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Commentary

Plucking Votes From Disasters

The electoral clout of a state can sway presidents on aid.

May 12, 2004 | Andrew Reeves | Andrew Reeves is a doctoral candidate in the department of government at Harvard University.

Last summer, rainstorms flooded Citrus County, Fla., damaging 41 homes. The governor of Florida quickly sent a request for federal disaster assistance to Washington, and it was granted by the president, clearing the way, potentially, for millions of dollars in aid.

Then, in late September, rockslides and floods in Frankfort, Ky., killed two people, destroyed eight bridges and damaged or destroyed more than 60 homes. But when the governor of Kentucky requested a federal disaster declaration from President Bush, the request was denied.

Despite comparable levels of destruction, why did one state receive a disaster declaration while the other did not? Cynics might suggest that it had to do with the fact that the governor of Florida is the president's brother. But I don't believe that. I suggest -- perhaps equally cynically -- that while Kentucky is likely to be relatively unimportant in the upcoming presidential election, Florida is a known battleground state, just as it was in 2000. Bush, like any good politician, knew what he had to do.

Presidential elections, after all, are won and lost in battleground states. In the 2004 election, states such as Florida, Michigan and Ohio are likely to determine the next president, and it is in states like these that the candidates will allocate most of their campaign resources.

The winner-take-all allocation of electoral votes dramatically increases the importance of swing states -- states that are winnable but not locked up and that could provide the critical electoral votes to muster the 270 necessary for victory.

Would a national politician really allow such base political considerations to affect public policy? My research suggests that he would. And not just Bush. Presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush appear to have done the same.

Perhaps this shouldn't be all that surprising. It is an accepted and fundamental tenet of American politics that members of Congress attempt to improve their chances of reelection by distributing benefits -- read: pork -- back in their districts. Since presidents, unlike members of Congress, lack a small, well-defined district, many Americans have assumed that they operate on behalf of all the people, to the universal benefit of the many. But the data suggest that this assumption is not correct, at least with regard to federal disaster declarations.

Start with this fact: Presidents have sweeping discretion in authorizing disaster declarations. The president may make a federal disaster declaration for anything deemed worthy, including major weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes and snowstorms, as well as events unrelated to weather such as riots.

The declaration clears the way for direct aid, small business loans and other support that can run into the millions of dollars. Although the president does not determine exact amounts of aid, he makes the critical initial authorization.

From 1989 to 1999, there were 659 declarations of disaster; the Federal Emergency Management Agency spent \$23.9 billion aiding victims.

I conducted a regression analysis examining all the disaster declarations made during that period, and a preliminary analysis of declarations through 2003. Using insurance company figures and declarations of damage from the National Climatic Data Center -- as well as information about the political significance of each state -- I was able to estimate the actual need of the state and its importance to the presidential race.

If disaster requests had been granted or denied strictly on the basis of need, it would have been clear. But they were not. Instead, I found that the electoral motivations of the president -- Bush and his two predecessors -- had a dramatic effect on which states were granted disaster declarations.

For example, a battleground state with 20 electoral votes receives about 50% more disaster declarations than a state with three electoral votes that is not considered crucial for victory, even after discounting for need. Likewise, more declarations are granted during election years than in off years, even taking disaster occurrences into account. Although need is still, overall, the best indicator of disaster declarations, electoral forces play a dramatic role in determining which states are granted requests for disaster declarations.

As Bush and John Kerry campaign for the presidency, we should pay close attention to which states are receiving most of their attention. Evidence here shows that electoral motives may spill over into policy considerations, and this is a concern for all citizens.