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978-1-107-02112-9 - Catastrophic Politics: How Extraordinary Events Redefine Perceptions of Government

Lonna Rae Atkeson and Cherie D. Maestas

Excerpt

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Extraordinary Events and Public Opinion

Extraordinary, catastrophic, and shocking moments such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Oklahoma City bombing, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina all have special meaning in the American psyche. They have become part of a national lexicon used by citizens, media, politicians, and policy makers to debate current events and policies. These and other crises force Americans to confront challenging questions about fundamental values in society such as the role of government in protecting its citizens, the balance between personal freedom and security, and the appropriate division of authority among different branches or levels of government. Disasters and their aftermath open up windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 2002). They raise the salience of disaster-related issues, alter perceptions of public figures and agencies, change the distribution of power between relevant interest groups or government elites, shape political agendas, and even spawn social movements (Birkland 1997, 2006; see also Baumgartner and Jones 2009).

What makes catastrophes politically influential? We argue that it is the fact that they engage the public differently than routine political conflicts. Therefore, catastrophes create a public opinion environment that permits political changes that would be difficult or unlikely during times of normal politics. The combination of the emotional impact of an extraordinary event and the media environment that surrounds it motivates attributions of blame that suggest particular avenues for

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reform to avoid similarly painful crises in the future. Strong emotions felt during catastrophes – even those experienced only vicariously through media coverage – can be powerful motivators of public opinion and public activism, particularly when emotional reactions coincide with attribution of blame to governmental agencies or officials (Jennings 1999).

The purpose of this book is to develop a general framework for understanding how extraordinary events create new considerations in the minds of the public that, in turn, shape a wide range of political attitudes. Policy scholars have long recognized catastrophes as a general class of events that can reshape the lines of political debate and alter the direction of public policy (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Birkland 1997, 2006; Wood and Doan 2003). Yet little attention has been paid to developing a general theory of how catastrophes ripple through the public psyche, shifting and reshaping political attitudes. Instead, research into public opinion following disasters tends to be event-specific. Studies of opinion following Three Mile Island (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), the *Challenger* disaster (Miller 1987), the Oklahoma City bombing (Lewis 2000), Chernobyl (Van der Brug 2001), the Persian Gulf crisis (Althaus and Kim 2006), Columbine High School (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001), Hurricane Katrina (Haider-Markel, Delehanty, and Bervelin 2007; Huddy and Feldman 2006), and, of course, 9/11 (Chanley 2002; Huddy et al. 2003; Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese 2007; Shambaugh et al. 2010) all explore public opinions that arise in response to a particular catastrophe. In doing so, all consider the narrow and broad significance of the catastrophe under study, but none offers an overarching theory to explain how disasters might create an environment that increases the likelihood of updating old and forming new opinions. This is an important lacuna to fill because collective tragedies have qualities that give them special status in the political landscape (Jennings 1999) and they are expected to occur regularly (Sornette 2002). The task of this book is to identify commonalities that underlie all extraordinary events, to varying degrees, to consider why they create a special individual and collective context that imparts broad political meaning.

Although our framework is intended to generalize to any disaster, we test the framework's implications by studying one highly salient, emotion-laden event: the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In Chapter 2,

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we develop an individual-level model of public opinion formation following extraordinary events that depends on external input from the media message environment. Although we provide a general theory of attitude formation that highlights the role of media messages, the specific message environment differs for each disaster. Therefore, for an in-depth and comprehensive test of our theoretical question, we rely on one case-specific analysis of media messages to generate the testable empirical hypotheses that are implied by the general theory. Hurricane Katrina is a fertile case to use for this purpose because the media environment offered a number of credible messages about political actors from different parties and different levels of government. In addition, the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina were attention grabbing and gut wrenching. The scale of the catastrophe was unprecedented and media coverage pervasive. As a result, the disaster created a sense of pain and loss in the hearts of citizens far beyond the areas directly affected by the hurricane. One indication of the disaster's impact on the public psyche was the degree to which Americans were willing to give to Katrina-related charities – an amount that exceeded donations following 9/11, the Asian tsunami crisis in 2004, and the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005 (Frank 2005). Katrina, therefore, offers an excellent testing ground to explore the paths of influence on public opinion during a catastrophic moment.

CATASTROPHES AS REGULAR CRITICAL MOMENTS
IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Catastrophes leave a lasting imprint on those who experience them. They create a sense of shared history and shared meaning among diverse groups of citizens. Although any particular calamity is rare, catastrophic events happen with some degree of regularity (Sornette 2002). In fact, major catastrophes happen at least as frequently as national elections, although the timing is obviously less predictable. Like elections, such catastrophes bring public attention to political actors, institutions, and policies, and they prompt evaluations of government performance. Unlike elections, however, disasters draw scrutiny from a wide array of citizens, not just those normally interested in news and politics. In a disaster, even citizens who typically shun news, political or otherwise, tune in. Because government leaders and

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agencies are active players in catastrophes, disaster coverage necessarily contains a political component. As a result, catastrophes create opportunities for citizens from every segment of society to observe and evaluate government in action in a social and media context that is very different from elections or other routine political debates.

There are many different ways of defining an “extraordinary event,” “catastrophe,” or “disaster” (see Birkland 1997, 2006), and we adopt a broad definition here.¹ An extraordinary event, in its most basic form, is any unplanned disruption that causes loss of property and/or life. Broadly defined, this includes calamities of a personal nature, such as car accidents or residential fires, as well as epochal disasters, such as 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing. From a political standpoint, the set of extraordinary events that are meaningful to study consists of those that contain a collective dimension, where the intervention of one or more levels of government is both expected and necessary to resolve the problems associated with the disaster. Often this occurs because the scope or magnitude of the disaster exceeds the resources of the local emergency infrastructure, and therefore other levels of government must allocate additional resources to the task. Similarly, catastrophes may have a collective dimension because government is the only agent with sufficient authority to coordinate recovery efforts or impose regulations to prevent future similar catastrophes. Accordingly, this definition includes many different types of extraordinary events: accidental, man-made disasters that result from faulty infrastructure or decision making; major economic downturns that are national or global; terrorism; major social unrest that leads to societal ruptures; and major epidemics. Of course, it also includes natural disasters such as fire, flooding, earthquakes, tornadoes, environmental degradation, and the like.

Catastrophes vary in their breadth of relevance; some are localized, with few ramifications for the broader public, while others, regardless of their size or location, profoundly affect the nation as a whole. We are most concerned with catastrophes that are national in scope – those that capture the attention of the national press and those that require response from national leaders and agencies. They are of special

¹ Unless otherwise stated, we use the terms *extraordinary event*, *catastrophe*, *disaster*, *crisis*, and *calamity* interchangeably.

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interest because they are most likely to generate a sense of shared experience across social strata and stimulate national-level conversations about government's role in society. However, the processes we outline in this book could be used to explain opinions following any catastrophe, whether personal, local, or national. For localized disasters, the population to which the model applies is much smaller and its effects on government policy are more limited. For national catastrophes, the model applies to a large swath of the population, thereby encouraging nationwide discussions and deliberation about policies related to the catastrophe. Of course, the larger and more shocking the catastrophe, the more likely it is that the national media will prioritize the event's coverage over all else, and the greater the chance that such an event will become a political catalyst that transforms national opinion and policy.

Table 1.1 shows a list of fifteen catastrophic events that held the lead story spot on *NBC Nightly News* for a minimum of six days during the period 1986 through 2010. Although the list is not exhaustive of all catastrophes covered in the national news, it gives a sense of the diversity and frequency of major catastrophic events that occupy the public news space. Of these, five were natural disasters, three were acts of terrorism, three were man-made catastrophes, two were unusual plane crashes, and two were mass murders.

Despite their diversity, each brought to the public news reports of government officials dealing with unexpected circumstances that highlighted both successes and failures of government. In some cases, such as the Space Shuttle *Challenger* explosion and the breach of levees in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the disaster highlighted faulty government engineering and oversight. In others such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Andrew, coverage highlighted weaknesses in governments' ability to respond quickly to citizens in need. Still others, such as 9/11, raised questions about national intelligence, security procedures, and disaster response. Even those catastrophes that stem from nonpolitical acts of violence, such as the Columbine High School shootings and the Virginia Tech massacre, raise the salience of political questions at the local and national levels. Questions about gun rights, student and family privacy, and school security moved to center stage in the national conversation as journalists, pundits, and public officials debated how to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

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Disaster	Year	Days as Lead Story during First 2 Weeks	Total Story Segments during First 2 Weeks
Exxon <i>Valdez</i> oil spill	1989	8	14
TWA crash	1996	9	16
Egypt air crash	1999	7	17
Embassy bombings	1998	6	18
Virginia Tech massacre	2006	7	18
Flooding in the Midwest	1993	9	20
Chernobyl	1986	8	24
Hurricane Andrew	1992	10	24
<i>Challenger</i> explosion	1986	7	26
Columbine High School shootings	1999	9	26
Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami	2004	13	29
Haiti earthquake	2010	10	38
Oklahoma City bombing	1995	13	46
Hurricane Katrina	2005	14	54
9/11	2001	14	80 ^a

Note: ^aIndexing of stories for 9/11 differs from other catastrophes. During the first three days of coverage, full broadcasts were indexed as a only a single segment each day.

Source: Search of *NBC Nightly News* broadcasts, Vanderbilt News Archives. Two coders independently counted story segments on *NBC Nightly News* in the Vanderbilt News Archives (accessed during the week of February 4, 2012). Overall, inter-coder correlations in coding both the number of lead stories and total stories were over 98 percent. Minor differences between the coders arose in coding support stories that were tangentially related to the disaster.

Catastrophes are unique because of the public's expectations for quick and effective government intervention. One fundamental principle of democratic societies is that the government has a responsibility for the safety and well-being of all its citizens. Catastrophes challenge government to uphold its end of the social contract under difficult conditions and under circumstances of intense public scrutiny. Given that citizens have expectations about how government should respond, any expectation gap will likely influence attitudes toward leaders, public policy, and government institutions (Jenkins-Smith, Silva, and Waterman 2005; Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999).

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Because expectations shape evaluations of government actors, especially presidents, they have additional ramifications for the ability of the president to make new policy and get things done (Genovese 2002; Kernell 1997; Lowi 1985). The public looks to elected officials for symbolic reassurance and empathy in times of crisis (Bucy 2003; Edelman 1985; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Successes bring new political opportunities to turn political capital into public policy or career gains, whereas missteps are judged harshly by the media and political opponents. The initial response of President George W. Bush to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and other U.S. targets garnered criticism from the media because he was viewed as out of touch at a time when the nation needed reassurance (Bucy 2003). Later, his response and leadership to the same catastrophe were widely praised and met with skyrocketing approval. Similarly, President Bill Clinton's reaction to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 was viewed as evidence of strong and empathetic leadership, and his approval ratings rose appreciably (Devroy 1995).

Of course, the president is not the only political leader to whom journalists turn for reactions in times of crisis, nor are they the only leaders to face public scrutiny. Previously unknown state or local political leaders often emerge as heroes or villains in the cast of characters during an unfolding drama. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York City, for example, won high praise for his handling of the aftermath of 9/11 and rode the wave of credit to national and international fame; *Time Magazine* named him "Person of the Year" in 2001 and he handily won reelection. These anecdotes point to the importance that the press and the public attach to executive leadership during calamitous times. Assessments of crisis leadership – whether positive or negative – have significant consequences for the political capital that presidents and other leaders wield in subsequent policy debates and can help or hurt them later at the ballot box.

THE POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES
AND ATTRIBUTIONS OF BLAME

Epochal moments are politically significant because they create a shared collective experience from which society draws meaning. These events are collective by nature because people from all social

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and economic strata are drawn to the human relevance of the story. They are also “collective” because they prompt people to recognize the need for collective – that is, government – solutions. Epochal moments draw public attention away from parochial concerns and toward the drama of the events of the moment. The public experiences the shock of learning unexpected news as it ripples through the media and social networks. They turn to common news sources and to each other as they mentally and emotionally process the event. This creates the dynamic of a shared personal experience that transcends ordinary social or political cleavages and becomes part of the collective societal memory, and although each individual responds to the messages based on his or her personal perspectives, the novelty of the event leads many individuals to process that information with greater scrutiny and deliberation. Momentous events, such as Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, 9/11, the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the *Challenger* explosion in 1986, create flashbulb memories that allow people to recall not only the circumstances in which they learned of the tragedy, but also the thoughts and emotions associated with it (Bohannon 1988; Bohannon, Gratz, and Cross 2007; Hirst et al. 2009; Kvavilashvili et al. 2009). The bundled recollection, complete with emotions, makes such an event a powerfully evocative social and political symbol. Shared tragedies, even if experienced only vicariously, become shared reminiscences that create a sense of familiarity. They help to define generational cohorts, and they provide a broader context for interpreting other social and political issues or events.

Central to this story is how the media and the public attribute blame in the aftermath of an extraordinary event. Causal stories provide a baseline from which to understand and infer responsibility, particularly political responsibility. Attributions of blame offered through the mass media provide a way to contextualize personal experiences and translate them into political problems (Mutz 1994). Attributions of blame have been studied extensively in political science because they help us to understand how and when citizens hold leaders accountable for economic, political, or social outcomes (see, for example, Arceneaux 2005; Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Atkeson and Partin 2001; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2008; Nelson 1999), and they help us understand why citizens form preferences for some policy solutions and not others (see Iyengar 1989, 1991). We build

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from this broader literature, but offer new insights into why disasters and other extraordinary events hold special power in shaping political attributions. Understanding causal attributions in the wake of extreme or tragic events is especially important because the collective experience makes them long-standing political touchstones that can be drawn upon in multiple political debates (Jennings 1999). Causal attributions form an important link in a chain that runs from citizens' receipt of information (for example, from mass media, elites, friends, or personal experiences) to their issue opinions, political evaluations, and, ultimately, political choices.

Even a cursory review of policy responses following extraordinary events reveals that they can lead to significant political change, but thus far no one has carefully explored how journalistic norms and a media message environment that pins blame upon others create conditions conducive to influencing public opinions on a mass scale. Our study differs from most previous research into political attributions of blame in that it focuses on understanding the formation of opinions outside of the electoral context and beyond periods of normal politics. Blame assignment is common during catastrophes, and these attributions serve to define problems of leadership and public policy. However, people assign blame during disasters in a way that differs considerably from how they do so during ordinary times. Normal political debates and events are meant to activate predispositions; elites target their messages to energize those in their base. During extraordinary times, however, the intensity and overwhelming nature of calamity attract broad attention, allowing journalists rather than elites to take center stage in framing events. This change provides a different context for opinion formation because the media images produced by the extraordinary event cue emotions that render predispositions less important and, therefore, attitude change more likely. Therefore, by exploring emotion, public opinion, and attributions of blame following disasters, we also, by definition, examine the effects of media and elite framing on opinion.

HURRICANE KATRINA AS A TEST CASE

In the following chapters, we develop and test a general theoretical argument for how catastrophic events alter both the media message

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environment and individual-level processing of information generated from that environment. We combine this general theory with a detailed analysis of the media message environment that arose during and after the time that Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005. There is no question that Hurricane Katrina falls in the category of epochal events. It was emotionally stimulating, it was personally relevant to many, and it had short- and long-term political consequences. It also continues to be a national political symbol of government failure, all of which make it an excellent test case to which to apply our theory.

To set the stage for later sections of the book, it is useful to recall the emotional and political impacts of the storm. On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, unleashing powerful winds gusting up to 140 miles per hour, torrential rains, and massive storm surges of over 20 feet. The devastation from the storm was shocking and America was riveted by the news coverage. Scenes of flooded towns, flattened homes, floating corpses, uncontrolled mobs, and tearful victims filled America's living rooms for weeks following the storm. Emotions ran high as journalists and citizens demanded to know why aid was so slow to arrive in New Orleans. Politicians responded with angry fingerpointing in hopes of deflecting the shrapnel of blame. Across the nation, citizens watched in stunned disbelief as an iconic American city lay exposed and bleeding from what some suggested was political neglect.

The disaster was an immediate collective crisis because the damage was so extensive that individuals on the ground could not address the myriad problems created by the storm. The levees, for example, needed to be repaired and rebuilt, as did much of the civil infrastructure along the Gulf. Thousands of victims needed shelter and relocation away from the damaged areas, and social order needed to be restored. Only government was capable of such actions. At the same time, the human tragedy and the potential broader implications of the storm made it relevant to a national audience. First, it prompted questions about the government's ability, in the face of severe tragedy, to do its job properly – something that had implications for citizens across the nation who might face future catastrophes of one kind or another. Second, the crisis had an immediate effect on gas prices and