

The Politics of Disaster Relief

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Abstract

Severe weather events provide unexpected tests of political leadership. From the perspective of the social scientist, disaster relief provides an excellent vantage point to observe the responses of both elected officials and voters to these dramatic events that, though not caused by politics, require a distinctly political response. This essay provides an overview of the research on the politics of disaster relief in the United States. The topic is vast and we focus specifically on the response of voters and politicians in the aftermath of severe weather events. We review the foundational research, discuss more recent advances, and then address what we see as the most important issues for future research on this topic.

INTRODUCTION

In his memoir, President Bill Clinton (2004) 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.” Increasingly, voters are touched by both the devastation of severe weather events and the response of state, local, and federal governments. This essay provides an overview of the research on the politics of disaster relief in the United States. The topic is vast and we focus specifically on the response of voters and politicians in the aftermath of severe weather events. We review the foundational research, discuss more recent advances, and then address what we see as the most important issues for future research on this topic.

The costs of natural disasters are immense. Single events cause billions of dollars worth of damage and governments devote resources to both prevent and mitigate these damages. With respect to disaster relief, one study estimating that Congress spent at least \$136 billion from 2011 to 2013, or about \$400 per household per year (Weiss & Wiedman, 2013). It is not just the staggering amounts of federal tax dollars that attract the attention of analysts. Natural disasters provide unexpected tests of political leadership. As President Clinton noted, politicians do not campaign on their response to unexpected events. In addition to its importance in terms of public policy,

natural disasters provide insights to the incentives and behaviors of both politicians and voters.

DISASTERS AND POLITICS

Writing in the sixteenth century, Niccolò Machiavelli warned of the importance of managing fortune, which he compared to a raging flood. According to Machiavelli, the ability to react with flexibility in the face of unexpected events will keep the prince in power. Indeed, Machiavelli's pronouncement captures two of the dynamics of disaster relief that we focus on here. First, we address the question of voter accountability. When faced with a potentially life-altering natural disaster, how do voters respond? Do they blindly blame politicians for the act of nature itself or do they hold their leaders only accountable for the response within their control? Second, we address lessons about the responsiveness of incumbent politicians. What are the factors that influence the quality of that response?

DISASTERS AND VOTERS

Much of the foundational literature on disaster relief examines how voters hold incumbent politicians accountable for both severe natural weather events as well as their response. Though this literature focuses on incumbent responsibility in the context of natural disasters, it also provides insights into the nature of democratic accountability and builds on the theory of retrospective voting (*inter alia* Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966).

Early studies in political science considered how weather patterns influenced the very fabric of politics. Barnhart (1925) argues that rainfall patterns in Nebraska induced voters to abandon the Republican Party and caused the rise of Populism in the 1890s. This study suggests that voters, especially farmers, held incumbent politicians responsible for the poor public response to droughts. Channeling one future strain of political science research, Barnhart (1925) warns that, "[t]o suggest that the farmer held the politician responsible for the shortage of rainfall would be an unwarranted exaggeration of the thoughtlessness of the voters" (p. 540).¹ Applying methods of survey research and multivariate data analyses, Abney and Hill (1966) investigate the response of voters in the New Orleans mayoral election that took place in the aftermath of Hurricane Betsy. This study found that Betsy had little negative impact on the incumbent mayor who faced reelection just 2 months after the storm struck; it concludes that the mayor's adept leadership in the storm's aftermath was the reason. In one interview, a victim (and new supporter)

1. For another early study, see Walker and Hansen (1946), which examines how local government institutions adapted in the context of varying weather conditions and westward expansion.

describes how she was rescued from atop her roof by the Mayor in a U.S. Army "Duck" (p. 980). In concluding the study, the authors lamented that social science had "neglected" natural disasters as a political variable and suggested that "technical and logistical" limitations were to blame (p. 980).

Using new data sources and research designs, recent studies have continued inquiries into the questions investigated by these earlier studies. A number has built on the inquiry of Abney and Hill (1966) using modern tools and data. Some studies have aimed to separate out the electoral repercussions from an exogenously caused weather event and politicians' response to it. Gasper and Reeves (2011) examine county-level presidential and gubernatorial election results from 1960 to 2006 in an effort to gauge the responsiveness of voters to severe weather damage as well as the response of politicians. This study finds that voters do blame politicians for externally caused weather damage; however, that blame is more than offset when a politician takes action in response. For scholars of voting behavior, natural disasters provide a nonpolitical stimulus to which a number of politicians must respond. Because of this, scholars have leveraged the opportunity to examine several aspects of voter decision-making. Because the response to disasters comes from politicians across a number of offices and levels of government, some studies have examined the extent to which voters hold different offices accountable for the same disaster (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). In an experimental approach, Malhotra and Kuo (2008) find that party cues and information about an elected official's responsibilities influence the extent to which respondents hold a number of federal, state, and local officials responsible for Hurricane Katrina. Still others have examined the time horizons over which individuals reward politicians for disaster relief. Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) examine this question with respect to the relief provided in response to the 2002 flooding of the Elbe River in Germany.

Other studies have examined the ways in which natural disasters affect voter turnout. One line of inquiry has focused on the increased logistical costs of voting created by natural disasters (Gomez, Hansford, & Krause, 2007; Sinclair, Hall, & Alvarez, 2011). For instance, Gomez *et al.* (2007) find that rain decreases turnout in presidential elections at the rate of "just less than 1% per inch" (p. 649), which has benefit Republican more than Democratic candidates. Others have examined expressive aspects of voter turnout (Chen, 2013; Sinclair *et al.*, 2011). Chen (2013) analyzes individual-level voter files and finds that disaster payments mobilized voters of the incumbent's party and demobilized voters of the other party.

Healy and Malhotra (2009) use the context of natural disasters to examine another fundamental question of voter accountability: do voters reward politicians for long-term investment or do they prefer short-term payoffs?

Specifically, they ask whether voters reward politicians for disaster prevention at the same levels that they reward them for disaster relief? The study reaches the provocative finding that, even though prevention is more effective at minimizing disaster damage, voters reward politicians for disaster relief at much higher levels.

Each of these more recent studies is made possible by the increased availability of weather-related data and the political response. Worth noting is the spatial hazard events and losses database for the United States (SHELDUS; Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute, 2009), which provides estimates of weather-related data at the county level. In addition, beginning with the efforts of Professor Richard Sylves at the University of Delaware and the PERI Presidential Disaster Declaration Website, governmental responses to natural disasters are increasingly made publicly available and distributed online in electronic format.

DISASTERS AND POLITICIANS

A second foundational strand of literature has examined the response of government to natural events. Many of these studies focus on public administration and bureaucratic response in the aftermath of natural disasters (e.g., Schneider, 1995; Sylves, 2008). These studies became especially salient in the aftermath of the Cold War as the mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) came to focus more squarely on response to natural disasters.² The response to Hurricane Andrew in 1992 also brought scrutiny to the capacity and the ability of the federal government to respond to natural disasters.

One line of inquiry focused on the political determinants of the disaster response. Specifically, a number of studies examine how the political characteristics of affected voters influence the nature of the response. Many of these studies analyze presidential disaster declarations, actions requested by an affected state's governor, and which initiate the federal response to a natural disaster. For example, in an analysis of presidential disaster declarations from 1981 to 2004, Reeves (2011) finds that swing states were more likely to receive disaster declarations all else equal, including the amount of damage caused by the weather event. Other studies employ case studies, process tracing, and the statistical analysis of empirical data to examine the responsiveness (or lack thereof) of governmental officials to natural disasters (Daniels, 2013; Garrett & Sobel, 2003; Salkowe & Chakraborty, 2009; Sylves & Búzás, 2007).

2. For one overview of this change, see Gup, Ted. 1994. "How the Federal Emergency Management Agency Learned to Stop Worrying—about Civilians—and Love the Bomb." *Mother Jones* Jan / Feb. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1994/01/fema>.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As we discussed throughout this essay, the study of the politics of natural disasters provides insight into the nature of democratic governance. As such, the findings from the above studies leave several questions left to be resolved. First, are voters “attentive” as suggested by Gasper and Reeves (2011) or “blind” as argued by Achen and Bartels (2004)? Though Achen and Bartels (2004) suggest voters foolishly hold incumbents accountable for rain fall, droughts, and even shark attacks, Gasper and Reeves (2011) argue that these responses are substantially outweighed by the response of voters to the actions taken in response to the carnage of natural disasters. Do voters hold their elected officials responsible for the things that they do or for the things that fortune delivers upon them? The answer bears directly on the findings of Healy and Malhotra (2009) that voters myopically and inefficiently reward disaster relief instead of prevention and mitigation. The finding that democratic accountability leads to distinctively suboptimal outcomes is, quite obviously, worthy of further inquiry. If voters give politicians incentives to behave irresponsibly, it seems that the politicians will oblige. Then arises the complex question of “what is to be done?”

The answers to these questions may be changing with time. Numerous studies document the role that context plays in conditioning voter accountability. This is not different in the politics of disasters. With new research into attitudes toward climate change and severe weather, it may be the case that voters increasingly view disasters not as acts of nature, but as the responsibility of politicians. For example, Abney and Hill (1966) suggest that one of the reasons the incumbent mayor was not blamed for Hurricane Betsy was because many citizens viewed the calamity as the “action of an inscrutable God” (p. 980). Yet, despite partisan polarization on the existence of global warming, most Americans believe that severe weather is being made worse by human action (Gillis, 2012). As voters shift accountability from natural or supernatural forces to actions of individuals, perhaps they will look more directly and carefully to government for both relief and prevention.

Like many areas of social science, research in disaster relief benefits from massive datasets and increasing computing power to analyze it. Thousands of real-time weather stations, buoys, and ships around the world are constantly collecting weather data. Combining these data with information about political boundaries, individual behavior, and economic outcomes continues to provide a challenge. Conventional statistical models are being combined with spatial statistics and other more advanced statistical models to properly understand these massive amounts of data. Moreover, like other aspects of big data, we must be vigilant to theorize and not simply fish for results. Severe weather provides unexpected challenges in the daily lives

of voters and the short- and long-term plans of politicians. For all of these reasons, it is a topic that will continue to enhance our understanding of politics writ large.

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