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Race, Retrospective Voting, and Disasters

The Re-Election of C. Ray Nagin After Hurricane Katrina

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The 2006 New Orleans mayoral election provides a unique opportunity to examine the influence of a natural disaster on voting behavior. Theories of retrospective voting presume that voters will punish incumbents whose performance they deem unacceptable. To many Americans, Ray Nagin had done a poor job in handling Katrina. Theories of racial conflict and accommodation, however, contend that voters in urban elections base their choice primarily on racial group interests. This study shows that racial identity was a critical factor in vote choice. Although judgments of Nagin's performance were important, many voters placed greater responsibility on the federal government for the response.

Keywords: *Hurricane Katrina; New Orleans; racial conflict; retrospective voting; disasters*

Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans on August 29, 2005. The nation then watched in horror as the levees protecting the city breached, leaving over 75 percent of New Orleans' buildings damaged and residents stranded. The hurricane and the resulting flood were responsible for more than 1,800 lives and caused approximately \$100 billion in damage.¹ Although much of the national focus was on assigning responsibility for the initial government response, the more important issues for the residents of New Orleans concerned the future: Would the levees be fixed and able to protect residents from another storm? What was the city's rebuilding plan?

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Would there be adequate housing, jobs, schools, and would residents be safe? Finally, who was going to lead the city's reconstruction?

New Orleans held its mayoral primary election in April, 2006, and a run-off in May. Prior to Katrina, Mayor C. Ray Nagin was considered largely unbeatable, but after the storm, a confluence of events propelled several candidates to run against him. Nagin rapidly went from "unbeatable" to "likely loser." The media seized on his behavior during the hurricane as well as what many described as his outlandish behavior following the disaster, notably his Martin Luther King, Jr. Day speech in which he proclaimed that New Orleans would be a "chocolate city."

How would voters judge Nagin? Theories of retrospective and economic voting contend that voting behavior is based on voters' judgments of candidates' performance. Many expected that Nagin would be judged harshly for his failures to evacuate the entire city prior to the storm. If voters judged Nagin's performance as poor, he should have been ousted. Theories of racial conflict and accommodation suggest that voting in urban elections is based more on long-standing political and social characteristics—specifically racial group interests. This study examines whether voters, in the wake of a disaster, base their choices more on retrospective evaluations of the incumbent's performance, or whether, regardless of these evaluations, race maintains its central role in urban elections despite the disaster.

Retrospective Voting

Elections following on the heels of natural disasters provide excellent tests of retrospective voting. Key (1964) proposed that although voters may not understand the candidates' positions on all issues, they are able to distinguish between good and bad performance by those in office. Fiorina's (1981) theory of retrospective voting contends that voters reward or punish candidates on the basis of whether they themselves are better or worse off (simple retrospective evaluations) or whether they support the actions taken by the government on particular issues (mediated retrospective evaluations). Howell and her colleagues (Howell and Perry 2004; Howell and McLean 2001) find that residents judge Black mayors less on the basis of their race than on their performance on city services, such as crime, housing, and public schools.

These evaluations by voters should be fairly easy in elections following a natural disaster. Disasters cause many voters to be significantly worse off

than before. For some, their loss is easily measured in property loss or lost wages. For others, loss is more difficult to measure but is nonetheless felt in the loss of hopes and dreams, missing friends and relatives, and the safety and stability of home and community. Voters should have no problem figuring out the state of their condition since the previous election. These theories would lead us to expect that when voters hold incumbents responsible for their handling of the disaster, they will reward or punish them based on their evaluations of their performance; furthermore, those who sustain greater damage in a disaster will be especially less likely to support the incumbent.

In their analysis of the effects of shark attacks, floods, and droughts on voting for president, Achen and Bartels (2002) suggest three conditions that should be met for natural disasters to lead to retrospective assessments. First, the disaster should cause significant destruction and death, as well as "considerable emotional and financial distress to entire communities" (p. 11). Second, the election must follow the disaster quickly enough that voters are not distracted and have not forgotten. Third, the government should be thought to hold some responsibility for dealing with the crisis.

Hurricane Katrina meets all three of these conditions. Thousands of people died, and the financial losses numbered in the billions. The election was held just a few months after the disaster. In fact, many residents had not yet been able to move back, and thousands were living in temporary conditions in or near the city. Finally, it is clear that today, all levels of government share responsibility for handling large-scale natural disasters (Cooper and Block 2006; Platt 1999). Thus, there are good reasons for voters to hold any or even all of the levels of government responsible for Katrina's devastating impact on New Orleans. Robert Stein (1990) has shown that voters are able to assign different functional responsibilities to officials at different levels of office and hold them accountable for their varying responsibilities.²

A recent study on the effects of flooding in Houston due to Tropical Storm Allison finds that voters will punish the incumbent mayor if they believe that the city is responsible for flood protection (Arceneaux and Stein 2006). Similarly, two other studies (Achen and Bartels 2002; Abney and Hill 1966) show that when voters do not believe that the government could have better prevented or responded to a disaster, they do not blame incumbents. After Hurricane Betsy in 1965, Abney and Hill discovered that the extent of personal damage had little effect on voting; residents living in flooded areas of New Orleans were not significantly less likely to vote for

the incumbent mayor than those in areas that did not flood. Voters generally did not believe that the mayor was responsible, and the incumbent was re-elected just months after the storm. The 2006 New Orleans mayoral election provides a good test of whether voters based their choice on evaluations of the incumbent and if the extent of personal devastation mattered for voters; or whether other, more long-standing factors were more important to voters.

Racial Conflict and Vote Choice

Much of the prevailing wisdom in political science would predict that natural disasters, like other short-term phenomena, are unlikely to have significant effects on voting, because voters base their choices on long-standing political and social characteristics. Partisanship, the strongest predictor of voting in national elections (Campbell et al. 1960), remains fairly stable throughout the life course and is unlikely to be changed, even by drastic events: “recessions, wars, and dramatic swings in the political fortunes of the parties tend to leave a shallow imprint on the partisan affiliations of adults” (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, p. 2).

Although partisanship is most important in national elections, voting in urban elections is often determined by another long-standing factor: racial group interests (Kaufmann 2004). The perception of racial group interests depends, in part, on the composition of the city. Key (1949) claimed that the greater the proportion of African American voters, the more status they have in local politics. This leads Whites to grow more hostile toward Black interests; voting, then, is racially polarized. Liu and Vanderleeuw (2007) argue that racially polarized voting and racial conflict “will be most extreme in the context where one racial group is on the threshold of losing political office . . . and the competing group is on the threshold of gaining political office” (p. 39). This is most likely to occur in settings where there is a nearly equal balance between Whites and Blacks in the electorate. In contrast, in settings where one racial group holds a clear majority in the electorate, racial conflict is diminished and “racial accommodation” leads to a high level of racial crossover voting.

Candidates adapt their campaign strategies to the local racial context. For example, Black candidates running in White majority areas typically de-emphasize their race to gain a large number of cross-over White votes (Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990). When Black candidates de-emphasize race to attract White voters, African American voters tend to remain a unified

voting bloc (Stone and Pierannunzi 1997). However, even in settings where African Americans are a majority, some Black candidates may still run deracialized campaigns, because when there are multiple African American candidates, there is often disagreement within the Black community about whom to support (Liu 2003; Vanderleeuw, Liu, and Marsh 2004). This division then gives Whites the opportunity to strategically choose the Black candidate that is most friendly to White interests (Liu and Vanderleeuw 2001; Liu 2006).

Natural disasters factor into voting in urban areas, because they are likely to alter, even temporarily, the racial composition of the city.³ Despite the common belief that disasters are indiscriminant, disasters do not affect all people equally. Affluent and often White residents are typically better able to evacuate, are more likely to live on higher ground, to be better protected by floodwalls and levees, and to have homes constructed with higher quality materials (Peacock and Girard 1997; Steinberg 2000). Since disaster recovery is largely privatized in the United States, with insurance being the most important determinant of recovery, the wealthy are also better able to recover more quickly than the poor (Drabek and Key 1982; Bolin 1982). Racial minorities and the poor are far more likely to have inadequate insurance coverage (Squires and Velez 1987; Bolin and Bolton 1986).

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, it was not difficult to see racial and class disparities from the beginning of the crisis. The vast majority of those stranded in the city were Black and/or poor. Residents of New Orleans who sustained the least damage were more educated, more affluent, and more likely to be White than those who had the most damage. They lived in neighborhoods that were on higher ground, farther from the breached levees, and with some of the oldest and sturdiest housing stock in the city. They were also more likely to have better homeowner's insurance and flood insurance.

These racial and economic disparities in damage and recovery gave way to significant changes in the racial makeup of New Orleans. African American residents, on average, were not able to return home as quickly as Whites were. By the time of the mayoral election in April, it was unclear whether African Americans still held a majority of the electorate. Given the unpredictability in the composition of the electorate, White voters seemed to feel that they were on the threshold of gaining back power in the mayor's office, after nearly 30 years. Likewise, African American voters felt they were on the threshold of losing power. As such, one would expect that the racial inequalities that resulted from Katrina and the subsequent changes in the city's composition would lead to a high level of racially polarized voting

and for race to be a central factor in voters' decisions. Despite the importance of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent, these evaluations may have been less important in this election than racial group interests were.

New Orleans and the 2006 Mayoral Election

Recent electoral history in New Orleans illustrates the important role that race has played in the city's elections. Since 1977, when the city elected its first African American mayor, any time a Black candidate has faced a White candidate, voting has been racially polarized. In 2002, two African American candidates ran against each other. The winning candidate, C. Ray Nagin, defeated his opponent by carrying White voters. Prior to the storm, most analysts considered Nagin to be heading toward an easy reelection. His citywide approval rating in 2004 was 61 percent (Howell, Burchard, and Hubbard 2004) and no serious candidates had voiced interest in running against him. However, his behavior during and immediately following the Katrina crisis made him vulnerable. Most infamously, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Nagin gave a speech that prodded Blacks in the city to "come together . . . to rebuild New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans." He went on to say that God wants New Orleans to be a majority African American city. In the months leading up to the election, Nagin was also criticized for his "Bring New Orleans Back" Commission because of its overlapping responsibilities with similar groups created by the governor and the city council (Burns and Thomas 2006). The group developed rebuilding plans that were both controversial and, in many cases, ineffective.

Following his "chocolate city" speech, several of the eventual twenty-two candidates entered the mayoral race that would take place in April, 2006. Although there were several Black candidates, only one, Reverend Tom Watson, was considered remotely serious. The most formidable White challenger was Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu. A revered member of Louisiana's version of the Kennedy family, Landrieu had wide name recognition and his family's history of building biracial electoral coalitions.⁴ The key unknown was the composition of the electorate. In January, more than half of New Orleans' population was still scattered across the country. A widely cited study predicted that the electorate would be majority White and with significantly higher incomes than before (Logan 2006; but see Thevenot 2006). Many believed that if not for the potential of a majority White electorate, few of the White candidates would have run. Of Landrieu, Nossiter (2006) wrote, "There would be a strong temptation to read his presence in the race, and any popularity he achieves, as a symbol of the changed electorate."

With many of his 2002 supporters now backing other candidates, Nagin reinvented himself to appeal to a new constituency. In 2002, he had been largely rejected by Black voters. In his four years as mayor, his support only declined within the Black community (Howell, Burchard, and Hubbard 2004). After the storm, however, he opposed his own commission's rebuilding plan, because it advised not to rebuild many of the most heavily damaged (i.e., Black) neighborhoods. Nagin reached out to Black ministers and earned their support. Voters seemed to understand the racial dynamics at play, viewing the election as more significant than any particular candidate. According to local analysts, Blacks felt that "It's not about Ray" (Russell and Donze 2006).

On April 22, Nagin came in first with 38 percent of the vote. He received less than 10 percent of the vote in predominantly White areas of the city. Louisiana election law requires a majority for a candidate to win, so Landrieu's second-place finish, with 29 percent of the vote, placed these two candidates in a run-off election.⁵ On May 20, Nagin was re-elected with 52 percent of the vote. Voting was reportedly racially polarized: Nagin and Landrieu garnered about 80 percent of voters from predominantly Black and White areas of the city, respectively. The results shocked the national media, who could not understand how voters could re-elect someone who, in their eyes, had so clearly failed at his job.

Data and Measures

The data for this study are based on two pre-election polls. One was conducted by Tulane University and the other by the Gallup organization. The Tulane poll was completed less than a week before the primary election, on April 16–17, 2006. Residents were sampled using random-digit dialing procedures for landline telephones in Orleans Parish. The survey itself was done by interactive voice response.⁶ The Gallup poll was conducted much earlier, on February 18–26, 2006, and also sampled residents using random-digit dialing techniques; they used Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing techniques for both landlines and cellular phones.⁷

The reason for using two surveys is that there were significant problems with sampling in the post-Katrina environment. An unknown portion of the electorate was displaced or could not be reached. This portion was less affluent and more likely to be African American. Because the Gallup poll has a substantially larger budget than Tulane researchers do, the people at Gallup could try addressing this omission by including cellular phones in

the sample. However, both samples require weighting techniques to correct for the nonrandom nature of the samples. The problem with poststratification weights in this case is that data on the characteristics of the population of New Orleans after Katrina were not available for some time. Furthermore, given that the population was and continues to be in flux, it would be inappropriate to weight the samples by data based on either the composition of New Orleans prior to the hurricane or current figures. Instead, the Tulane poll is weighted according to the racial composition of the 2006 primary electorate; the Gallup poll is weighted based on the number of working telephone lines respondents have and the number of people who use each of those lines. The use of two different surveys is useful because, if the results are similar using surveys conducted by different organizations, with slightly different sampling techniques, and at different points in time, that should alleviate some fears about the reliability of the data.

Both surveys had questions to test retrospective voting. First, each included a measure of Nagin's approval in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (see appendix for the question wording). Under retrospective voting theory, the more one approves of the job Nagin has done (i.e., his performance), the more likely he or she is to vote for him. Retrospective voting theory also posits that those who are personally worse off will be more likely to punish the incumbent if they view the incumbent as responsible. Both surveys offer a way to examine the extent of the damage to each respondent and therefore examine whether voters reward or punish Nagin based on their personal level of suffering. With the Tulane data, I was able to code the peak level of flooding at their homes by using the street addresses of respondents.⁸ This gives a measure of the actual damage of respondents' homes. In contrast, the Gallup poll asked respondents about their perceptions of how badly they had been affected by Katrina by asking about the degree of financial impact they suffered. There are often differences in the effects of actual and perceived damage. In the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, for example, those who thought they had severe damage, even though they were able to live in their houses, struggled emotionally, more significantly than those whose homes were uninhabitable (Moore and Moore 1996).

The polls also include respondents' race; this allows for an examination of the extent to which voting was a result of racial identity. Given the changes in the composition of the electorate, it is reasonable to expect that voting would be highly racially polarized. The Gallup poll also asked respondents whether they were offended by Nagin's "chocolate city" comments. Whites were significantly more likely than African Americans to say they were offended. Nearly 48 percent of Whites were offended by his remark, compared to only

17 percent of blacks ($p < .0001$). Given the racial divisions in these responses, this question is also a test of how race may have influenced voters.

Result

The results from both polls show that Nagin's approval rating is significantly related to voters' likelihood of voting for him (Table 1). The Tulane poll shows that 59 percent of those who approved of the job Nagin had done since Katrina were planning to vote for him in the primary election. Although only 44.7 percent of voters in this survey approved of his job performance, this still provides enough support to put Nagin in a run-off as well as a basis from which he could build in the run-off campaign. The results are similar in the Gallup poll. The vast majority (80 percent) of those who approved of his response to Katrina were considering voting for Nagin. In the Gallup poll, taken months earlier, Nagin earned a 55.5 percent approval rating.

These results also show that race is a significant factor in predicting Nagin votes. The Tulane poll, conducted just days before the election, shows that 44 percent of African Americans planned to vote for Nagin, compared to just 4.8 percent of Whites. Two months earlier, before the campaigns had really started, Nagin still had a significant advantage with African Americans, but even 43 percent of Whites said they were considering voting for him. It is possible that the slight differences in sampling and weighting are the root of these differences. More likely, however, Nagin lost support within the White community throughout his campaign. With serious White contenders, many White voters who had supported Nagin in 2002 and may have backed Nagin early on in 2006 likely changed their minds in favor of one of the White candidates.

It seems reasonable to expect that those who suffered the most significant damage would take it out on Nagin in the ballot box. However, those whose homes flooded were no more or no less likely to vote for Nagin than those whose homes were spared. Even those who said they had "lost everything" were nearly as supportive of Nagin as those who were "not really hurt by" Katrina.

Table 2 shows logistic regression results from each poll. The first models within each poll exclude the variable for approval of Nagin's response to Katrina because of its close relationship to the dependent variable, intention to vote for Nagin. Looking at the first models, both polls indicate that race plays a central role in explaining vote choice. Based on the predicted probabilities, in the Tulane poll, African Americans are 52 percent more likely to

Table 1
Bivariate Analyses of Intention to Vote for Nagin

	Tulane Poll, April 16–17, 2006, “Will Vote for Nagin”	Gallup Poll, February 18–26, 2006, “Will or Might Vote for Nagin”
Nagin approval following Katrina		
Approve	59.0%	80.3%
Disapprove	4.4%	20.3%
	$\chi^2 = 101.28 (p < .0001)$	$\chi^2 = 1062.23 (p < .0001)$
Race		
Black	44.3%	72.7%
White	4.8%	43.1%
	$\chi^2 = 84.59 (p < .0001)$	$\chi^2 = 241.15 (p < .0001)$
Offended by “Chocolate City” comments		
Did not say anything wrong	—	72.2%
Not offended, should not have said it	—	67.6%
Offended by his remark	—	28.2%
	$\chi^2 = 457.07 (p < .0001)$	
No flooding		
Number of flooding	32.0%	—
Flooding	26.5%	—
	$\chi^2 = 1.444 (p < .230)$	—
Perception of financial impact of Katrina		
Not really hurt by it	—	52.7%
Had some losses, nothing major	—	53.8%
Major financial hit, not lose everything	—	49.5%
Lost everything	—	56.0%
	$\chi^2 = 6.799 (p < .10)$	

Note: Numbers in columns represent the percentage within each independent variable; a “yes” response to voting for Nagin is the dependent variable. Therefore, columns will not add up to 100.

say they will vote for Nagin than Whites; with the Gallup data, African Americans are 24 percent more likely to consider voting for Nagin. In addition, voters who were offended by Nagin’s “chocolate city” comments (most of whom were White) were about 46 percent less likely to consider voting for him than those who believed that he did not say anything wrong.

The two surveys show different results on the impact of damage levels, based on whether damage is measured in real terms (Tulane poll) or if respondents are asked their perception of the damage they sustained (Gallup poll). The actual level of flooding in one’s neighborhood did not have a significant influence on vote choice, whereas those who perceived they were worse off were about 18 percent less likely to vote for Nagin than

Table 2
Logistic Regression Results for Intention to Vote for Nagin in the Primary Election

	Tulane Poll						Gallup Poll					
	Predicted			Predicted			Predicted			Predicted		
	Model 1	SE	Probabilities	Model 2	SE	Probabilities	Model 1	SE	Probabilities	Model 2	SE	Probabilities
Black	3.475***	.627	.524	2.994***	.607	.237	.982***	.214	.236	1.279***	.257	.303
Female	.062	.690	.004	.657	1.113	.014	.243	.177	.060	.150	.210	.037
Democrat	-.346	.743	-.020	.389	.810	.009	—	—	—	—	—	—
Level of flooding in neighborhood	-.078	.217	-.020	-.186	.346	-.018	—	—	—	—	—	—
Perception of financial impact	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.246*	.112	-.180	-.163	.112	-.121
Offended by "Chocolate City" remark	—	—	—	—	—	—	-1.043***	.162	-.459	-.581**	.190	-.277
Approve of Nagin's job/response following Katrina	—	—	—	3.255**	1.034	.222	—	—	—	2.476***	.219	.550
Constant	-2.984***	.670	—	-5.253**	1.699	—	-1.420***	.293	—	-7.18†	.379	—
N	205	—	—	195	—	—	733	—	—	712	—	—
Pseudo R ²	.30	—	—	.52	—	—	.13	—	—	.31	—	—

Note: Numbers in columns are logistic regression coefficients. Predicted probabilities are a measure of the marginal change from the lowest to the highest value, while holding all other variables at their mean.
†*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

those who perceived they sustained little damage. This not only suggests that perception and reality have differing effects on attitudes but also that there is some support for the notion that voters who feel they are worse off are less likely to support the incumbent.

The second models include the indicator for Nagin approval to show how its inclusion influences the effect of race. These results show that although approval of Nagin is both statistically and substantively significant, race remains highly significant in both sets of data. The Tulane poll shows that African Americans are still 24 percent more likely to vote for Nagin than Whites are (a change from 52 percent in the first model); similarly, those who approve of Nagin's job following Katrina are about 22 percent more likely to support him than those who disapproved of his performance. The Gallup data indicate that the inclusion of Nagin approval increases the likelihood that African Americans will support Nagin (30 percent with model 2, compared to 24 percent in model 1). In these data, voters who approved of Nagin's job performance were 55 percent more likely to vote for him than those who were opposed to his performance. The differences between the polls are again likely indicative of changes in voters' attitudes throughout the campaign. Retrospective evaluations of Nagin were more important than racial identity in the early poll, but not as important in the later survey.

An analysis of the relationship between race and approval of Nagin shows further evidence that the electorate became increasingly racially polarized throughout the campaign. In the days just before the election, 65 percent of African American voters, compared to only 22 percent of Whites, approved of Nagin's performance ($p < .001$). As such, retrospective evaluations are endogenous to race in these data. The Gallup data, collected months earlier, show that majorities of both African Americans and Whites (61 percent and 51 percent, respectively) approved of Nagin's response to Katrina ($p < .01$). As the campaign progressed, evaluations about Nagin, and ultimately, his electoral support, became more racially polarized.

Conclusion

Many Americans were stunned that New Orleans could re-elect a mayor that, in the eyes of so many outside New Orleans, had left thousands of his city's poorest residents to fend for themselves during a natural disaster. Did Katrina have any effect on this election? The mere fact that Nagin was re-elected does not mean that the hurricane had no impact on voting. First,

prior to the hurricane, Nagin likely would have faced weak opposition and would have won easily. Nagin ran a very different campaign than he would have without the disaster. It is also clear that Katrina had the potential to be an accountability crisis for Nagin, since voters in New Orleans based their vote partly on Nagin's job performance in the wake of Katrina.

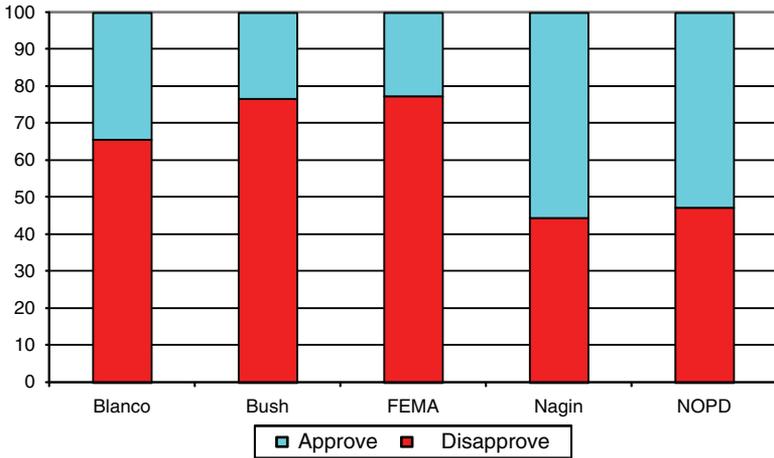
One surprising factor for many Americans is that the voters in New Orleans largely supported Nagin's job performance. Although many Americans were dissatisfied with Nagin, voters judged him much less harshly. Perhaps the main reason why voters of New Orleans were more sympathetic to Nagin was because they have a different understanding of the true culprit of their disaster—the failed levees. Because the levees were built and maintained by federal authorities, most New Orleanians believed that it was the federal government's responsibility to protect them from flooding. The Gallup data indicate they were much more dissatisfied with the federal government's response to Katrina than local authorities (see Figure 1). Thus, voters viewed Nagin as having made some mistakes—as evidenced by the opinion about his “chocolate city” remarks—but as having done his job adequately in the face of what should have been a federal responsibility. Since voters largely did not blame Nagin for Katrina, they saw no reason to oust him from the office because of it.

Although Nagin's performance was very important to voters, racial divisions were a primary factor in this election. The campaign did not start out as racially polarized as it ended up. The Gallup data show that two months before the election, White voters were more supportive of Nagin's job performance and were more likely to vote for him than they were in the days immediately before the election, as indicated by the Tulane data. Throughout the campaign, attitudes became increasingly polarized by race. Retrospective evaluations were less important as Election Day drew closer.

This case confirms much of the findings in current scholarship on race and voting. Although retrospective calculations were important, these evaluations, and ultimately Nagin's support, became increasingly linked with racial group interests. This election also provides continued support for the idea that racial conflict is related to the racial composition of the city. With one racial group on the verge of losing long-held power and another seeing the potential to gain power, racial group interests were bound to become a defining issue in the campaign and for voters as they selected their next mayor.

White voters saw an opportunity in the election of 2006. For the first time in decades, they believed that a White mayor could be elected and they would not have to choose strategically for their most preferred Black

Figure 1
Government Job Approval Ratings in Response to Hurricane Katrina



candidate. African Americans responded to this challenge. When nearly two dozen candidates, many of whom were White, entered the mayoral race, it activated the African American community and led Nagin to change to an overtly racial campaign strategy. Undoubtedly, African Americans saw this election as the key to holding onto power in the city, as well as a harbinger of the future, should a White mayor get elected. This racial conflict led to racially polarized voting. Months prior to the election, before the campaigns had started in earnest, and before the stakes had been made clear, majorities of African Americans and Whites approved of Nagin’s response to Katrina. By Election Day, however, approval of Nagin, and thus, support for his re-election, were defined by race.

As of this writing in the fall of 2008, the year alone has included massive flooding in the Midwest, wildfires in California, a record-breaking winter storm and blizzard affecting many states, and two major hurricanes in the United States. In addition to the presidential election, thousands of state and local officials are up for election. These disasters provide a unique opportunity for political scientists to examine and compare the effects of short-term versus long-term forces on voting.

Appendix

Question Wording and Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables from Tulane and Gallup Polls

Tulane Poll	Descriptives
Vote choice: "If the New Orleans mayoral election were held today, will you vote for Ray Nagin?"	28% will vote for Nagin 72% will not vote for Nagin
Nagin approval: "Do you approve of the way Ray Nagin has handled his job as mayor since Hurricane Katrina?"	45% approve of Nagin 55% disapprove of Nagin
Level of flooding: Coded by matching address to peak level of flooding	No flooding = 46.5% < 1 foot = 6.5% 1 to 3 ft = 16.0% 3 to 5 ft = 20.7% > 8 ft = 3.3%
Gallup Poll	
Vote choice: "For each of the following candidates for mayor, please tell me whether you will definitely vote for the person, whether you might consider voting for that person, or whether you will definitely not vote for that person. How about Mayor Ray Nagin?" (Recoded to combine "definitely" and "might consider")	53% will/might vote for Nagin 47% will not vote for Nagin
Nagin approval: "Do you approve or disapprove of the job Mayor Ray Nagin did in responding to the effects of Hurricane Katrina?"	54% approve of Nagin 46% disapprove of Nagin
Chocolate City comments: "As you may know, Ray Nagin said that New Orleans should be rebuilt as a 'chocolate city.' How would you describe your reaction to his statement? Would you say you were offended by what he said, you were not offended but think he could have said it better, or you didn't think he said anything wrong?"	10.3% = not wrong 53.0% = not offended/could have said better 36.7% = offended
Financial impact: "Which of the following statements best describes the impact of Hurricane Katrina on your personal financial situation—you lost everything or almost everything you had, you took a major financial hit but did not lose everything, you suffered some financial losses but nothing major, or you were not really hurt that much by the hurricane?"	14.9% = Not hurt 33.4% = Some losses 24.6% = Major hit 27.2% = Lost everything

Notes

1. I refer to the effects of "Katrina" or "the hurricane" or "the disaster" repeatedly. By this, I mean both the hurricane and the flood. In fact, the vast majority of the damage to New Orleans was directly caused by the flood, not the hurricane.

2. Unfortunately, there are no data on the extent to which New Orleans voters correctly understood federal and local responsibilities.

3. Some scholars suggest that disasters do not cause long-term social or economic dislocation (Friesma et al. 1979).

4. Not only was Mitch Landrieu's father the last White mayor of New Orleans, but his sister, Mary, is a U.S. senator from Louisiana. Many other members of the Landrieu family hold local and state positions.

5. In the primary election, Nagin won 38 percent of the absentee votes and Landrieu came in second with 35.5 percent. In the run-off election, absentee votes were evenly split between the two candidates. The other results of the primary were Rob Couhig, 9.5 percent; Ron Forman, 17.3 percent; Tom Watson, 1.2 percent; other candidates, 4.6 percent.

6. With interactive voice response (IVR) surveys, respondents hear a recorded voice and their answers to each question prompt the software on which question to ask next. The main reason for choosing IVR is because it significantly reduces costs. IVR's proponents argue that it also reduces social desirability bias (Turner et al. 1998; Newman et al. 2002). The biggest problem with IVR surveys, as compared to Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (a live operator), is that it is easier for respondents to drop out without offending a live person, thus lowering the response rate (Tourangeau, Steiger, and Wilson 2002). Here, however, the response rate is acceptable (44 percent) and only slightly lower than the Gallup poll's cooperation rates of 50 percent for cell phones and 59 percent for land lines.

7. Cell phones cannot be called using autodialing techniques. Since most surveys use autodialing, they are not able to include cell phones into the sample. In the Gallup poll, nearly 64 percent of respondents were contacted by cell phone. Because cell phone users may not reside in the target geographic area, Gallup added a screening question that excluded all those who were not "currently living within the city limits of New Orleans." Gallup contacted cell phone users on weekends and at night to address the issue of respondents' reluctance to use cell phone "minutes," and they found cooperation rates to be comparable to those of land-line users (50 percent vs. 59 percent). Those contacted by cell phone were slightly harder hit by the hurricane, as would be expected, since many did not have working land lines; however, no substantial attitudinal differences were observed (Jones 2006). The margin of error is ± 4 percentage points.

8. The map was provided by C&C Technologies Survey Services at Louisiana State University Hurricane Center. It was created to help displaced residents learn more about the devastation of their homes. It was located on the Web at <http://mapper.cctechnol.com/flood-map.php>, but was taken down several months later because insurance companies were using it in settling claims, which was not the intention of those who put it up.

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