“I don’t give a damn about Election Day after what happened here. I am worried about the people of New Jersey. #Sandy.” In the hours after Hurricane Sandy made landfall in New Jersey, Governor Chris Christie—presumably clad in his now iconic navy blue fleece jacket—solidified his transition from Garden State bully to national bipartisan hero in a single tweet. It was a declaration he continued to repeat to the media in the days leading up to the 2012 presidential election, as he refused a visit from fellow partisan and Republican presidential nominee former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney—a man for whom Christie had been campaigning extensively throughout the 2012 cycle while rumored at one point to become his running mate. Christie, stereotyped up to that point of his first term as brash and bossy due to his Mafioso-like style of governing, had suddenly morphed into a fearless leader of heroic proportions. Showing a more compassionate and courageous side of himself than ever before, Christie gained immense praise state and nationwide for putting politics aside, putting his people first, and—both literally and figuratively—embracing President Obama and the help of the federal government in the storm’s devastating aftermath.

Christie was already used to the national spotlight before Sandy and had received a great amount of affection from fellow Republicans across
the country, as well as a large amount of encouragement to make a 2012 presidential run himself, but he also faced a divided New Jersey electorate split mainly by partisanship in his first three years in office. His bully-like persona, “no holds barred” attitude, and positions against unions and teacher tenure often made him an enemy in the press and a divisive figure in the polls. Immediately prior to the storm, New Jersey voters were lukewarm on their governor and willing to look for a new one in 2013 as Christie became an increasingly polarizing figure: while 44 percent of New Jerseyans supported Christie’s reelection, 47 percent said it was time for someone new. But as Sandy wreaked havoc throughout much of New Jersey and destroyed both the physical landscape and cherished memories of the state’s beloved shore region, Christie’s talk and actions portrayed him as a genuine leader in the moments before, during, and after the storm.

Christie became a symbol of hope for New Jerseyans in Sandy’s wake. After a much-condemned absence for a family vacation two years earlier during a blizzard and an average amount of praise for his handling of Hurricane Irene, the accolades and adoration Christie received post-Sandy were unprecedented. The governor was a commanding force in Sandy’s wake—the kind of leadership not seen perhaps since President George W. Bush’s “I can hear you” moment at the fallen World Trade Center towers a decade earlier. Christie’s bluntness, once thought of as brash and ill-mannered, came in handy as he demanded evacuations beforehand and immediate physical and financial assistance in the storm’s aftermath. His leadership translated into soaring ratings across the board: 67 percent of New Jersey voters now felt favorable toward the governor—the highest yet of his time in office—and 59 percent said he should be reelected. These trends endured in the months following Sandy as New Jerseyans continued to “rally” around Christie, consistently giving him high ratings on favorability and job performance through Election Day in November 2013, when he was reelected by a 22-point margin.

Sandy proved to be the perfect political storm, producing a prolonged “rally ’round the flag” (RRTF)—or rather “rally ’round the governor”—effect for Christie that elevated him from being one of the most divisive governors in recent history to an icon of sorts. Post-Sandy, Christie's support saw a significant and sustained shift to his advantage, as New Jersey voters praised his bipartisan gestures and adjusted the criteria upon which they judged him from top issues such as taxes, jobs, and the economy—perennial concerns of utmost importance in New Jersey—to storm recovery and the future of the Jersey Shore. Christie also garnered