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The Politics of Denying Aid: An Analysis of Disaster Declaration Turndowns

John T. Gasper
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Federal disaster aid provides resources to affected victims and potential votes for both governors and presidents, but the denial of aid can especially painful for all parties involved. This paper examines whether political factors contribute to which areas are denied federal disaster aid. Analyzing county-level data from 1992 through 2005, I find that political factors do shade a president's decision to deny aid, but that some of these factors are only present during presidential elections years.

Natural disasters give political leaders a stage to show their concerns for citizens' suffering and needs. Victims of these disasters often are faced with hardship that they have never experienced before and look to their elected officials for help. Governors and the President are in a position to redirect resources to those affected, but those officials are also responsible for efficient and effective governance. As severe weather and disaster declarations become more common and state and federal and state budgets become tighter, the choice officials face as to who does or does not receive aid becomes more difficult. This paper presents a county-level analysis of which areas are denied a presidential disaster declaration.

Both political folk-wisdom and previous academic studies contend that politics and disaster declarations are intertwined. James Lee Witt, the former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, told Congress in 1996 that "disasters are very political events" (Sobel and Leeson 2006). Natural disasters offer an opportunity for officials to demonstrate their ability to lead during stressful times (Boin et al. 2005; Birkland 2007). Citizens don't ask whether governments should play a role, but these events are seen as public problems requiring public intervention and strong leadership (Schneider 2011). Intergovernmental relations and interactions between local, state, and federal officials are key to successful post-disaster policy (Rubin and Barbee 1985).

Other scholarly work has shown that disaster declarations can be electorally beneficial to both presidents and governors (Gasper and Reeves 2011). Some studies have found that presidents are sensitive to electoral concerns when granting aid (Reeves 2011; Garrett and Sobel 2003). In particular, Garrett and Sobel (2003) find that half of all disaster relief is motivated politically rather than by need. Disaster declarations denials, or turndowns, may be exceptionally worrisome for elected officials. While granting federal monies can be seen as pork-barrel, denying aid is an official rebuff to the governor of the affected area.

As the chief executive of her state, the governor initiates the disaster declaration process by making a formal request that is then reviewed and passed on with a recommendation from the regional FEMA office to the president. The president has unilateral authority to grant or deny this request and is not required to provide explanation for his decision. Requests for

federal aid come after events that range from massive hurricanes to more minor floods and snowstorms. If a request is approved, a state can expect an inflow of monies, access to loans, and other federal resources. If request is turned down, however, no federal aid is delivered. This paper examines what, if any, political factors influence a president's decision to turn down a governor's request.

To preview the results of my analysis, I find evidence that some disaster declaration denials, or turndowns, are a function of apolitical, administrative, concerns. These results comport with federal guidelines and arguments by other scholars, such as Sylves (2008), suggesting that turndowns are primarily nonpolitical in nature. I also, however, find that in election years political factors do influence the likelihood of county being denied aid. I find that a president's implicit threshold for the amount of damage sustained is lower in competitive states during election years. I also find evidence of partisan forces influencing the president's decision. Previous work at the aggregated state level has not found a relationship between the party of the president and the party of the governor on the likelihood of a disaster declaration. On the other hand, using a more detailed county-level analysis, I find that the co-partisan relationship between a governor and president does influence whether a county is denied aid.

In the following sections, I examine disaster declaration turndowns in every county in every state, excluding Alaska, from 1992 through 2005. Previously, data indicating a disaster declaration turndown were only available at the state-level.¹The county-level data I use in this analysis is new and gathered from a Freedom of Information Act request to the FEMA office of Department of Homeland Security (FOIA 09-678).²

1 The Declaration Process and Political Incentives

Natural disasters and severe weather provide an opportunity to examine the motivations of political leaders. While these occurrences of severe weather are exogenous to the political system, the intensity and type of response by elected officials may be influenced by political factors. Research has shown that voters respond to these "acts of God" as well as governmental responses (Achen and Bartels 2004; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Gasper and Reeves 2011). While it is plausible that voters are not observant enough to notice a turndown, Gasper and Reeves (2011) find that county-level electorates are attentive to their officials' behavior even when aid is not promised or received. Previous studies conducted at a more aggregated state-level have found that politicians, (Reeves 2011; Garrett and Sobel 2003; Sylves and Búzás 2007; Salkowe and Chakraborty 2009; Gasper and Reeves 2012), as well as political parties (Barnhart 1925), are also sensitive to the disaster declaration process as a mechanism to leverage political fortunes. The current disaster declaration process in the United States was codified in 1988 in Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.³ The federal response to a disaster requires that the governor of the affected state first

¹ It is interesting to note that given a request a president can deny specific counties. Hence a state may receive both a disaster declaration and a turndown for the same event. Counties can also be added to a request after the fact. Requests that were initially made and turned down may also be appealed. Unfortunately very little data exists on which requests were appealed, but conventional wisdom suggests that it's a rare occurrence.

² While a longer time period of analysis would aid in comparing the findings here with previous research, I was only able to obtain data from this time period.

³ The statute previously defining roles and responsibilities following a disaster was the

request a disaster declaration. This request, along with a recommendation from a regional FEMA office, is then passed to the president and it is the president's decision alone to grant or deny that request.⁴ If the request is granted, the federal government may provide a variety of aid, including access to federal monies to local and state governments, individual and household assistance, as well as grants and loans. If the president denies this request, however, no federal aid is promised or necessarily given.⁵

The president's decision to grant or turn down the request is his alone. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its regional offices provide guidance to both the affected states and the president. The recommendations to the president are a matter of executive privilege and not accessible for analysis. There are broad guidelines that govern the recommendation from a regional FEMA office, such as the severity or magnitude of the event and whether the incident goes beyond the capabilities of the affected local governments Sylves (2008). Given these guidelines, my first hypothesis, which I refer to as the administrative hypothesis, is that the probability of a turndown will be negatively related to the amount of damage sustained in a county.⁶

The Stafford Act nonetheless does not name any threshold for damage sustained in the affected area or any specific mathematical formula in determining suitability for disaster declarations. So while there may be recommendations from FEMA officials, there is no required threshold for a declaration and the president has unilateral authority in granting or denying the gubernatorial request. Given this discretion granted to the president and the vague criterion spelled out in the Stafford Act, the disaster declaration process could be influenced by political factors. In fact in a state-level analysis of disaster declarations from 1991 through 1999, Garrett and Sobel (2003) find that that nearly half of all disaster aid is politically motivated. Reeves (2011) includes in the analysis a measure of damage and finds that since the passage of the Stafford Act the electoral competitiveness of a state influences whether a state receives a presidential disaster declaration.

It is not clear, however, that this effect can be attributed to presidents alone. The disaster

Disaster Relief Act of 1974, signed into law by Nixon.

⁴ The prerequisites for a gubernatorial request are not trivial. Besides a preliminary damage assessment conducted with the help of regional FEMA offices, the Stafford Act requires that the governor take appropriate action under the affected state's law and execute the state's emergency plan. The governor must furnish information detailing the efforts and resources that have been or will be used.

⁵ Under rare occasions the president may preempt a gubernatorial request. According to the federal law, "the President may exercise any authority vested in him by section 5192 of this title or section 5193 of this title with respect to an emergency when he determines that an emergency exists for which the primary responsibility for response rests with the United States because the emergency involves a subject area for which, under the Constitution or laws of the United States, the United States exercises exclusive or preeminent responsibility and authority." USC 42 §5191 (b)

⁶ Damage sustained in an area is not a perfect indicator of a disaster declaration. According to the Code of Federal Regulations, there are approximately a dozen different factors that regional FEMA offices are instructed to consider when making a recommendation (Title 44, part 206.36). Moreover, damages which are sustained but insured are not covered under applicable costs. Yet, all other things equal, damage to an affected area is a clear objective measure of need.

declaration process is sequential, and the governor must initiate this process. Gasper and Reeves (2012) finds that opportunistic governors who are reelection eligible may drive the politicization of the disaster declaration process. Governors from presidentially competitive states know their states are attractive to presidents and ask for aid disproportionately more often, controlling for damage sustained. If governors are driving the politicization and presidents are primarily turning requests down for administrative reasons, we would expect counties in competitive states to be turned down more frequently because those governors will be requesting more often. I refer to this as the *gubernatorial hypothesis*.

Alternatively, previous research seems to indicate that political incentives for a president are heightened during election years. Sylves and Búzás (2007) and Salkowe and Chakraborty (2009) both find that the likelihood of a disaster declaration for a state is a function of electoral timing, in that declarations are more common during presidential election years. These studies both use a state-level analysis and neither includes an objective measure of the damage sustained from the disaster. Given these findings, I posit that when a disaster strikes will influence the likelihood of a county being granted federal aid. More specifically, my *electoral hypothesis* is that during presidential election years, all else equal, a county will be less likely to be denied aid. These counties are affected at a crucial and perhaps opportune time for the president. When the president feels his electoral pressures, these counties will have a lower likelihood of being turned down.

A more refined hypothesis regarding the electoral motivations of presidents relates to their implicit threshold for damaged sustained in the requested area. The theory behind this hypothesis is that presidents are always evaluating the suitability of a disaster declaration with regard to some threshold, but the ambiguity of the Stafford Act allows for flexibility in this threshold.⁷ While there is multiple criteria factoring into the president's decision, damage or severity of the incident is a primary factor. Therefore I hypothesize that in more politically attractive circumstances, i.e., more competitive states during an election year, a president will lower his threshold for damage sustained. I call this hypothesis regarding the interaction of these variables the *threshold hypothesis*.

Finally, presidents may feel the pressure of their party when dealing with governors. In a world where parties are teams, the president may attempt to help his teammate achieve her goals (Cox and McCubbins 1993). The empirical evidence of party influence on the disbursement of federal monies for relief is mixed. Neither Sylves and Búzás (2007) nor Salkowe and Chakraborty (2009) find evidence of the partisan politics dictating which states receive a declaration, yet research by Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2006) finds evidence in other policy domains that presidents reward same party governors with federal dollars. My *co-partisan hypothesis* is that presidents will be less likely to turndown counties requested by a same party governor. In a time with tighter state budgets, the disaster declaration process is a mechanism where the president can aid his co-partisan governor with federal funds, access to grants, and other resources.

The disaster declaration process is defined via statute, but the guidelines spelled out by that law are vague. While previous research has found evidence of varying degree of the

⁷ In particular, there are recommended thresholds for federal public assistance based on uninsured state and county per capita damages, but these are guidelines that the president may disregard. In fact, (Sylves 2008, 103) that suggests, "politically subjective determinations come into play in the matter of 'marginal' disasters."

different types political motivations influencing presidential disaster declarations, all have used an aggregate, state-level, analysis. In the sections that follow, I test the above hypotheses using new county-level data examining disaster declaration turndowns.

2 Data and Methods

In this section I describe the data I use to analyze presidential disaster declaration turndowns and test the hypotheses outlined in the previous section. The disaster declaration process is inherently sequential. Governors initiate the process by making a formal request for federal disaster aid, it is then the presidents' decision alone, albeit with guidance from FEMA officials, to grant or deny that request.

Federal disaster declarations at the state-level are infrequent and turndowns are even rarer. The county-level analysis I present here offers a finer granularity as well as a better understanding about the frequency of these events at the county level. Approximately 18% of the gubernatorial requests I analyze receive a turndown, with 42 different states being denied aid at some point between 1992 and 2005.

This data I use in my analysis comes from several sources. The unit of analysis is a county-year from 1992 through 2005, including all counties in all states except Alaska.⁸ I limit my analysis to only those cases that have observed a positive amount of damage in a given year. I describe this measure of damage below but all descriptions of the data are with this restriction.

The main dependent variable in my analysis of presidential turndowns is an indicator if a county in a given year was ever denied aid in that year. Data on which counties were denied aid has been notoriously difficult for researchers to obtain. The data I use in my analysis is new and gathered via a Freedom of Information Act request to the FEMA office of Department of Homeland Security (FOIA 09-678). This request names the recorded counties and date involved in a request that was denied aid. I then aggregate by the year to indicate which counties were denied a request in a given year. Previous studies, such as Gasper and Reeves (2011) and Sylves and Búzás (2007), have used state-level disaster declaration turndown data but the county level data has only become available due to this the FOIA request.

Data on which counties were granted a disaster declaration was provided by the Public Entity Risk Institute and the FEMA website. There are counties that receive multiple disaster declaration requests in a given year but these events are rare and I collapse this information into a binary variable. This indicator is then used to determine if a county received a presidential disaster declaration in a given year.

I assume that the union of presidential disaster declarations and turndowns form the universe of gubernatorial requests for a county-year. Figure 1 presents the county-level geographic variation in disaster declaration requests that I analyze. I restrict my analysis of turndowns to the universe of gubernatorial requests. I also limit my analysis to only those counties that have observed a positive amount of damage in a given year. The measure of damage was gathered from by the Spatial Hazards Events and Losses Database for the United States (SHELDUS 2011). I then adjust these damage estimates for inflation and create measure in logged dollars per ten thousand individuals.

⁸ I exclude Alaska from the analysis due to inconsistent county boundaries

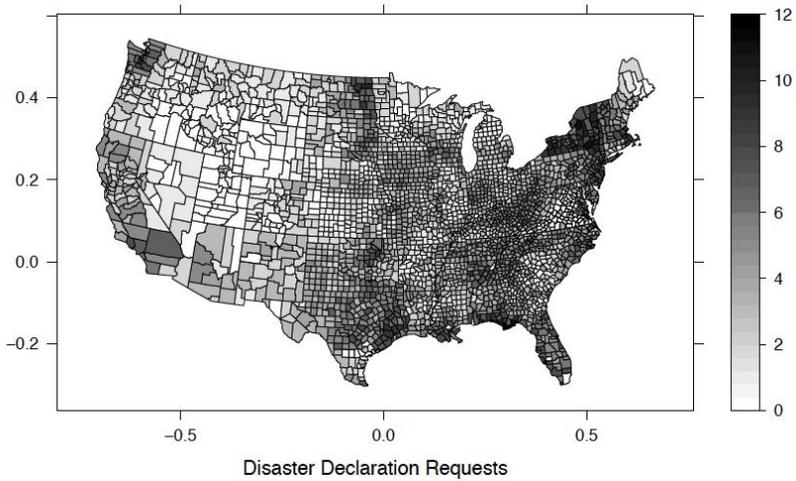


Figure 1: U.S. county-level map of the universe of disaster declaration requests analyzed from 1992-2005. These requests represent either presidential disaster declarations or turndowns.

Given Electoral College votes are not split proportionally, close or highly competitive states are disproportionately more attractive to a presidential candidate. A slight increase in the vote to win a majority will yield all electoral votes. The competitiveness of a state in the presidential election is a key component in my gubernatorial and threshold hypotheses. The measure used is the losers vote share of the statewide two-party vote in the previous presidential general election. The measure ranges from 0 to .5, with .5 being the most competitive. I also control for county population, but since county populations are highly skewed, I include the logged county population in all analyses.

To test the co-partisan hypothesis I include a dummy variable to indicate if the president and governor are of the same party. I also include an indicator for the party of the governor. Finally I included indicator variables for a presidential election year to test the hypothesis related to electoral timing. Given the dependent variable is dichotomous, I estimate a multilevel logistic regression where I allow the intercept to vary by state and region×year groupings.

3 Results

I now turn the results of the empirical analysis described above. I find various levels of support for the hypotheses. I find support of the administrative hypothesis, that damage is a main negative predictor of the likelihood of a turndown. Unlike others, I find that electoral timing, all else equal, does not influence the probability of a county being denied aid. However, counties in competitive states are substantially less likely to be denied aid during an election year. I also find that, in non-presidential election years, a state's competitiveness is a positive predictor of a turndown. While this finding might seem odd, it is perfectly consistent with the finding that governors are trying to leverage their state's role in presidential elections and confirms my gubernatorial hypothesis. My results indicate that

same party governors are less likely to be denied a declaration (co-partisan hypothesis). Finally, I do find an increasing negative effect of damage for competitive states during election years (threshold hypothesis).

Table 1 presents my model of presidential declaration turndowns. I restrict my analysis to only those cases in which there was a positive amount of damage and the governor requested aid. All outcomes are either declarations or turndowns. Column 1 presents the basic model of presidential turndowns. Model 2, presented in column 2 presents a refinement of model 1 and allows the intercept and slope of state-level competitiveness to vary by whether it is a presidential election year. Model 3, presented in column 3, allows me to test the threshold hypothesis and presents the estimated results with a three-way interaction between the damage sustained in the county, an indicator for a presidential election year, and the statewide presidential competitiveness.

The coefficients presented are of a multilevel logistic regression with the random effects not presented, and therefore the marginal effects can be hard to interpret directly from the table. I present a graphical display of the simulated probabilities of a disaster declaration turndown for the various hypotheses below. In each model, I find that damage sustained in the county is a negative predictor of a disaster declaration turndown. This confirms my administrative hypothesis and comports with the federal guidelines for public assistance. Using simulated probabilities from the model of turndowns found in Model 3 of Table 1, I find that a one standard deviation increase in my (logged per 10,000 individuals) measure of damage results in a risk ratio of .85, while holding all other variables at their mean or median value. The risk ratio is simply the ratio: $P(\text{turndown}|x') / P(\text{turndown}|x)$, where x represents the set of covariates set to their central value, and x' is the same except with a one standard deviation increase in damage.

The coefficient of the *SameParty* indicator addresses my *co-partisan hypothesis*. Contrary to some previous research on the politics of disaster declarations, I do find an effect of the president and governor acting as teams. I find a negative association on the likelihood that a requested county is denied aid. There is a lower probability of a turndown when the president and the governor are of the same party.

Figure 2 presents the simulated probability of a presidential disaster declaration turndown when the two officials are of the same and different parties. The red line presents the density of the simulated probability of a turndown when the governor and president are of the same party, while the green represents the density for opposite party officials.

Previous research has shown that some governors are opportunistic when they request disaster declarations (Gasper and Reeves 2012). In particular, governors from presidentially competitive states know that the president could be eager to come in to the state and provide aid. The evidence I find here is consistent with these findings. I find a *positive* effect of a state's competitiveness on the likelihood of a turndown. The marginal effect on the probability of a turndown due to a point increase in the state's competitiveness, measured by the losers vote share in the previous election, is difficult to immediately calculate from the coefficients presented in the table. Figure 3 displays the simulated probability of a disaster declaration turndown, calculated from Model 2 of Table 1, when all variables are held at their central value (mean, median, or mode). The figure shows that the model predicts an increase in the likelihood of a turndown as a state is more competitive during non-election years. During election years, however, there is no difference and overall lower likelihood of a turndown.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
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(Intercept)	-8.360*** (0.977)	-15.316*** (1.184)	-6.066* (3.081)
Damage (logged p.c.)	-0.107*** (0.016)	-0.081*** (0.016)	-0.653*** (0.252)
Competitiveness	17.592*** (1.737)	31.891*** (2.163)	11.495 (6.531)
ElectionYear	-0.773 (0.757)	15.943*** (1.505)	1.769 (5.199)
SameParty	-0.441*** (0.104)	-0.222* (0.111)	-0.266* (0.109)
Population (logged)	-0.105*** (0.027)	-0.107*** (0.028)	-0.101*** (0.028)
Competitiveness × ElectionYear		-37.983*** (2.785)	-6.280 (11.324)
Damage × Competitiveness			1.310* (0.544)
Damage × ElectionYear			0.750 (0.419)
Damage × Compet × ElectionYear			-1.905* (0.918)
Log-likelihood	-3217.344	-3115.819	-3125.033
Deviance	6434.688	6231.638	6250.066
AIC	6450.688	6249.638	6274.066
BIC	6508.375	6314.536	6360.597
ROC AUC	0.893	0.903	0.902
N	10005	10005	10005

Table 1: A model of presidential disaster declaration turndowns. A logistic multilevel model with state and region×year random effects (not presented). Unit of analysis is a county-year. The dependent variable is coded as a 1 if the county received a turndown in a given year. A turndown occurs when a governor makes a formal request for federal aid for a county but the president denies that request.

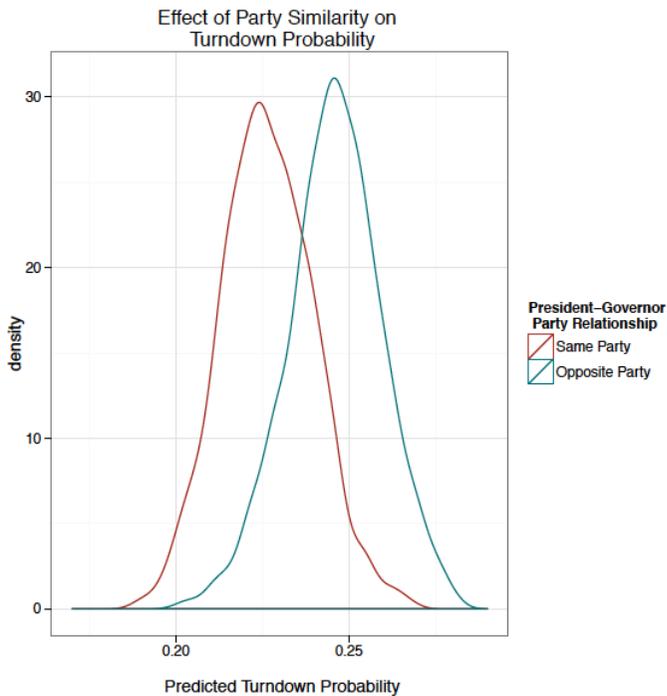


Figure 2: **Effect of partisan relationship between the governor and president on the probability of a disaster declaration turndown.** Probabilities simulated from Model 3 of Table 1. The red line presents the density of the simulated probabilities when the governor and president are of the same party, while the green represents the density for opposite party officials. All other values are held at their central value. The figure shows that when the officials are of the same party, a requested county has a lower probability of being denied aid.

During presidential election years, the findings are somewhat different. Figure 3 shows how the overall likelihood of a denial is lower during election years. The threshold hypothesis is a refinement of the previous hypotheses and states that presidents will use a lower threshold for damage sustained for competitive states during election years in determining whether to grant a declaration. In other words, when the state is most attractive to a president, damage will be a stronger negative predictor. Model 3 of Table 1 tests this hypothesis with the estimated coefficient on the three-way interaction. Figure 4 presents the substantive effects of this interaction. This figure presents the effect of damage on the likelihood of a disaster declaration turndown during election years and non-election years, for a state that is at the 75th percentile of competitiveness.⁹ This figure highlights the differential negative effect of damage on the probability of a turndown. Note that during election years, damage has a

⁹ This level of competitiveness chosen for the simulated probabilities is arbitrary and is meant to capture a state with above average competitiveness that is not extremely competitive.

stronger negative effect on the probability of a turndown in competitive states. This implies that the implicit threshold for damage a president is using to evaluate the event is lower. More precisely, the threshold hypothesis is confirmed with the negative effect of three way interaction found in Model 3 of Table 1.

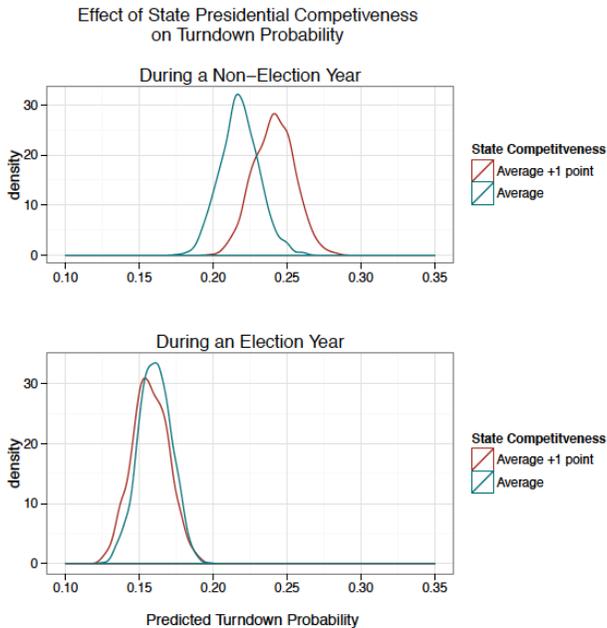


Figure 3: **Effect of the state’s presidential competitiveness on the simulated probability of a disaster declaration turndown.** The green line indicates the baseline predicted probability of a turndown, given a gubernatorial request. The density plot in red indicates the increased probability of a turndown with a one-point increase in the presidential competitiveness of the state. The top panel shows the simulated probability of a turndown during a non-election year, and the bottom panel shows the same during presidential election years. All other values are held at their central, mean or median, value. The figure demonstrates that the model predicts an increase in the likelihood of a turndown as a state is more competitive during non-election years. Probabilities simulated from Model 2 of Table 1, which includes an interaction between presidential election year and competitiveness.

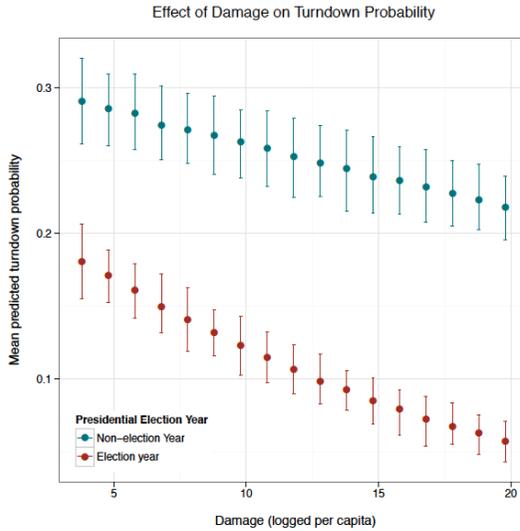


Figure 4: Effect of damage in competitive states during presidential election years on the simulated probability of a disaster declaration turndown. Red bars indicate the 95% confidence interval in presidential election years and green bars indicate the same confidence interval in non-election years. The x-axis presents the logged per capita measure of damage from the lowest to highest observed value. Results are from a thousand simulations of regression model 3 found in table 1. Presidential competitiveness set to the 75th-percentile to represent high but not extremely competitive states. All other values are held at their central, mean or median, value. The probability of a presidential disaster declaration turndown is lower with a low amount of damage in competitive states during presidential election years.

Some discussion of the overall fit of the model is warranted. A traditional measure such as the R^2 is inappropriate for the logistic regression analysis. A more appropriate measure is the area under the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve. The ROC curve maps the model's predictive true positive rate versus the false positive rate. The ROC for Column 2 of Table 1 is found in Figure 5. Perfect prediction occurs when the area under the ROC curve (ROC AUC) is 1, and when the ROC AUC is near .5 and follows the diagonal the prediction is worthless. The closer the measure is to 1, the better the model is at predicting turndowns. We can see from Table 1 that both column 1 and 2 fit the data fairly well. Column 2 has a higher ROC AUC and also has a lower Bayesian information criterion (BIC), which is often used to aid in the choice between models.

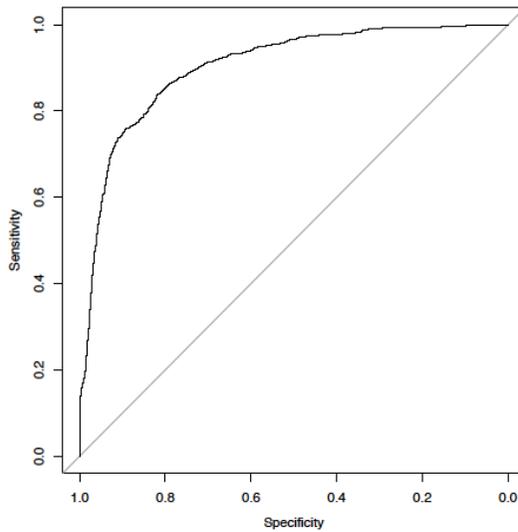


Figure 5: **The receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve for the model found in Model 3 of Table 1.** The area under the ROC curve for this model is 0.903. Perfect prediction occurs when the ROC AUC is equal to 1. The ROC curve maps the model's sensitivity (true positive rate) versus the specificity (1 - false positive rate).

In summary, I find an association between which counties are denied aid and several political factors. During presidential election years, I find that presidents are inherently using a lower threshold for damage sustained in a county in a competitive state, or more precisely this interaction with damage is a strong negative predictor of a turndown. This confirms my threshold hypothesis. This effect, however, diminishes dramatically during non-election years. I also find, contrary to some previous research, that counties requested from a same-party governor are more likely to be granted a declaration. Finally, I find evidence that is consistent with some of the politics of disaster declarations begin driven by governors, in that governors from competitive states are asking for aid disproportionately more than other governors. Therefore state competitiveness is a positive predictor of being denied aid. This finding is consistent with previous research on opportunistic governors. Previous research has shown that a state's competitiveness is positively related to the likelihood of a presidential declaration (Reeves 2011). Restricting my analysis to only gubernatorial requests, I find that a state's competitiveness is a positive predictor of a turndown as well. This result confirms my gubernatorial hypothesis.

4 Discussion

My analysis uses new county-level data from 1992 through 2005 to analyze a president's decision to deny a governor's request for federal disaster aid. I find that in non-election years, many disaster declaration turndowns are more of a function of administrative, rather than political, concerns. This view comports with federal guidelines on amount of damage sustained in an affected area, with damage being a primary predictor.

I do find, however, that even during non-election years, party similarity influences which counties are granted and which are denied aid. This result counters some previous research that does not find a relationship between party similarity and the disaster declaration

process (Sylves and Búzás 2007; Salkowe and Chakraborty 2009). This previous research was conducted at the state-level. This aggregated level of analysis does not allow one to see when a president might help his party teammate by granting an additional county that could be important to the governor. It is precisely the new county-level data that allows for an analysis of which counties are denied and marginally granted aid, given a gubernatorial request. An analysis at this smaller geographic unit was not previously available.

Similar to previous findings (Sylves and Búzás 2007; Reeves 2011; Garrett and Sobel 2003), my results indicate that political factors play a role in the president's decision to grant or deny aid during election years. I find that during election years, damage sustained in a county of a competitive state has a much larger negative effect on the likelihood of a denial.

This is evidence that presidents are using a lower implicit threshold for in their evaluations to grant or turn down a request for these politically attractive areas.

My findings that political factors influence a president's decision to grant or deny aid has larger public policy implications. Those involved with the policy process often bemoan the lack of mitigation efforts by local communities. Birkland (2007) points to FEMA administrator Joseph Allbaugh scolding a community in Iowa for failing to build a floodwall to prevent flood damage. Mitigation has been seen as a problem of local implementation. Intergovernmental policy implementation, however, can be challenging especially when the national government fails to pressure local officials. My findings indicate that if an event occurs in a competitive state during an election year, presidential pressure is off. Similarly if the governor is of the same party as the president, then she feels that it is less likely that the president will deny her request. These political pressures can influence local and state officials and might dampen mitigation efforts.

Natural disasters and severe weather events are not caused by politics factors, but I find that James Lee Witt was correct when he told Congress "disasters are very political events." My results indicate that political pressures can at times influence which counties are denied and granted aid. The electoral pressures felt by the president influence the allocation of resources independent of actual need. Citizens who experience similar levels of damage may see differing levels of federal aid depending on their states role in the last presidential election and when the disaster occurs during the electoral cycle.

Author's biography

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Appendix: Summary of the data

Tables 2 and 3 give the descriptive statistics for the variables of interest in the analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the continuous variables of interest.

Variable	n	Min	q1	x	\bar{x}	q3	Max	s	#NA
Damage (logged per capita)	10005	3.79	10.45	11.99	11.90	13.39	20.57	2.34	0
Presidential Competitiveness	10005	0.29	0.42	0.46	0.45	0.48	0.50	0.04	0
Governor Support (logged)	10005	3.89	7.78	8.60	8.76	9.58	13.86	1.38	0
Population (logged)	10005	3.99	9.60	10.43	10.55	11.38	16.10	1.43	0

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the dichotomous variables of interest.

Variable	Levels	n	%	%
Presidential Election Year	0	7476	74.7	74.7
	all	10005	100.0	
Gubernatorial Election Year	0	7541	75.4	75.4
	all	10005	100.0	
Same Party	0	5209	52.1	52.1
	all	10005	100.0	
Republican Governor	0	4246	42.4	42.4
	all	10005	100.0	
Termlimited	0	3342	33.4	33.4
	all	10005	100.0	
Disaster Request	1	10005	100.0	100.0
	all	10005	100.0	
Disaster Declaration Turndown	0	8195	81.9	81.9
	all	10005	100.0	
Presidential Disaster Declaration	0	906	9.1	9.1
	all	10005	100.0	

Figure 6: Distributions of the main continuous independent variables

