Hurricane Sandy has devastated much of the east coast of the US. In my city the damage from floods was quite severe and many areas were left without power. In the neighboring state of New Jersey the damage appears to be even worse. Although it is difficult to think of politics at a time like this, with the election only five days away, it is almost more difficult to avoid thinking about politics. One of the major political stories to arise from the hurricane has come from New Jersey, where there has been strong bipartisanship and cooperation between the Democratic president, Barack Obama, and the Republican governor, Chris Christie, which has been both striking and encouraging. Despite the fast approaching election, the Governor and President have been able to work together to address the crisis confronting many in New Jersey and to rapidly mobilize resources to help those people.

Disasters and crises of this kind are often make or break moments for presidents and other leaders. They can either appear like serious competent hands on decision makers or they can seem overwhelmed and poor at management. Obama during this Hurricane Sandy or Mayor Rudolph Giuliani during the terrorist attacks of September 11th are examples of the former, while President George W. Bush during Hurricane Katrina is the best example of the latter. Challengers who do not hold executive positions often become bystanders in these situations, able to do little more than offer statements of support and, when appropriate and after some time passes, criticize the executive for how the crisis was handled.

This is the situation in which Republican nominee Mitt Romney finds himself, except that this hurricane is also test of Romney, and indeed his party's ideology. The ideology of small government and the belief that taxing people for any reason is not only bad governance, but is also close to immoral, is central to the Republican and Romney worldview. At times like this, it is difficult not to scrutinize that view a bit. During a Republican primary, advocating for abolishing FEMA or making disaster relief the responsibilities of the states, is easy, but in the middle of a huge disaster that has wrought havoc across many states, those ideas seem nonsensical. Romney's silence at this time makes it clear that he does not fully stand by his views on FEMA and the role of the federal government. Governor Christie's cooperative approach to working with President Obama also indicates that the New Jersey governor, quite honorably, thinks that helping the people of his state at a very difficult time is more important than his party's ideology.

It is nonetheless very telling that even the leaders of the Republican Party, notably, but not exclusively, Mitt Romney, seem to recognize the major role the federal government must play after a disaster of this kind. If Romney or Christie really believe the government should get out of the business of helping to address disaster relief or that states can do it better, they should say that now. Christie's actions make it clear where he stands; and Romney's silence on the matter does the same, as does the silence of most Republican leaders.

The unwillingness to criticize the federal government for taking on these tasks might be read as sensitivity at a difficult time, but it also demonstrates that Republican ideas about drastically reducing government are so extreme that they themselves don't take them seriously. An ideological belief that is legitimately held should become even stronger at times of crisis, but at this moment the Republican Party seems to be running, or at least hiding, from its signature...
If the idea that in its current extreme form has been central to Romney’s campaign for the last few years, and to his party’s platform for the last decade or so, was legitimate or even serious now would be a time when its advocates would be calling for it more loudly and its appeal would be more clear. Obviously, neither of those things are happening. This is the very nature of the small government appeal—it works during good times. When you are employed, unemployment insurance seems like a waste of money. When you are healthy and employed, requiring people to have health insurance seems invasive and when the weather is nice, FEMA seems like a waste.

Hurricane Sandy has revealed that not only is the core of the Republican platform a flight of ideological fancy, rather than a concrete recommendation for how to govern, but that when the chips are down, even the Republicans don’t believe in it. Regardless of who wins on Tuesday, Sandy is a reminder that there still is a role for government, one that will grow, not shrink, as we begin to repair the damage from this hurricane and begin to think about how to buffer ourselves from the next inevitable major weather event.