

**ESSAYS ON THE POLITICAL AFTERMATH OF NATURAL DISASTERS**

**Colby J. Clabaugh**

**A DISSERTATION**

**PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY**

**OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY**

**IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE**

**OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE**

**BY THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS**

**Adviser: Jennifer Widner**

**September 2016**

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PREVIEW

## ABSTRACT

In a series of essays, this dissertation examines three political phenomena in the context of natural disasters: retrospective voting, civic engagement, and social capital. In “Voting after the Storm: Hurricanes, Electoral Retrospection, and the 2008 US Presidential Election,” I investigate the ability of retrospective voters to hold incumbent politicians accountable for their performance in office. Using county-level data on severe weather events and presidential election returns, I find that counties affected by election-year hurricanes increased their support for incumbent-party candidate John McCain by at least three percentage points in the 2008 presidential election. This essay’s main findings provide evidence that supports the existence of an attentive electorate, one in which retrospective voters evaluate politicians’ responsibility for outcomes, rather than blindly punishing them for events beyond their control.

In “Civic Engagement in the Aftermath of Natural Disasters,” I explore whether American citizens become more or less civic when their communities are struck by natural disasters. Using individual-level survey data on civic engagement and county-level data on natural hazard events, I find that experiencing a natural disaster in the previous 12 months decreases the probability of an individual engaging in non-electoral forms of political participation—by as much as five percentage points—but increases the probability of an individual volunteering and giving to charity—by up to six percentage points.

Finally, in “Pulling Together or Pulling Apart? Social Capital in the Aftermath of the 2010 Benin Floods,” I analyze the impact of the historic 2010 floods in the Republic of Benin on stocks of social capital among affected individuals. Using original household survey data collected in flood-affected communes, I show that individuals’ experiences during the floods—and in their immediate aftermath—are strongly associated with indicators of social capital

observed years later. In particular, the occurrence of grassroots disaster-relief efforts and the formation of new voluntary associations following the floods are positively related to present-day social capital, while disaster-induced hardship is negatively associated with subsequent social capital levels. These results suggest that natural disasters can trigger social dynamics that produce lasting change in affected communities' social capital stocks.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people over many years helped make this dissertation possible. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Jennifer Widner, Leonard Wantchekon, Evan Lieberman, and Atul Kohli, my Princeton advisers past and present, who guided me through my training as a political scientist. I am especially grateful to Jennifer and Leonard, who provided me with invaluable support throughout the sometimes painstaking process of researching and writing this dissertation. Other Princeton faculty to whom I also owe special thanks include Keith Whittington, the Director of Graduate Studies during my tenure in the Politics Department; Amaney Jamal and Marty Gilens, my dissertation Readers; and Helen Milner, who offered me a formative research assistantship in Uganda following my second year.

While at Princeton, I was fortunate to be surrounded by dozens of brilliant colleagues who sharpened my thinking and gave me insightful comments on my work. In particular, this dissertation benefited from conversations with—and feedback from—Brandon de la Cuesta, Mike Hoffman, Aram Hur, Erin Lin, Liz Nugent, Bethany Park, Joan Ricart-Huguet, and Yang-Yang Zhou. In addition to its people, Princeton's institutional resources were instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. My dissertation research was supported by funding from the Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice at Princeton University and the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS). Staff at the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IERPE) in Abomey-Calavi, Benin assisted me with the survey for "Pulling Together or Pulling Apart? Social Capital in the Aftermath of the 2010 Benin Floods." Special thanks go to Leonard (again, this time for connecting me to IERPE), Benjamin Djiffa, Kassim Assouma, and Lucrèce Ahandagbe, without whose support one-third of this dissertation would not have been possible. Finally, I would like to thank Politics Department

Librarian Jeremy Darrington, who was hugely helpful in gaining me access to the SHELDUS database, a major source of data for this dissertation.

Throughout graduate school, whenever I needed to escape the intellectual rigors of academia and restore balance to my life, I had no better outlet than rugby. Therefore, I must extend sincere thanks to my GW, Washington Irish, PAC, Kyadondo, and Old Gaelic rugby families. Without you all, I would have surely lost my sanity long before finishing this project. Dissertation or no dissertation, Saturday's always a Rugby Day.

When I decided that I wanted to go for my PhD, I was fortunate to have the counsel—not to mention the recommendation-writing prowess—of three of my favorite GW professors: Steven Kelts, Chad Rector, and David Throup. Looking back, I realize that their advice to think long and hard about my decision was exactly what an aspiring PhD student needs to hear. Many thanks Kelts, Chad, and David; I wouldn't have written these pages without you.

Long before I arrived at Princeton, two people, in particular, were already making invaluable contributions to this dissertation. My parents, Ann Frederick and Chad Clabaugh, have been investing—in every sense of the word—in my education since the very beginning of my life. Whether it was reading to me as a child, financing 18 years (!) of tuition, or simply asking me how my dissertation's coming along, Mom and Dad have always supported me throughout a lifetime of learning. It is to them that I dedicate this work.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful for the support of my loving wife and best friend, Jessica. As it happened, a natural disaster almost prevented Jess and I from crossing paths in the first place. She and I were supposed to be in Wisconsin for the wedding of mutual friends in early November 2012, but just days before, Hurricane Sandy struck New Jersey and nearly ruined my travel plans. Fortunately, my flight to the Midwest eventually got out of LaGuardia

and the rest, they say, is history. It's difficult to overstate Jess's role in helping me complete this dissertation. Throughout my research and writing, Jess was my motivation every step of the way. She always knew just what I needed and when, whether it was a pep talk, a kick in the pants, or an excuse to forget about work for a while and go out dancing. Of course Jess's help didn't stop there. She also gave me the hard deadline I needed to finally push this project over the finish line: her pregnancy with our first child.

Colby J. Clabaugh

August 2016

Harrisburg, PA

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PREVIEW

*To my parents, Ann and Chad*

**VOTING AFTER THE STORM: HURRICANES, ELECTORAL RETROSPECTION, AND THE 2008 US  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

**I. Introduction**

If retrospective voting is to produce democratic accountability, voters must be able to differentiate competent politicians from incompetent ones based on the politicians' past performance. Research in political science shows that voters are limited in their ability to draw this distinction, calling into question whether retrospective voting yields democratic results. Nonetheless, research also shows that voters can make rather sophisticated judgments about incumbents' competence, renewing confidence in the ability of retrospective voters to hold elected officials accountable. While research has established that retrospective voting can be both "responsive" and "attentive," the existing literature is much less clear about the conditions that favor one type of retrospection over the other. This paper examines the 2008 presidential election as a case study on retrospective voting in the context of natural disasters.

History will define the 2008 presidential election in the United States in terms of two themes: Barack Obama's election as the country's first black president and a campaign that coincided with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis. However, the 2008 presidential election is also remarkable in that it took place in the midst of an extraordinarily active Atlantic hurricane season. In 2008, 16 named storms formed in the Atlantic, including two—Hurricane Gustav and Hurricane Ike—that each caused more than a billion dollars of damage in the US alone. Both Gustav and Ike struck the American Gulf Coast, where just three years prior Hurricane Katrina inflicted more damage than any hurricane to hit the US before or since. The devastation that Katrina visited upon the Gulf Coast—and the federal government's mismanaged response to the disaster—captured public attention. Public opinion polls taken in the hurricane's aftermath

consistently showed that large numbers of Americans were troubled by the Bush administration's handling of Katrina. The federal government's failures at responding to Hurricane Katrina contributed to a decline in President Bush's approval rating, which never regained pre-Katrina levels during the remainder of Bush's second term. In late August 2008, with Gustav bearing down on the Gulf Coast, the prospect of another major hurricane making landfall in Louisiana evoked memories of Katrina and the lackluster response across levels of government. Republican presidential candidate John McCain curtailed the opening-night agenda for the Republican National Convention, citing an imperative "to do away with our party politics and...act as Americans" (Espo 2008). President Bush and Vice President Cheney canceled scheduled speaking appearances at the convention and several Gulf Coast Republican governors stayed home to monitor the hurricane. Ultimately, neither Gustav nor Ike—which made landfall around Galveston, TX less than two weeks after Gustav struck Louisiana—was as catastrophic as Katrina. Moreover, Americans evaluated the federal government's performance responding to the 2008 hurricanes far more favorably than they viewed the Katrina response. The unique meteorological circumstances of the 2008 presidential election cycle beg the following questions: When hurricane-affected voters went to the polls in November 2008, did they reward Senator McCain for his party's apparent improvement at disaster management? Alternatively, did hurricane-affected voters sanction McCain simply for the Republicans having presided over bad times? Finally, what impact did revived memories of the Republican administration's dismal performance following Hurricane Katrina have on voters in the 2008 presidential election?

This paper examines these questions using county-level data on severe weather events and party vote shares in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. I find that counties experiencing hurricane-related property damage in 2008 rewarded Senator McCain with at least

three additional percentage points of the vote, compared to counties unaffected by the 2008 hurricane season. These results provide evidence against the notion that the election-year hurricanes provoked voters to sanction the Republican Party, either by raising the specter of Katrina or simply by producing bad outcomes for which the incumbents were blamed. On the contrary, the 2008 hurricane season may have given the incumbent Republican administration an opportunity to showcase—in an election year no less—significant improvements in the government disaster management system. More broadly, the study’s findings are consistent with the existence of an attentive electorate which makes retrospective judgments of incumbents based on the incumbents’ perceived responsibility for influencing outcomes. The study also raises new questions about how attentive electorates function. Foremost among these questions is whether voters may actually overlook incumbents’ complicity in bad outcomes, provided that more recent outcomes signal to voters that incumbents are learning and improving their performance.

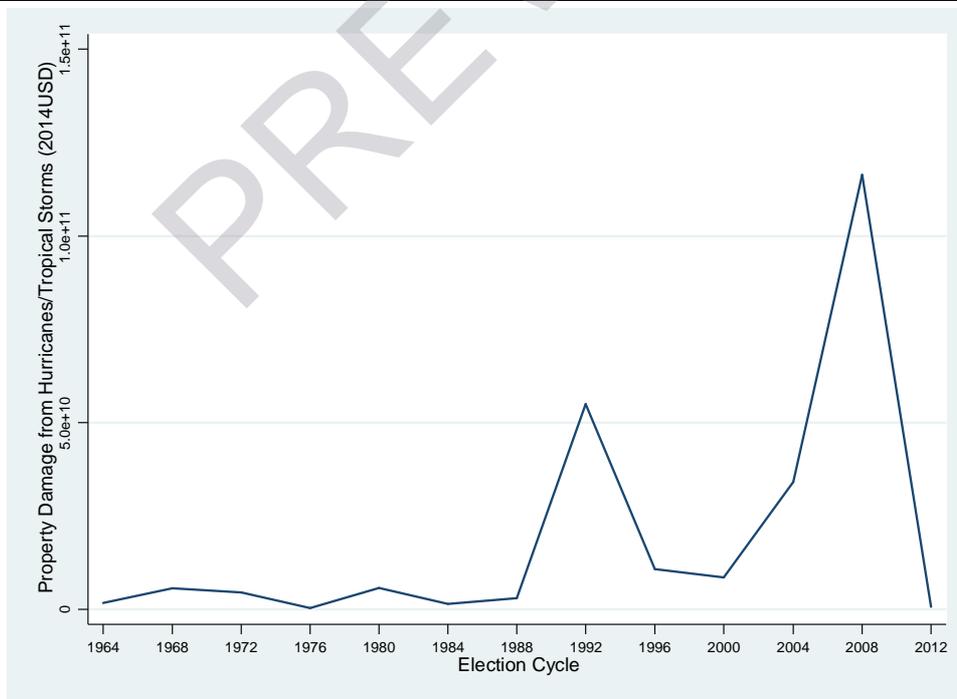
The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section II provides background information on Hurricanes Katrina, Gustav, and Ike and their relationship to the 2008 presidential election. Section III reviews the empirical literatures on retrospective voting and the political effects of natural disasters. The study’s hypotheses are also identified in Section III. In Section IV, I present the data and methods used in this study. Section V reports the study’s main results. A counterfactual analysis illustrating the practical implications of the study’s findings is presented in Section VI. Section VII concludes.

## **II. Hurricanes Katrina, Gustav, & Ike and the 2008 Presidential Election Cycle**

The 2008 presidential election cycle was remarkable in many ways. One of those ways is the extraordinary destructiveness of the hurricane seasons that fell within that election cycle. The

2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008 hurricane seasons caused a combined \$116 billion<sup>1</sup> in property damage in the United States (HVRI 2015). As Figure 1 shows, the 2008 election cycle is an outlier in terms of hurricane damage incurred during a four-year interval spanning presidential elections. Since 1960, only the 1992 election cycle compares to the 2008 cycle when it comes to hurricane damage. Even then, the 1992 cycle’s damage figure is less than half of the figure for the 2005 – 2008 period. Moreover, the 2008 election year was, by itself, record-setting for hurricane activity. The 2008 Atlantic hurricane season was the first in which six consecutive tropical cyclones made landfall in the continental US. The 2008 season was also the first in which a major hurricane formed in five consecutive months (NOAA 2008). The remainder of Section II provides an overview of the hurricanes from the 2008 election cycle that are the focus of this analysis: Katrina, Gustav, and Ike.

**Figure 1. Property Damage from Hurricanes and Tropical Storms by Election Cycle, 1964 – 2012**



<sup>1</sup> SHELDUS damage estimates tend to be lower than similar estimates from other sources. The data presented in Figure 1 are intended to demonstrate relative, rather than absolute, damage across election cycles.

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in southeastern Louisiana as a Category 3 storm. Katrina brought intense rainfall, wind, and storm surge that combined with the failure of manmade infrastructure in and around New Orleans to produce the costliest hurricane in economic terms in American history (Blake, Landsea, and Gibney 2011). In addition to the economic toll, at least 1,833 people lost their lives as a result of Katrina. The hurricane displaced more than one million people from their homes, damaged over one million units of housing in the Gulf Coast region, and decreased the population of New Orleans by more than one-half (NCEI 2016; Plyer 2014).

Perhaps most importantly for this study, Hurricane Katrina was a quintessential “focusing event” (Birkland 1998), which highlighted the inadequacy of government—at multiple levels—to respond to a major crisis. News coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath commanded the attention of the American public like few other events before or since. A national survey conducted in early September 2005 found that 96 percent of respondents were following coverage of Katrina either somewhat or very closely (Moore 2005). Another survey fielded later in the year showed that Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita were, together, the top news story of 2005, with 73 percent of survey respondents saying they followed coverage of these storms very closely (Pew Research Center 2005b). What is more, public attentiveness to Hurricane Katrina coverage peaked around September 1, a moment when the failures of the government response to the disaster had become particularly apparent (Atkeson and Maestas 2012: 47). By then, news media were reporting vivid images of catastrophe: cities and towns under water, people in need of shelter and other basic necessities, looting and general social disorder. The peak of public attentiveness to the disaster also coincided with the dramatic—and widely reported—deterioration of conditions inside the New Orleans Convention Center and the

Louisiana Superdome. Both makeshift hurricane shelters were overcrowded, lacked supplies and sanitation, and had become sites of violence, drug trafficking, and multiple deaths in the days since Katrina struck (Treaster 2005; Gold 2005; Haygood and Tyson 2005; Brinkley 2006). Meanwhile, the government response to the disaster was slow, uncoordinated, and characterized by a “failure of initiative” (Thomas 2005; *Frontline* 2005; Select Committee 2006).

Surveys taken in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina indicate that Americans attributed blame for the disaster to all levels of government. Sixty-one percent of respondents to a national survey conducted between September and November 2005 agreed to some degree that the federal government was not adequately prepared to respond to Katrina (Atkeson and Maestas 2006). However, 77 percent of respondents to the same survey thought that the Louisiana state government’s “failure to call for help” had at least some effect on the length of time it took the federal government to respond. Survey respondents were also critical of the performances of individual politicians across levels of government. Seventy-two percent said that President Bush’s performance during the aftermath of Katrina was only fair or poor, with 42 percent saying poor. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco’s performance was rated just fair or poor by almost two-thirds of respondents. While New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin fared the best of the three leaders, his performance was judged either fair or poor by 62 percent of respondents.

Given the mishandled government response to the historic catastrophe that was Katrina, it is unsurprising that there was plenty of blame to go around in the hurricane’s aftermath. However, that Americans were critical of all levels of government should not obscure the political damage that the Katrina response inflicted on the Bush administration in particular. Indeed, if one moment came to symbolize the incompetence of the government response, it was President Bush’s much-ridiculed praise for then-Federal Emergency Management Agency

(FEMA) Director Michael Brown days before the latter resigned his office: “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” Opinion polls taken in the aftermath of Katrina showed that the backlash against the Bush administration’s handling of the disaster was swift and severe. In early September 2005, a Pew Research Center (2005a) poll found that fully two-thirds of those surveyed thought that President Bush could have done more in handling Katrina relief efforts. The same poll showed that the president’s approval rating had dropped to 40 percent, down from 44 percent in July and 50 percent at the beginning of the year. By November, Bush’s approval rating would slip further to 36 percent (Pew Research Center 2005b). Another national poll from September 2005 reported that 49 percent of respondents had not much or no confidence in the federal government’s ability to manage disasters (CBS News 2008). The following February, 48 percent of registered voters that responded to a WNBC/Marist Poll (2006) said that the Bush administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina bothered them a great deal, with another 18 percent saying the response bothered them a good amount. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* in late 2008, Dan Bartlett, Counselor to the President from 2005 to 2007, summed up Katrina’s political impact on the Bush administration this way: “Politically, it was the final nail in the coffin” (Murphy and Purdum 2009, quoted in Atkeson and Maestas 2012: 11).

Between 2005 and 2008, Hurricane Katrina became a catalyst for government to improve its performance at disaster management. In the months following the hurricane, both houses of Congress, the White House, offices of federal Inspectors General, and the General Accountability Office (GAO) launched investigations into the preparations for, and the response to, Katrina. The findings of those investigations laid the groundwork for major reforms to federal emergency management policies, including passage and enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA). Among the reforms of PKEMRA

was the creation of a “New FEMA,” with an updated organizational structure, enhanced authority, increased autonomy from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and new leadership positions and position requirements (Bea 2007). In addition to the policy reforms, government management of subsequent disasters suggested that many of Katrina’s lessons were being heeded. The vigorous government response to Hurricane Rita, which struck the Gulf Coast less than a month after Katrina, prompted a *Washington Post* headline that declared, “Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Were Like Night and Day” (Hsu and Hendrix 2005). After a devastating tornado hit Greensburg, KS in May 2007, President Bush personally visited the town, in keeping with the administration’s “much more aggressive and engaged reaction to disasters since Hurricane Katrina” (Associated Press 2007). As a final illustration: when describing government preparations for responding to the 2007 California wildfires, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff cited “lessons from Katrina which we have put into effect here” (CNN 2007). Although none of these three disasters approached the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, they presented government generally—and the Bush administration in particular—with an opportunity to demonstrate improved performance in an area where it had previously faltered badly.

While American voters had reasons to favorably update their assessments of government disaster management practices following Hurricane Katrina, the storm nonetheless remained a powerful symbol of government failure by the start of the 2008 presidential election campaign. In the intervening years, news coverage of each new disaster consistently framed Katrina as a benchmark for measuring government performance (Hsu and Hendrix 2005; Associated Press 2007; CNN 2007; Atkeson and Maestas 2012: 13). Moreover, Democrats had already successfully politicized Katrina during the 2006 midterm election, in which they regained control

of Congress. And although Katrina may not have been the most important factor in the Democrats' victory, it is likely that "the 2006 election could not have been a landslide without Katrina" (Mongoven 2007). So when Hurricane Gustav threatened to strike the Louisiana coast in late August 2008, Hurricane Katrina was thrust into a central role in that year's presidential election campaign. At the time, the political implications of Hurricane Gustav—and its predecessor from three years earlier—were not entirely clear. On the one hand, Gustav threatened "to remind voters of perhaps the signal event that helped turn them against the GOP—the Bush administration's botched response to the devastating 2005 storm" (Balz 2008). On the other hand, a government response judged competent by the public could prove politically advantageous for Republicans, as Representative Peter King (R-NY) predicted (Carnevale 2008). For Republican nominee John McCain, the reawakened memories of Katrina demanded that Hurricane Gustav be handled with finesse. McCain canceled all non-essential activities for the opening day of the Republican National Convention, which coincided with Gustav's eventual landfall in Louisiana. While the disrupted convention cost McCain the national spotlight for a night, the candidate's decision to curtail the opening-night agenda reinforced the narrative that he was a public servant who puts country ahead of politics. Gustav also effectively canceled planned convention speeches from President Bush and Vice President Cheney, allowing McCain to distance himself from the unpopular incumbent administration. Ultimately, it was expected that the political impact of Gustav would hinge on the storm's outcome and the government's performance responding to the disaster.

Although Gustav was responsible for more than \$6 billion in losses and 53 deaths in the United States, its toll was far less devastating than Katrina's had been (NCEI 2016). In another contrast with Hurricane Katrina, the government's handling of Hurricane Gustav was widely

perceived as effective. Beginning with the evacuation of New Orleans, which an urban planning expert has lauded as “one of the most successful evacuations in U.S. history” (Renne 2011), government performance managing Hurricane Gustav far exceeded the precedent set during and after Hurricane Katrina. President Bush called the Gustav response “excellent,” adding that “[s]tate government, the local government and the federal government were able to work effectively together” (Riechmann 2008). Polling in the wake of Gustav suggests that many Americans agreed with the president’s assessment. A CBS News poll taken in Gustav’s immediate aftermath reported that 50 percent of those sampled approved of Bush’s handling of the hurricane, compared to 19 percent who disapproved. Only 26 percent of the same poll’s respondents had not much or no confidence in the federal government’s ability to respond to a natural disaster, a figure that was down from 49 percent following Hurricane Katrina (CBS News 2008). Not only was the American public generally satisfied with the government response to Gustav, it believed that government had learned from its experience handling Hurricane Katrina. A nationally representative survey conducted roughly a week after Gustav made landfall found that 66 percent of respondents felt that the federal government was more prepared to handle a major hurricane than it had been during Katrina (Kaiser Family Foundation 2008). Even larger shares of respondents—over 70 percent in each case—thought state and local preparedness had improved since Katrina. Finally, 79 percent of those surveyed thought the country, in general, had learned a lesson from Katrina and was consequently better prepared for natural disasters and other emergencies.

Less than two weeks after Hurricane Gustav made landfall in Louisiana, the capacity of the government’s disaster preparedness and response system was tested again by Hurricane Ike. On September 13, Ike struck Galveston Island, TX as a Category 2 hurricane. Ike’s immense size

and persistence as an extratropical cyclone that swept across inland regions of the United States contributed to the storm's heavy toll. In total, Ike caused an estimated \$33 billion in losses, making it the third costliest hurricane in US history, behind Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. Ike claimed the lives of 112 people and left millions without power for extended periods of time (NCEI 2016). Although the effects of Ike were severe, the government response to the hurricane received some favorable reviews. A poll of Houston-area voters commissioned by the *Houston Chronicle* in late October 2008 found that 78 percent of respondents thought the local government's handling of the Ike recovery effort was excellent or good (Snyder and Stiles 2008). While the *Chronicle* poll did not inquire about the federal government's performance, local officials in the most severely affected areas offered praise for FEMA. According to Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas, "Had it not been for FEMA, the city wouldn't have recovered as well as it has" (*USA Today* 2008). Houston Mayor Bill White attested to the emergence of a "new FEMA," saying that the agency's performance responding to Hurricane Ike was an improvement on its handling of Hurricane Katrina (*USA Today* 2008; Snyder 2008). Without question, FEMA did face criticism following Ike (e.g. Snyder 2008; Elliott 2008). However, FEMA's shortcomings, and those of the government response more generally, were not so serious as to invite comparisons to the scandal of Hurricane Katrina. On the contrary, during the 2008 Atlantic hurricane season, "there were more stories of triumph than tragedy [and] largely successful responses at all levels of government" (Kaniewski 2009).

Of course, the vast majority of voters in the November 2008 presidential election did not cast their ballots with Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Gustav, or Hurricane Ike foremost on their minds. Indeed, the political salience of Gustav and Ike was no doubt dampened by the surge in public attentiveness to the financial crisis that was unfolding concurrently (Pew Research Center

2008). News coverage of Ike's aftermath, in particular, was largely overshadowed by reporting on the faltering US economy and turmoil in the financial markets. During the week when Ike made landfall in Texas, coverage of the hurricane accounted for 14 percent of the weekly "newshole," making Ike the second most covered story of the week (Jurkowitz 2008a). The following week, which included the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, Ike coverage fell to seven percent of the newshole, while coverage of the financial crisis claimed a 37 percent share (Jurkowitz 2008b). From mid-September until Election Day, the economy was the top storyline of the presidential election campaign. Even so, the economy did not dominate the media's campaign narrative. Between the end of the Republican National Convention and the final presidential debate, the economy and the financial crisis accounted for just 18 percent of the campaign newshole, meaning that a large majority of election coverage focused on other stories (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). These data suggest that the economy was not the singular frame through which the electorate viewed the 2008 election, but rather that voters cast their ballots with a plurality of issues in mind. Particularly for voters in communities still recovering from Gustav and Ike, the election-year hurricanes were potential determinants of vote choice. Did these hurricanes impose an electoral cost on John McCain? Or did Gustav and Ike earn McCain electoral credit by virtue of the much-improved government response to these storms compared to Katrina? The following section describes two theoretical frameworks that propose divergent answers to these questions.

### **III. Theories on Retrospection: Responsive and Attentive Voters**

Retrospective voting refers to the idea that voters assess incumbent politicians' past performance in office, and then vote to replace or retain the incumbents based on those assessments. Pioneering studies of retrospective voting (e.g. Key 1966; Fiorina 1981) view

voters as largely capable of shouldering the responsibility of holding governments accountable, even if they often rely on informational shortcuts to evaluate politicians. Much of the political science research on retrospective voting investigates how voters use economic conditions as a benchmark for incumbent performance. In general, good economic times bode well for the electoral prospects of incumbents, whereas bad times are often an incumbent's downfall (e.g. Kramer 1971; Lewis-Beck 1988; Markus 1988). Although seminal works on retrospective voting upheld the rationality of voters, subsequent studies have called into question whether or not voters in fact make rational assessments of incumbent performance in office. One branch of theorizing on retrospective voting holds that voters judge incumbent politicians based on changes in their own well-being, irrespective of the politicians' responsibility for those changes. So-called "responsive voters" react to prevailing conditions in the world around them, rewarding politicians for favorable outcomes and punishing them for unfavorable ones. Other theories of retrospective voting, however, share Key's and Fiorina's optimism about voters' capacity to exercise democratic accountability. According to "attentive electorate" theories, voters reward or punish incumbents based on the incumbents' responsibility for shaping outcomes. The remainder of Section III elaborates on the responsive and attentive electorate theories, and presents hypotheses generated by each of these frameworks.

#### A. Responsive Voters

Responsive voters have been described as engaging in "blind retrospection" (Achen and Bartels 2004). That is, when evaluating incumbent performance, responsive voters are either unwilling or unable to ascertain the responsibility of politicians for the conditions in which voters live. As Achen and Bartels (2004: 7) put it, "In most cases, incumbents will pay at the polls for bad times, even in situations where objective observers can find little rational basis to