produce nearly 10,000 fires, forcing hundreds of people from their homes. The cost of the response effort is nearing \$100 million.

In April, Perry, a Republican who is a fierce advocate for “states’ rights,” wrote a letter to President Obama requesting a federal major disaster declaration for nearly the entire state, which would make it eligible for additional federal assets to supplement state resources.

Families sometimes take extraordinary measures to cover important costs such as education or health care, such as working second jobs or dipping into savings. Couldn't Texas take a similar approach to raising funds?

Certainly, Texas is no stranger to federal assistance. Since the beginning of wildfire season, the state has received some \$25 million in grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to cover some of the estimated \$84 million in costs accrued by the state in responding to the fires. According to FEMA data, Texas has also received nearly \$250 million in the past decade in grants to provide training and equipment for fire departments and to help them recruit more firefighters.

But earlier this month, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) denied Perry's request, provoking criticism from the governor. “I am dismayed that this administration has denied Texans the much needed assistance they deserve,” Perry said in a May 3 statement. “It is not only the obligation of the federal government, but its responsibility under law to help its citizens in times of emergency.”

Perry's disapproval of the Obama administration's decision was joined by similar responses from several other Texas lawmakers, including Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, and Rep. Mike Conaway — all Republicans.

The lawmakers were among those who have made the most forceful calls for reduced government spending. Faced with the real-world consequences of their budget-cutting ideology, however, it appears that those calls may have applied only insofar as their constituents were not affected.

“When nearly 7,000 individual wildfires burn through more than 2.2 million acres, result in loss of life, and destroy homes, businesses, farms and ranches across the state, it’s hard to understand how these conditions don’t spell ‘disaster’ for this Administration,” Cornyn said in a May 4 statement. “We’ve yet to enter the hottest months of the year and already wildfires have wreaked havoc in Texas — yet our state has not received sufficient federal disaster aid.”

Conaway also issued a statement saying FEMA’s decision would endanger recovery efforts and cause further harm to individuals affected by the fires. “Without federal assistance, these communities will suffer immense challenges and obstacles as they attempt to rebuild and recover from this disaster,” he said May 4.

The Texas lawmakers’ pleas for additional federal resources, however, are at odds with their voting records, in which they supported cuts in funding for federal disaster assistance.

A historical perspective on who “deserves” aid — part 1

Observing the apparent disjunction between generalized calls for reductions in federal aid and support for such aid when it helps locally, Remapping Debate sought some historical perspective. We turned to Benjamin Soskis, a writer and independent scholar living in Washington. Soskis, a recent Columbia Ph.D., is currently working on a project on what he calls the “suspicion of giving” in American thought.

He began by noting that the split between regarding individuals in unfortunate circumstances as either “deserving” or “undeserving” goes back “a long way, at least to the 15th century.” It was a duality that continued.

In the 1830s, for example, we find increasing calls to look more carefully at who is receiving support, Soskis said, and “to decide which of those groups are actually deserving based on their capacity to work, and which groups aren’t. And that line of argument continues up through the New Deal, to welfare reform. It’s a longstanding way of thinking about the poor.”

In the 1870s, in the wake of natural disasters, and there was strong, but not universal, support for the idea that the categories of deserving and undeserving should be “put on hold to some extent” in that context. Even then, however, “you still have people saying, be very careful about giving money” because of a fear of the consequences, a fear of creating dependence.

Soskis describes the “suspicion of giving” as a hardy perennial in American thought, although, “after all the major financial panics or recessions of the 1870s and 1890s, there was a sort of reappraisal of this idea that individuals were responsible for their own economic condition. But in every occasion...the argument that somehow the poor were indeed responsible for their economic plight managed to survive real critical challenges.”

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Cuts and more cuts

In April, a shutdown of the federal government was averted with mere minutes to spare when the Obama Administration agreed to GOP-demanded cuts representing a \$40 billion reduction in spending compared with the previous year (more than the GOP House leadership had even originally requested).

Shortly thereafter, Obama praised what he called the “largest annual spending cut in our history.”

The spending agreement reflected Republican priorities. It cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency by \$1.6 billion, a 16 percent reduction from the previous year; some \$3 billion was cut from a high-speed rail program; and a ban on using federal and local funds to pay for abortions in Washington was reinstated. At the same time, the spending bill managed to increase Department of Defense funding by \$5 billion.

Hutchison called the budget resolution a “down payment toward meaningful deficit reduction” in an April 14 statement.

A historical perspective on who “deserves” aid — part 2

Indeed, Soskis describes the view in the 1870s that “the real cause of wide scale poverty was excessive charity, that things wouldn’t be so bad if people didn’t hold out private charity and public relief to the poor. [If they hadn’t, the crises] would have passed, and people would have managed to pull up their bootstraps and keep on working.”

We asked Soskis about the impact of the Great Depression on this line of thought. The argument, he said, became “very difficult to make,” although, he pointed out, some people did continue to make it at the time. “It’s interesting to think of the economic and environmental catastrophes sort of converging in the 20s and early 30s. In some extent, I think that helped people understand that some of these economic forces at work were really extracted from any individual decision.”

How is it that a politician today can simultaneously call for cuts in programs and happily accept federal disaster aid for constituents? Soskis noted, first of all, that it was easy to see an element of “political opportunism” at play, but also an element of people separating abstract political considerations (those that are seen to have an impact on others) from those day-to-day decisions that resonate as having immediacy due to proximity, familiarity, or identification.

Back in the late 1800s, organizations like the Charity Organization Society sought to cut public relief spending in many major cities, Soskis says. The motto was “no alms but a friend,” so their point was “we won’t give you any money but we’ll sort of help you with moral support.”

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“In the coming debates on runaway federal spending and the mounting debt, we’ll be dealing with cuts in the trillions, not billions,” Hutchison said. “I look forward to finally setting our nation on a fiscally responsible track.”

In addition to the above cuts, however, the budget agreement also cut resources meant to mitigate and respond to disasters such as the Texas wildfires. In fact, prior to asking for federal assistance to help with the wildfires, Texas lawmakers voted to cut hundreds of millions of dollars for federal disaster response programs.

According to an Apr. 12 statement from House Appropriations Committee chair Harold Rogers (R-KY), the committee, when it crafted H.R. 1473, the fiscal 2011 budget resolution, “went line-by-line through agency budgets.” That resolution cut \$786 million — a 26 percent reduction — from a FEMA state and local grant program to train first responders to prepare for and assist in emergencies. The bill also cut half the funding — \$50 million — for a “predisaster mitigation” grant program that provides funding for state and local organizations to plan for disasters ahead of time.

A historical perspective on who “deserves” aid — part 3

“It turns out though that...several of the leaders of these organizations, despite their calls for basically doing away with public relief and private charity, when it came to someone coming up to them and asking for money, were unable to say no. And I think what that suggests is [that]...there are two levels of operation. There’s the political level where you’re talking about the state as sort of [an] abstract force — really separate from your own life — [and] often hostile to the kind of intimate forces that you find important... Then there are the decisions you want to make everyday. So for those who see the state as really removed from one’s personal life it’s sort of easy to make these calls for a lack of funding. But, when you need government, or when you’re approached yourself and confronted with poverty and confronted with need, the ability to talk about the poor in kind of an abstract way is sort of radically challenged.”

Remapping Debate asked Soskis about the problem created if the basis of giving is rooted in some sense of immediacy: Is it not less likely that someone would reach out from his own heart to those he cannot personally identify with or exert control over?

“I think that’s true,” responded Soskis. “The foundation of giving in the U.S. has always been an idea of neighborliness,” and the question of how to help people imagine that people who live far away and who may live in very different socioeconomic conditions can indeed be their neighbors is one that has been repeatedly posed in the United States for almost a hundred years.

“I think it’s probably safe to say that you can look at some of these funding debates and come to the conclusion that America is...still a very fractured nation,” concluded Soskis. “One in which the ideas of who constitutes our neighbor, who is deserving, are still very vexed.”

Interviewer: Craig Gurian

Shannon Baxevanis, deputy director for the National Association of Regional Councils, which opposes the cuts to the FEMA programs, told Remapping Debate that while the FEMA state and local grant programs that were cut in H.R. 1473 are intended to aid in defending against terrorist attacks, the funding also helps emergency workers with responding to natural disasters, such as the Texas wildfires or the tornadoes and floods that have devastated the South and Midwest in recent weeks.

The grants could be used for such objectives as purchasing vehicles, providing training for first responders, and updating emergency communication systems, Baxevanis said.

H.R. 1473 passed the House on a 260-167 vote (many Republicans opposed the bill because they thought the cuts were not deep enough). The Senate quickly followed suit and passed the bill in an 81-19 vote.

H.R. 1, the fiscal 2011 spending bill drawn up by House Republican leaders to reflect their legislative priorities, went even further in cutting programs to assist with disaster planning and response. It gutted a FEMA firefighter assistance grants program, cutting \$90 million (23 percent) from funding to provide equipment, vehicles, and training to local fire departments and completely zeroing out a \$420 million program to assist fire departments with recruiting and hiring firefighters. (President Obama in his fiscal 2012 budget proposed eliminating a \$60 million FEMA grant program to fund emergency operations centers, but did not propose changes to grants for state and local first responders, firefighter assistance, or predisaster mitigation.)

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H.R. 1 passed the House on a 235-189 vote with the support of nearly all Republicans in the chamber. Of the 32-member Texas delegation, 22 of the 23 Republicans, including Conaway, voted in favor of the bill while one Republican did not vote. Of the Texas Democrats, 8 voted against the bill and one did not vote. The bill failed in the Senate on a 44-56 vote (it needed 60 votes to pass) despite the support of both Cornyn and Hutchison.

Wasteful FEMA?

Why were the FEMA grant programs cut so dramatically in the Republican spending bills?

“Our bill targets wasteful and duplicative spending, makes strides to rein in out-of-control federal bureaucracies, and will help bring our nation one step closer to eliminating our job-crushing level of debt,” Rogers said of H.R. 1473.

Baxevanis, however, said that not enough research was done to determine the effectiveness of the programs whose funding was eliminated in the bills.

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In a 2009 report, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, took aim at the firefighter assistance grants program. The report argued that the grants were wasteful because it said its own analysis showed the grants had no impact on firefighter and civilian deaths or injuries.

A 2003 evaluation by the U.S. Fire Administration, on the other hand, found that the firefighter grant program was “highly effective in improving the readiness and capabilities of firefighters across the nation.” A separate evaluation the same year by the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General concluded that the grant program “succeeded in achieving a balanced distribution of funding through a competitive grant process.”

But this is different...

In interviews with Remapping Debate, representatives for Texas lawmakers who were critical of FEMA’s denial of Texas’ disaster declaration request insisted that their appeals for federal assistance were made only in extraordinary circumstances and were motivated by the unprecedented destruction caused by the Texas wildfires. They also emphasized that the livelihoods of constituents were at stake.

A Hutchison spokesperson, in an emailed response, pointed out that H.R. 1473 increases the FEMA disaster relief fund by \$1 billion, a 60 percent boost. A document on the Senate Appropriations Committee website, however, notes that the increase was provided to make up for a shortfall from past disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Midwest floods of 2008.

A Conaway spokesperson said, “It’s not about just getting FEMA to come in and give them money, it’s looking out for the welfare of these communities that otherwise have no outlet for help.”

On his congressional website, Conaway espouses a fiscally conservative philosophy that advocates spending restraint. In a section related to the housing crisis, Conaway says, “I believe that we are all responsible for the decisions we make and the agreements we sign, and so I do not support a bailout of individuals who have made poor financial decisions.”

Asked why Conaway thought that those who have been affected by the Texas wildfires were deserving of federal assistance when the state was short on funds, while those whose livelihoods are in danger because they are behind on their mortgage payments were not deserving of federal assistance,

the spokesperson said it was a “fair point,” but that he would have to speak with Conaway to “get a sense of where he’s at on this issue.” A follow-up email seeking a specific response from Conaway to the question received no reply.

Lucy Nashed, a spokesperson for Governor Perry, tried to explain the request for federal assistance. She said that, because of the extent of the wildfires, “it’s gotten to the point where the state cannot continue to cover everything that we need to respond to these fires.” Perry believes that the federal government should not involve itself in what he sees as affairs best handled by the states, Nashed said, but disaster assistance is an exception to the rule.

“There are certain core functions that the federal government is responsible for: border security, military, helping our states in times of disaster when they cannot cover it,” Nashed said. “Beyond that, they don’t need to be coming down here and telling the states, micromanaging how we educate our children, how we deliver our healthcare, how we clean our air and our water.”

Texas’s own solution appears to be additional service reductions. Texas state lawmakers are now considering cuts to education and health care to close a multibillion-dollar budget gap, and Perry has said that tax increases are off the table.

Asked why Perry thought the federal government was obligated to provide additional assistance to aid wildfire response efforts, while Texas lawmakers were not obligated to raise additional revenue in order to avoid cuts to education and healthcare, which also have a direct affect on people’s livelihoods, Nashed said, “at the end of the day we have to do the same thing that families and businesses have to do. We have to sit down and look at where we can streamline spending, where we can make things more efficient, and we have to prioritize.”

Families, however, sometimes take extraordinary measures to cover important costs such as education or healthcare, such as working second jobs or dipping into savings. Couldn’t Texas take a similar approach to raising funds?

Nashed said only that Perry believes that Texans sent a “loud and clear” message in the November elections that they “want a fiscally responsible, limited government.”

The proposed cut in a state volunteer fire department assistance program “really sends us a strong message about what our state lawmakers value in terms of public safety for the state,” Linda Moon said.

The Texas budget

State legislators are currently trying to resolve differences between budgets passed in the state’s House and Senate, including differing proposals relating to cuts in public schools funding and Medicaid reimbursement rates.

Both budgets do contain a \$32.5 million reduction in a volunteer fire department assistance program at the Texas Forest Service that helps rural fire departments fight wildfires. Linda Moon, communications manager for the Texas Forest Service, said volunteer fire departments account for 90 percent of responders to wildfires. The cut for the volunteer fire department assistance program would leave only about \$7 million per year in funding, hindering the fire departments' capacities for training firefighters and obtaining safety equipment, Moon said.

"That really sends us a strong message about what our state lawmakers value in terms of public safety for the state," Moon said.

Remapping Debate sought to ask Texas state legislators about their rationale as they work on budget negotiations, but calls to their offices were not returned.

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/deserving-versus-undeserving>