

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

*Time for Some Traffic Problems...*

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*Dr. Steven Haber*

As we are in the thick of the presidential primaries at the time of this writing, I am thinking back to another election. On November 5, 2013, I found myself in a voting booth in New Jersey about to do something I had never done before. I had been a lifelong Democrat, raised by parents who were lifelong Democrats, who were in turn raised by Russian Jewish immigrants

whose trade unionism and pre-McCarthy era socialism flowed naturally into the party of FDR and JFK. So the decision to pull the lever for a Republican governor was not an easy one. It seemed to be an affront to my political DNA. But this was no ordinary election.

Exactly one year and two weeks before that election, on October 22, 2012 New Jersey, along with New York City and the entire Northeast faced the most destructive hurricane to hit the region in recorded weather history. Thousands of homes, businesses, and cars were underwater. Half of Manhattan was dark. Power failures affecting millions of people in the region lasted not days but weeks. Entire neighborhoods along the shoreline had been washed away. At least 233 people had died of storm related causes. And in the midst of this devastation, on October 31, one week after the storm had hit, and one week before the national election that would put President Obama back in the White House for a second term, Governor Christie did something that was quite unexpected. He invited the president to New Jersey to tour the worst of the flooded areas to get assurance that the federal government would provide the funds, supplies, and manpower to clean up and rebuild the devastated communities. After the tour, the president pledged that not only would the full force and resources of the federal government be directed to the cleanup and rebuilding effort, but that he personally would guarantee that this would be done as expeditiously as possible.

It is not easy to adequately emphasize the political significance of this moment. After all, it is not unusual for a governor to invite the president to tour a devastated area after a natural disaster. What made this visit so unusual was the timing. Here a Republican governor was offering the Democratic president an extremely valuable media opportunity almost guaranteed to enhance Obama's reputation and popularity just six days prior to the election for his second term of office. Even though in hindsight most analysts would say that Obama

would have beaten Mitt Romney regardless of whether he had come to New Jersey or not, at the time, six days before the election, the president's victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. Christie's decision to invite the president to the state took considerable courage and political will as many of his fellow Republicans would later blame the governor for helping propel their opponent into a second term.

Yet the gamble paid off for Christie in many ways. First, the president, recognizing a quid pro quo when he saw one, was as good as his word, expediting the transfer of needed funds, personnel, and material to New Jersey and the storm damaged region. But for Christie's political career, there could be no better catapult. In an atmosphere of toxic partisanship in Washington where the government in October of 2013 would literally shut down for 16 days due to partisan politics, Governor Christie had not just stepped, but leapt over party lines. By reaching out to the Democratic president on the eve of his re-election, Christie proved that he was more than willing to put the needs of his state above the rancor of partisan politics. And it is not an exaggeration to say that it was this singular act that all but guaranteed his re-election as governor in 2013, winning over not only many independent voters, but even many Democrats, myself included, who saw in Christie's gesture, a moment of courage and integrity that has become all too rare in contemporary politics. It is also safe to say, that not only New Jerseyans, but the entire nation had taken notice of this moment, and that the governor, whose popularity was growing and who seemed destined for a presidential run, if not in 2012, then surely in 2016, would be able to capitalize on this moment for years to come.

But then something almost unbelievable happened. It was September 9, 2013. I had just moved to Fort Lee to a building only a few blocks from the George Washington Bridge. As I drove to work that morning, fortunately heading against the rush hour traffic, I was puzzled as to why the police were directing cars away from the local entrance ramp to the bridge. As I drove up onto the opposite ramp and headed south on the Turnpike, I could see that traffic had backed up for miles as those seeking an alternate route onto the bridge were now jamming all the highway approaches. And as I later learned, all the local roads in Fort Lee had become so impassable with the backed up traffic that not even emergency vehicles could get through. To make matters worse, this was the first day of school for many children adding to the morning rush, the traffic forcing many schools to delay opening. None of this would have seemed that out of the ordinary as traffic jams approaching the GW Bridge are fairly common. But when this scenario repeated itself the next day, and the next day, and the next, and

that there had been no accidents or construction reported, it became clear that something had gone very wrong. The official explanation from the Port Authority was that the ramp closures were part of some mysterious traffic study, the purpose of which nobody seemed able to explain. It would be almost 14 months after Christie's re-election that a federal investigation indicted the governor's then deputy chief of staff, Bridget Kelly along with Christie-appointed Port Authority officials Bill Baroni and David Wildstein for ordering the local bridge access shut down in a deliberate effort to cause traffic jams in the town of Fort Lee. The reason, as suggested by emails subpoenaed by the investigation, was to punish the Democratic Fort Lee mayor Mark Sokolich for his refusal to endorse Christie for re-election.

Although Christie initially denied that this was the reason for the shutdown, or that he had anything to do with it, he later spent more than eight million dollars of the State's money to hire a law firm ostensibly to do a thorough internal investigation. However the results of the report seemed more like a legal brief to clear Christie of any wrongdoing as opposed to getting to the bottom of what actually happened. The report, which was later heavily criticized by the US District Court, failed to include the testimony of key witnesses, including Kelly, Baroni, and Wildstein, or any other Port Authority employees, nor did the attorneys conducting the investigation preserve their original notes of interviews.

Flash forward to the presidential primaries of 2016. In June of 2015, Christie embarked on a nine month run for the Republican nomination. But after embarrassingly weak showings in Iowa and New Hampshire, he ended his campaign on February 10, 2016. Perhaps he had thought that in a national election, not many people outside of the state of New Jersey would take much notice of, nor care about, the scandal now known as Bridge-gate. As he said while campaigning in Iowa, "Let us remember one thing everybody: This was a traffic jam. This was not a murder." Or he believed that he would not be held personally responsible for that debacle. Yet, in both Iowa and New Hampshire, Christie only managed to finish in tenth and sixth places respectively. Christie's poor showing may not have been due to Bridge-gate alone. The New Jersey governor might have seemed too socially moderate for the Conservative wing of the Republican Party. Or perhaps despite Christie's cutting of taxes and spending, there had been no stellar economic recovery or employment boom in New Jersey. But when push came to shove, whether Christie was directly involved or not, neither the big PAC donors nor the public would forget those four days in September when three of his high ranking appointees in a juvenile and reckless act of political revenge took such delight in engineering a traffic jam designed to cripple the streets of a town.

"Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee," Bridget Kelly wrote to David Wildstein in an e-mail. Time indeed.

While the rise and fall of the governor's political star might read as a cautionary tale to would-be candidates and

their appointees, the larger issue of accountability and trust in our elected officials, and in fact, the entire political process looms large as we enter the 2016 presidential campaign. Public and media cynicism triggered by scandals, distrust in candidates who re-draft their policy positions to pander to whatever group they hope to attract, outrage at the undue influence of wealthy PACs and lobbyists, emotional appeals to xenophobia and prejudice, and the tactics of character assassination, incivility, and mudslinging seem to have taken the electoral process and politics in general to a point where many people have simply thrown up their hands in disgust. But even before the presidential campaigns began, perhaps what has been most offensive to the voting public is the general atmosphere of stagnation in Congress.

Younger voters may not realize that prior to the 1990s, bipartisan support for legislation used to be the norm rather than the exception. If we look back at one of the most significant pieces of legislation of the 20th Century, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which effectively ended Jim Crow segregation, it is remarkable to see the degree of bipartisanship that went into the passage of that law. In the House 153 Democrats and 136 Republicans voted for the bill. In the Senate 46 Democrats and 27 Republicans voted yes. It is almost impossible to imagine a major bill moving through Congress today with that kind of bipartisan support. Consider, by comparison, the vote on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) which passed in the Senate 60 to 39 with virtually all Democrats and two Independents voting for it and all Republicans voting against it. The House passed the Senate bill with a 219–212 vote on March 21, 2010, with 34 Democrats and all 178 Republicans voting against it. Consider also the government shutdown in October of 2013 when a group of House Republicans, in a desperate attempt to defund provisions of the ACA, refused to pass a budget, virtually holding the government hostage for 16 days until public outrage finally forced a concession. It is estimated that the shutdown cost the U.S. economy 55 billion dollars in lost wages, productivity, and tax revenues, and nearly compromised the government's credit rating.

Perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the voting public's general disgust with the sclerotic atmosphere in Washington and distrust in politicians in general is none other than Donald Trump, who, at the time of this writing, has won early primaries in 18 states and seems poised to win many more. A big part of his appeal, as Bruce Chadwick points out in this issue, is his outsider status. Not a professional politician, not beholden to billionaire PAC donors, Wall Street bankers, or lobbyists, not in lockstep with the GOP faithful on policy issues, not associated with political gridlock, and totally uncensored when it comes to saying what he thinks, Trump's charismatic persona and candor seem to many of his supporters like a fresh wind blowing away not only the toxic smog of gridlock, but also the smoke and mirrors around Washington. It is not so much what Trump has to offer policy wise. His proposals, often outrageous, such as deporting all illegal aliens, banning all

Muslims from immigration, and replacing Obamacare are conspicuously lacking in specifics. Yet none of that seems to matter to his supporters. The perception by many voters is that a charismatic outsider, no matter how inexperienced, racist, sexist, xenophobic, or crude, will be a better choice than the establishment candidates that the party leaders and their financial backers might choose. The perception by many voters is that Trump seems to care about the interests of the working and middle class as opposed to the establishment candidates whose promises to cut taxes, shrink government, and protect trade seem to benefit only the rich. Like customers in Mr. Trump's gaming establishments, a growing number of people seem ready to roll the dice on "The Donald" in the hope that if we just give him a chance, maybe he really can somehow "make America great again" meaning actually making the lives of working class people better as opposed to Mitt Romney who in his 2012 campaign seemed to write off nearly half of the American electorate. Yet whether Trump wins or loses, his growing appeal should remind us that there is great disaffection and distrust in our political system and its leaders, and that needs to be addressed no matter who steps into the Oval Office in 2017.

In this issue of *The Academic Forum*, we examine the landscape of politics, ideology, and the American electorate from a variety of perspectives. Bruce Chadwick, who can trace his personal history with Donald Trump back to the 1980s when he covered Atlantic City as a reporter for *The New York Daily News*, has written on Trump's improbable rise as a serious presidential contender. Jason Martinek writes about the

equally improbable rise of Bernie Sanders to political prominence as a democratic socialist in an era of political conservatism. Donna Farina writes about the risks to American democracy resulting from the circus-like atmosphere of political campaigns. Godwin Ohiwerei writes on the outsized influence of private wealth influencing the political arena. Will de Vega analyzes the disenfranchisement of large segments of the electorate as more than half of those who are eligible either exclude themselves or are excluded from the voting process. In a similar vein, Grace Wambu and Zandile Nkabinde examine barriers to voter participation among recent immigrants who have become naturalized citizens.

The Fall 2016 issue of *The Academic Forum* is seeking articles on the theme of personal possessions and identity. Contributors are invited to select a specific possession, groups of possessions, or artifacts and reflect on their significance in the development of a personal, professional, or cultural identity.

Special thanks to Provost Daniel Julius for his support in bringing back *The Academic Forum* after a three year hiatus. Thanks also to Ellen Quinn for her outstanding work in layout and design. As always, we express our deepest appreciation to all of our contributors for their efforts in producing an outstanding collection of articles. Thanks also to the editorial board: Nurdan Aydin, Alberto Barugel, Gloria Boseman, John Donnellan, Corey Frost, Jimmy Jung, Siyu Liu, Sherrie Madia, Karen Morgan, Wanda Rutledge, Lourdes Sutton, and Deborah Woo. On behalf of the editorial board, we wish the NJCU community a restful and productive summer.