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## The Great Debate

# How disasters change elections

By Andrew Reeves

November 5, 2012

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Even though politicians don't control the weather, voters punish them for the damage it causes. But analyzing all county-level election results for incumbent governors and presidents from 1970 to 2006 also shows that this punishment is dwarfed by the reward for taking action.

In my study with Professor John Gasper of Carnegie Mellon at Doha, [published last year in the American Journal of Political Science](#), we examined countywide damage caused by natural disasters in the three months preceding elections. When a governor requested aid and a president approved it, presidents received a half-point increase in their county vote share while governors saw a four-point bump.

Hurricane Sandy was unprecedented because it was so destructive and occurred so close to Election Day, which makes its political impact difficult to predict. The impact on state and local elections may take time to discern, but it is clear that Sandy put the brakes on a Romney campaign that had been gaining momentum and thrust President Obama into a leadership role. Actions the president took and images he created will help determine how voter emotions about Sandy are expressed in the voting booth on Tuesday.

Why are politicians rewarded for natural disasters? Hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and other calamities are pop quizzes in leadership. While voters switch channels to avoid the millions of dollars' worth of political ads late in a campaign, in a crisis they tune in for information from mayors, governors and presidents. They seek guidance, assurance that help is on the way and comforting empathy.

Sometimes, they find a proverbial knight in shining armor. When Hurricane Betsy struck New Orleans in 1965, the city's mayor in a U.S. Army "duck boat" rescued at least one citizen stranded on her roof. But leaders sometimes fail the test, as in 1979 when Chicago Mayor Michael Bilandic so badly handled a snowstorm that he lost the Democratic primary to Jane Byrne's insurgent campaign. And recall that President George W. Bush, in his final press conference, was still addressing questions about the federal response to Hurricane Katrina.

With Sandy, President Obama seems to have at least passed the test. He acted swiftly by issuing emergency declarations to several states before the storm made landfall. In the days after the storm he toured disaster areas, received briefings from officials and comforted voters. In storm-ravaged Brigantine, New Jersey, touring with Governor Chris Christie, the president was seen comforting tearful citizen Donna Vanzant – creating an emotional video of a man often accused of being cold and aloof personally connecting with a victim to assure her she'd get the help she needed.

So what will Obama's reward be? Our study found a modest effect of a typical disaster declaration by a president. But most natural disasters are local in impact. Sandy is a national story, so citizens across the country see the powerful images, which could magnify support. Eventually, many of those affected will receive monetary assistance, but this will occur well after Tuesday. Based on history, the bounce for the incumbent will likely be less than two points.

The politics of Sandy display both the virtue and vice of democracy. Voters hold the president more accountable for his response than for a weather system beyond his control. At the same time, Governor Romney and President Obama have been mostly silent on climate change, a leading suspect in the cause of the calamitous weather of our 21st century. As other research has shown, forging short-term gain for long-term benefit is not a task at which we humans excel. Although this is exactly the task at hand, leaders are unlikely to do it unless an engaged electorate supports them.

PHOTO: U.S. President Barack Obama hugs North Point Marina owner Donna Vanzant as he tours damage done

### AUTHOR PROFILE



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