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The political dynamics of voter retrospection and disaster responses

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Natural hazards not only have socioeconomic ramifications, they also have political repercussions. This paper takes stock of the fast-growing area of research linking disasters triggered by natural hazards to voting behaviour. It is based on the central tenet of voter retrospection: voters place emphasis on past events when making their selection. The study uncovers a great disparity in analysis of electoral outcomes in the wake of disasters, part of which can be explained by the different methodological choices of authors. However, the unpredictability of voting behaviour in the aftermath of disasters also points to the relevance of introducing an intermediate variable when elucidating voter movements. This variable should capture the prevailing political discourses that surround disasters, as these are likely to shape the dynamics of voter retrospection. The paper demonstrates the analytical relevance of such political discourses by contrasting political dynamics in Denmark and Sweden following the Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004.

Keywords: disaster discourses, elections, government responses, political narratives, tsunami, voter retrospection,

Introduction

It is well known that natural hazards can have severe socioeconomic consequences, but their considerable political repercussions are less acknowledged. Indeed, natural hazards with adverse socioeconomic impacts are often referred to as 'natural disasters'. Such a term might be helpful in categorising different disasters according to their main triggers, yet it inevitably also reinforces the misconception that disasters are in some way 'natural', and not, as the disaster community has emphasised for decades, an epiphenomenon stemming from the intersection of natural hazards and vulnerable human-made political and socioeconomic systems (Rubin and Dahlberg, 2017). Ideally, 'disasters triggered by natural hazards' should be the preferred terminology throughout the paper, but the expression is rather cumbersome. At times, therefore, this paper uses 'disasters' for short.

This study engages critically with state-of-the-art research linking disasters triggered by natural hazards to retrospective voting behaviour in pluralistic regimes. The underlying theoretical maxim for research connecting disasters to voting behaviour is that voters will either punish or reward incumbent governments, depending on how they handle the adverse consequences of such events. Assuming that they are interested in staying in power, incumbent governments will thus have incentives to mitigate the adverse consequences of disasters triggered by natural hazards (Sen, 1999, 2009; Boin et al., 2005; Kahn, 2005; Flores and Smith, 2013). Or they will be interested in artificially naturalising the harm caused by disasters triggered by natural hazards (Chmutina et al., 2017); incumbent governments are particularly prone to blaming them on *force majeure*, nature's unpredictable wrath or divine intervention, in order to avoid blame and political responsibility.

The focus of this paper, therefore, is primarily on the political *implications* of disasters rather than on their *causes*, meriting, too, political research. This analytical emphasis should not be conflated with the view that disasters arise out of nothing to engulf unwitting citizens and governments. Rather, it constitutes a choice to try to shed light on the political consequences of disasters triggered by natural hazards.

The past decade has witnessed a surge in academic interest in investigating the political consequences through the lens of retrospective voting theory, but few studies have hitherto cultivated this field of enquiry.[1] Interestingly, compiling the many works reveals a disparity of electoral outcomes in the wake of disasters. Some scholars argue that such disasters will always be to the disadvantage of governments because voters will punish them for the adverse consequences of the hazards. Others make the case that governments could benefit electorally from disasters provided that voters approve of their disaster mitigation efforts.

Empirical evidence supports both positions. Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier (2016, p. 86) summarise the existing literature by claiming that it suggests that incumbent governments are penalised by voters for natural hazards beyond their control. Eriksson (2016, p. 130), on the contrary, claims that the accumulated evidence of retrospective voting is good news that points to retrospection as an accountability mechanism. The ambiguous empirical evidence linking disasters and retrospective voting behaviour can be ascribed in part to methodological

[1] For an overview, see Rubin (2018).

differences and caveats, relating to: the timing of the elections; their competitiveness; how causality is established after a disaster; how socioeconomic heterogeneity across regions is accounted for: whether studies assess voting gaps or overall election results; and the extent to which a broader palette of political responses are included in the analyses.

This paper's key argument is that the apparent unpredictability of retrospective voting behaviour following disasters also highlights the need to introduce an intermediate variable when explaining voter movements. That variable should capture the dominant political discourses that are prevalent post disaster. These political discourses can affect voting behaviour directly, and they can distort the relationships between disaster impacts and policies on one side and voting behaviour on the other. Through a most-similar comparative evaluation of the political dynamics in Denmark and Sweden after the Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004, the paper demonstrates the relevance of including such an intermediate variable.

The study is set out as follows. First, it takes stock of existing state-of-the-art research connecting disasters triggered by natural hazards to retrospective voting behaviour. Next, it engages critically with this literature, pointing to caveats and methodological choices that might contribute to the observed discrepancies in voting behaviour. Finally, it makes the case for paying attention to dominant political narratives and symbols when researching the nexus between disasters and voting behaviour, and demonstrates the applicability of such an approach by contrasting political dynamics in Denmark and Sweden following the 2004 tsunami.

Disasters and voting

Essentially, disasters pose a risk to democratic governments because the adverse socioeconomic ramifications undermine the electoral support necessary to keep them in office after subsequent elections (Mesquita et al., 2003; Morrow et al., 2008). Voters can punish governments that do not do their utmost to ease the adverse impacts of disasters, which is why government responsiveness in a time of distress is found to be stronger (*ceteris paribus*) in more pluralistic political systems (Sen, 1999, 2009; Boin et al., 2005; Kahn, 2005; Flores and Smith, 2013).

This type of research is principally shaped by the theory of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Retrospective voting theory assumes that individuals place emphasis on past events when casting their vote. In the context of disasters, retrospection will most often involve an assessment of the nexus between the effects of a natural hazard and government responses to them. *Blind retrospection* predicts that voters will concentrate mainly on the impacts of disasters and punish governments at the ballot box for any maladies that they experience owing to the hazards (Fiorina, 1981; Achen and Bartels, 2004). Hence, voters are assumed to be guided by a high degree of bounded rationality, judging the incumbent government solely on whether or not their own situation has deteriorated. *Mediated retrospection* predicts that voters will judge the incumbent government chiefly on its policy responses to the disaster (Fiorina, 1981). As such, voters do not base their decision on particular outcomes, but rather on the policies implemented. Blind retrospection can only lead to one type of voting behaviour given the likely assumption that major disasters have negative impacts: voters will punish the incumbent government for the event itself. Mediated retrospection, in contrast, can lead to voters penalising the incumbent government or rewarding it, depending on the policies introduced.

Several studies have documented that governments lose support after a disaster triggered by a natural hazard. Achen and Bartels (2004) evaluated the effect of torrential rains and droughts on presidential elections in the United States. They found that voter support for the incumbent government decreased by about 1.5 percentage points in constituencies that experienced extreme precipitation in the period leading up to the poll. Similarly, Healy and Malhotra (2010) assessed the effect of tornado damage on US presidential elections and found that it decreased the incumbent party's share of the vote in the worst-affected counties by between one and two percentage points as compared to the national average. Arceneaux and Stein (2006) analysed political blame following Tropical Storm Allison in June 2001, which caused a 500-year flood that wreaked havoc in Houston, Texas. People who lived in neighbourhoods hard hit by the flood were more likely to blame the government for inadequate flood preparation policies than Houstonians in less affected and unaffected areas. Here, mediated retrospection (appraisal of government policies) was clearly conditioned by blind retrospection (the level of destruction owing to the flood).

This finding is very similar to those in a study by Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier (2016) of voting behaviour after a flood in the Canadian city of Calgary in June 2013. In this case, the

authors contrasted the 15 flooded subdivisions with the 127 subdivisions that were not flooded and discovered a substantial and significant vote gap of six percentage points between the two. Based on a historical study of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, Heersink, Peterson, and Jenkins (2017) found that this event ended up decreasing voter support for presidential candidate Herbert Hoover by more than 10 percentage points in affected counties, despite an unprecedented level of disaster relief at the time. Beyond the US, Cole, Healy, and Werker (2012) documented that voters across 28 states in India appeared to punish incumbent government coalitions at the ballot box for extreme changes in rainfall. Rainfall just one standard deviation from the optimal level reduced their share of the vote by three percentage points. Eriksson (2016) examined Cyclone Gudrun, which hit southern parts of Sweden with great force in January 2005. The destruction led to a decline in support for the government in affected areas of almost four percentage points at the next national poll.

Other studies have shown that disasters triggered by natural hazards lead to an increase in government support. While incumbent governments might start out at a disadvantage because they can lose support instantly during a disaster (blind retrospection), they can actually end up gaining votes by handling the situation effectively (mediated retrospection). Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) scrutinised German voting behaviour after the Elbe flood in August 2002. The launch of one of the most comprehensive disaster relief programmes in recent history led to the incumbent government being rewarded quite substantially: a vote share increase of seven percentage points in affected areas as compared to unaffected areas (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). Neugart and Rode (2017) also spotlighted German voting behaviour in their study of the electoral implications of the major flooding in Germany in May–June 2013. The incumbent federal government implemented a generous disaster policy that uniformly matched any decentralised state spending on relief, yet the study could not identify a significant electoral impact *overall* in subsequent federal elections held a few months afterwards. However, disaggregating the municipalities into a western part and an eastern part revealed an interesting mediated retrospective dynamic: the incumbent government received a larger vote share, of two percentage points, in the flooded municipalities in the east of the country as compared to those in the west in the elections in 2013, controlling for other factors. This difference, Neugart and Rode (2017) argued, was probably due to the fact that less democratically experienced voters in the east were more responsive to the government's disaster policies.

Reeves (2011) analysed the electoral impacts of US presidential disaster declarations and found that one can bolster the incumbent president's vote share by one percentage point in affected states as compared to those with no declaration. Velez and Martin's (2013) study of voter movements following Hurricane Sandy in October–November 2012 also suggests that voters reward governments for disaster policies. Correcting for socio-political heterogeneity across affected and unaffected counties through statistical matching, they estimated that then US President Barack Obama's share of the vote increased by four percentage points in areas affected by Sandy. Remmer's (2014) analysis of voting behaviour in less mature democracies across 21 Caribbean islands found that hurricanes could augment chances of re-election by as much as 10 percentage points. This rise was closely linked to a proxy for government competence in managing the disaster, indicating a high degree of mediated retrospection. The aforementioned study by Healy and Malhotra (2010) found that tornado damage might actually increase votes for the president's party *provided* that the incumbent president issued a disaster declaration and released federal funds.

Although this finding was not statistically significant (in part owing to the infrequency of disaster declarations), the same authors reached a similar conclusion about major disasters in general: the incumbent party received a higher share of votes in US counties in which major disasters were followed by relief aid (Healy and Malhotra 2009). Not all studies, however, found that mediated retrospection could cancel out the initial drop in voter support. Cole, Healy, and Werker (2012), for example, discovered that Indian governments could only regain a fraction of what they lost initially from just presiding over a natural hazard event. Thus, while voters did reward the incumbent government for the provision of effective and swift emergency aid to disaster-affected states, this mediated retrospection effect was minuscule as compared to the impact of blind retrospection.

Table 1 summarises the different electoral outcomes of disasters triggered by natural hazards according to each study and the dominant theory of retrospection.

Table 1. Classification of studies linking disasters triggered by natural hazards to voter movements

	Blind retrospection dominates	**Mediated retrospection dominates**

Increase in support		Healy and Malhotra (2009) Healy and Malhotra (2010) Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) Reeves (2011) Velez and Martin (2013) Remmer (2014) Neugart Rode (2017)
Decline in support	Achen and Bartels (2004) Arceneaux and Stein (2006) Cole, Healy, and Werker (2012) Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier (2016) Heersink, Peterson, and Jenkins (2017)	Eriksson (2016)

Source: author.

The difference in electoral outcomes is apparent from Table 1. Most studies acknowledge that the two different types of retrospective dynamics are not mutually exclusive, and that retrospective voting behaviour frequently entails blind and mediated dynamics. The studies differ, though, in terms of which retrospective dynamic dominates, reflected in the great disparities of voting outcomes across the studies. These tend to cut across economic development and geography, with the important caveat that most works address electoral dynamics in the US and only a few investigate voting behaviour in developing countries.

A related limitation with the academic literature linking disasters to retrospective voting behaviour, including the present paper, is that the empirical scope is mostly restricted to mature democracies. The field of research draws primarily on data from elections in liberal democracies such as the Canada, Germany, India, Sweden, and the US. These countries are all characterised as 'free' by the independent watchdog organisation, Freedom House (2018). Very few have been conducted in nations with authoritarian (not free) or hybrid (partly free) regimes, despite the fact that citizens there tend to suffer the most owing to disasters triggered by natural hazards: 15 of the 20 most lethal natural hazards in 2017, for example, occurred in authoritarian or hybrid regimes (CRED, 2017; Freedom House, 2018).

This bias is caused not only by academic ethnocentrism. An obvious methodological hurdle is that elections in such countries (to the extent that they are held) cannot be used as an unbiased indicator of voting behaviour. Hence, while acknowledging case selection bias, it also appears relevant to focus on the overarching methodological caveats of the studies at hand as a potential source of the diverse results of voting outcomes.

Main methodological differences and caveats

This paper has identified six methodological issues that merit further discussion. Some of these could very well account for parts of the divergence of electoral outcomes. Others pertain more directly to the need for including a broader scope of political strategies in retrospective analyses. The six methodological issues relate to:

- the timing of the elections;
- the competitiveness of the elections;
- how socioeconomic heterogeneity across regions is accounted for;
- whether studies assess voting gaps or overall election results;
- how causality is established post disaster; and
- the extent to which a broader palette of political responses are included in the analyses.

The relevance of the timing of elections

The first issue relates to the importance of election cycles in retrospective voting behaviour. Myopic voters, so the argument goes, will value recent events more than those in the past (Kiewet and Rivers, 1984). Achen and Bartels (2004) document that the number of years until the next election reduces the electoral impact of disasters. The Indian study by Cole, Healy, and Werker (2012) suggests that voters respond to disaster relief only in the year preceding an election. Other works suggest a more enduring but diminishing effect of retrospection. Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) examine the durability of voter gratitude for effective disaster policies by drawing on voting behaviour after the Elbe flood in 2002. Electoral gains in affected areas in the 2002 elections (seven per cent) extended to the 2005 polls (two per cent) before dissipating in 2009. Eriksson (2016) also found that the impact of Cyclone Gudrun impacted on voting in Sweden more than 1.5 years later, and that the decline

in government support carried over (albeit on a smaller scale) to the elections in 2010 and 2014. The timing of the election, therefore, is an important additional variable.

The relevance of the competitiveness of elections

The second issue looks specifically at the level of competition in pluralistic regimes. It is known from presidential elections in the US that the level of competition varies substantially from state to state, and that political attention centres mostly on a handful of 'battleground' states. Reeves' (2011) study of US presidential elections in the period 1981–2004 analysed whether or not differences in electoral competitiveness influenced disaster declarations. The average margin of victory in the three preceding elections served as a proxy of the extent of electoral competiveness. A large margin would thus indicate limited electoral competitiveness, whereas a small margin would denote more fierce competition. Reeves (2011) found the number of disaster declarations to be twice as high in competitive states after controlling for the actual impact of the disaster triggered by a natural hazard.

The importance of electoral competitiveness is also supported by a study by Gasper and Reeves (2011), which discovered that governors of highly competitive states asked for more federal relief. Interestingly, term-limited governors (who did not face re-election) did not exhibit this behaviour. Sainz-Santamaria and Anderson (2013) evaluated the electoral politics of disaster preparedness across US counties and concluded that disaster spending peaks in the most competitive counties because of their higher electoral returns. Consequently, it appears that the level of competition matters for electoral outcomes. Yet, most studies do not control for the different levels of competition across constituencies. The political outcomes of retrospective voting, it follows, are not just shaped by the ramifications of disasters, but also by variations in pre-existing electoral characteristics across constituencies.

Heterogeneity between affected and unaffected areas

The third issue is related to the socioeconomic heterogeneity of regions. Although disasters can be treated as exogenous shocks for analytical purposes, simple comparisons of voting behaviour in affected versus unaffected regions are probably flawed owing to inherent socioeconomic heterogeneity across regions. While an earthquake might be truly exogenous, the local impacts are formed by baseline political and socioeconomic factors. These context-specific socioeconomic factors produce different trajectories of electoral outcomes from one election to the next in the aftermath of a disaster. Merely comparing the electoral

consequences of affected regions with unaffected regions without statistical matching (or the employment of a similar statistical tool) could lead, therefore, to biased estimates. Hurricane Katrina, for instance, which made landfall in Florida and Louisiana, US, in August 2005, disproportionately affected regions with certain socioeconomic characteristics (poorer African-American neighbourhoods) (Hartman and Squires, 2006). Hence, any differences in voting gaps at the subsequent elections are probably influenced not only by the hurricane, but also by the baseline socio-economic heterogeneity between affected and unaffected areas.

Some studies do not address this heterogeneity when comparing the voting gap between affected and unaffected areas (Achen and Bartels, 2004; Cole, Healy, and Werker, 2012). Others apply statistical tools to alleviate the bias caused by this heterogeneity (Velez and Martin, 2013; Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier, 2016). Concretely, Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier (2016) highlight that socio-political conditions in flooded regions as compared to non-flooded regions of Calgary were not equivalent. In fact, once they were matched statistically, the voting difference between them (noted earlier) became insignificant.

Voting gaps or gains?

The fourth issue addresses the difference between investigating voting gaps and overall electoral gains. The focus often is on voting gaps between affected and unaffected areas (Achen and Bartels, 2004; Lazarev et al., 2014; Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier, 2016; Eriksson, 2016). Such lacunae, however, say little about the overall electoral effect of the disaster, and whether a disaster might prove to be an advantage or a disadvantage for a government. In the event of a major disaster, it is unlikely that the voting behaviour of the control group (unaffected areas) will remain constant. Mediated retrospection dictates that *all* voters assess the government's disaster policies; not just those affected by the event. Very generous relief aid might increase government support in affected areas, but it might lead to less support in those unaffected areas that need to pay the bill. While the generous disaster management policies in the wake of the 2002 Elbe flood increased support for the incumbent government in affected areas, the same policies appear to have cost it three percentage points of support in unaffected districts (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). In this particular case, the net voting result ended up being of advantage to the incumbent government, but this is by no means a guaranteed outcome. Most disasters have consequences that are geographically confined and might only affect a small proportion of the population.

Assuming or establishing causality?

The fifth issue relates to causality. Very few studies engage in process tracing. Most rely on co-variation by establishing that government disaster policies have been criticised and that the incumbent government subsequently lost votes (Velez and Martin, 2013; Eriksson, 2016). However, they do not investigate the causal link between an unfavourable public perception of government policies and the decline in government support. Thereby, they fail to eliminate the possibility of other factors driving the outcome.

The research by Montjoy and Chervenak (2018) illustrates how other factors can counter expected retrospective voting dynamics. They analysed the local re-elections in New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina and found that other voting dynamics dominated the retrospective effect, leading to the re-election of the incumbent mayor, C. Ray Nagin, amidst great destruction and public criticism. Race-based voting as well as prospective voting, according to the authors, were key determinants of voting behaviour in the local election in 2006 (Montjoy and Chervenak, 2018, p. 10).

A related challenge is how to tease out the exogenous effect (the natural hazard) from the more endogenous political factors (such as inadequate preventive policies, flawed early warning systems, and weak building codes). The extent to which voters react to extremes in rainfall (an exogenous effect) vis-à-vis the country's worn and unmaintained sewerage system (an endogenous political factor) is difficult to disentangle using large-N studies only. Ideally, therefore, assessments of mediated retrospection should trace causality from a certain public perception of disaster policies to an actual electoral outcome. Analyses can use mixed methods to flesh out better the causal mechanisms between flawed government policies and certain electoral outcomes. Qualitative studies could uncover other potentially relevant political variables and strengthen the field of research either as standalone contributions or nested in large-N quantitative studies (Lieberman, 2005). This paper will point to one such variable that captures the prevailing political discourses.

Suboptimal disaster responses

The last issue relates to government responses. While retrospective dynamics in a pluralist regime surely elicit government responses in the wake of disasters, the added value of such a response is an open empirical question. Governments are rarely rewarded electorally for proactive policies that prevent disasters. Not only are politicians rarely rewarded electorally

for a non-event (the lack of a disaster), but also they need to defend what seem like policy inefficiencies over many years in anticipation of a possible disaster in the future. Hence, governments are mostly rewarded electorally for reactive reconstruction and management policies rather than preventive policies. This leads to perverse political incentives in disaster management, where there are few political advantages to implementing preventive measures despite obvious humanitarian benefits. Healy and Malhotra (2009) have estimated cost–benefit ratios that strongly suggest spending on disaster preparedness: one dollar spent could avoid seven dollars' worth of disaster damage in the future.

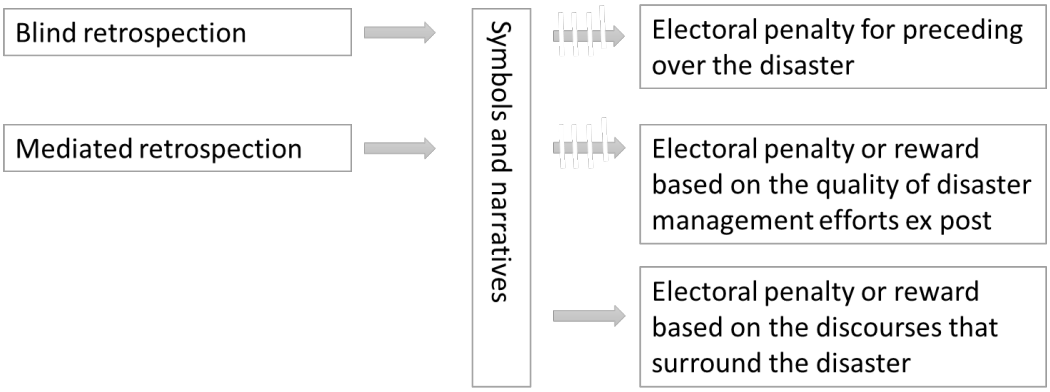
The ramifications of this adverse political dynamic are exacerbated further by a whole range of counterproductive behavioural characteristics in human beings, such as generally underestimating low-probability events, having a certain degree of fatalism, and finding it unappealing to think about death and destruction (Bucci and Savadori, 2018). In addition, disasters might elicit not only disaster policies of the sorts included in most of the studies, but also a broader spectrum of political strategies, including blame avoidance, manipulating public opinion, scapegoating, and secrecy (Boin et al., 2005; Hood, 2011). This broader palette of political responses to disasters triggered by natural hazards points to the relevance of paying attention to other political variables, such as one that captures the dominant political discourses surrounding the disaster.

The power of disaster discourses

While the methodological differences and caveats just presented explain some of the ambivalence in voter movements following disasters, this paper argues that an omitted variable could be a key driver of these divergent results. That voting behaviour appears so unpredictable might point to the existence of an important intermediate variable that has not received much attention to date in the retrospective voting theory literature. This variable is best explained by the public debate that ensued in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, which made landfall in Texas in August 2017 with great force, displacing some 30,000 people and leaving several hundred thousand people without electricity. Within days, President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump travelled to the state to survey the ongoing devastation and to bring comfort to the victims. The First Lady boarded Air Force One to travel to Texas wearing black pegged trousers, black sunglasses, an olive-green bomber jacket, and five-inch Manolo Blahnik stilettos. When re-emerging from Air Force One in Texas she had dressed down to white sneakers, a T-shirt, and a black baseball cap. Melania Trump's attire has

nothing to do with the impact of the hurricane and the hardship suffered; nor is it related to the actual disaster policies being implemented. However, it mattered tremendously on a symbolic level, and her upscale apparel initially attracted much public criticism (*The New York Times*, 2017; *The Telegraph*, 2017; *Vanity Fair*, 2017). When it was revealed that she had in fact changed into something more practical on the flight, this generated an equal amount of public debate and partisan accusations (Fox News, 2017; *Los Angeles Times*, 2017). It is evident, therefore, that symbols and narratives also affect voter retrospection, distorting the perception of disaster-related damage and policies *and* resulting in independent direct impacts on voting behaviour (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Voter retrospection conditioned by disaster political discourses



Source: author.

The direct effect is clear from the example above: how politicians behave post disaster matters. They are expected to be a uniter in a time of chaos, convey the nation's compassion to victims, grieve with the surviving relatives, and instil hope and optimism for the future (Rubin, 2015). The fact that symbols and narrative also shape the dynamics of the other types of retrospection should be equally clear. When a disaster is successfully framed as God's punishment, governments can duck responsibility for both the adverse consequences of the disaster (blind retrospection) as well as any inadequate disaster policies (mediated retrospection). Many consider the Great Lisbon Earthquake in Portugal on 1 November 1755 to be the point of turning away from perceiving disasters as a divine force and viewing them from a more naturalistic/scientific standpoint (Dynes, 2000). Even today, though, religious explanations in terms of a divine judgment appear to be persistent, particularly in developing countries (Chester and Duncan, 2010). Ergül, Gökalp, and Cangöz (2010) document how

Islamic newspapers in Turkey regularly adopt a religious frame of reference to explain many disasters triggered by natural hazards. This effectively disguises government mismanagement, which the authors claim is the principal agent in the loss of thousands of lives.

Deficient symbolic acts could also exacerbate the electoral implications of poor disaster policies. Rather than being on the ground, shoulder to shoulder with the Louisiana governor and the people of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President George W. Bush was photographed peeking out of the window of Air Force One, hovering high above the destruction. In his autobiography, he referred to this image as one of his biggest mistakes and acknowledged that it came to embody the public's critical perception of his disaster management efforts (Bush, 2010). Thus, there appears to be an important intermediate variable that relates to the prevailing discourses around disasters. Voters might be primarily intuitive at the ballot box and not assess critically the pros and cons of different government policies, but the voting decision will be strongly rooted in prevailing narratives. These narratives can also embody promises and expectations of reconstruction and recovery, factors usually associated with prospective voting, to the extent that they are linked to prevailing political disaster narratives. From this perspective, the causes and consequences of major disasters are not crystal clear to voters, not just because of bounded rationality, but also because they are communicated in a political arena where different myths, narratives, and symbols fight for dominance.

This focus on narratives in retrospective voting theory is inspired by the positivistic and empirical branch of the narrative policy framework (NPF) (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan, 2014; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth, 2018). NPF research understands a policy narrative as a story with some combination of a setting, characters (heroes, victims, and villains), plots, and a moral of the story (policy solution) (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 329). Disaster narratives, owing to their disruptive and critical impacts on people's everyday lives, will often contain these elements in ample supply. The NPF literature provides useful guidance with regard to the typologies of different narratives and the preferred methods to capture and analyse policy narratives (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan, 2014). However, including narratives as a variable in retrospective voting theory diverges from the way in which they are employed in the NPF.

Rather than asking about the role of policy narratives in the policy process, retrospective voting theory queries the role of disaster narratives in influencing voter dynamics.

Consequently, the differences between the approaches can be elucidated along two dimensions. First, retrospective voting theory seeks to explain voting behaviour. The dependent variable, therefore, is not policy processes, but electoral dynamics. Second, the independent variable of interest is political narratives shaped by disasters rather than policy narratives. Political narratives extend beyond policies. Political narratives moulded by disasters might include specific policy narratives, but their main impetus frequently will be related to the symbolic acts themselves as opposed to the actual policies implemented. Indeed, one of the main arguments of the paper is that political narratives of disasters could be constructed with little emphasis on policies.

There are two methodological challenges to introducing this intermediate variable based on the dominant political narratives of the disaster. First, it is difficult to quantify the variable, as it relies on less tangible discourses and public perceptions than do variables based on concrete disaster impacts and government policies. However, triangulating qualitative and quantitative analyses of newspaper articles, social media feeds, graphical illustrations, transcripts from parliamentary debates, and national value surveys could help to establish the dominant political narrative that surrounds a disaster. Approaches based on this variable are well suited to mixed-methods research where both quantitative and qualitative data serve to inform the analysis (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Small-N comparative studies can be nested in larger quantitative studies as a means of triangulating findings and examining alternative models (Lieberman, 2005). These studies would make a fruitful contribution to the research field, until now dominated by large-N studies.

Second, it appears difficult to separate out the effects of this intermediate variable from the other dynamics of retrospection. The challenge is that effective disaster policies (mediated retrospection) and favourable disaster narratives are highly correlated. Most politicians underpin disaster narratives in concrete disaster management policies, just as successful disaster policies help to constitute political narratives.

Hitherto, two methodological approaches have been applied to separate out the effects of political symbols and narratives from those of disaster policies: one that exploits spatial

variations, and one that takes advantage of temporal variations. Lazarev et al. (2014)'s study of voting behaviour following the forest fires in Russia in summer 2010 separated out the two effects by analysing spatial differences in voting behaviour. The authors included the symbolic effect of government performance by using the proxy of President Vladimir Putin's visits to some of the affected villages. Compared to his popularity in unburned villages, Putin's popularity increased by about 15 percentage points (controlling for other factors) in the villages that he visited, despite them not having received any additional relief aid. Johnston and Goggin (2015) relied on temporal variation in their study of US voting behaviour after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that started in the Gulf of Mexico on 20 April 2010. According to the study, voters' confidence in the Obama administration was unaffected at first by the oil spill itself (blind retrospection). A reduction in public confidence in President Obama could be identified only after the media coverage went from descriptive journalism to a focus on accountability and blame. This led to the authors concluding that voters do not blindly attribute blame for a disaster; rather, media framing was the necessary intermediate variable translating the oil spill into actual voting behaviour (Johnston and Goggin, 2015, p. 468).

This paper will be the first to apply explicitly a third methodological approach to show the importance of the intermediate variable of political narratives and symbols. The comparative research design below will look for variation in the independent variable itself: is the disaster tied to political discourses that frame it successfully as a government liability?

Tsunami political discourse and electoral dynamics in Denmark and Sweden

The literature investigating the linkage between disasters and voting behaviour has paid little attention to cases where major disasters do not really affect voting behaviour at all—Montjoy and Chervenak (2018) is a noticeable exception. Such an outcome defies blind and mediated retrospection, both of which hypothesise that major disasters influence voting behaviour. One explanation could be that other voting dynamics neutralise the effect of voter retrospection, resulting in an electoral impasse of modest voter movements (Montjoy and Chervenak, 2018). Within retrospective theory, though, the lack of electoral consequences can be explained by the fact that disasters need to be framed as a political issue in order to have an electoral bearing. What is needed, therefore, is a research design where the political narratives can be clearly distinguished from mediated retrospection in the form of government policies.

The impact of the 2004 tsunami in Denmark and Sweden provides a unique opportunity to construct a most-similar research design that addresses the connection between political discourses and electoral consequences following a disaster triggered by a natural hazard. The most-similar comparison seeks to contrast cases that share most features to produce a quasi-experimental design that neutralises some differences while highlighting others (Landman, 2017). Denmark and Sweden are very similar along most socio-political dimensions: both countries are mature liberal democracies with vocal opposition parties and a free and critical media. In addition, they have multi-party political systems in which no single party is likely to hold an absolute majority; thus, the governing norm is a coalition government that does not face a vote of non-confidence in parliament. The two countries not only share many socio-political characteristics, but also they displayed many likenesses when it came to the impact of the 2004 tsunami (blind retrospection) and critical public perceptions of policies related to the event (mediated retrospection). For instance, the tsunami was the deadliest natural disaster for more than 100 years in Denmark and Sweden. Owing to the many Scandinavian holidaymakers in Thailand, Sweden and Denmark lost 543 and 46 citizens, respectively, to the tsunami. By way of comparison, only 35 people in Sweden and 24 people in Denmark succumbed to natural disasters in the entire last century (CRED, 2017). Importantly for the present research design, the two countries did differ in terms of the political narrative that surrounded the disaster (the independent variable of interest) and how it affected the electoral dynamics (the dependent variable).

The tsunami was the deadliest natural hazard for more than 100 years in both countries, yet the number of Swedish fatalities was still 10 times greater than the number of Danish fatalities (seven times controlling for population). One cannot rule out that this marked disparity of deaths *by itself* might explain differences in voting behaviour. That the Danish elections took place immediately after the tsunami, whereas the Swedish elections occurred more than one year later, is likely to counteract some of the electoral consequences of this variation. More significantly, the media outlets did not blame the governments for the high number of fatalities, but rather for the deficient evacuation plans and flawed information-sharing.

The 2004 tsunami case is unique in that it is related to political dynamics in Denmark and Sweden—countries far removed from the epicentre of the disaster—necessitating that disaster

responses can be separated analytically from ex ante *disaster prevention policies*. Nobody voiced the opinion that the Danish and Swedish governments should have set up warning systems in the Indian Ocean. The media abstained from criticising the two governments for the deaths themselves, concentrating instead on their inadequate evacuation policies, a lack of coordination, insufficient medical and organisational staffing on the ground, and poor information dissemination (see below). Any electoral movement, therefore, can be attributed purely to the public's perception of the governments' ex post disaster management efforts.

Following the recommendations of NPF theory, the political narratives of the tsunami rely primarily on meso-level content analysis of media reports and editorials (Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan, 2014; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth, 2018). Media outlets have been singled out as a particularly useful source of narratives (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth, 2018, p. 340).

Table 2 outlines some of the most important differences in political narratives between the two countries, distilled from a much more comprehensive comparative assessment of the Danish and Swedish responses to the tsunami based on media reports (Rubin, 2017). Most importantly, Table 2 reveals that the tsunami produced a powerful political narrative in Sweden but not in Denmark. In Sweden, the tsunami was turned into a political narrative around which different political actors positioned themselves: Prime Minister Göran Persson apologised, deflected blame, and visited the affected area; the independent evaluation report assigned clear political responsibility; and the opposition parties and the media were highly critical of the government, calling for the resignation of Persson. In Denmark, the criticism was mainly restricted to the bureaucratic mistakes made. Furthermore, the opposition never contested the government's handling of the tsunami, the evaluation report was conducted in-house, and Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen did not apologise for any political faux pas or visit the disaster area. Instead, he effectively depoliticised the tsunami, delivering a statesman's speech of hope and comfort in his New Year address to the nation, a political tradition in Denmark (but not in Sweden), which did not spark a single critical remark from the opposition parties.

These different narratives resulted in very different electoral outcomes. In Denmark, Fogh Rasmussen was so confident that the government's handling of the tsunami would not have adverse political consequences that he called for a general election just three weeks after the

tsunami—to be held on 8 February 2005. Despite the proximity of the election to the tsunami, the campaign themes never covered the inadequate government response to the event (Andersen et al*.,* 2005). Instead, the focus was on major issues such as immigration and taxation reform, as well as minor matters such as an EUR 0.06 levy on Danish credit cards (Pedersen, 2005). For the first time in almost a century, the incumbent prime minister from the Liberal Party remained in office. This was in stark contrast to Sweden, where the adverse electoral implications of the Swedish narrative were evident: the incumbent government was ousted on 17 September 2006 after 12 years in power. Subsequently, the ousted ruling party commissioned an evaluation report to investigate what had gone wrong. The report concluded that the government's handling of the tsunami and the ensuing critical debate had played a substantial role in the defeat (Social Democrats, 2006). This is supported by the quantitative study by Eriksson (2016), which identified a small but statistically significant negative impact of slightly less than one percentage point on the government's vote share in tsunami-affected municipalities after controlling for other factors. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the unfavourable tsunami narrative stuck to Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds and contributed strongly to her resignation months before the general election in 2006 (Sveriges Radio, 2006).

Table 2. Key descriptors of political tsunami narratives in Denmark and Sweden

	Denmark	**Sweden**
Government actions	The prime minister did not visit the disaster area.	The prime minister visited the disaster area.
	The prime minister did not (need to) deflect blame.	The prime minister deflected blame by accusing the Thai authorities of not alerting him fast enough, and by singling out two particular civil servants in the foreign ministry for sitting on vital information for too long.
	The prime minister was never forced to apologise personally for the inadequate disaster management of the government.	The prime minister had to issue a formal apology for the inadequate disaster management of the government.
The official inquiries	The tsunami evaluation report was conducted in-house by the foreign ministry.	The tsunami evaluation report was conducted by an independent commission.
	The report did not assign any political responsibility.	The report assigned political responsibility to the prime minister and the Foreign Minister

	Upon publication, political parties from both sides of the aisle emphasised the need to look ahead.	The report sparked massive critique from the media and opposition calling for the PMs resignation
Political actors and the media	The Royal Family refrained from any political comments.	The King issued a badly concealed critique of the government in an interview following the tsunami: 'in certain situations it is better to act than to do nothing. It is better to call an ambulance and then to send it back if it is not needed. But too often in Sweden nobody dares to take responsibility' (Dagens Nyheter, 2005; author's translation).
	There was a clear party truce between the government and the opposition. At a political rally after the tsunami, for example, all political leaders agreed not to engage in the usual political exchanges in the light of the tragedy.	Opposition parties openly criticised the government, by claiming that it lacked competence, and that it did not comprehend that injured citizens needed to come home and be treated. They went as far as to argue that 'had Sweden had a centre-right government, fewer citizens would have died' (Expressen, 2005; author's translation).
	No major media outlets called for the resignation of the prime minister.	Many major media outlets called for the resignation of the prime minister.
	No individual ministers were subject to criticism or scrutiny.	The foreign minister, in particular, was heavily criticised for incompetence and indifference.

Source: author based on Dagens Nyheter (2005), Expressen (2005), and Rubin (2017).

A quantitative content analysis of newspaper articles in Denmark and Sweden can aid triangulation of the previous findings and supply additional evidence of linkages between the tsunami and political narratives.[2] A proxy of the extent to which the tsunami was part of a political narrative is provided by newspaper articles mentioning both the tsunami and the prime minister in the same piece. The actual content of these articles spans from neutral (such as an account of the prime minister participating in memorial ceremonies) to negative (such

[2] Data on newspaper articles about the tsunami were extracted from two sources: Copenhagen Business School (2017) for the Danish data and BTJ (2017) for the Swedish data. Although the databases had different interfaces, the study strived for consistency in the search criteria. The more comprehensive Danish database did contain more newspaper articles but this was accounted for by expressing the number of articles in relative terms.

as highly critical opinion editorials and articles directly targeting the prime minister). No articles connecting the tsunami to the prime minister were approving of the government's disaster management efforts, although a few opinion pieces did call for the 'witch hunt' to stop (HD, 2005). Even Persson's visit to the tsunami-stricken areas of Thailand received negative coverage in the media (Aftonbladet, 2005). Hence, the vast majority of articles linking the prime minister to the tsunami are critical and unfavourable with respect to the government.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is hypothesised first that the proportion of tsunami newspaper articles explicitly referring to the prime minister would be higher in Sweden than in Denmark (H1), supporting the finding that the tsunami is part of a political narrative in Sweden but not (or much less so) in Denmark. Consequently, it is hypothesised second that this dynamic will be magnified during election campaign periods where political positioning and struggles become even more salient (H2). Finally, it is hypothesised third that the publication of the highly critical independent evaluation report in Sweden would generate a spike in negative coverage associating the prime minister with the tsunami, and that one would not expect to see similar dynamics after the publication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark's own evaluation report (H3). Table 3 summarises the main results of the analysis.

Table 3. Newspaper articles on the Tsunami, Denmark and Sweden

Description		**Period**	**Search terms**	**Denmark (%)**	**Sweden (%)**
Total period	H1	26 December 2004 to 31 December 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'FOGH'	6	–
Total period	H1	26 December 2004 to 31 December 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'PERSSON'	–	12
Danish election campaign period	H2	18 January 2005 to 08 February 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'FOGH'	8	–
Comparable period before election campaign	H2	26 December 2004 to 17 January 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'FOGH'	5	–
Swedish election campaign period	H2	1 January 2006 to 17 September 2006	'Tsunami*' and 'PERSSON'	–	29
Comparable period after election campaign	H3	18 September 2006 to 31 December 2006	'Tsunami*' and 'PERSSON'	–	9
A month after the release of the tsunami report in Sweden	H3	1 December 2005 to 31 December 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'PERSSON'	–	26

Comparable month of December in Denmark	H3	1 December 2005 to 31 December 2005	'Tsunami*' and 'FOGH'	5	–
Comparable month after the release of the tsunami report in Denmark	H3	23 May 2005 to 23 June 2005	'Tsunami*' AND 'FOGH'	4	–

Notes: percentages express the share of total tsunami articles in the period that contained the search terms.
Source: author based on BTJ (2017) and Copenhagen Business School (2017).

With regard to H1, it appears that twice as many tsunami articles in Sweden explicitly referred to the Swedish prime minister as compared to Danish newspaper articles referring to the Danish prime minister in the same period. This pattern is more pronounced in the election campaign periods. In the Danish case, there appears to be a slight increase in the number of tsunami articles that refer to the prime minister (from five to eight per cent). However, this slight rise is dwarfed by the Swedish statistics: 29 per cent of the tsunami articles in the Swedish election campaign period referred to the prime minister as compared to just 9 per cent in a comparable period.[3] Finally, the publication of the Swedish evaluation report incited more critical articles linking the tsunami to the prime minister, thus supporting H3. The Swedish prime minister was more frequently connected to the tsunami as compared to his Danish counterpart: 26 and 4 per cent of tsunami articles in Swedish and Danish newspapers, respectively, mentioned the prime minister following the release of the evaluation report. The quantitative content analysis and confirmation of the three hypotheses yields further credence, therefore, concerning the argument of the two different narratives surrounding the 2004 tsunami: a bureaucratic narrative in Denmark and a political narrative in Sweden.

Conclusion

Disasters triggered by natural hazards receive much public attention. The event that attracted the most readers of online news globally in a single day in 2017 was Hurricane Irma (*The Economist*, 2017). It superseded every other happening that year, including the inauguration of Donald Trump, various terrorist attacks, and the many political and celebrity scandals.

[3] The differing lengths of the election periods in Denmark as compared to Sweden is due to the general election occurring every four years in Sweden (down to the day), whereas the prime minister in Denmark has the prerogative of calling the general election (within a four-year limit). This substantially lowers the duration of election campaigning in Denmark to around 20 days, which is the period between calling the election and the holding of it.

Hence, it is not surprising that empirical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that disasters do indeed impact on retrospective voting behaviour.

The paper pointed up huge disparities, however, with regard to both the scope and the direction of the electoral consequences. Some studies document a decrease in the vote share of incumbent governments following a disaster, whereas others record an increase. While methodological differences might account for some of the variation, the paper makes the argument that an intermediate variable capturing the political discourses surrounding disasters might be useful in accounting for the diversity of electoral outcomes. The study of the disparity between Danish and Swedish political discourses pertaining to the 2004 tsunami and their electoral consequences lent credence to the merits of including the variable. The paper further posited that mixed methods would make a useful contribution to a research field that so far has been constituted primarily by large-N quantitative studies. Qualitative studies within a smaller subset of cases would provide more robust evidence of the actual mechanism through which disasters are translated into electoral outcomes. Mixed methods are also well equipped to research voter retrospection of disasters in developing countries or in non-pluralist regimes. Triangulation of data and methods is generally recognised as a beneficial approach towards cases where statistical data are in short supply and access to reliable information is limited (Creswell and Clark, 2017).

Improving understanding of the dynamics of voter retrospection in the wake of disasters is essential for policy. Both theoretically and empirically, there are grounds to prefer pluralistic political systems to authoritarian ones based on their instrumental effect on disaster mitigation. Most famously, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (1999, 2009) has argued that democracies have eradicated the threat of famine. Although the conclusiveness of the statement has been contested (Devereux, 2007; Rubin, 2009), there is reason to believe that democracies contain safeguards that would effectively prevent major disasters akin to the famine in North Korea in the 1990s, which is estimated to have claimed the lives of approximately one million people (Haggard and Nolan, 2007). An independent and active opposition, a free media, and an informed electorate are integral components of such safeguards.

Yet, there is a flipside to retrospective voting in pluralistic regimes: politicians appear to prefer responding to natural hazards to committing to more effective proactive policies of

prevention. None of the retrospective dynamics presented here are unequivocally a force for effective disaster management following disasters triggered by natural hazards. If blind retrospection is too prominent, it could undermine the government's incentives for supplying humanitarian relief—why bother? If mediated voters are very myopic, the government's incentives to act would depend crucially on the timing of the disaster vis-à-vis the election. If voters mainly register symbolic acts and political narratives, then politicians might place emphasis on empty rituals post disaster, rather than on the nuts and bolts of effective disaster management.

The controversy surrounding Hurricane Maria, which struck Puerto Rico on 20 September 2017, lends some credence to this statement. Although the Government of Puerto Rico, as well as independent reports, estimated the number of fatalities at slightly less than 3,000, President Trump has vehemently denied these calculations, instead referring to the disaster management as an 'incredible, unsung success' and 'one of the best jobs that's ever been done' (BBC News, 2018; Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University, 2018). It would not be unreasonable to speculate that the analytical perspective of narrative retrospection will become even more salient in a political climate of 'fake news' where the echo chambers of politically-charged social media newsfeeds and discussions explicitly aim to convey narratives rather than facts.

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