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Incumbents after Natural Disasters: Does Media Coverage Jeopardize Reelection?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the effect of media coverage on an incumbent's election performance following the occurrence of a natural disaster. It hypothesizes that broader media coverage, especially as it focuses on the incumbent or portrays the incumbent in a negative light, will correlate with reduced support from voters. To study this relationship, three comparative case studies are used: New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin in 2006, Houston mayor Sylvester Turner in 2019, and Chicago Mayor Michael Bilandic in 1979. Each of these incumbents presided over a natural disaster and was considered for reelection within a year of the initial crisis. The effects of the race of the incumbent and the extent to which their constituencies are advantaged or privileged is also considered, especially to the extent these factors influence media coverage. Analyzing the three case studies leads to evidence that there may be a correlation between media coverage and reduced performance, but that it depends more strongly on the tone of the media coverage than its totality. Race and privilege do not appear to correlate strongly with either improved or diminished incumbent performance.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

When a natural disaster strikes, it can make or break political fortunes. Some elected officials thrive and see their profiles raised dramatically, while others appear to wilt under the pressure and face consequences at the voting booth. What makes the difference between these politicians? Why is it that some politicians lose badly in an election following disaster, while some succeed under near-identical circumstances? What causes this variation? One under-researched option: media coverage.

Few events can generate newspaper headlines, populate television chyrons, or dominate the national conversation to the degree – or in the variety of ways - severe natural disasters do. Hurricane Katrina served as a memorable stain on George W. Bush’s already controversial legacy (Walsh, 2015). The devastating California Wildfires hurt Gavin Newsom during his efforts to overcome a recall effort, as well as then-candidate for Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2020 General Election, after their visits to damaged sites played poorly in the media (Castronuovo, 2020; Massie, 2020). Following Hurricane Sandy, the widely publicized Obama-Christie cooperation (and actually non-existent “hug”) played a major role in their respective 2012 and 2013 campaigns (Epstein and Gerstein, 2012), helping each secure reelection amidst claims of a true bipartisan alliance and personal friendship (Halloran, 2013; Horsey, 2012). Both claims were short-lived (Walsh, 2013). Yet, for all of these very widely reported-on and memorable and politically important moments, very little research has been done analyzing the

role of the media in one of the most practical concerns for politicians following a natural disaster: whether the media coverage is going to hurt their reelection campaign.

The media permeates every aspect of politics in the United States of America. Edmund Burke first referred to the media as the “Fourth Estate” in 1787 (Carlyle, 1907), and many others since have also referred to the media as such since for its ability to advocate issues and frame policies. The media has only grown more influential, and more volatile, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the democratization of news and information that the internet has brought. Still, little has been done in the way of researching how it effects elections following severe crises like a natural disaster. In fact, politicians, especially local politicians, have remarkably little literature at their disposal if they want to know what factors are likely to influence their election performance following a natural disaster. This is an important topic – insight into why voters express preferences the way they do, and how voters come to those preferences, is a key part of the political science literature. It is a practical consideration following these types of disasters.

This paper will analyze instances when an incumbent politician at the state-wide level or lower, with limited power to genuinely improve conditions following a natural disaster, runs a reelection campaign following a natural disaster. From there, it will explore how media coverage influenced those candidates’ performances in their reelection campaigns. Media will always come to cover natural disasters and their aftermath to some extent, but it could be that the amount of this coverage actually makes the difference between candidates who perform well, and those who do not. In some circumstances, the media may perpetuate and spread political narratives which actually blame an incumbent for the disaster and its aftermath, even though there is typically little they can do.

We know that voters employ retrospective voting for politicians following natural disasters, but this has been analyzed primarily at levels in which those politicians have the power to effectively respond to these crises, such as in studies which found that areas impacted by torrential rains and droughts (Achens and Bartels, 2004) and tornadoes (Healy and Molhatra, 2013) tended to support the incumbent president and their party around two percentage points less on average. However, how these voters employ this retrospective voting is certainly influenced by the discourse surrounding it, led by political narratives.

Symbols and narratives of political responses to a disaster do matter. When then-First Lady Melania Trump wore the infamous jacket which had “I REALLY DON’T CARE, DO U?” written on the back while on the way to and returning from meeting with disaster victims, it led to a narrative that the first lady was out of touch with, uncaring, or perhaps even hostile towards the victims, something which damaged her, and likely her husband’s political image. This led to a politicization of a disaster stemming from a natural disaster (Rubin, 2019). Ted Cruz’s ill-advised trip to Cancun amidst massive, deadly power outages in Texas fed a political narrative that he was not invested in his state (Gabbatt, 2021), and in many ways furthered a narrative – true or not – that Republican power grid oversight prioritized profits over people, and was to blame for the crises (Newburger, 2021).

There may not always be such dramatic and obviously political narratives surrounding local candidates following a natural disaster as there are for nationally recognized US Senators, but political discourse and narratives are likely to still play a key role in their reelection. The ability of the media to perpetuate narratives which place blame on incumbents has the potential to be a so-far overlooked but important factor. In short, this thesis will introduce media coverage as a variable to explain US local incumbent electoral performance following a natural disaster. I



expect to find support for the theory that media coverage is typically harmful for the incumbent due to the political narratives they spread.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Crises as Political Variables

For as long as Americans have voted, crises have impacted their choices. War, disease, economic depressions, and innumerable other factors have long struck fear in the heart of the American electorate and impacted their voting habits. A crisis is defined as: “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending... especially (a change) with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This paper focuses on just one type of crisis: natural disasters; “a sudden and terrible event in nature (such as a hurricane, tornado, or flood) that usually results in serious damage and many deaths” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). A natural disaster usually creates an unstable state of affairs, decisive change, and undesirable outcomes for those impacted.

Before analyzing the relationship between incumbents and natural disasters as it is affected by media coverage, it’s important to know what existing literature says about natural disasters (and other types of crises) in politics. First, it is important to note: the response of electorates to natural disasters is not inherently negative towards the incumbent officials. It is influenced by several factors. One factor is the government’s ability to mitigate the effects of the disaster (Abney and Hill, 1966). If voters feel that the natural disaster was well-contained or responded-to, they are not expected to reduce their support for the incumbent. However, the political skills of the politician can still help even when the disaster is not particularly well-handled: so long as there is not an identifiable pre-disaster mistake on the part of the

government, the evidence suggests that the politician in question can refurbish their image by being “politically sensitive” to the event (Abney and Hill).

Still, when voters believe that local officials have not adequately prepared for the disaster or that they made a mistake, they often “punish” the incumbent - even when it was the federal government’s responsibility. Whether voters feel this way is impacted by the severity of the disaster in their immediate neighborhood, and their knowledge of local politics – the more damage their neighborhood sustained, and the less knowledgeable about local politics they were, the more likely they were to punish the incumbent regardless of actual fault (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006). Importantly, evidence suggests that voters typically attribute responsibility to local government to respond to these natural disasters, even if that is not true (Wolensky and Miller, 1981).

Another factor that may potentially impact whether an incumbent sees diminished support from voters is whether or not a voter has previously applied for aid following a natural disaster. A study has found that voters’ overall expectations of the federal government’s response to current floods are substantially lower if they have previously applied for government aid following floods in the past (Darr, Cait, and Moak, 2019). If repeated interaction with the government following natural disasters can negatively affect a voter’s faith in federal government competency, those doubts regarding competence may extend to local officials; we know that many voters will attribute at least some post-natural disaster responsibility to them.

There are limitations to the research that can be done on natural disasters in political science. Researchers in this field usually limit their US-focused studies to a single city, as finding multiple comparable situations is difficult because of natural disasters’ unpredictability, rarity, and variety - in both the type of disaster and type of area or groups affected. It can also be

challenging to conduct a comprehensive quantitative analysis of their impacts because they rarely impact a neat voting area in consistent ways. Still, independent findings within the field typically affirm each other, and there the evidence suggests the conclusions are reliable.

Abney and Hill in 1966 and Arceneaux and Stein in 2006 established the essential foundations of modern natural disaster literature within Political Science: election outcomes following natural disasters will not always feature a disadvantaged incumbent. However, voters are more likely to blame incumbents for disasters if they themselves were more severely impacted by the disaster, or if they are less knowledgeable about the mechanisms of local politics. The incumbent also increases this likelihood of by being unable to respond to the disaster or acting politically insensitive.

These results are important, but natural disaster literature has thus far missed a crucial factor which heavily influences the public's perception of incumbent candidates following a natural disaster: media coverage. There is evidence to suggest that while, yes, voters blame politicians for things outside of their control, this is the case far more often when there is a widely shared political narrative, often spread through media coverage. Research has been conducted finding that the public blames incumbents – even local ones -- for many crises such as shark attacks, droughts, and floods, over which they have no control. This is in line with conventional findings within natural disaster literature, but one study noted the importance of the political narrative.

Achens and Bartels in 2017 cite the example of Woodrow Wilson, who was blamed for shark attacks which became a media sensation, despite them being outside of his control (and largely fabricated). However, he was not blamed at the polls for the 1918 pandemic, because no one “supplied a convincing argument that the government did control or should have controlled

the spread of the pandemic or its horrific consequences.” The existence of a political narrative spread through the media – not actual responsibility or factual reality – was the decisive factor in whether the electorate blamed Wilson for perceived problems. Voters are not irrational, as Arceneaux and Stein concluded. Rather, they are “gullible” due to their lack of knowledge in science and other complex topics (Achens and Bartels, 2017). If they are presented with a compelling narrative by the media which blames incumbents for a crisis, they will typically accept that narrative and act on it when voting.

### **Influencing Media Coverage: How Race and Privilege Matter**

Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that the race and income of natural disaster victims impact the level of media coverage disasters receive. In this way, these forces may have an indirect effect on electoral outcomes because of the ability of a political narrative to be spread. Consider, for example that the groups and individuals who contract a type of disease influence how much media coverage that disease gets. This is displayed in studies focusing on individual celebrities (Elliot, 2002), as well as more generally as citizens see coverage in the print and broadcast news (Armstrong, Carpenter, and Hojnacki, 2006)

Another key example of this phenomenon is in attention to missing persons. Known colloquially as “Missing White Woman Syndrome,” is the fact that media within the United States are far more likely to report on missing persons who are both white and female (Sommer, 2016). The United States and the media within the United States consistently gives more attention, and more sympathetic attention, to privileged victims of unfortunate events, so this

likely remains true for natural disasters victims as well.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, news coverage of Hurricane Katrina has been widely accused of reinforcing racial stereotypes through sensationalized coverage of poverty and too-significant reportage on instances looting (Gordon, 2005). This is an example of coverage that, even when focusing on the hardships a less privileged group faced, was still conducted in a way which deemphasized the importance of the victims themselves.

Victims of natural disasters are not the only people whose race matters. It may matter for the incumbent as well. Political scientists analyzing race in US elections have found that voters use race as a shortcut to assume numerous policy preferences (McDermott, 1998) and as a reason to doubt a candidate's overall competence level (Sigelman, Walkosz, and Nitz, 1995) which is particularly relevant in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

Thus, understanding the relationship between media coverage of a natural disaster and incumbent election performance is not just about whether that coverage focuses on the government and the incumbent themselves. Instead, the characteristics of those in power and those affected may alter the perception of the media coverage, and even influence the media coverage itself.

These findings lend themselves to the question: could the incumbent simply spread their own political narrative through the media to obtain the reverse effect? If media coverage can be manipulated all of the different things that the literature suggests it can be manipulated by, why do incumbents not use it every chance they get? While the American literature did not feature

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<sup>1</sup> Demographic considerations impacting media attention may be further enhanced by the idea of target populations. Target populations are groups of citizens that society designates as being less important than others through the news, policy, and other methods. Events impacting these groups are sometimes not given the same weight as if they happened to a more popular group. These groups are less likely to see citizen participation correcting ineffective or even harmful treatment by the government because they receive messages encouraging apathetic political behavior (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

examples of this, Italian research has found that an incumbent's election performance following a natural disaster is primarily influenced by two factors: media exposure and incumbent advantage. The more media attention focusing on these post-disaster actions; the better incumbent mayors perform in reelection. (Masiero and Santarossa, 2021)

There are of course, key differences: Italian mayors tend to hold far more power to respond than their American counterparts because of the stark geographical divides in the largely mountainous country, which disadvantage national response efforts. This difference may support the US-based findings that voters' response to natural disasters depends largely on a government's ability to mitigate the effects of the disaster (Abney and Hill, 1966). This suggests perhaps an incumbent in the US does not have the ability to manipulate coverage as easily as they would like.

This chapter summarized the literature surrounding natural disasters' role in elections. In the next section, I develop hypotheses based on this literature. Generally, I expect that media coverage, which is itself influenced by demographic factors, will affect the incumbent's election performance following a natural disaster due to its likelihood of spreading harmful political narratives.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Approach

#### Expectations and Justifications

This chapter will present the conceptual argument of this thesis, the overall purpose of which is to explain the variation in incumbent election performances<sup>2</sup> following a natural disaster. The underlying question of this paper is: why do some politicians perform better than others in elections following a natural disaster? I argue that the variation results from media coverage focusing on the disaster and its aftermath, as voters can become exposed to political narratives through their consumption of media. I also argue that because the amount of media coverage can be influenced by various characteristics of the incumbent and voters, these characteristics consequently also affect incumbent performances following a natural disaster.

Before proceeding with a detailed explanation about why I expect these things, I will first list the major concepts within my paper. My dependent variable is the election performance of an incumbent following a natural disaster. My primary independent variable is the scope of media attention following a natural disaster. Other independent variables include the race and sex of a candidate, and the race and income of affected voters. I will control for the severity of the disaster and the incumbent's popularity.

My most key expectation is this: the amount of media coverage following a natural disaster will directly influence how an incumbent performs in the election following the disaster. I expect this outcome because evidence suggests that the reach of a political narrative assigning

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<sup>2</sup> "Performance" and "incumbent performance" throughout this paper refer to how an incumbent performs in their relevant election, i.e., the level of support they receive from voters, unless otherwise noted as referring to something else.



blame to an incumbent has significant ramifications on their election performance, and that that reach is tied to the amount of media coverage a crisis receives. One example cited was Woodrow Wilson, who was punished by voters more for shark attacks than a pandemic (Achens and Bartels, 2017). The explanation is that the former was extensively covered by the media, which allowed a harmful political narrative to be effectively spread, while the latter was often downplayed in major newspapers, giving little oxygen to any political narratives blaming Wilson.

We know from existing literature that voters do not always automatically blame incumbents for natural disasters and other crises (Abney and Hill, 1966). However, once voters are introduced to a narrative which blames the incumbent, they are often willing to accept and act upon this narrative. These narratives are primarily spread through media channels, such as newspapers, which is where voters become exposed to them (Achens and Bartels). This is how media coverage comes to influence incumbent performance following a crisis, and specifically a natural disaster – by increasing voters’ exposure to political narratives which blame the incumbent for voters’ ill fortunes.

So, it is not news and media coverage, period, that influences election results. Rather, the more plentiful the coverage of a crisis is, the more opportunities there are for political narratives placing blame on the incumbent to spread and for voters to be exposed to them. It is these political narratives that are influencing the results; media coverage is the vehicle in which they do so.

I also expect to see the race and income-level of those affected by the natural disaster influencing an incumbent’s performance, because there will be a direct relationship between these factors and the totality of media coverage. As discussed in the literature review, media

attention consistently favors the wealthy and the white when disaster or other misfortunes strike in many settings and circumstances (Sommers, 2016 and Elliot, 2002). The observation of this phenomenon in such a wide variety of other areas suggests it occurs following natural disasters, as well. Because whiter and wealthier groups attract more media coverage, and media coverage is expected to correlate with lower incumbent performance following a natural disaster, then we can expect incumbents with these types of voters to fare worse than others.

Additionally, more effective, and simply more political narratives may be aimed at target groups which are advantaged, such as the middle class. These groups will typically be recipients of messages which encourage political engagement, while other groups will typically be exposed to messages discouraging political engagement – something which we would expect to benefit an incumbent (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). This is perhaps further exacerbated by difficulties that lower-income and non-white, especially Black, populations face registering to vote and voting. Stricter Voter ID laws and other policies which make it hard to vote are thought to exist in many predominantly Black and lower-income communities.

While research is not conclusive on whether voters tend to favor white candidates over non-white candidates, there is evidence to suggest voters use a candidate's race to make assumptions about them, especially their competence and their policy preferences – both of which may be under particularly scrutiny following natural disasters. Therefore, I also expect that incumbents who are white will fare better in elections following natural disasters than the average.

## **Hypotheses**

From my theory, I have identified three main hypotheses, outlined below. I hypothesize that (H1) the amount of media attention focusing on a natural disaster will negatively impact local incumbent electoral performance, especially when it focuses specifically on the incumbent. Thus, I expect there to be a negative relationship between media coverage of a natural disaster and subsequent incumbent electoral performance.

Additionally, I expect that (H2) incumbents who are white will perform better in elections following natural disasters than their non-white male counterparts. Thus, I expect to see a positive relationship between an elected official being white, and the incumbent's subsequent electoral performance following a natural disaster.

Finally, I expect that (H3) more privileged groups of voters are less likely to continue supporting an incumbent candidate following a natural disaster. Thus, I expect to see a negative relationship between a more privileged electorate, and subsequent incumbent electoral performance following a natural disaster.

## **Alternative Explanations**

There are other potential explanations for why natural disasters affect election outcomes, of course, but they have been explored and catalogued in the existing literature. The media-focused explanation I present here, while found within broader crisis literature, has up until this paper not been sufficiently explored as it relates to natural disasters.

Most of the conclusions found within natural disaster literature are not being disputed here. Existing natural disaster literature has found that voters will sometimes punish incumbents

for presiding over natural disasters, regardless of performance. I agree, but where existing literature suggests that the variation in incumbent performance is a result of irrational voters, or that it occurs with no basis whatsoever, I am instead arguing that it results from media-driven political narratives blaming the incumbent, acted upon by gullible or uninformed voters.

A different type of competing explanation came from Masiero and Santarosa's study. They also find that media coverage leads to a variation in local incumbents' election performances, but that the amount of media coverage positively correlates with these election performances. The evidence for this is strong – in Italy. Crucially, Italian mayors hold extensive powers to respond to a disaster, which means they can use media channels to spread a political narrative highlighting their competent response efforts. US mayors and local officials rarely share these powers. Thus, the media attention which benefits Italian incumbent performance hinders their American counterparts (Masiero and Santarossa, 2021). Consequently, this is not truly a competing answer. The difference is explained by a meaningful difference in their abilities to respond to the disaster, which evidence has shown is a key factor in how well an incumbent performs following a natural disaster.

### **Variables to Control For**

There are several factors within this research that must be accounted for in this study. The first, and most important of these is the severity of the natural disaster preceding the election. Literature has demonstrated the importance of a disaster's severity on the perception of that disaster, and while I expect it to be secondary to media coverage, it is still worth controlling for, if only to see if that trend is illustrated in this research as well. Of course, a full analysis of the

relationship between severity of disaster and variation of incumbent performance is outside the scope of this study and would be remarkably hard to conduct on a national level due to the previously mentioned limitations on natural disaster literature (infrequency, lack of comparable attributes, lack of existing data). However, it follows intuitively that if voters do sometimes blame incumbents for natural disasters, their reaction would be more severe correlating to the intensity of the disaster. I want to control for that variable due to its lack of relevance in a media-centric study.

The second variable I will control for is the popularity of an incumbent. How popular an incumbent was pre-natural disaster will obviously impact their performance afterwards. If an incumbent was wildly popular, they may prove to be very durable in the face of even extensive criticism, as they have far more support to lose and still hold support from a majority of voters. If the incumbent was more controversial, even a small number of voters impacted by political narratives switching their vote may be enough to doom an incumbent. Thus, to measure incumbents on an even playing field, their popularity from before the natural disaster struck will be controlled for when measuring their subsequent performance. Controlling for this variable will be part of how the incumbent's election performance is assessed, rather than belonging to its own category.

### **Modelling and Summary**

The conceptual model can be summarized as follows:

*Incumbent Election Performance following a Natural Disaster =  $f(a_1, a_2, a_3, a_4)$*

Where:

*f= The function of each variable*

*a1= Scope and type of media coverage following a natural disaster*

*a2= Privilege of impacted constituency*

*a3 =Incumbent's racial identity is White*

*Controlling For:*

*a4= Severity of disaster*

I believe each of the independent variable affects incumbent performance to some degree, but that media coverage – *a1* – has an outsized influence. Following a natural disaster, I expect to observe a significant negative relationship between incumbent election performance and the amount of media coverage. I also expect that there will be a negative relationship between incumbent election performance following a natural disaster and the wealth and whiteness of voters. Finally, I expect to see a positive relationship between election performance following a natural disaster and the incumbent's status as a white male. For each of those variables, I expect that these are related to media coverage in the ways explained above.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Design**

#### **Overview**

To analyze and respond to the hypotheses I outlined in the previous chapter, I am using case studies; analyzing three notable examples of US mayoral incumbents who ran for re-election following a natural disaster. I have collected data on these incumbents, as well as their corresponding constituencies and elections, and the natural disasters they experienced. I am using that data to explore the possibility that media focus is an important, even outsized variable influencing how incumbents perform after a natural disaster.

The ideal method for determining the nature of this relationship would be to simply analyze the results of every election held after a natural disaster within the United States, as well as the totality of the media coverage, and calculate the impact media had on the outcome. However, because of the extreme limitations surrounding natural disaster literature, this is not possible. Instead, I am testing this relationship by categorizing the media coverage by its scope, specificity to the incumbents, and tone towards the incumbents. I am then comparing the results of the elections with that in mind.

This is not a perfect measurement. Three case studies cannot prove a relationship exists universally, or precisely determine the exact extent of the relationship between media coverage and incumbent performance. However, this is the strongest option available to me right now. There are benefits to this approach, as well. Its strength is that by selecting a handful of examples, I can more thoroughly explore the media coverage for each and better understand the nature of it. The weakness is that it will be a smaller sample, presently at three case studies,

which makes it more difficult to determine the accuracy of some of the other hypotheses, for instance whether race plays a role in incumbent performance in these situations.

My dependent variable is the election performance of an incumbent, which varies across incumbents – this is my unit of analysis. My primary independent variable is the extent to which media spreads a harmful political narrative for the mayor. The race of the incumbent, the wealth and racial demographics of their constituencies, and the severity of the natural disaster are all independent variables as well.

The reason I am using incumbents as units of analyses, rather than something else -the natural disaster, for instance - is because it is the incumbent and their performance that I am interested in. The natural disaster (or other factor) is merely the thing which allows for the study of an incumbent's performance in unusual and interesting circumstances. There are also typically several incumbents impacted by a natural disaster at once, and not all of these incumbents share similar abilities to respond to a natural disaster, come up for re-election during a helpful time frame, or any other number of differences.

### **Case Study Criteria**

It is essential for any research using case studies that a consistent set of criteria for the case studies is implemented, lest the researcher risk desired results influencing the chosen case studies. As previously noted, the preeminent obstacle to thorough and reliable literature on natural disasters within the study of political science is the rarity of these events. Finding comparable events is difficult and becomes more so with each additional criterion. This paper has several.



The first set of requirements serve the same purpose: leveling the playing field for the case studies. The incumbent must be a mayor, and they must hold office in the United States of America. The goal of this research is to determine why some incumbents perform better than others following natural disasters, and especially whether media is a significant factor. Thus, the incumbents must be bound by roughly the same limitations and affected by the same media. If the research would extend itself to Italian mayors for example, it would consequently be tasked with considering the wildly different ability to respond to a natural disaster that Italian mayors have.

This leads into why the use of mayors was the best option for the units of analysis. There are several reasons. Importantly, existing literature has shown time and again that the ability to respond to a natural disaster has significant ramifications on how an incumbent performs following a natural disaster. Therefore, it is important that each incumbent holds the same office. But why that office, specifically? Mayors were specifically chosen because natural disasters do not affect counties or states – they affect the cities within them. People identify with the cities and towns they live in far more often than their counties. When Hurricane Katrina hit, the response was organized through cities, and people looked to their mayor and other city officials to respond, not county officials. This is not universally true – some populations in Maryland, for instance, identify with their county rather than a city, but this is a rare exception to a very commonplace rule.

Furthermore, mayors are the best type of incumbent to measure post-natural disaster performance because they are limited in their ability to respond to a natural disaster, but still widely regarded as vulnerable to voters' attitudes about the response to a natural disaster (Achens and Bartels, etc.). They are also the least “powerful” elected position that it is still

possible to typically gather both election results for, and news coverage of. Both are essential to this research.

The next requirement is the size of the population over which the mayor presided. As I previously stated, it is important to choose incumbents with similar powers. It is also important to choose incumbents with similar responsibilities. The jobs of the mayors of cities with millions of residents, and mayors of cities with only a few thousand residents, are not comparable for the purpose of this research. Consequently, the case studies must involve cities that occupy the top fifty most populated metropolitan areas at the time immediately preceding the disaster. This is also done to ensure that the election would be important enough that it could theoretically generate news coverage sufficient to influence the election – it would be very unlikely that a small town or city impacted by a natural disaster would see media of a scope beyond local coverage regardless of the disaster’s severity. This is not to suggest that local coverage is not important – it is probably at least as, if not more important than national coverage. However, this research utilizes a mixture of both local and national coverage, since, especially for the two more modern case studies, voters are likely to consume both local and wider coverage. Additionally, voters who read or watch coverage about the natural disaster in a national outlet may ascribe more importance to the event, since they now view it as “worthy” of that broader attention.

Another important criterion is the severity of the natural disaster. As with the ability to respond by an incumbent, existing literature has identified the severity of the natural disaster to be a factor which influenced an incumbent’s prospects for reelection, although not to the extent as other factors. Because natural disasters with conditions which encourage study are so rare, it is impossible to find events with identical or even similar severity levels. Instead, in this research I wanted events with a certain floor for natural disaster severity.

In each potential case study, the disaster needed to be severe enough that daily life in the affected areas was significantly disrupted for at least a twenty-four-hour period following the natural disaster, with effects felt for at least 72 hours beyond that. Each of the natural disasters selected met and surpassed these criteria by a wide margin, as I will explain when presenting the chosen case studies. The reasoning behind establishing a floor for natural disaster severity, rather than parameters on each side is as follows: disasters which only briefly effect the lives of constituents are forgotten relatively easily, so long as there are not severe death counts. However, a disaster with extended disruption to daily life and longstanding effects are more likely to be seen as ongoing issues.

While there was no “hard” ceiling for disaster severity, none of the disasters chosen led to deaths which surpassed even one percent of a population, which would have resulted in conditions far beyond that of just a severe natural disaster. While some of the already-mentioned criteria had the purpose of ensuring the potential for wide-ranging media coverage existed, the level of media coverage was itself a factor in selecting case studies. Media coverage had to be present in each case study in nationally syndicated newspapers, online articles, or television coverage. This was to ensure that there was sufficient opportunity for coverage focusing on the incumbent themselves to exist.

It also served a more practical purpose – it is much more difficult to scour media sources not catalogued on the internet or online databases, and it is more difficult to determine whether voters could have been exposed to these less widely-available sources. That is not to say that local coverage was not used – the Chicago Tribune, for example is a nationally syndicated newspaper and a local source, and the Houston Star-Ledger is an acceptable media outlet because of its being a premiere and widely-read outlet within the Houston-based case study.

However, the disaster itself must have attracted attention from non-local sources to ensure an availability of coverage to analyze.

The final fixed requirement for the case studies was the timing of the election after a natural disaster. To determine the effect of the independent variables on the incumbent's performance, the election must have been held within a reasonable timeframe from the natural disaster. The further away from this disaster the election is held, the more difficult it becomes to determine whether an outside factor seriously influenced the election. Ultimately, one year was used as the deadline. Two of the elections in the case studies were within about four months of the disaster, and one was nine months out.

Related to this requirement a qualitative one another –there had to be a certainty that no significant outside scandal or factor occurred after the natural disaster that offset the impacts of the natural disaster. This is different from all the other criteria in that it is not a factor that *must* exist, but one which must not. This is yet another reason for the minimum population requirements; the city must be significant enough that mayoral scandals would be published and there would be no possibility that a crucial factor was missed which influenced the election results after the natural disaster.

To briefly summarize, each case study is bound by the following guidelines: it must focus on a US mayor of a major (top-50 most-populated) city, who presided over a natural disaster and ran for re-election within a year. Furthermore, the disaster had to be a serious disruption to daily life which received media coverage which could have theoretically reached wide swaths of affected voters. It is important to note that these case studies do not constitute a non-random draw: in addition to meeting the criteria, each was chosen for its significance in academic and national discourse, or unexpected lack thereof. Hurricane Katrina is the most significant natural

disaster in US history, the 1979 Chicago Blizzard presents a how-to in using the media to upset an incumbent, and Sylvester Turner demonstrates a candidate with remarkable resilience in popularity despite presiding over a series of natural misfortunes.

### **Concept Measurement: Media Coverage**

Media coverage, especially as it targets the incumbent, is this research's most key independent variable. Each case study has its own unique media coverage, both in scope and character. Thus, it is important to measure both the totality of media coverage for any given case study, but also the extent to which that coverage focuses on the incumbent. This categorization is a significant cause of this research being done through case studies – it would be difficult for datasets to capture these unique traits in the coverage. At least, no dataset doing so yet exists. Poring through this coverage manually to determine these characteristics then becomes necessary, and that is what is done here. Media coverage will be represented in three figures. One represents the overall scope of the coverage, and how much attention the natural disaster or its aftermath received. Another represents the quantity of media attention which focuses on the incumbent, relative to the totality of all media coverage of the event. The third represents the attitude presented in that coverage – was there significant criticism of the incumbent? Or was the attention on the incumbent neutral or even positive, for instance in a matter-of-fact newspaper article of an incumbent's speech.

Each of these three qualities of the media coverage will be labeled on a one to three scale, with one representing the least amount of total coverage, the least amount of incumbent-specific

coverage, and the least-negative coverage, respectively. The qualities for each category are represented in the table below.

**Table 1: Measuring Media Coverage**

Categories	Total media coverage	Focus on the incumbent	Attitude towards the incumbent
1	Limited attention nationally; not a major focus in national media sources, significant focus in local media	Limited focus on the incumbent; vast majority of coverage focusing on individuals who are not the incumbent or merely reporting on disaster	Attitude towards the incumbent ranges from positive to almost entirely neutral, very little coverage critical of the incumbent
2	Significant attention nationally; media coverage in major outlets (CNN, New York Times, ABC News, etc.). Main focus of local media.	Significant focus on the incumbent, but not necessarily the main focus of the coverage. Focus on the incumbent makes up a large minority of the coverage.	Attitude on the incumbent ranges from largely neutral to mildly negative. A significant number of articles, but not the majority, are critical.
3	Universal attention nationally, dominated media focus both locally and across the US.	Media focuses largely on the incumbent. The incumbent is a critical component of all media coverage on the disaster.	Coverage is extremely critical of the incumbent when focused on the incumbent. Nearly universally critical.

The reason for measuring media coverage in three separate categories is that I hypothesize that it is not just media coverage itself that influences election results, but also media coverage which focuses on the incumbent, and especially negative coverage. As I stated, there does not exist a tool which sufficiently logs media coverage and its tone towards the incumbent. To analyze and categorize the media coverage, media sources such as newspapers, magazines, online articles, and archived television footage from the relevant times, as well as articles summarizing the coverage, are being used. Limiting this research to only three studies is

beneficial because it allows for a more thorough analysis of these sources, and consequently a more accurate categorization.

### **Concept Measurement: Voter Privilege**

The privilege of the population voting in the incumbent's reelection is an important one in this research, because existing literature illustrates a marked difference in how groups of different privilege levels respond following demanding situations, like natural disasters. I hypothesize that where the negative relationship between media coverage and incumbent performance exists, that relationship will be more dramatic the more privileged the voters. Privilege presents itself in many ways, but of particular importance within a racially and economically diverse country such as the United States, are racial makeup and income. These factors are among the most important, and best catalogued, markers of privilege.

Thus, to measure the privilege level of a group of voters, I am calculating their income as well as their racial makeup. I am representing the former as the percentage above or below the US median income that the city's median income occupies. For the latter, I am calculating the difference between the US percentage of individuals who are Black, and the city's percentage.

I believe this is the best method for estimating a group's privilege with the data available. Its strength lies in its simplicity – there is no argument to be had that these factors do not affect privilege, which is far outside the scope of what this research is trying to determine. By using the two measures separately, this research avoids having to invent a formula to approximate a population's total privilege. This would be far beyond the scope of the research, and is a massive undertaking better left to those more qualified than I. This research is also not trying to create an

exact measure for a population's privilege. Using these metrics is sufficient for painting a broad picture of a group's privilege that is necessary to see how privilege interacts with media following a natural disaster.

### **Concept Measurement: Incumbent Racial Identity**

As discussed in the literature review, while there is not explicit evidence that voters are overall less likely to support a candidate due to that candidate's race, there is evidence that a candidate's race is sometimes used as a shortcut for voters to make assumptions about things which are crucial to an incumbent's perception following a natural disaster, like their competence. Consequently, I hypothesize that where a negative relationship between media coverage and incumbent performance exists, it will be exacerbated for non-white candidates.

To test this theory, I will compare the two candidates who are Black, and their election performance following a natural disaster, with the one incumbent who is white. While I believe this is the best option for testing this relationship, it is perhaps less useful due to the limited nature of three case studies. There is only one case study which uses a white incumbent, which makes it more difficult to analyze the role race played in his election. Research using a larger number of elections would be preferable for exploring this relationship. However, it is a subject of interest to me, and I do plan to test the hypothesis with the data available.

### **Concept Measurement: Disaster Severity**

The severity of a disaster is one of the most important factors in the study of incumbent performance following a natural disaster. Voters' response to a mild and short-lived rainstorm



with minor flooding, and to a devastating hurricane interrupting life for weeks on end, is always going to differ dramatically. Thus, as I will discuss in my criteria for selecting a case study, all disasters had to meet a certain level of severity. However, even after establishing a more level playing field, the severity of the disaster is still a factor which should be noted when analyzing the relationship between media focus and incumbent performance.

To measure the severity of the disaster, I will be measuring severity on a one through three scale. One will represent the least severe designation for a disaster, two the next most severe, and three the most severe. The qualities for each categorization are represented in the table below.

**Table 2: Measuring Natural Disaster Severity**

Severity	Conditions
1	The natural disaster absolutely halts daily life for at least a twenty-four-hour period, with severe disruptions continuing for a period of up to 72 hours. Most residents could resume normal activities within a week of the initial disaster period's end.
2	Inability to resume daily life exceeds the initial three days, and major disruptions to infrastructure and an inability to resume daily life continue beyond week following the natural disaster. The disruption to daily life is still seen as "temporary" but continues for significant portions of residents for days or weeks on end following the initial disaster period.
3	Catastrophic levels of destruction lead to a disruption to daily life which is ongoing for an extended period and is likely to not be seen by residents as "temporary." There is significant displacement or an inability to resume daily life for many residents in the weeks or months after the initial disaster period.

I am using the disruption to daily life and normal activities as the deciding factor for a disaster's severity because this is how most voters will perceive the disaster – as a disruption to their life. I considered using deaths or property damage, but each of these has issues. Deaths are an indicator of a severe weather event, but depending on the type of event, a smaller number of deaths may seem more significant. Property damage was disqualified because of the difficulty of

taking inflation of assets into account, and the wildly different values of homes in different areas. Disruption accurately captures the period in which a disaster weighed on voters' lives, and the damage sustained can be factored in through a disruption to city services, whose value is not monetary but in the services they provide.

### **Concept Measurement: Incumbent Popularity and Performance**

While this research is determining the effect of media attention on incumbent performance, incumbents do not run for reelection in a vacuum free of any issue not related to a natural disaster. Consequently, estimating an incumbent's popularity is useful, especially before a natural disaster. The margin by which the incumbent won their last election is one indicator. Polling taken from before the natural disaster is another. The benefits of using each of these factors are that, unlike a politician's "image," perceived attributes, or other intangibles, their prior election performance and their approval ratings are quantifiable. There is certainly room for a discussion of certain perceived attributes influencing their post-natural disaster performance, but that is difficult to categorize. For instance, George W. Bush was often portrayed as an out of touch leader both pre- and post-Katrina, which would have certainly impacted a theoretical campaign following that event. However, it is difficult to ascribe a value to the "out of touch" attribute.

As I mentioned in the theoretical approach, it is important to control for previous support when measuring an incumbent's support. Rather than controlling for this factor as its own independent variable, I will be instead measure the change in support an incumbent sees as their measure of performance in their reelection. Doing this allows the research to illustrate how media

coverage following a natural disaster caused a divergence from the type of election performance the candidate would have been expected to have if they were not exposed to any political narratives, placing different incumbents on an even footing upon which to measure the independent variables. Of course, it is impossible to calculate with certainty how an incumbent would have performed in a hypothetical election where they did not experience a natural disaster. However, by using both prior election performance, and their approval rating before the natural disasters, we can get a sense of their popularity, which could have consequences for their durability following a natural disaster. It allows us to see how much support was gained or lost following the event. I will then subtract the measures of Previous Support from their actual two-party percentage of support, finding their Change in Support. This is summarized in the table below.

**Table 3: Measuring Incumbent Support**

Concept	Summary	Measurement
Change in Support	Change in Support is a measure of how much electoral support the incumbent gained or lost following the natural disaster, generally by comparing it to the concept of “Previous Support.”	This concept will be measured in two ways: by subtracting the percentage of the two-party vote from a.) the previous percentage of the two-party vote and b.) the support garnered in polls before the disaster.
Previous Support	Previous Support is a representation of the support a candidate had in their most recent election, which is necessary for determining how the natural disaster impacted their performance: “Change in Support.”	This concept will be measured in two ways: a.) by taking the percent of the two-party vote the incumbent received, and b.) by using approval rating the candidate had shortly before the disaster.

Constituency Privilege	Constituency Privilege approximates how privileged relative to the average American the voters in the incumbent's city are.	Constituency privilege is measured in two ways: a.) the population's percentage above or below the US Median income. b.) the difference between the percentage of the US which is Black, and the percentage of the constituency which is Black.
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## **Chapter 5**

### **Selected Case Studies**

#### **Ray Nagin**

Ray Nagin was the mayor of New Orleans, Louisiana from 2002 to 2010. Although indicted on numerous corruption-related charges in 2014 (to which he is currently confined to house arrest for in 2022), he enjoyed periods of significant success and popularity while in office, especially leading up to Hurricane Katrina (Howell, 2003). He is perhaps best-known for being the mayor of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, which is the natural disaster this case study focuses on. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and its surrounding areas in late August of 2005, and the severe weather combined with failures in infrastructure led to some of the worst and most widely publicized natural disaster conditions seen in a first-world country. The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina included such recognizable moments as musician Kanye West stating on live television that (then-President) “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!” (West, 2005) and Geraldo Riviera crying on television while pleading for the government to provide support for residents of New Orleans, and to allow them to leave the area, as many were being forced to stay in the Superdome (Riviera, 2005).

Katrina’s status as a disaster the likes of which the US had not seen since in years gives it particular recognition in the public conscience. Simply put, it is far more well-known than most natural disasters. Because of this, it is an event many readers can connect to and understand concepts through easier than in other disasters. It is particularly useful in this research because of how well it fits within the defined criteria for case studies.

Ray Nagin fits the ideal profile for an incumbent – he was the mayor of a top-50 most-populated US city and was well into his term when a serious natural disaster hit his constituency of Orleans Parish/New Orleans. Additionally, his election was within a year of the natural disaster. Hurricane Katrina landed on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005, while the New Orleans mayoral election was held on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006. This is the longest period between natural disaster and election within the case studies being researched, but it does not provide an issue. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath dominated the media and political landscape in the eight months between the two, and there was no major scandal or other event which would have impacted the election. Put simply, little else could have emerged as a major story coming out of Katrina due to the massive devastation it caused.

Indeed, the absolute destruction the hurricane wreaked is what makes it most distinct from the other two case studies, which did have longstanding effects, but of a quite different kind than Katrina. Daily life in New Orleans was not simply interrupted for a few weeks. Hundreds of thousands of residents had to evacuate or be evacuated, and the city of New Orleans lost close to 200,000 residents in the year following the disaster. For the city of New Orleans, there is a before, and an after, Hurricane Katrina. This stands in contrast to Chicago, where the most significant and long-lasting result of the 1979 Blizzard was a political change – the breakdown of the Democratic Machine, and Houston, a city which has been impacted regularly in recent years by severe weather events. Hurricane Katrina easily meets the necessary criteria to be labelled as a “3” in terms of disaster severity.

An important element of the disaster is the way it disproportionately affected residents of different races. Before Hurricane Katrina, the city’s population stood at roughly two-thirds Black. By the time Nagin was up for reelection, that had changed dramatically. Now, the city

was roughly even in terms of Black and white residents (UPI, 2006). However, his approval rating was relatively high with both Black and white residents before the disaster (Howell, 2003) and so this demographic change is not commonly cited as a primary cause for the election results.

This case study has by far the largest scope of overall media attention. Hurricane Katrina was the most significant news story from that year for the entire United States, and in fact the media attention surrounding the disaster is itself a significant and memorable event, as discussed in this paper's introduction. This media coverage did not extend much blame onto Ray Nagin himself, relative to the overall proportion of coverage. That is not to say critical coverage did not exist – it did – but most of it was aimed at the federal response, George W. Bush, and even the residents of New Orleans, who were unfortunately subject to coverage derided by many as racially influenced (Gibson, 2005), and later shown to be largely overdramatized (Al Jazeera, 2005). The undersecretary of FEMA, Michael J. Brown, was a particularly oft-targeted figure of media ire as well (Pao, 2015).

That is not to say that there was no coverage critical of Nagin – there was, especially after he made comments suggesting that Hurricane Katrina was “God’s punishing America for invading Iraq”, referring to the 2003 invasion (DuBos, 2006). He was also criticized for waiting what some thought was too long to issue a mandatory evacuation order (Brinkley, 2006), although evacuation efforts had started in earnest well before the announcement had made, and some 92% of the population was successfully evacuated before dire consequences were seen. Retrospective coverage of the disaster often cites issues with Nagin’s ego, or his frequent trips out of the city (Carr, 2007), although these criticisms, despite what some retrospective coverage implies, were mostly mounted after Nagin’s reelection. However, relative to the overall

proportion of coverage for Katrina, the amount focusing on Nagin, and therefore negative towards Nagin, is quite small. National coverage, in particular rarely focuses on his perceived handling of the disaster one way or the other, and far more frequently brings up perceived failures of the federal government and the executive branch. For this reason, Nagin is categorized as a “3” for totality of media coverage, a “1” for amount of coverage focused on him, and a “2” for the tone of the coverage. This represents a huge amount of total coverage, very little of which was directed towards Nagin, but which was often negative when it was focused on the mayor.

### **Sylvester Turner**

Sylvester Turner has been the mayor of Houston, Texas since 2016, and has been the mayor during two significant natural disasters: Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and Tropical Storm Imelda in 2019. This case study focuses on his election following Imelda in 2019 but will include discussion of some elements of Hurricane Harvey as well. The reason for this is because the media will often cover both disasters when covering the election, and the memory of Harvey certainly impacted perception of Tropical Storm Imelda and Turner in 2019.

Houston is a city which stands within the United States’ 50 largest, and Texas as a whole has been on the receiving end of more than one significant natural disaster in recent years. It has also been subjected to massive power outages because of grid failure stemming from winter conditions, which were severe enough that they are comparable with natural disasters. All of this is to say that while Turner was the recipient of the least-severe natural disaster in terms of its aftermath, his constituency was likely fatigued in terms of natural disasters.



Additionally, just because Imelda is the “least-severe” of the natural disasters does not mean that it was not severe. Just the opposite. Ignoring Hurricane Harvey, Tropical Storm Imelda was Texas’ most significant storm since 1978, and the fifth wettest in contiguous US history. The conditions of the storm met the requirements for a case study, as daily life was interrupted for over twenty-four hours, and the flooding as a result of the storm lasted for days past that. The natural disaster is ranked as a “1.” This is because although the storm was severe enough to impact Houston for a three-day period, and damage sustained led to problems past that, daily life was able to largely resume on the Monday following the rainfall which started Thursday and continued into Friday. However, for those initial few days, much of the city and county were indeed affected by the storm to a point where basic everyday life was halted. This was further exacerbated when the rainfall caused massive overflows of sewage and rainwater. While these floods did not affect the quality of most drinking water, there was also a rationing of water in the city due to fears of that event occurring (Brillo, et al, 2019).

Hurricane Harvey’s shadow stood over much of the aftermath of Tropical Storm Imelda. For one city to undertake two separate severe-rainfall events in as many years was unprecedented for this region, and many residents were still recovering from Hurricane Harvey. Many houses and other buildings had flooded or been otherwise materially damaged in 2017, and there had been issues for some residents receiving aid to assist them in the recovery from Hurricane Harvey. However, the existence of Hurricane Harvey also made Imelda easier, as the city of Houston would likely have received significantly more intense flooding and damage had the infrastructure implemented following Harvey not been in place. This is especially true because relatively little was done to prepare for the storm, which forecasters dramatically underestimated the intensity of leading up to the rainfall (Baldwin, 2019).

The coverage of Imelda often focused on the disaster within the framing of a city which had been recently hit by another significant natural event, that being Hurricane Harvey. There is indeed national coverage of the event, both as it pertained to the larger storm covering much of Texas, and more importantly the way the storm affected the residents of Houston. In this way, the coverage meets the necessary level for a case study. Because Houston, while severely impacted, was not the hardest-hit area, the national coverage of the disaster frequently touches not just on Houston, but the wide swaths of Texas which experienced torrential downpours and subsequent flooding. Indeed, what made Houston so notable when it did stand out in coverage, was the recency of Hurricane Harvey. Consequently, the totality of media coverage reaches the level of “2.”

While the coverage of Tropical Storm Imelda was significant, very little of it focused on the Mayor of Houston: Sylvester Turner. Sylvester Turner had been a relatively new mayor when Harvey hit in 2017 but was coming up for reelection very shortly – three months – after Tropical Storm Imelda. Most media coverage of Turner is simply reporting on his announcements. Rarely are editorials or newscasters giving glowing endorsements, nor are there televised pundits or opinion contributors expressing severe disappointment. The coverage of Turner as it relates to the disasters is startlingly neutral. Given this finding, the totality of media coverage relating to Turner reaches a “1,” and the tone of media coverage towards Turner is also a “1.”

Tropical Storm Imelda hit Houston on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and the runoff for the Mayoral election of Houston took place on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019 (Harris County Elections, 2020). This is quite a small period between the storm and the election, and consequently it is easy to determine whether there were significant election-altering events in this period: there were not. Indeed, much of the narrative surrounding the election was specifically about Tropical

Storm Imelda, as well as Hurricane Harvey two years prior, as some blamed Turner for a delay in financial assistance from the government following Hurricane Harvey, especially because large sums of the assistance funds remained unspent in 2019, which Turner defended (Abrahams, 2019). This delay in financial assistance was one of the most notable instances of the disaster playing a role in the 2019 mayoral election. Because Turner had received blame in the media for the failure to pay recipients following 2017, the possibility that he might once again fail Houston residents in some way following a natural disaster was something brought up by Republicans and covered in local media coverage such as on ‘click2houston.com’ (Rhodes, 2019).

This case study was chosen not simply because it met the necessary criteria, but also because it is at the time of writing a relatively recent election, only three years old. Additionally, it was chosen because of the uniqueness of the media coverage. There is nothing to suggest that Turner was less worthy of coverage than Bilandic or Nagin, but indeed he seems to be an afterthought in nearly all coverage of the disaster. While not to the extent of Hurricane Harvey, Imelda did seriously damage the city of Houston and cause problems for its residents. Turner was “on the hook” for not one, but two natural disasters. However, his media coverage is low compared to the other two candidates. Choosing a case study where there are two distinct and severe disasters in a two-year period (even if only the latter is being utilized) for an incumbent would seem to indicate he may perform poorly based on existing literature. However, the lack of media coverage would suggest he is unlikely to see a serious loss in support if my hypothesis is supported.

### Michael Bilandic

Michael Bilandic was the mayor of Chicago, Illinois from 1976 to 1979. He assumed office from Richard Daley, who had been the figurehead of the Cook County Democratic Organization; dubbed an “invincible (political) machine” (Kneeland, 1979). He assumed both the mayoral office and the head of this organization. He presided over a series of winter storms which occurred in the early months of 1979. He then ran for and lost reelection in April of 1979 (Chicago Democracy Project, 1979). Like Turner, there was a brief period between the disaster and election. As a mayor of a top-50 US city, Bilandic fits the criteria for the incumbent.

The disaster also falls within the confines of the criteria. The storms, especially a nine-inch New Year’s snowstorm and more significantly, the “1979 Blizzard” on January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> which produced 20 inches (Skilling, 2019), were absolutely debilitating for the city of Chicago (Skilling, 2015 and Wagner, 1979). Daily life ground to a halt, and snow remained on the ground in quantities large enough to affect trains and other city services for something close to 40 days. There were multiple deaths relating to the blizzard (Changnon et al, 1980). Consequently, while the actual severity of the disaster is not the most severe among the case studies, the aftermath was long and difficult.

Bilandic was the subject of massively critical media attention from outlets both locally in Chicago and across the country. Many saw the failure to respond to the snow as Bilandic’s fault, and to this day he is cited as an incumbent who was irreparably harmed by media attention surrounding a natural disaster he presided over (Moser, 2011; Nigut, 2014; etc.). Of course, Bilandic was a first-term mayor of a major city with countless responsibilities. There is little reason to believe the policies dictating the blizzard response were his specifically, or that he had any significant ability to combat the storm of unheard-of severity. Rather, the vast media

attention singled him out as a scapegoat, and his administration's inability to handle and respond to the coverage is what doomed him, as he lost in a primary, a huge upset. The media attention was certainly sufficient to impact the election, and indeed it did, defining his short mayoral career as one in which a snowstorm and resulting media attention destroyed a once invulnerable political machine.

The media coverage of the event took place on a national scale, but the most intense coverage took place in Chicago itself. National coverage focused largely on the onslaught of snow, and then on Michael Bilandic's strategy, or perceived lack thereof. There is certainly no positive coverage of Bilandic from this time to be found. He was already a figure who was not exceedingly well-liked, as he was the current recipient of the powers of the Democratic Machine. At most, coverage would concede that the snow had reached levels not seen since Chicago's "benchmark" (Skilling, 2019) Blizzard of 1967, which would have been difficult to manage. Media institutions of Chicago could be described as ruthless. The coverage of Bilandic was universally negative. Recollections from more modern times nearly always remark on Bilandic's being hurt from a public relations perspective, and examining these primary sources demonstrates why: his challenger, Jane Byrne was extremely quotable and capitalized on the "City that Works" inability to function correctly after the blizzards. The blizzard is referred to on multiple instances in retrospective coverage as being the event which led to Bilandic's loss or Byrne's win (Benzkofer, 2019; Moser)

It is worth noting the possibility that a perception exists that while hurricanes and floods may be somewhat outside the control of a mayor's power, blizzards – at least the response to blizzards – are more easily addressed by them. There may be truth to that perception, but it is also the case that severity of the 1979 Hurricanes were highly unexpected, and Bilandic's

response was not out of the ordinary – but his response and its failures were publicized widely and effectively by Byrne and others.

After analyzing the available sources, this case study can be summarized in the following manner: The totality of media coverage reaches a 2 out of 3 – while it was the dominant story within Chicago, and reported on nationally, the aftermath of the storm was not the dominant national story. Coverage focusing on the incumbent, and the tone of that coverage, both reach a level of 3 out of 3 – a vast majority of the coverage focused on Bilandic following the storm, and this coverage was universally critical and established a narrative that problems occurring because of the snowfall laid on Bilandic’s shoulders.

The disaster is categorized as 2 out of 3. The snowfall went on for two straight days, leading to close to thirty cumulative inches between the New Years and mid-January storms, and daily life did not resume for a few days after. However, infrastructure was heavily impacted for well over a month, and snow lay on the ground for forty days. There was a particularly significant disruption to infrastructure in Black communities, where trains stopped receiving passengers to speed up service in other areas. However, despite all these problems, the aftereffects were still temporary, and little widespread permanent damage occurred – rather, the snow kept otherwise functional services out of operation.

## Chapter 6

### Results and Analysis

#### Summary of Incumbent Election Performances

**Table 4: Incumbent Change in Support from Prior Election**

Incumbent	Support Change from Pre-ND Election	Percentage of Two-Party Support in Pre-ND Election	Percentage of Two-Party Support in Post-ND Election
Nagin	-6.65	59 <sup>3</sup>	52.35 <sup>4</sup>
Turner	5.08	50.96 <sup>5</sup>	56.04 <sup>6</sup>
Bilandic* <sup>7</sup>	-11.94	60.9 <sup>8</sup>	48.96 <sup>9</sup>

**Table 5: Incumbent Change in Support from Prior Approval Rating**

Incumbent	Support Change from Pre-ND Polling	Pre-ND Approval %	Percentage of Two-Party Support in Post-ND Election
Nagin	-27.65	80 <sup>10</sup>	52.35
Turner	4.94	51.1 <sup>11</sup>	56.04
Bilandic	0.96	48 <sup>12</sup>	48.96

The two tables above represent the support each incumbent saw in their elections – both their actual margin of victory (or loss), and the extent to which they gained or lost support from

<sup>3</sup> Louisiana Secretary of State, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002

<sup>4</sup> Louisiana Secretary of State, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Harris County, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Harris County Election Results, 2020

<sup>7</sup> \* Michael Bilandic lost in the Chicago Democratic Primary of 1979. Thus, both his Pre- and Post-ND election results represent a primary race.

<sup>8</sup> Chicago Democracy Project, 1977

<sup>9</sup> Chicago Democracy Project, 1979

<sup>10</sup> Howell, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Rice and Watkins, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Moser, 2016

their previous election or prior polling. Following Hurricane Katrina, Ray Nagin lost significant amounts of support. In the 2006 election, Nagin did prevail with 52.35% of the votes which went towards the top-two candidates. However, this was a loss of over six percent from his 2002 election, where he saw 59% of the votes. More significantly, Nagin had been polling at extremely high levels pre-Katrina, at 80% approval. When measuring by approval ratings, Nagin saw a decrease in support to a tune of over twenty-seven percent.

Sylvester Turner on the other hand fared the best of the three candidates, gaining support in both metrics. Compared to both his previous election performance and polls conducted shortly before Tropical Storm Imelda, Turner improved by approximately five percent. He is the only candidate to gain support when comparing to both his prior election and polls.

Michael Bilandic saw decreased support when comparing his pre- and post- natural disaster elections. Bilandic was elected as the mayor of Chicago with a healthy 60.9% of the vote among the top-two candidates in the Democratic primary. He lost a significant amount of electoral support – close to twelve percent. He ultimately fell to Jane Byrne in the 1979 Chicago Democratic Primary. However, this was not out of line with the polling he had been experiencing. Recent polls conducted before the blizzard had Bilandic at a 48% approval rating, which is slightly (but probably not significantly) worse than his actual results, where he received just shy of 49% of the votes. This means he *technically* outperformed expectations by this metric.

While measuring the change in support is crucial to fully grasping an incumbent's performance, it does not matter as much to an incumbent as the simplest test of performance – did they win? Turner won with even greater success than his first election, Nagin won but with less support than before, and Bilandic lost.



### **Results for Media Coverage and Incumbent Performance**

As I have stated repeatedly, the main variable I am interested in studying is media coverage as it effects incumbent performance. Not only do I expect media coverage to negatively correlate with election performance, but I also expect media coverage to be the best predictor of election performance of all of the studied variables. When combining each of the three media categories, Michael Bilandic would be expected to perform the worst, as he had a total score of 8. Ray Nagin would also be predicted to perform poorly, as he received a score of 7. Sylvester Turner would be expected to perform the best, as he had a total score of just 4.

Michael Bilandic was indeed the only one of the three candidates to lose, which in a sense supports the hypothesis. Additionally, he lost the most support from his prior election to the one which took place post-blizzard. Both of these measures support the hypothesis that media coverage does have a negative impact on incumbent performance. It should be noted, however that Change in Support from polling would not support the hypothesis – Bilandic saw minor gains from his approval rating pre-blizzard. Based on the hypothesis, Ray Nagin was also expected to perform poorly in his reelection. Nagin did see diminished support when comparing his reelection support to his approval ratings – he lost a stunning 27.65% of support. This was by far the sharpest drop when comparing polling to reelection. He also saw diminished support when compared to his first election, at around a six percent difference. Thus, when measuring by polls, Nagin lost more support than expected. When measuring using previous election data, Nagin performed as expected. However, Nagin ultimately went on to win his reelection, while Bilandic lost. Finally, Turner performed exactly as the hypothesis would expect – he did not lose support when compared to either polls or his previous election, and far outpaced the other two incumbents in any positive gain in support.

If Total Media Coverage was the only measure of media coverage used, I would mostly expect to see the results which do in fact occur. Hurricane Katrina received the most coverage of any of the disasters, and Nagin did lose the most support from a polling standpoint, and the second most support from an election standpoint. However, again he did win reelection. Tropical Storm Imelda and the Chicago Blizzard of 1979 received comparable amounts of Total Media Coverage. However, Turner and Bilandic saw drastically different Change in Support. Because their performances were so different, and the media coverage focusing on the disasters themselves more similar, I do not think Total Media Coverage is has as strong as a relationship with incumbent performance as other characteristics in the media coverage.

The next two characteristics of media coverage: Focus on Incumbent, and Tone towards Incumbent, resulted in identical scores for all three incumbents. This was not by design, nor does it take away significance from either characteristic, in my opinion - something which I will discuss in the next chapter. If either category was the only one used, I would expect that Bilandic, who personally received the most and harshest coverage, would lose the most support. Nagin would be expected to lose the second-most support, and Turner perform the best.

The results for these two characteristics each match the results discussed above, when combining the three different characteristics of media coverage. When measuring an incumbent's performance using either a change in support from their previous election, or simply by whether or not they won, the hypothesis that media coverage influences performance is supported. When measuring incumbent performance by a change in support from pre-natural disaster polling, Bilandic and Nagin each occupy the role we would expect the other to, and Sylvester Turner performs as expected.

Based on this very limited case study, the totality of media coverage does not appear to correlate strongly with an incumbent's performance in their reelection. However, the tone of that coverage, and the extent to which that coverage focuses on the incumbent, does (at least for these cases) correlate strongly with incumbent performance – especially when using change in support from a previous election, or simply a win-loss value as the measurement. When combining all three characteristics of media coverage, that correlates with performance to, although the totality of media coverage is not an important factor within that.

### **Results for Natural Disaster Severity and Election Performance**

The relationship between the severity of a natural disaster and the incumbent's election performance is well-tread ground in natural disaster literature, as one of the earliest found conclusions in seminal works. Some of these results affirm that relationship, while others do not. If using a simple win-loss metric, then this relationship is not present because Ray Nagin, who experienced the worst disaster, won his reelection. However, he did lose massive support when compared to his polling pre-Katrina, and a significant (but smaller) amount when compared to his previous election. While Sylvester Turner and Michael Bilandic's disasters were of relatively comparable severity, they are categorized differently because the long-term effects of the Chicago Blizzard of 1979 were more detrimental to more people. Bilandic did perform worse than Turner in every metric, but he performed better than Nagin when comparing pre-disaster polls. Once again, Turner performed as expected. His disaster was the least severe, and he gained about five points in both measurements of performance. He also won his reelection. I did not hypothesize that the severity of the natural disaster would impact performance. Rather, I wanted

to quantify it to see whether it would exceed media coverage in its correlation with performance.

As I hypothesized, by most metrics used, the three case studies demonstrated a stronger relationship between media coverage and performance than natural disaster severity and performance. If natural disaster had been strongly correlated with performance, then I would have expected Nagin to lose the most support, and Bilandic and Turner to have lost similar amounts of support. This did not occur.

### **Results for Race and Incumbent Performance**

I hypothesized that race would play a role in the performances of the incumbents, and that where the negative relationship between media coverage and incumbent performance exists, it will be exacerbated in for Black incumbents. The results of this research do not support this hypothesis whatsoever. Nagin and Turner both won their reelection campaigns, and when using the difference between pre- and post-natural disaster election performance, Bilandic performs the worst. When using approval ratings from polls, Nagin does perform the worst, but Bilandic performs worse than Turner.

### **Results for Constituency Privilege and Incumbent Performance**

**Table 6: Constituency Whiteness**

Incumbent	Difference between % of white population for constituency and US	Percentage of constituency is white	Percentage of US is white

Ray Nagin	-40.5%	26.5% <sup>13</sup>	67% <sup>14</sup>
Sylvester Turner	-35.68%	24.4% <sup>15</sup>	60.1% <sup>16</sup>
Michael Bilandic	-13.3%	69.8% <sup>17</sup>	83.1% <sup>18</sup>

**Table 7: Constituency Income**

Incumbent	% Difference between med. income for constituency and US	Constituency Median Household Income	US Median Household Income
Ray Nagin	-34.6%	\$30,216 <sup>19</sup>	\$46,242 <sup>20</sup>
Sylvester Turner	-6.2%	\$61,638 <sup>21</sup>	\$65,712 <sup>22</sup>
Michael Bilandic	16.1%	\$19,187 <sup>23</sup>	\$16,530 <sup>24</sup>

I hypothesized that the privilege of the incumbents' constituencies would also play a role in the incumbents' performance; that the correlation between media coverage and election performance would become more negative the more privileged a constituency is. The results of this research do not generally support this hypothesis. When using the difference in the percentage of the US and incumbents' populations which are white, Ray Nagin is expected to perform the best, Sylvester Turner expected to perform the second best, and Michael Bilandic (with a significantly whiter voter-base) expected to perform much worse. Indeed, Bilandic is the only incumbent to lose his election, and he sees the most support lost from one election to the next. This aligns with the hypothesis that a more privileged population correlates with a worse

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<sup>13</sup> US Census Bureau, 2015

<sup>14</sup> Passel and Cohn, 2020

<sup>15</sup> Houston City, Texas, 2019

<sup>16</sup> US Census Bureau

<sup>17</sup> Usowski, 1980

<sup>18</sup> Gibson and Jung, 2002

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Census Bureau

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Census Bureau

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Census Bureau

<sup>23</sup> Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1990

<sup>24</sup> US Census Bureau

performance. However, Nagin would be expected to perform similarly to but better than Turner, as their white populations are relatively similar. While both won reelection, Turner did so more easily than Nagin, gained support instead of lost it, and gained support when compared to pre-disaster polling.

If measuring privilege through income, the results are not better. Bilandic would be expected to perform the worst, which he did when measuring using through the previous election. He is also the only incumbent to lose, which supports the results as well. However, Nagin would be expected to perform by far the best with a relatively low-income population. Turner would be expected to perform the second worst, when in fact he performed the best in every measure. Thus, neither measure for privilege correlates very strongly to the incumbent's performance.

### Results Summary

**Table 8: Categorizations Summary**

Incumbent	Change from Election	Change from Polling	Total Media	Inc. Media	Inc. Media Tone	Disaster Severity	Candidate Race	Privilege (Race)	Privilege (Income)
Nagin	-6.65	-27.65	3	2	2	3	Black	-40.5%	-34.6%
Turner	5.08	4.94	2	1	1	1	Black	-35.68%	-6.2%
Bilandic	-11.94	0.96	2	3	3	2	White	-13.3%	16.1%

The table above highlights where each incumbent was categorized in terms of the media coverage they experienced (total, pertaining to them, and tone towards them), disaster severity, and race. Additionally, the figures representing their voters' privilege level (income and whiteness) and their change in support (from approval ratings and prior election support) are also

presented. Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans experienced the most severe disaster and the most significant total media coverage. The media coverage pertaining to him was less frequent and less severe than that relating to Mayor Michael Bilandic of Chicago, who saw less total coverage of his disaster, and more coverage focusing on him. Bilandic's disaster, while severe, did not come close to matching that of Hurricane Katrina. Mayor Sylvester Turner of Houston saw a comparable amount of total media coverage to Bilandic, but far less coverage pertaining to his actions as mayor. His disaster was the least severe of the three, but he had the misfortune of also presiding over a disaster which was more severe than Bilandic's, although still not the catastrophe that Hurricane Katrina was. Nagin and Turner are Black, while Bilandic is white. Ray Nagin had the least privileged constituency, according to the two indicators. Sylvester Turner also had a constituency that was less privileged than the typical American. Bilandic actually had a constituency that was more privileged than average, although much closer to that average.

## Chapter 7

### Discussion and Conclusion

Because a variety of measures for performance were used, there is also a variety of support for the hypotheses. While not every measure supported every hypothesis, the results are very encouraging overall. There are two measurements for an incumbent's reelection performance. The first: how much support was gained or lost when comparing the post-natural disaster election to the pre-natural disaster election? The second: how much support was gained or lost when comparing the post-natural disaster election to the pre-natural disaster approval ratings? The results sometimes differed drastically. Of course, there is another measure of performance which does not control for pre-disaster popularity, but is more important to the incumbents themselves: did they actually win another term? Each of the two (really three) measures of success saw different levels of correlation to the primary independent variable, media coverage.

I believe the best way to measure an incumbent's performance is also the measure which most strongly correlated with media coverage: a change in support from previous election results. I prefer this measurement because it is more accurate than polling. An approval rating has a margin of error, and people can give whatever answer they like with no consequences. Contrasting that, voters *voting* express their true, private preferences which will actually affect an important outcome. However, because so much can happen between an incumbent's first election and the occurrence of the natural disaster, it is important to get an idea for how they were doing well into their term, as well. Winning, while the most important measure of success to a politician, does not give researchers enough information, especially when it is in a comparative case study with only three cases. The way in which Turner and Nagin won are very



different, for example, but that would not show up in a simple win-loss metric. Their performance would appear identical in that scenario.

Still, the majority of evidence suggests media coverage influences incumbent performance. This is especially true depending on the *type* of media coverage. Media coverage focusing on the disaster broadly did not appear to sway voters very much one way or the other. It did correlate strongly with the severity of a natural disaster. This is not surprising – it follows logically that more severe disasters are more news-worthy – but it does potentially explain the low correlation between voters' privilege and an incumbent performance. I hypothesized that more privileged communities would hold politicians more accountable for natural disasters because there would be more total media coverage pertaining to the disaster. If this is the case, it did not happen at a level apparent here, perhaps because total media coverage did not lead to worse incumbent performance. Thus, to the extent that the privilege of voters influences coverage, that coverage would not necessarily influence incumbent performance because it would not dictate the tone or focus of the coverage toward the incumbent. Further research into the topic could prove fruitful. It could be that less privileged populations may receive less aid and support from various institutions, leaving local voting as one of a very limited number of outlets to hopefully spark change. This could offset the advantages privileged populations have in terms of easier access to voting, more targeted media coverage, etc. More research would need to be done in order to determine the extent of this relationship or its potential causes.

Throughout the results, the incumbents Bilandic and Nagin frequently occupied roles which hypotheses thought would belong to the other. This most frequently came through Bilandic's gain in support in his reelection compared to polling. For a variety of reasons, but one in particular, I believe Bilandic actually performed far worse than the numbers suggest. Despite

his greater loss in support from an approval rating perspective, Nagin did still win his reelection, which is the true judge of success. No incumbent would prefer Bilandic's election result just because he had a smaller level of support lost compared to Nagin. While Nagin lost more support, rarely does an 80% approval rating actually carry into an election. It is one thing to simply approve of a politician while they are in office, and another to vote for them when you have your choice of candidates, as New Orleans did in a non-partisan election leading into a runoff between two Democratic candidates. Nagin did see a significant loss in support but simply put, he had the support to lose. Bilandic, on the other hand did not. Bilandic's loss is especially notable because he did not lose in a general election or a runoff - he never made it that far. Bilandic lost in the primary to a serious underdog, Jane Byrne, despite being the candidate representing one of the most notorious political machines in the United States.

For Bilandic, with all of the support of the Democratic machine of Chicago behind him, and all of the powers of the incumbency at his aid, to be primaried by a relative unknown going into the election and actually lose constitutes a failure on a much grander scale than Ray Nagin losing the support of many who had approved of his handling of the mayoral duties or voted for him in a previous election. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the hypothesis stating that media coverage will cause worse incumbent performance, especially when the coverage focuses on the incumbent, has the strongest level of support of any of the hypotheses in this research. I believe that if a researcher were able to do a broader study of many different elections following natural disasters, these results would clearly emerge.

As stated previously, this research was limited by time, resources, and data. In a perfect world, a broader quantitative study would be conducted analyzing the election results of dozens of incumbents post-natural disaster. Instead, as a result of the limitations, the best option

available to research this topic were comparative case studies. However, if those limitations were not in place, I believe a more thorough analysis could be done. One such approach would be to compile election data on every race where an incumbent at the state level or lower came up for reelection following a natural disaster, within a set period of time. These races, hopefully totaling at least a few dozen, could be compared in several ways – how did incumbents of  $x$  race do compared to  $y$  race, or what level of voter privilege seems to correlate with enhanced incumbent performance. I still believe that Change in Support through prior elections is the best measure of performance, but the simple win-loss measure would also be effective, especially in a larger sample size where the sheer number of cases would diminish the effect of potential outliers or unique circumstances. While establishing the tone towards incumbents would be difficult in this type of research, the level of focus coverage had on the incumbent would be theoretically possible through keyword searches of databases and media archives, using their name or other indicators.

Race is another factor I hypothesized would influence incumbent performance, which was not demonstrated by these case studies. As discussed in the literature review, there is some evidence to suggest that race may influence incumbent performances because of “shortcuts” voters make in assuming things like competence and policy preferences in a candidate. However, if that relationship does exist, it was not strong enough in these three examples to overcome media coverage’s effect on an incumbent’s performance. While the hypothesis is not supported, I do not believe that necessarily implies its falsehood. Rather, it is a difficult relationship to explore in only three case studies, especially when it was not a main focus in those case studies’ selection. Future research on how candidates of different racial and ethnic backgrounds perform following crises and disasters could be interesting, and this is a topic which was unfortunately

not able to be explored due to the limitations of research design. I still think the relationship exists, but I do not think it is important enough to outweigh media coverage, which appears to be a more important variable for these three incumbents. I do not think that these results suggest that race does not impact election results, or even that it is better to be Black than white in the occurrence of presiding over the natural disaster (as the results technically suggest). Instead, they simply demonstrate that three case studies are not enough to analyze this relationship. If race had been my priority, then I could have perhaps chosen better, or additional case studies to address this relationship. However, I wanted to primarily analyze the impact between media coverage and performance.

While not all hypotheses saw support, this was expected. For the media to play an outsized role in how incumbents perform following a natural disaster, we would expect to see factors which could theoretically influence the results actually fall by the wayside if they were dwarfed in importance by media coverage. In these case studies, media attention, especially as it pertained to the incumbent or was harsh towards the incumbent, did consistently correlate with worse-than-expected incumbent performance in their election. This is true even when accounting for things such as the severity of the disaster: Sylvester Turner and Michael Bilandic's natural disasters were far more comparable in terms of severity than Bilandic and Ray Nagin, but their performances were wildly different: Turner, despite a severe Tropical Storm and a Blizzard the likes of which Houston had not seen before, gained support. Sylvester Turner did not need to be heralded by many as a great leader following a crisis. Instead, he merely had to not be scapegoated as an unprepared and incompetent incumbent, as Michael Bilandic was.

The findings from these case studies could prove useful for incumbents who are seeking to minimize potential risks to reelection following a natural disaster. If the worst performances

were from the incumbents who received a stronger focus from the media, or a more adversarial focus from the media, then it stands to reason that incumbents' efforts would be well-spent on counter messaging or putting oneself in the media as much as possible. While local incumbents like mayors have limited abilities to respond practically to a natural disaster, they are in a strong position to respond through media channels to seem statesman like, or at least sympathetic.

Appearing sympathetic (and avoiding blunders) being key to success was one of the key findings that the first seminal work on the topic by Abney and Hill in 1966. This strategy has played itself out relatively recently: Newark mayor Cory Booker saw widespread positive media coverage following Hurricane Sandy because he was able to effectively use what limited power he did have to appear sympathetic and helpful – even going so far as to allow displaced residents to temporarily stay in his residence. He never came up for reelection, because he was instead selected to fill an empty US Senate seat, a position far more powerful than his mayorship.

Indeed, if the media is as powerful an influence on an incumbent's reelection as these case studies suggest it may be, then politicians would benefit from utilizing that to their benefit, instead of leaving it alone to their detriment. Doing things publicly which are likely to attract positive attention is always smart, but it may be more than that following a natural disaster: it may be crucial. Of the three incumbents studied here, Ray Nagin seemed to try the hardest to do so following his natural disaster, but he also had missteps, such as spending what some deemed to be an inappropriate amount of time outside of the city, and politicizing rebuilding efforts by suggesting they may cater to Black residents through his "chocolate city" comments, among others. Bilandic's PR following the disaster was abysmal – agencies under his control put out opposing messaging and did little to combat the effective ad campaign Jane Byrne ran. Sylvester turner did comparatively little, but he was not effectively blamed through media outlets for the

disaster or failures during recovery. His opponent was a relative newcomer to politics; a notable lawyer within Houston, who may not have had the political savvy to use media to his advantage. Media outlets themselves were simply not very focused on Turner. In each of these cases, the incumbent could have better utilized the power of the Fourth Estate to their advantage, and it may have potentially changed the results quite substantially, especially in Bilandic's case.

Ultimately, three case studies do not provide enough evidence to make broad conclusions about the nature of media coverage and incumbent performance. However, they allow us to look at these incumbents specifically, point out the patterns that appear, and discuss how those patterns may present themselves more broadly. Using different measures for media coverage and different measures for incumbent performance, there was a relatively consistent correlation between more and harsher media coverage and less support in an incumbent's reelection campaign. This pattern was the strongest presented within the data. Negative media coverage focusing on an incumbent was a better indicator of poor performance than the privilege of a population, total media coverage, or even natural disaster severity. Evidence from existing literature and this research suggests that may hold true in local elections across the United States, and that further research on a wider scale could be beneficial.

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# ACADEMIC VITA

## Gabriel Lee Johnson

### Education

**The Pennsylvania State University – Schreyer Honors College** | University Park, PA Spring 2022

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science

Schreyer Honors Thesis: “Incumbents after Natural Disasters: Does Media Coverage Jeopardize Reelection?”

Supervised by Dr. Raymond Block, Jr.

**Baruch College - CUNY** | New York, NY Fall 2018 – Spring 2020

Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Political Science

Provost Honors Scholar

### Honors and Certifications

Dean’s List Fall 2018 – Fall 2021

CITI Program Social and Behavioral Human Subjects Research (IRB) Course Completion December 2020

Baruch College Max Berger Pre-Law Fellowship August 2019 – May 2020

### Work and Experience

**Ansible Government Solutions, LLC** | Philadelphia, PA May 2021 – August 2021

*Summer Intern Reporting to Director, Corporate Compliance*

- ✦ Researched employment practice liabilities and contract law for a private company doing business with the US Federal Government
- ✦ Reviewed and summarized relevant Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) as it applied to a healthcare solutions company working on behalf of the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs, State, Defense, and Homeland Security
- ✦ Summarized and provided review of EEOC and OSHA filings, to include in-depth research on potential exposure and liabilities
- ✦ Initial review of corporate structure (LLC, C-Corp, and S-Corp) as well as Operating Agreement and various state business licenses. Also reviewed and gained understanding of corporate financials to include Balance Sheet, Income Statement, and Statement of Cash Flow
- ✦ Supported Corporate Director of HR with research and analysis of turnover and liability; submitted reports on these topics to Ansible staff to aid the company in their decision-making process

**Sigma Alpha Delta Honors Society** | New York, NY May 2019 – August 2020

*Chair of Volunteering*

- ✦ Organized and led Sigma Alpha Delta’s 50+ person efforts to volunteer services and goods for the communities of New York City
- ✦ Served underprivileged and at-risk populations of the city individually and as part of teams

**Baruch College New Students and Family Programs** | New York, NY August 2019 – May 2020

*T.E.A.M. Baruch First-Year Seminar Peer Mentor*

- ✦ Planned and taught weekly lessons for classes of 40+ students new to Baruch College
- ✦ Tracked student performance through weekly grading and consistently updated online resources

**Baruch College Student Government** | New York, NY

September 2018 – May 2020

*Legislative Affairs Committee*

- ✦ Selected to serve on the committee focused on increasing the student population’s civic knowledge and activity level
- ✦ Led and contributed to campaigns increasing student voter registration and census response levels, and efforts to lobby New York State officials on behalf of the student population’s interests

**Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas** | Norristown, PA

May 2018 – August 2018

*Seasonal Judicial Intern for the Honorable Judge Carolyn Carluccio*

- ✦ Observed up to five cases daily; note-taking on significant observations
- ✦ Reported back to bench what was witnessed, personal interpretations, and relevance to judicial proceedings

**Additional Activities**

Pi Sigma Alpha

October 2021 – Current

Penn State University Navigators

January 2021 – Current

Sigma Alpha Delta Honors Society

September 2018 – August 2020

Baruch College Pre-Law Society

September 2018 – May 2020

New York Cares

September 2018 – March 2020