

The high-risk politics of hurricanes

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(CNN)Natural disasters, like hurricanes, can put human-made disasters, like politics, in perspective. When a storm hits, bitter personal rivalries seem small.

But when the water recedes, there are winners and losers. Sluggish hurricane relief response has crippled presidencies and swung elections.

Now, with Hurricane Michael slamming into the Gulf Coast less than four weeks before the midterms, the result could impact pivotal races in Florida — and raise questions about the politics of climate change denial in the conservative South.

Disaster responses can make or break political careers. One of the first modern examples was the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, which deluged 23,000 square miles. It is perhaps best known today as the subject of the epic Randy Newman tune, “Louisiana 1927,” in which the songwriter depicts a callous President Calvin Coolidge, saying “isn’t it a shame/what the river has done/to this poor crackers’ land.”

In fact, Coolidge delegated the disaster response to his Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover (who, full disclosure, is my wife Margaret Hoover’s great-grandfather). Hoover had come to international prominence saving millions from starvation in the wake of World War I, and he reprised that role with more comprehensive relief and rebuilding, earning the title “the master of emergencies” and boosting his national profile on the way to a landslide presidential victory in 1928.



Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover broadcasts a plea to the nation to donate funds for disaster relief for the victims of the Mississippi flood in April 1927.

Fast forward to 1992, and perceptions of a sluggish FEMA response to the Category 5 Hurricane Andrew in Florida hurt President George H. W. Bush. He won the state narrowly but lost the presidency, and campaign aides believe the episode helped move the once-dependable Republican bastion into purple swing-state status.



President George H. W. Bush, Barbara Bush and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney visit with Marines taking part in the disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in Homestead, Florida on Sept. 1, 1992.

Hurricane Katrina defined the domestic side of President George W. Bush's downward-spiral second term. The September 2005 storm devastated New Orleans and cost more than 1,800 lives. Bush was slammed for a delayed federal response after local officials like Mayor Ray Nagin went MIA. Bush's infamous praise of FEMA director Michael Brown — "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job" — became an internet meme that served as shorthand for clueless self-congratulation.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declined to run for re-election under intense criticism, while Nagin was re-elected, with backing from the Bush White House, before being later indicted and imprisoned on charges of bribery and fraud.



President Bush waves as he takes a walking tour of Biloxi, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina on September 2, 2005.

Superstorm Sandy hit the northeast US one week before the 2012 presidential election, with polls showing a tight race between President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. The disaster response highlighted Obama's role as "comforter in chief," along with highly publicized praise from a frequent Republican critic, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

The disaster raised questions about whether Romney's budget plans would cut FEMA funding. The New York Times ran an editorial, "A Big Storm Requires Big Government," that summed up many Democrats' belief that the response highlighted the positive role of government for Main Street America.



President Barack Obama is greeted by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie upon arriving in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on Oct. 31, 2012, to visit areas hardest hit by Sandy.

Donald Trump slammed Obama in a tweet at the time, claiming “Not only giving out money, but Obama will be seen today standing in water and rain like he is a real President — don’t fall for it.” Nonetheless, Gallup showed Obama received a small but decisive bump in job-approval polls from 50 to 52% heading into the election.

During President Trump’s tenure FEMA earned high marks for its response to Hurricane Harvey, which submerged large parts of Houston and surrounding areas. But when Hurricane Maria decimated Puerto Rico in September 2017, the federal response was sluggish, compounded by weak infrastructure. Trump attacked the Mayor of San Juan repeatedly as “totally incompetent” and then went on to deny the official George Washington University study commissioned by the government of Puerto Rico that showed the actual death toll was 2,975 — some 46 times higher than the previous “official” death toll of 64.

Trump’s response represented an epic fail of the “comforter-in-chief” role. And to date, Congress has still not sought to implement a fact-finding mission into this deadly modern disaster.



Hurricane evacuation: A beginner's guide

With Hurricane Michael making landfall in the Florida Panhandle, Governor Rick Scott has seized the mantle of managing the disaster, which raises his profile in powerful ways weeks before he squares off against Democratic incumbent Senator Bill Nelson, who can only offer commentary and constituent services. At the same time, Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum has suspended campaigning for Governor as he works to secure his city — while leading Republican Rep. Ron DeSantis in the polls.

The hard work of disaster response on both fronts could have a tangible impact on these elections, benefiting executives who show they have the right stuff while running the risk that sustained power outages could anger constituents as they head to the polls. An additional X factor is whether the Sunshine State's large and growing number of Puerto Rican residents will vote against Republicans because of Trump's callous response to their friends and family impacted by Hurricane Maria.

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But Hurricane Michael is part of a larger trend of major storms slamming into the Southern US, as studies show that climate change is contributing to more intense hurricanes. The total cost of US hurricanes this decade is at least \$356 billion, and the Richmond Federal Reserve released a report that found "evidence that higher summer temperatures could reduce overall U.S. economic growth by as much as one-third over the next century, with Southern states accounting for a disproportionate share of that potential reduction."

With Republicans disproportionately dominating Southern states, it's enough to wonder whether changing conditions and increased costs will cause some conservatives to distance themselves from Trump's description of climate change as a "hoax" and embrace policies that recognize and try to address this new reality. But that would require putting people and problem-solving ahead of partisan politics.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/10/opinions/hurricane-michael-high-risk-politics-avlon/index.html>

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