

# Public Opinion and Public Support in Crisis Management

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## Summary

In times of crisis, citizens look to their leaders for aid and assistance. In the democratic context, the focal figure is likely the chief executive accountable to the whole of the nation. With a specific focus on the American president and the incidences of natural hazards, public opinion and governmental response to these crises are analyzed. While one may expect such a universal actor to aid each according to their need, new scholarship finds that voter behavior and electoral institutions incentivize the president to support only a small slice of the electorate. Empowered by federal disaster relief legislation in the 1950s, the president targets electorally valuable voters when disbursing aid or allocating resources in response to disaster damage. Voters in those areas respond myopically and tend to vote for the incumbent for reasons ranging from economic to emotional. Thus, elites anticipate voter reactions and strategically respond to disasters to mitigate blame or punishment for the event and capitalize on an opportunity for electoral gains.

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## Weathering the Election

One week before the 2012 election between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney, Hurricane Sandy approached the northeastern coast of the United States. In anticipation of the superstorm, both candidates suspended campaign activities. The president flew back to the White House to oversee relief efforts. When the candidates returned to the campaign trail, Sandy had caused an estimated \$50 billion in damage, making it the second most destructive storm in the United States at that time (Plumer, 2012).<sup>1</sup> President Obama was unlikely to lose those areas that bore the brunt of the damage—solidly democratic New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut—but some studies found that Sandy still affected voting in 2012. In part, this was because the hurricane allowed President Obama to act presidential. Meanwhile, “the storm knocked off [Mitt Romney, his challenger] out of the headlines and robbed his campaign of any momentum it may have had” (Cassidy, 2012). Velez and Martin (2013) estimate that the storm boosted President Obama’s vote share by 4% in affected areas, enough to swing Virginia in his direction. Had the storm hit further south, the study finds,

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North Carolina would have turned blue as well. Analyzing survey data, Hart (2014) argues that in the immediate aftermath, positive news coverage likely boosted Obama's ratings. Sides and Vavreck (2013) also find a small increase in positive news coverage following Sandy; however, they attribute this bump to the closeness of the race rather than the hurricane. President Obama's skillful crisis response knocked Romney out of the spotlight and potentially altered the electoral results in Obama's favor.

Neustadt (1990, p. 5) observed that "By present standards what would once have been emergency is commonplace." As the nation's chief executive, the president must respond to and manage a stream of crises during his (and eventually, her) tenure in office. Despite the frequency of crises, each one has the power to define a presidency. The day-to-day business in Washington arouses little public interest, but "[crisis] changes that. It makes people look to government to act and notice when it acted" (Stimson, 2004, p. 6). The media increases coverage, and the public pays attention (Olson & Gawronski, 2010; Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). Crises, by definition, are extraordinary events, and the public expects a competent response (e.g., Davies, 2017; Wolensky & Miller, 1981).

This article proceeds by defining crisis in the context of natural hazards, tracing the nationalization of disaster management, and considering how public support and public opinion shape elite responses to crises. In addition to focusing on the American president, reactions from other leaders are considered. The article concludes by surveying crisis scholarship beyond natural disasters and identifies gaps in the literature that warrant additional research.

## Defining Crisis

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Given its far-reaching impact and \$70 billion price tag, Hurricane Sandy was undeniably a crisis. But more generally, how does one define and determine what constitutes a crisis? Existing political science research tends to define crisis in specific contexts, such as natural disasters, war, terrorism, or economic crashes, rather than studying crises as a general class. This fragmentation leads to an ill-defined conceptualization of an oft studied topic (Boin, 2004). However, McConnell (2003) develops a crisis typology. The *sudden crisis*, like a hurricane, is swift and unexpected, demanding an improvisational response. The *creeping crisis*, like climate change, is apparent yet intractable. Finally, *chronic crises*, like the fight against ISIS, present ongoing challenges without clear resolutions. More colloquially, crises are thought of as shocks to the normal state of affairs (Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, & Friedenber, 2018; McConnell, 2003), sharing three elements: threat, urgency, and uncertainty (Boin, Hart, & Kuipers, 2018; Boin, Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2016).

Following Boin et al. (2016, 2018), this article focuses on sudden crises, specifically those caused by natural hazards—extreme and unexpected weather events such as hurricanes and tornadoes. Natural hazards provide ideal opportunities to test theories of public response in crisis management. Unlike foreign wars, economic crashes, or terrorism, which are in part driven by political actors, natural hazards are largely exogenous shocks.<sup>2</sup> These events also occur without regard to the political, social, or economic characteristics of a population,

allowing researchers to leverage the as-if random assignment in developing identification strategies (Healy & Malhotra, 2010). They are also salient, easily understood, and widely covered by the media (Sood et al., 1987).

Natural hazards are also getting worse. In 2018 alone, wildfires, hurricanes, and other extreme weather caused over 200 deaths and nearly \$100 billion in damage (Dennis & Mooney, 2019). Climate change will only increase their frequency and destructive potential (Marshall, 2018). Disasters associated with natural hazards are frequent and dramatic events that necessitate a governmental response, which reveals the governing capability of elected officials.

## **The Nationalization of Crisis Response**

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From the 18th century until the 1950s, American states, local governments, and private philanthropic organizations assumed primary responsibility for rescue and reconstruction in the wake of natural hazards (Landis, 1997; Platt, 2012; Rubin, 2019). Federal legislators were hesitant to disburse relief due to beliefs about welfare, moral judgment, and the blameworthiness of the victims. Congress frequently denied appeals, as members feared that providing aid would create a costly precedent (Landis, 1997). Individuals, as well as state and local authorities—not the federal government—shouldered the financial burden in early America.

In the mid-20th century, a concert of social, cultural, and demographic changes led to the federal assumption of relief responsibilities. Puritan theology of the 1800s held that disasters were not the result of moral failings or divine retribution, but acts of an infallible God. Social and political philosophy began emphasizing sympathy, empathy, and pity for those experiencing undeserved suffering (Landis, 1997). Judges, lawyers, and political elites were also developing new understandings of liability and negligence. By 1870, federal amelioration of hardship had become the norm (Landis, 1997).

Still, a century passed before legislation codified the federal assumption of disaster relief. Following the Great Depression, the federal government took on a more active role and began legislating its obligations, starting in the 1930s. The Federal Disaster Relief Act (FDRA) of 1950 was the first piece of legislation to establish federal aid for local damage. To avoid logrolling and delay, Congress delegated authority to the president by giving him the power to issue a disaster declaration under the FDRA, which allocates federal funding to affected populations. However, legislators failed to define what constitutes a disaster, giving the commander in chief unilateral control to determine who qualifies for aid (Kriner & Reeves, 2015a). Renewed in 1974, the Act included private entities and individuals while providing expertise through government programs (Platt, 2012). The Stafford Act of 1988, an amended and retitled version of the 1974 FDRA, further prohibited the use of formulas to deny disaster assistance to geographic areas, expanding the scope of federal power. By the end of the 20th century, the federal government assumed 75% of disaster relief costs, unless the president chose to raise the threshold to 90%, or even 100% (Platt, 2012).

In the mid-1990s, Congress debated the moral hazards of relief policies, arguing that state governments and individual actors could shirk disaster preparation and assume risks, confident they would be reimbursed for recovery expenses by the federal government (Platt,

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2012). These concerns were not unfounded. The measure of need a state experiences in the aftermath of a disaster is an opaque matter. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had no consistent method for evaluating state and local capabilities (Platt, 2012). Through the federal government's acceptance of responsibility for natural hazards, the public now expects a federal response, and legislation enables both the president and members of Congress to disburse grants, which may boost public support and electoral margins in the wake of a natural disaster.

## The President as Consoler in Chief

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At the apex of the federal disaster response in the United States is the president. As Neustadt (1990, p. 7) notes, "everybody now expects the man inside the White House to do something about everything." Crisis management is no exception. The public expects the president to play the role of "Consoler in Chief" (Heim, 2013) and "take personal charge when an especially large disaster strikes: visibly directing the federal response and also providing empathetic, emotional leadership—channeling the grief that the affected community feels, providing consolation" (Davies, 2017, p. 530). As the only politician elected by the entire nation, the American public also expects presidents to engage in symbolic gestures to foster trust and support (Eulau & Karp, 1977).<sup>3</sup> In his memoir, President Clinton noted that "voters don't choose a president based on how he'll handle disasters, but if they're faced with one, it quickly becomes the most important issue of their lives" (Clinton, 2004, p. 428). The president may convey a sense of safety, security, and guidance in the wake of a crisis. If he fails to fulfill this role—by jetting off to the golf course or a family vacation while others are suffering—he may expect to face criticism in the popular press and sanctions in public support.

While an unsatisfactory response can damage a presidency, competent management can translate into political capital. Natural disasters allow the president to express concern for citizens' needs both by demonstrating empathy for affected citizens and by pushing legislative efforts to aid them (Sylvester, 2014). A 2018 poll indicated that 83% of respondents believe it is the president's job to act as a consoler in times of national crisis (Manchester, 2018). Beyond his constitutional functions, the public expects the president to heal, comfort, protect, and instill a sense of hope.

## Mass Response to Crisis

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When a natural hazard occurs, its effects are felt locally. But crises do not stay local in the age of nationalized media and significantly federalized disaster management. The more severe a weather event, the more the media covers it (Sood et al., 1987) and the more the public pays attention (Coombs, 1995). Even those unaffected citizens across the nation will see images of destruction and personal suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Crisis management is a political process that is influenced by factors beyond objective levels of need. Inadequate preparation or poor response may transform inclement weather into a disaster when it impacts a vulnerable population. Factors such as race, age, or class affect one's vulnerability and are intertwined with the political process. (Boin et al., 2018; Cannon, 1995; Wijkman & Timberlake, 1984). However, leaders may claim that these events are natural without acknowledging the other political and economic choices such as building

communities in earthquake or flood-prone areas. During a crisis, the media may be more willing to accept elite explanations without further interrogation. The media will “innocently accept the view that high winds and water killed so many thousand victims of a given cyclone. They do not dig to see why so many people were allowed to live in such dangerous houses exposed to a storm surge. . .” (Wijkman & Timberlake, 1984, p. 16). Once the immediate threat has receded, however, citizens may begin asking questions. Elected leaders must defend themselves against charges of incompetence or ignorance to remain in office (Boin et al., 2018).

While they cannot go back in time to mitigate the destructiveness of a natural disaster, elected leaders are expected to take action when disaster strikes. In determining how to respond, officials may consider the electoral implications. Voters are retrospective and use an incumbent’s past performance to predict future behavior (e.g., Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Kramer, 1971).<sup>5</sup> Theories of electoral accountability often highlight two mechanisms by which this retrospection can occur—competency-seeking and sanctioning behavior. One camp contends that voters are attentive, able to apportion credit or blame based on a politician’s actions (see Gasper & Reeves, 2011). Others take a more pessimistic view of the electorate. Advocates of sanctioning argue that the electorate is not sophisticated enough to discriminate between acts of God and acts attributable to the government (e.g., Achen & Bartels, 2017). The distinction matters because each theory leads to a different crisis management response.

## Economic Voting

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When election day arrives, voters may review an incumbent president’s actions and the outcomes over which he presided and decide whether to reward him at the polls. This behavior—using past performance by the incumbent as a criterion for voting—is known as retrospective voting. For some small-d democrats, this process would ideally involve voters compiling information—voting records, policy proposals, etc.—and making reasoned judgments about the quality of incumbent performance. But this is unlikely given voters’ low levels of knowledge. Many citizens cannot name their democratic representatives (Carpini & Keeter, 1996). While few citizens follow the day-to-day events in Washington, DC, they do “have one comparatively hard bit of data: They know what life has been like during the incumbent’s administration. They need not know the precise economic or foreign policies of the incumbent administration to see or feel the results of those policies” (Fiorina, 1981, p. 5). If the president has cleared some performance-based bar, then voters will retain him to benefit in the future (Kramer, 1971). While individual voters may use different measuring heuristics, this process tends to work in the aggregate (Erikson, Mackuen, & Stimson, 2002; Fiorina, 1981; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Key, 1966; Page & Shapiro, 1992).

The retrospective voting literature traditionally focuses on economic indicators (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Erikson et al., 2002; Fiorina, 1978, 1981; Healy & Malhotra, 2010; Hopkins & Pettingill, 2018; Kramer, 1971; Tufte, 1975; Wolfers, 2002), but these variables may be problematic. Healy and Malhotra (2010) point to three concerns. First, economic changes are challenging to define temporally (e.g., when do you know you’re in a recession?). Second, macroeconomic outcomes are neither randomly assigned nor exogenous to the political process. Third, macroeconomics defy simple categorization, such as “good” or “bad” (e.g., inflation hurts the rich more than the poor).

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Additionally, increasing partisanship and partisan-motivated reasoning among the electorate has led to differing perceptions of the economy and a weaker link between economic conditions and presidential approval (Donovan, Kellstedt, Key, & Lebo, 2019; Jones, 2020). Natural hazards offer a cleaner test of the retrospective model. They occur without regard to who sits in the White House, and no politician can prevent them. They are also assigned as if random, unambiguously negative, and temporally discrete (Healy & Malhotra, 2010).

But is it rational for voters to punish a president for bad weather? While voters may credibly blame the government for an unforeseen economic downturn, does the logic extend to tornadoes or hurricanes? Under the assumption that voters are punishing politicians for the response rather than the event itself—yes (Ashworth et al., 2018; Flores & Smith, 2013; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Healy & Malhotra, 2010). Healy and Malhotra (2010) focus on tornadoes, decomposing their effects into fatalities, which are outside political control, and economic damage, which the incumbent can mitigate through relief efforts. They find that voters do not punish incumbents for deaths but do take economic loss into account when casting ballots. If the president issues a disaster declaration that authorizes the disbursement of federal funds, he avoids sanction. Looking beyond tornadoes to other weather events, Gasper and Reeves (2011) come to similar conclusions. Voters punish incumbent presidents for weather damage; however, a disaster declaration both mitigates the penalty and provides an electoral bump. Actions are more important than random events.

Beyond economic transfers, citizens' perceptions of the political response affect voting. After a natural hazard occurs, some citizens directly experience its effects while others watch from afar. Those not directly affected will experience little to no change in their daily lives and judge the president's response differently from those who suffered directly. They evaluate the president based on how his actions affect distant or abstract victims and perhaps gain insight into the competence of the leader. Victims beset by sudden misfortune may consider how government intervention affects them personally, relying more on self-interest or pocketbook concerns. In either case, political sophistication may be critical to the process of determining blame.

Political sophistication may enlighten citizens' understanding of leaders' functional responsibilities concerning crisis management. While citizens may cast judgment based on outcomes alone, they may also take into account the authority and actions of a leader in addressing a calamity. In the case of natural hazards, voters who knew the job titles of specific politicians were able to correctly attribute blame in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, while those with less political knowledge relied solely on partisan cues (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). Knowing job titles or other political specifics requires a degree of knowledge and sophistication. These attentive voters are better able to synthesize information about governmental response and pocketbook outcomes. In the congressional context, Gomez and Wilson (2001) find that less sophisticated voters attribute economic outcomes to the president, ignoring the substantial role of Congress.

Crises also allow the president to act presidential. The hazard may not be the direct result of his actions, but the event presents an unexpected test of leadership. Both victims and observers experience fear during a crisis (Olson & Gawronski, 2010). To mitigate that fear, those affected want closure. Those watching from afar look for signs that the crisis will be contained. Finally, both groups look to their leaders for assurances that the crisis will not repeat itself in the future (Coombs, 1995). Voters can also observe how the president performs



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under pressure and evaluate his competency for continued leadership (Ashworth et al., 2018). Healy and Malhotra (2010) find empirical evidence of this effect. Looking at tornado damage, they show that residents of neighboring counties impose a penalty on the president of a similar magnitude to affected counties in response to economic damages, conducting a competency assessment unrelated to direct loss. In the aggregate, it appears that voters can learn and are capable of making retrospective evaluations of presidential performance when a hazard strikes.

## Attribution and Sanctioning

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One central concern of democratic politics is the ability of voters to attribute outcomes to elected officials appropriately. Often, voters “hold presidents accountable for localized outcomes, even if they are beyond the president's control” (Kriner & Reeves, 2015a, p. 37). It is not unreasonable to assume “a citizen upset by garbage collection, service by the local phone company, crime, traffic, or any number of ills may choose to express his or her frustration on ‘the president,’ presumed manager of everything” (Erikson et al., 2002, p. 75).

Idiosyncratic local conditions affect voters’ understanding of the national economy and may lead to a penalty on presidents at the ballot box (Healy & Lenz, 2017; Park & Reeves, 2020; Reeves & Gimpel, 2012; Wolfers, 2002). Achen and Bartels (2017) find that voters punished President Woodrow Wilson for a spate of shark attacks (but see Fowler & Hall, 2018). They also find evidence that voters throughout the 20th century blamed incumbents for flood and drought conditions, concluding that “. . . climatic distress is a pervasive risk to the reelection chances of every incumbent, and no more controllable than the rain” (Achen & Bartels, 2017, p. 132).

Given that severe weather events are acts of God or Mother Nature, why would voters punish presidents? Achen and Bartels (2017) argue that if voters are seeking more redistributive welfare, there should be a sustained leftward shift in the electorate following a natural disaster. One would also expect some incumbents to receive praise for their competent crisis management, especially when compared to the average response.

Neither of these hypotheses is borne out by the empirical evidence. Incumbents, regardless of party, are almost always punished. Voters in the sanctioning model appear to be responsive—they respond to the adverse impacts of natural hazards—but are unable to discriminate between random shocks and leader competency. Voters also tend to overrate gains and losses immediately preceding an election (Healy & Lenz, 2014; Huber, Hill, & Lenz, 2012) and reward incumbents for distributive benefits (Chen, 2013; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Healy & Malhotra, 2009; Reeves, 2011). If a natural hazard occurs in the months leading up to an election, a savvy president can take advantage of the situation to boost his support.

## Emotional Voting

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Voters may be especially likely to misattribute blame when they are unable to disentangle events within and outside of a politician’s control. Similarly, emotional voters may not distinguish between political and apolitical stimuli. Watching their football team win or losing

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a bet may affect their choices inside the polling booth (Healy, Malhotra, & Mo, 2010). Moreover, incumbents are likely to be targets of such emotions, as they—like the accessed emotions—are associated with the past (Healy et al., 2010; Webster, 2018).

Anxiety is perhaps the most salient emotion for citizens directly affected by a natural disaster, and it may persist well after the event is over (Verduyn & Lavrijsen, 2015). Anxiety is also more likely to endure when prompted by severe events or when respondents continued to think about the incident after it had concluded. As citizens may realize the implications of a hazard over time, various contexts may prompt citizens to consider the event again, prolonging their emotional distress (Verduyn, Van Mechelen, Tuerlinckx, Meers, & Van Coillie, 2009). The severity, length, and aftermath of a disaster can extend feelings of anxiety, meaning voters may hold politicians accountable days, months, or years after the initial event.

Several theories account for the role of anxiety on political behavior (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Gadarian & Albertson, 2014; Ladd & Lenz, 2008). Affective intelligence theory predicts that anxious voters will seek additional information about candidate quality and policy issues rather than voting only by party cues. Though this surge in attention may be normatively appealing, anxious learning is distinct from learning that is not motivated by distress. Anxious information seekers are more likely to incorrectly recall information, reject new ideas, and retain less information than more tranquil learners. Anxiety can also lead voters to favor authoritarian values (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Mass media focuses on the most threatening aspects of a story and offers little reassurance (Nacos, Bloch-Elkin, & Shapiro, 2011). The public then turns to their elected leaders for guidance, increasing trust in elites who promote protective policies, even if they infringe on democratic ideals or promise to abridge rights for threatening groups (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). These voters may be more susceptible to manipulation, especially from politicians offering protection at the expense of liberalism.

Conversely, endogenous affect theory (Brader, 2006; Ladd & Lenz, 2008) claims that voters' evaluations of candidates will elicit specific emotions. As applied to natural hazards, the political messenger rather than the message may incite anxiety. Voters' preexisting favor toward the current administration can lead them to be more trusting or accepting of the disaster response. In contrast, those with a negative perspective of the political actors will respond with anxiety.

Ultimately, anxiety leads voters to make choices against their long-term self-interest. They may vote against competent incumbents or elect authoritarian politicians in an effort to attribute blame or to make sense of their loss (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Verduyn & Lavrijsen, 2015). The intensity of these emotions can also increase turnout. In the calculus of voting, a hazard will not change a voter's impact on the outcome of an election. Still, the catharsis voters experience by expressing approval or dissatisfaction will lead some to the polls (Downs, 1957). Attribution error and emotional voting create a noisy signal, forcing presidents to respond by anticipating and mitigating the adverse effects of a natural hazard to dodge blame or sanction.



In the wake of a natural disaster, the president is expected to be particularly responsive to mass opinion (Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004). The sudden attention of both citizens and the media pressures the president to act. Public opinion may appear to swing in opinion polls in the immediate aftermath of a natural hazard, but it does not capture voters' long-term feelings (Sorrentino & Vidmar, 1974). These crises, by definition, are short-lived, and opinion reverts to the mean or some new postcrisis equilibrium (Stimson, 2004). Presidents, then, consider the longer-term effects of their responses, especially as they relate to the next election (e.g., Erikson et al., 2002; Flores & Smith, 2013; Kriner & Reeves, 2015a) or their approval rating, which they can strategically rely on to push their agenda through Congress (Barrett & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2007; Canes-Wrone & de Marchi, 2002; Erikson et al., 2002; Marshall & Prins, 2007). A response that garners public approval can translate into electoral gain beyond the proximate election (Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011), while a bungled response can damage a presidency. As Matthew Dowd, one of President George W. Bush's strategists, remarked in the aftermath of Katrina:

The president broke his bond with the public. Once that bond was broken, he no longer had the capacity to talk to the American public. State of the Union addresses? It didn't matter. Legislative initiatives? It didn't matter. P.R.? It didn't matter. Travel? It didn't matter. I knew when Katrina—I was like, man, you know, this is it, man. We're done.

(Murphy & Purdum, 2009)

The public is sensitive to crisis response strategies, which the president can leverage to boost his support or squander his credibility. Members of Congress can similarly take advantage of a natural hazard to earmark funds for their district and make consolatory public appearances. As a result, the cunning leader can use a crisis for electoral benefit.

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## Presidential Particularism

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While pork-barreling and reelection seeking are often associated with the legislative branch, the president similarly campaigns for a small share of swing voters and governs to please his base (Kriner & Reeves, 2015a). Although the president is nominally accountable to the entire nation, the Electoral College makes some voters more influential than others. Rather than incentivizing the universalist behavior from a national leader, America's electoral institutions encourage unequal and targeted treatment of voters by the president. The Stafford Act gives the president broad unilateral authority to act when a natural hazard strikes. He is the sole actor who can declare a federal disaster and disburse federal funds to an affected area. And while voters will punish a president for weather damage, they will reward him above and beyond the exacted penalty if a disaster is declared (Gasper & Reeves, 2011).<sup>6</sup> Kriner and Reeves (2015a) find that, after controlling for storm damage and objective need, the president is 5% more likely to declare a disaster and direct federal funds to electorally competitive swing states. During a presidential election year, however, those same states are 23% more likely to receive a disaster declaration. Gasper (2015) not only finds a similar effect of

competition and electoral immediacy on declarations but also finds that the threshold for damage sustained is lower in competitive states during presidential election years. These figures highlight the fact that crisis management can be a profitable electoral strategy (Garrett & Sobel, 2003; Kriner & Reeves, 2015a, 2015b; Reeves, 2011). Presidents also direct additional disaster relief to counties that voted for them in the previous election (Healy & Malhotra, 2009) and to states that comprise their core constituency while ignoring states unlikely to vote for them (Kriner & Reeves, 2015a). The electoral rewards for these transfers can persist beyond the proximate election. Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) finds that the incumbent party appropriated €7.1 billion in disaster relief after the 2002 Elbe flood in Germany and reaped an average of seven additional points in affected districts in the next election. Three years later, the incumbent party received 25% of the initial boost due to relief spending. This particularistic behavior is unique to neither a partisan era nor natural disasters. During the nation's worst economic crisis, the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt directed New Deal spending toward electorally vulnerable states at the expense of the solidly Democratic South (Wright, 1974).

While more preventative spending would lead to better outcomes and lower receipts overall, voters do not reward presidents for this behavior. Healy and Malhotra (2009) find that voters consistently prefer direct transfers over collective goods, such as firefighter training, flood protection, or contingency planning—even when the incumbent provides for those goods. The U.S. electoral system incentivizes the president to narrowly target specific voters during times of crisis, disbursing taxpayer money and boosting electoral support.

## Federal, State, and Local Responses

Members of Congress also capitalize on natural hazards by distributing particularistic benefits. Because the Stafford Act prohibits the use of formulas to allocate relief spending, members of Congress can try to persuade FEMA to disburse excess funds to electorally important constituencies (Garrett & Sobel, 2003). Legislators are also more likely to cater to special interests in the wake of a crisis because the media pays less attention to Congress to focus on an event (Kaplan, Spenkuch, & Yuan, 2019).

Because politicians exist at multiple levels of government in a federal system, elites must respond to citizen expectations by controlling the narrative (Olson, 2000). But not all political actors have the ability to respond to crises with policy change or the particularistic distribution of resources. Leaders have an incentive to frame the crisis by exaggerating or minimizing the stakes. Politicians posture to regain, solidify, or control privileges. In doing so, they define how the public will interpret the event—its causes, outcomes, and responsible parties.

Humans have a psychological bias toward attending to negative news and events; media outlets cater to this bias by highlighting conflict and misconduct in their reporting (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). In times of crisis, then, politicians are incentivized to highlight others' blameworthiness rather than claim credit for mitigated outcomes. Politicians are not limited in their choice of scapegoats as federalism spreads responsibility throughout the political system. Mortensen (2012) finds that regional leaders are more likely to blame the federal government for poor policy implementation when they are of the opposite party.

Politicians may be most concerned with a particular political audience, like their party, or their immediate political network. In the wake of a disaster such as an extreme weather event, they are likely to assign blame to preserve their reputation in the preferred network (Moynihan, 2012).

Politicians also consider the news media when framing a crisis. As the mediator between elites and mass publics, news media have the power to shape the story. While a sympathetic outlet may de-emphasize the leader's shortcomings, others may portray that politician as incompetent. Thus, elites must navigate three aspects of crisis management—their level of cooperation with the public and the media, attribution of responsibility, and considerations of how their actions may result in removal from office (Boin, Hart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010). In their public response, politicians may even consider international audiences. For example, a 1985 earthquake in Mexico led to 9,000 reported deaths. The government de-emphasized the loss of life and exaggerated the economic downturn to increase their posture in a debt negotiation with the International Monetary Fund (Olson, 2000).

## **Mass and Elite Response in Developing Democracies and Autocracies**

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With the benefit of financial resources, developed infrastructure, and detailed response plans, established democracies often have an expanded capacity to respond to natural hazards and disasters. Wealthy societies can invest in protective infrastructure and evacuation plans and retroactively respond with medical aid, food, and shelter (Strömberg, 2007). Political elites are also electorally incentivized to help victims. In a free and open society, the media can freely report events and assign blame while citizens can hold their leaders accountable in the next election. In more fragile democracies or autocracies, one may expect the patterns of mass and elite responses to differ.

A crisis may destabilize newer or more fragile democracies. Adverse shocks to public opinion can incite violent political or social conflict. A disaster may motivate political leaders to overstep the bounds of their institutionally defined roles. Citizens may incrementally support the suppression of political rights and liberties in return for immediate relief (Norris, 1999). The increased volume of demands and the novelty or context of those demands puts stress on the political system. Leaders may lack the capacity to respond or the motivation to invest in recovery efforts (Carlin, Love, & Zechmeister, 2014). Using in-person surveys after an earthquake and tsunami in Chile, Carlin, Love, and Zechmeister (2014) find that disaster damage decreased victims' support for municipal governments. Victims were more supportive of military coups and the use of unilateral executive power. Respondents were, however, more willing to engage in political behaviors such as contacting elected officials and attending community meetings. While there was a decrease in support for the existing political system and democratic values more broadly, victims were more likely to engage in conventional forms of political behavior.

In the developing democracy of Pakistan, however, the government's response to blunt the economic consequences of a severe flood led to increased engagement with the democratic process (Fair, Kuhn, Malhotra, & Shapiro, 2017). Those living in the affected areas became more politically active; however, their participation was not intended to reward or sanction

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the incumbent government. Rather, the competent response highlighted the government's impact on the average person's daily life, which motivated citizens to engage more deeply with the democratic process going forward.

Like democratic regimes, autocracies rely on legitimacy or the belief that authority is rightly held in order to persist. Public opinion is difficult to estimate accurately in autocracies due to political repression, and the absence of free media creates a barrier to the assignment of blame and demand for political action. Despite these issues, Lazarev, Sobolev, Soboleva, and Sokolov (2014) find that individuals who were exposed to fires in rural Russia and subsequently received relief from the government increased their support for their governor, Prime Minister Putin, President Medvedev, and the United Russia Party even though half of the respondents recognized the government's responsibility for the fire.

While citizens under autocratic regimes may not express opinions the same way as citizens of democratic countries, evidence suggests that mass responses to relief are not categorically unique. The same can be said of elite responses. To protect their authority, leaders in less stable democracies or autocracies also disburse aid to victims, and in turn, are viewed more favorably. Ultimately, regime type may not be the most substantial influence on mass and elite responses to crises.

## Beyond Natural Hazards and Disasters

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Every effective crisis response requires a two-pronged strategy—dealing with events on the ground and managing the political fallout (Boin et al., 2018). The story may be more complicated in other crises, but evidence indicates that both mass and elite responses are similar.

Consider the economy. Although fewer researchers have directly investigated the effects of large-scale economic crashes, a rich literature explores the connections between presidential approval, vote share, and the economy. When the economy is weak, voters punish the incumbent (e.g., Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Tufte, 1975). Voters seek competent economic managers and rely on past performance as a heuristic to understand prospective gains. While the economic voting literature often focuses on periods of non-crisis, recent comparative research has examined the impacts of the 2008 economic crash in Europe more broadly. A study of Greece's 2008 financial breakdown finds that "economic evaluations do have an impact on support for the incumbent, but in a period when the economy is at its worst the incumbent has no real chance of winning and should expect support only from its long-time loyal supporters" (Nezi, 2012). These results replicate in other Western European democracies like Ireland (Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2012), the United Kingdom (Palmer & Whitten, 2011), and, to a lesser extent, Germany (Anderson & Hecht, 2012). In each of these instances, voters blamed the incumbent party presiding over an economic crash come election day. However, two pieces published in 2019 indicate that the link between presidential approval and the economy in the United States is weakening, raising questions as to whether these results would replicate. Both Donovan et al. (2019) and Jones (2020) leverage large surveys and find that partisanship colors economic evaluations, and the weakening of this link has increased under Presidents Obama and Trump. Additionally, financial crashes do not affect all voters through the same mechanism. For example, inflation primarily hurts the wealthy, while

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unemployment is most concerning to the poor (Healy & Malhotra, 2010). There is also a question of endogeneity. While a natural hazard is equally likely under the tenure of a competent or incompetent president, economic crashes are more directly tied to leader competency and the political system at large.

War also meets definitions of a crisis, but the variables may shift from economic indicators to human lives. As casualties mount and the war drags on, the public will express dissatisfaction—support for the war and leader will decline (e.g., Karol & Miguel, 2007; Mueller, 1973). Although U.S. wars are often fought on foreign soil, their effects, like natural hazards, are felt locally. Communities directly impacted by casualties will show the most significant decline in support (Kriner & Shen, 2010). However, casualties are not randomly assigned. Communities with low levels of education and economic prosperity are more likely to suffer personal losses (Kriner & Shen, 2010). Partisan politics and ideology also shape interpretations of war (Jacobson, 2009). In an experimental setting, Berinsky (2007) advances the “elite cue theory,” which describes how the public develops foreign affairs opinions from elite speech. When partisan cues converge, voters across the partisan divide may support the war; however, when cues diverge, voters retreat to their partisan camps. Additional political information does not mitigate these effects. Media coverage (Bennett & Manheim, 1993; Zaller & Chiu, 1996) can shape individual interpretations as well. Especially during a war’s early stages, the media may faithfully present the government’s perspective rather than look at the crisis with a critical eye. Foreign wars are also intimately tied to politics. Leaders may intentionally go to war to take advantage of a “rally around the flag” effect at home (Baker & Oneal, 2001).

Terrorist attacks are another phenomenon that falls under the definition of crisis. The extent to which they are attributable to the actions of a leader or political party is variable. There is evidence that an attack will lead to a decline in leader support and probable replacement of the government or cabinet (Bali, 2007; Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin, & Mierau, 2008; Montalvo, 2011). However, terrorism is not randomly assigned. Extremists may strategically time attacks to disrupt peace processes, especially when the parties do not trust one another or when the government is hardline (Kydd & Walter, 2002). Terrorists may also time attacks to influence elections. Aksoy (2014) shows that permissive democratic systems allow their citizens to peacefully express discontent while less permissive systems foreclose the possibility of electoral competition and may see increased terrorist activity as a result. Attacks can also affect electoral outcomes. In studying the impacts of a terrorist bombing in Spain 3 days before an election, Bali (2007) concludes that attacks occurring close to elections prime voters to consider the government’s performance and vote accordingly. Terrorism is also an issue owned by the right (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Getmansky & Zeitzoff, 2014; Petrocik, 1996). Its effects on leader support are likely conditioned by which party is in power.

## Conclusion

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In a crisis, voters are sensitive to loss and expect a response by their leaders. The sudden onset captures media and citizen attention, which politicians can leverage to boost their political capital and electoral support. As they respond to these incidents, research shows that leaders embrace political considerations as they address issues on the ground.

Future work can expand both theoretically and methodologically. Many political science studies use crises as random shocks to test theories of voter behavior, mass opinion, and elite response, but different types of crises may require distinct political considerations. Studies of creeping crises such as climate change may examine longitudinal elite framing or volatility of public opinion about the crisis. Chronic crisis research may consider how political institutions develop to respond to ongoing threats. Further, researchers can further benefit from an interdisciplinary approach to crisis management and can integrate perspectives from geography, sociology, public policy, and public administration scholarship to define “crisis” more systematically. An interdisciplinary approach would expand knowledge of public support and public opinion about broader crisis management strategies and political outcomes.

In 1996, former FEMA director James Lee Witt stated that “disasters are very political events” (Sobel & Leeson, 2006). Crisis management research must, therefore, consider political factors such as policy area, leadership style, or federalism. Exploring resource and capacity constraints of an institution can explain when political factors are relevant to pre- and postcrisis choices. Such an approach may alleviate the discontinuity between research that examines either behavior that occurs within an institution to prepare for or respond to crises or institutional practices aimed at influencing public perceptions of crises.

Alternative theoretical approaches may reframe how scholars understand public reactions to crisis management. Much research on public perceptions of crisis management relies on attribution theory where the public assigns responsibility for outcomes to relevant political actors. Understanding how public knowledge of an institution influences evaluations of the institution’s actions can address questions related to trust in or legitimacy of the institution. Researchers should make efforts to move beyond case studies to identify systematic patterns in crisis management. Studies comparing similar crises or the responses of countries to an international crisis can provide insight into institutional factors that affect decisions to respond or public perception of effectiveness. Similarly, the relationship between national and subnational actions to mitigate and respond to crises can shed light on the role of federalism in crisis management. In doing so, scholars can identify counterfactual examples and isolate which factors influence management decisions.

By only observing a crisis and not the absence of a crisis, scholars struggle to isolate which factors influence crisis management. Thus, there is a limited understanding of how preparation prevents events from developing into crises or how political actors can dampen their magnitude. Future work should consider how precrisis preparation drives postcrisis management. Additionally, in studying postcrisis outcomes, such as institutional learning or public responses, researchers can consider political actors’ past actions and anticipated results. Despite a robust literature, ample opportunity for investigating political influences on crises exists.

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## Notes

1. In 2018, Sandy ranked as the third most destructive hurricane, behind Katrina in 2005 and Harvey in 2017 (Frohlich, 2018).
2. Although the impact of such hazards is mitigated or exacerbated by long-term, structural political, social, and economic factors, natural hazards are considered to highlight their sudden and often unpredictable nature. While political actors may not repair a broken levy or may ignore signs of climate change, which exacerbates the impact of a hurricane, no political actor can cause or prevent a storm.
3. Under Article 12 of the United States Constitution, electors vote for the president (i.e., the Electoral College). However, the president holds the only elected position for which every eligible voter may cast a ballot.
4. During the fall of 2017, hurricanes were the most covered topic on U.S. local news broadcasts (Martin & McCrain, 2019).
5. For a thorough overview of the retrospective voting literature, see Healy and Malhotra (2013).
6. Despite the electoral benefits of declaring a disaster, presidents still deny some requests. Gasper (2015) finds that from 1992 to 2005, presidents denied 18% of gubernatorial requests from 42 states. Though the primary predictor of denial is damage sustained, they are more likely during a non-presidential election year in electorally competitive states; however, presidents' copartisan governors were more likely to receive a declaration.

### Related Articles

Vulnerable Groups During Crisis

