

Donald Trump's lukewarm response to Puerto Rico was pretty predictable. Here's why.

[washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/02/puerto-rican-residents-dont-vote-for-president-or-congress-could-that-affect-trumps-response-to-hurricane-maria](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/02/puerto-rican-residents-dont-vote-for-president-or-congress-could-that-affect-trumps-response-to-hurricane-maria)

By Andrew Reeves

Many have criticized the Trump administration for responding slowly to Puerto Rico's devastation from Hurricane Maria. Critics note that Trump has devoted more tweets to the NFL controversy than to Puerto Rico and its 3.4 million residents.

What explains the Trump administration's lukewarm reaction? Is it part of the generally unusual nature of the Trump presidency, or a response to Americans' general ignorance that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens? Perhaps. But more generally, presidents tend to respond in proportion to an affected place's partisan loyalty to the president's party in previous elections and its political clout in the next presidential election.

Some citizens are more equal than others, politically speaking

In theory, the U.S. president is, as Woodrow Wilson put it, "the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people." This image is often contrasted with that of members of Congress, who are often accused (and sometimes accuse one another) of putting their districts ahead of the nation.

But in practice, Trump, like presidents before him, may be discriminating among citizens based on their political significance, a behavior known as presidential particularism. Sometimes that inclination is explicit, as when President Richard M. Nixon sent a private memo, since discovered in his archives, instructing aides to punish Democratic states in budget plans. Other times it is inferred by outsiders; some observers claim that Trump has "pushed an array of policies that tend to punish states that voted Democratic in last year's presidential election." And it has a long history in U.S. politics. Even in the 19th century, presidents worked to locate post offices near their own voters, or those they wanted to vote their way.

In other words, Trump, like presidents before him, is probably paying less attention to Puerto Rico's disaster because of the incentives of the office. That is a tendency confirmed by research, including my own with Douglas Kriner. We identified three types of presidential particularism:

- *Electoral particularism* drives presidents to attend more closely to constituents living in swing states that may be pivotal in future presidential elections.
- *Partisan particularism* motivates presidents to favor their base by rewarding constituents in areas that vote consistently for the president and his party.

- *Coalition particularism* pushes presidents to reward constituents living in congressional districts represented by the president's co-partisans.

Such calculations affect many presidential efforts, including federal grant spending, trade policies, base closures, transportation spending and, yes, disaster aid. As you might expect, we also found that electoral particularism was especially strong during election years. Though second-term presidents engage in particularism, it is an even stronger influence during the first term. That would explain why, under Trump, the federal government responded vigorously to Hurricane Harvey in Texas, a solidly Republican state, and Hurricane Irma in Florida, a swing state that narrowly went for Trump — but is moving sluggishly to respond to Puerto Rico's disaster.

Here's what our research says

In a study from 1984 to 2013, Kriner and I found that the electoral and partisan characteristics of a place, after accounting for the severity of a natural disaster, influenced the chances that a president would issue a disaster declaration, a decision that clears the way for federal resources. Our finding held true for both Republican and Democratic presidents. States that were either electorally uncompetitive or not likely to vote for the president's party were much less likely to get the disaster declaration, and the federal assistance that followed.

In an earlier study looking at presidential disaster declarations from 1981 to 2004, I found something similar. Again accounting for how severe the weather was, swing states had about twice as many disaster declarations as uncompetitive states.

This strategy works out pretty well for presidents. In a study of county-level election returns from 1970 to 2006, John Gasper and I found that presidents are rewarded for taking action in the aftermath of a disaster. If they don't act, voters punish the commander in chief at the ballot box when Mother Nature goes awry.

However, voters have notoriously short memories, with most research suggesting that votes are affected by events that happen closer to Election Day.

Puerto Rico doesn't have much clout in presidential elections.

If electoral and partisan politics guide presidential behavior, Puerto Rico finds itself at a profound disadvantage. Residents of Puerto Rico do not vote in the general election for president and have only nonvoting representation in Congress. Some congressional districts have substantial numbers of Puerto Rican constituents, who do vote for president while they reside in other jurisdictions, but they are often in urban districts that lean toward Democrats.

In the case of Puerto Rico, presidential particularism could backfire. Many observers predict that the ongoing devastation in Puerto Rico will push large numbers of its citizens to move to the mainland. If they do, many of them will settle in Florida — and Trump won Florida by just over 1 percent of the state’s vote. Conceivably, in the 2020 election, dislocated Puerto Ricans could shift the result in the very significant Sunshine State.

Hurricane Maria was a historic event. That will influence the president’s response.

Much of this research looks at grants, aid or weather events that affect mainly local areas and take place below the national radar. By contrast, Hurricane Maria was a historic event that, like Hurricane Katrina, is getting a tremendous amount of national media attention.

Research shows that partisanship will influence how voters view Trump’s performance, with his supporters more likely to give him the benefit of the doubt than his critics. But that goes only so far. The national focus on Trump’s response to the crisis in Puerto Rico may now be overriding his first particularistic impulses, pushing him to pledge that he will travel to the island to see the damage firsthand.

The American people are watching Trump’s leadership in Puerto Rico’s struggles toward recovery. Because Puerto Ricans have no political voice in Washington, that national gaze may be their best hope of gaining the president’s attention.

Andrew Reeves is associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis and the author, with Douglas Kriner, of “The Particularistic President: Executive Branch Politics and Political Inequality.” Follow him on Twitter @ajreeves.