

U.S.

# In Texas, Distrust of Washington Collides With Need for Federal Aid

By RICHARD FAUSSET SEPT. 4, 2017

Few places need the federal government right now more than Texas does, as it begins to recover from Hurricane Harvey. Yet there are few states where the federal government is viewed with more resentment, suspicion and scorn.

For Republicans, who dominate Texas government, anti-Washington sentiment is more than just a red-meat rhetorical flourish — it is a guiding principle.

Gov. Greg Abbott, the Republican former state attorney general, once described a typical day in his old job as, “I go into the office, I sue the federal government and I go home.” His predecessor as governor, Rick Perry, wrote a book titled “Fed Up! Our Fight to Save America From Washington.”

The sentiment is not limited to politicians. In June, the legislature of Texas Boys State — the mock-government exercise for high schoolers, run by the American Legion — voted overwhelmingly to secede from the union.

Now, though, it is Texas Republicans who will be crucial in securing, and helping to coordinate, what is likely to be one of the most ambitious and costly federal disaster-relief packages in American history, one that will almost certainly run to tens of billions of dollars.

There are few doubts that a Republican-dominated Congress will end up delivering aid to a battered state and key base of Republican power. But along with an outpouring of support, the process is raising eyebrows and drawing charges of

hypocrisy.

What this means for Texas politics is difficult to say, at a time when rescue crews and volunteers are still plucking flood victims from their homes. But the new reality is already making itself felt.

Most notably, Senator Ted Cruz, one of Washington's most ardent proponents of fiscal restraint, has suddenly taken on a new role, promising to lead the effort to secure a generous federal aid package.

In 2013, in a move his critics consider infamous, Mr. Cruz joined more than 20 of his Texas colleagues in Congress in voting against a \$50.5 billion relief package for victims of Hurricane Sandy, saying that the bill was larded with pork projects unrelated to rebuilding the battered Northeast coast. (The bill passed regardless.)

Last week, Mr. Cruz was all over the Texas flood zone, promising that Congress would provide "very significant resources for the people who have been damaged by this terrible storm." Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, a fellow Republican, was moved to public outrage.

"I have no sympathy for this — and I see Senator Cruz, and it's disgusting to me that he stands in a recovery center with victims standing behind him as a backdrop," Mr. Christie, whose state was among the hardest hit by the 2012 storm, said on CNN.

Mr. Cruz last week continued to defend his 2013 vote, arguing that more than two-thirds of the Hurricane Sandy relief bill went to spending unrelated to the storm, an assertion that fact checkers have found to be largely untrue.

But in Texas, some conservatives say Mr. Cruz's actions, both then and now, square with their principles of fiscal prudence and the proper role of government.

Michael Berry, a libertarian-leaning host of a popular Houston-based radio talk show, said that Mr. Cruz's decision on the bill was a stand on principle, but he figured that it was one the senator took knowing the bill would eventually pass.

"It was really more a dissent than opposition to any rebuilding," Mr. Berry said, "and most people at the time knew he was going to run for president."

Mr. Berry, whose home was badly flooded by Harvey, said that Texans like him certainly believe many federal government powers to be intrusive, overblown or unnecessary. But he argued that disaster relief was not one of them. Rather, he said, it was a necessary government function, like the military or infrastructure spending, that conservatives support.

This line of thinking explains, in a way, how Texas conservatives saw no hypocrisy when Mr. Perry suggested in 2009 that the state might secede over profligate Washington spending, but bitterly complained four years later when the Obama-era Federal Emergency Management Agency declined to pay for all of a disaster recovery effort after a fertilizer plant exploded in the city of West, Tex.

Texas has its own “rainy day fund” estimated at \$10 billion, but Mr. Abbott said on Friday that he had no plans to call a special legislative session, which would be required to tap the fund. In a statement, his press secretary, John Wittman, said the governor could call a special session “at any time” in the future.

Mr. Wittman and Mr. Abbott say the state is allocating resources and working with the federal government on reimbursement of disaster expenses.

“We won’t need a special session for this,” Mr. Abbott said Friday at a news conference. “We have smartly provided a lot of resources, at my disposal, to be able to address the needs between now and the time the next session will begin” in January 2019.

In a statement, Mr. Wittman said this was not a moment to allow politics to impinge on the relief effort. “It’s asinine to think that after this catastrophic hurricane, the federal government would not step up to help communities recover and rebuild like it has in the past,” he said.

Despite the pervasive anti-Washington rhetoric, Texas relies heavily on the federal government. About 32 percent of the state government’s revenue is federal money, according to an analysis of data from fiscal year 2014 performed by the Tax Foundation. From 1953 to 2011, Texas received 86 major-disaster declarations, the most of any state, according to a 2012 report by the Congressional Research Service.

Robert M. Stein, a political science professor at Rice University, said that “most Texans believe they send more tax dollars to Washington than they receive back,” though, in fact, the reverse is true.

Opinions about the federal government are far from uniform. Home to Houston, Harris County, the third most-populous county in the country, voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, in November.

In Houston and elsewhere, secession talk is not unusual, but it usually falls somewhere between a pipe dream and joke, a way to underscore Texas’ brief 19th-century run as an independent republic and a pervasive sense of exceptionalism and independence. Indeed, the idea of Texans as self-reliant and a breed apart is one shared across the political spectrum.

“It’s an independent, pioneering people — that might sound corny, but it’s true,” Mr. Berry said.

“That’s the positive spirit of it, that we’ve got to rally among ourselves to take care of ourselves,” said Jim Hightower, a Democratic former Texas agriculture commissioner and supporter of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Mrs. Clinton’s main rival in the primaries.

More generally, however, anti-Washington sentiment seemed to ratchet up significantly under President Barack Obama. In a February 2015 poll conducted by the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin, only 23 percent of Texans had a favorable view of the federal government, which ranked last in the poll among a number of American institutions.

Texas conservatism, before Hurricane Harvey, manifested itself in ways both typical and sometimes bizarre. The state is one of 19 that have declined to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, saying that doing so would be fiscally irresponsible. Parts of Texas were also gripped in 2015 by fears that a military training operation, Jade Helm, held during the Obama administration, was actually a huge covert operation to steal Texans’ guns and impose martial law.

For liberals in Texas and elsewhere, the new mainstream of Texas conservatism is almost as disturbing. Mr. Hightower accuses Mr. Abbott and others of indulging in “laissez-fairyland economics that everybody should just be on their own and the strong people survive.” He added, “They abandoned the essential American notion that we’re all in this together.”

Some say that changing that perception will depend, in great part, on the efficacy of the government response. Toward the end of the Obama presidency, FEMA bragged that it had significantly improved its disaster response, compared with the days of Hurricane Katrina, when its performance came in for withering scorn.

But other aspects of the federal response to Hurricane Harvey are already under fire. Joe Nixon, a lawyer who served as a Republican representative in the Texas Legislature from 1995 to 2007, had harsh words for the Army Corps of Engineers after he was forced to evacuate his home in the Briargrove Park neighborhood of Houston.

The floodwaters were lapping against his door in part because the Corps of Engineers has been releasing water into Buffalo Bayou from the Addicks and Barker Dams all week. “I don’t think they know what they’re doing,” he said. “We survived the storm, but we may not survive the Corps.”

Indeed, to some Republicans, the way Texans have banded together and mounted ad hoc rescue operations demonstrated not only the concept of Texan self-reliance but also a conservative principle that there are forces more important than government.

“If you’re in America and you’ve been blessed, you have some flexibility in your schedule, and you have some resources, then you know what to do,” said State Senator Bryan Hughes, Republican of Mineola, more than 200 miles from Houston, who patrolled greater Houston in a friend’s boat after the flood, rescuing stranded people. “The government doesn’t have to tell us to. You just know what to do.”

But many Texans also acknowledged individual efforts were not enough.

In Newton, Tex., last week, the Rev. Joe Miller Jr., a former pastor of a local Methodist church, praised the work of a neighbor named Paul, who was using his smoker to cook barbecue for the victims.

“He’s cooking the meals, and this guy is amazing,” Mr. Miller said. “Local people like him, we have that. But he can’t rebuild a hundred homes, or whatever it is out there on the river, or a thousand homes — I don’t know how many it’s going to be — that are under four feet of water. These people have nothing.”

Michael Hardy contributed reporting from Houston, David Montgomery from Austin, Tex., and Campbell Robertson from Newton, Tex.

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