



Voters react to events over which the government has no control, the authors say.

Natural disasters hurt incumbents

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As Hurricane Sandy leaves millions without power across the East Coast, many commentators have argued that at least one person may benefit from the storm: President Barack Obama. But seeing Sandy as only an electoral benefit for the president ignores accumulating evidence on how “acts of God” influence elections. That evidence shows that voters often punish the incumbent party for adverse events, even events seemingly beyond any president’s control.

For example, one of us was part of a team that examined how tornadoes affect voting behavior. We found that voters in counties which sustained damage in election years were 1 point to 2 percentage points less likely to vote for the incumbent. While most states

affected by Sandy are reliably Democratic, even small changes could affect close House and Senate races in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, or in a swing state such as Virginia.

A Princeton study found that American voters punished the incumbent presidential party for droughts, flu epidemics and even shark attacks. In 1916, in some of the very same New Jersey beach communities devastated by Sandy, shark attacks cost incumbent Woodrow Wilson up to eight percentage points.

In recently published research, we looked at decades of weather data and hundreds of elections in India. We found that incumbents fare much worse at the polls when droughts or floods — events over which the government has no control — occur. An adverse weather event cost incumbent parties about six percentage points at the polls. While the United States is not India — our population of farmers is smaller — the study provides two important lessons. First, the electoral effect is much more pronounced when the weather shock occurred in an election year. Second, voters voted against the incumbent ruling party, rather than against their individual legislators.