



Douglas, however, said any lasting penalty was unclear. If anything, he said, area candidates appear to want to be seen embracing bipartisanship.

Back at the diner, Lynne Gleeson was quick to praise Christie, a Republican, even though she said she grew up in a Democratic household. "I think he did a good job after (Hurricane Sandy)," she said.

And Frank Gleeson said his criticism of programs such as Medicaid has softened now that he is getting older and closer to needing them.

He remained skeptical about some parts of what he had heard about the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, but was open to finding out more.

Ultimately, Frank said, he was just not confident that one party had the answers, and wanted to know more about this year's candidates.

"One side is not going to run everything," he said. "I know they all try to mean well, but what will they do?"

Whatever happens, he said, just pray for balance."

But for others, politics is barely more than an abstraction.

When they left, their waitress, Kimy Ale, said she had no plans to vote. Instead, the 33-year-old single mother of three said she has focused her efforts on providing for her children. That alone is hard enough, she said, the economic downturn limits how much people are dining out - and tipping.

"I know my answer is to get at least three jobs," the Somers resident said. She walked over to the only other customers in the restaurant, who ordered sandwiches.

Four days later, Mike Williams, 40, his wife Michele, 37, and their daughter Alysa, 8, enjoyed a rare meal out at the Diamond Diner.

Mike Williams said he liked Christie, adding that the governor seemed "pretty smart" and praising his forthright nature. "I don't think he's holding anything back."

But the election meant little to the couple, who said they last voted in 2008 for Republican presidential candidate John McCain.

"Honestly, it never seems like it makes a difference," said Mike Williams, a union painter who recently lost his job. "It seems like no matter what we say, it doesn't make a difference."

The past five years have been increasingly difficult, they said, and they now struggle to pay their mortgage. Michele Williams, an Egg Harbor Township school cafeteria worker, said, "You never know what the right thing is."

This year, however, Mike Williams said, politicians offered him few choices, and he said he didn't trust politicians' motivations. Why vote, he asked, if all seems like it's pretty internal, like they've