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Commentary

Florida Disaster Aid Can Help Bush

October 03, 2004 | Andrew Reeves | Andrew Reeves is a graduate student in the department of government at Harvard University and an associate of the Center for Basic Research in the Social Sciences.

The Bush campaign has enlisted the help of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain to make stump speeches on behalf on the president's reelection effort, but in the end it may be Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne delivering the president a second term in office.

Though Schwarzenegger and other Republican leaders can wax patriotic on the president's virtues, it is the recent devastating hurricanes that have given President Bush an extraordinary opportunity to deliver billions of dollars directly to the pockets of Florida's 13 million potential voters.

Florida, prominent among the battleground states with 27 electoral votes, is considered a top prize for the Bush campaign, for reasons that became obvious in 2000. Bush and John Kerry have visited the state repeatedly -- more than any other state except Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Now the question is how the president can use the millions of dollars he controls in federal disaster aid to influence the election. Is that too cynical? Do you doubt that such crass political motives would influence public policy? My research shows that it does happen -- and it happens regardless of whether the president is a Democrat or Republican.

Indeed, the research suggests that the electoral importance of a state plays a large role in determining whether a president declares a disaster, an act that clears the way for large sums of federal money to be sent to devastated areas.

In a study examining all presidential disaster declarations from 1989 through 1999, I found that a non-battleground state with three electoral votes is almost 50% less likely to receive a disaster declaration than a battleground state with 20 or more electoral votes -- even after accounting for actual need (in the form of private insurance claims stemming from disasters). In a preliminary analysis (which does not yet include the most recent Florida disasters), Bush seems to be similarly disposed to allowing electoral considerations to shade disaster-declaration policy. For example, in Connecticut, which is not a battleground state, an ice storm downed power lines and left thousands of residents without power for days in January 2003. The total damage was estimated at \$2.55 million; Bush did not declare it a disaster. A few months later in June, a rainstorm hit Florida -- causing \$613,047 damage to 41 homes -- and this time a disaster was declared.

As political scientists have long known, politicians send pork back home to their constituents in order to secure reelection. Presidents rarely have the chance to deliver resources so directly to constituents in the way that members of Congress do. Except for disaster declarations. In the case of disaster declarations, the president has total discretion.

Dealing with the grief and havoc of a natural disaster also offers the president a chance to display his leadership skills. Just as scholars have shown that the public rallies around the president and the flag during times of war, there may be a similar tendency when it comes to natural disasters. On the White House website right now, there are pictures of the president touring stricken orange groves, embracing relief workers and flying in on a helicopter to survey hurricane damage.

While pundits, journalists and academics rail against the Bush and Kerry campaigns focusing on a handful of battleground states and ignoring the rest of the country, I think the greater problem is not that campaign resources are being disproportionately allocated to battleground states but that government resources are.

The Florida hurricanes caused massive damage and resulted in the loss of human life; the president was right to declare a disaster. But would he have reacted so swiftly and with such a massive amount of money if Florida wasn't a hotly contested state? I think the answer is no.