



Did Hurricane Sandy influence the 2012 US presidential election?



Joshua Hart*

Department of Psychology Union College, Schenectady, NY 12308, United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite drawing on a common pool of data, observers of the 2012 presidential campaign came to different conclusions about whether, how, and to what extent “October surprise” Hurricane Sandy influenced the election. The present study used a mixed correlational and experimental design to assess the relation between, and effect of, the salience of Hurricane Sandy on attitudes and voting intentions regarding President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in a large sample of voting-aged adults. Results suggest that immediately following positive news coverage of Obama’s handling of the storm’s aftermath, Sandy’s salience positively influenced attitudes toward Obama, but that by election day, reminders of the hurricane became a drag instead of a boon for the President. In addition to theoretical implications, this study provides an example of how to combine methodological approaches to help answer questions about the impact of unpredictable, large-scale events as they unfold.

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1. Introduction

Even before the tropical cyclone dubbed “Hurricane Sandy” made landfall along the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast United States coastline on October 29, 2012, pundits began speculating about how the storm might affect the impending presidential election. Some suggested that voters would be inclined to displace negative attitudes about the disaster onto incumbent President Barack Obama. Others posited that the storm would give Obama a chance to “look presidential” in the days before the election, thus boosting his approval ratings enough to make a difference in the tight race. Political science data can be found to support both theories (e.g., [Gasper and Reeves, 2011](#)), and in context, both theories seem plausible: Obama did receive positive news coverage for his administration’s response to the hurricane (including widely reported praise from Chris Christie, New Jersey’s Republican Governor and a Romney surrogate), but soon thereafter, news coverage seemed to focus more on the devastation the storm had wrought and the suffering of millions of citizens in its aftermath.

Similarly, social psychological theories could be used to generate different predictions. For example, several perspectives would view a natural disaster as representing a large-scale psychological threat to the population, either due to its instilling of uncertainty, existential insecurity (e.g., system justification theory, [Jost and Banaji, 1994](#)) or a sense of not having control over events (e.g., compensatory control theory, [Kay et al., 2008](#)). System justification theory, which posits that people are motivated to defend established social systems, particularly when fundamental psychological needs are threatened, could be used to make opposing predictions. On one hand, the hurricane should increase Obama’s favorability to the extent that

* Fax: +1 518 388 6177.

E-mail address: hartj@union.edu

the incumbent President represents the “status quo” that people are motivated to preserve (i.e., “justify”) to assuage uncertainty and threat; on the other hand, the hurricane might cause a “conservative shift” (because conservatism reflects an ideological preference for tradition; Hennes et al., 2012), which would negatively influence Obama’s favorability. (Perhaps, then, system justification theory suggests offsetting forces in the present case that would lead to the hurricane having little overall effect.) Compensatory control theory, which posits that people are motivated to perceive that some agent—either the self or an external power—is in control of circumstances and imposes order and predictability on an often chaotic-seeming world, would seem to predict a benefit of the hurricane for Obama, whose confident leadership would be expected to compensate for people’s feelings of not having control (see Kay et al., 2008).

Along similar lines, research on terror management theory suggests that a hurricane could influence voters’ political leanings as they seek comfort in the face of existential vulnerability (i.e., caused by death reminders; see Cohen et al., 2004; Landau et al., 2004). Specifically, a natural disaster would be expected to increase ideologically similar (i.e., liberal) voters’ liking for Obama to the extent that he is a charismatic leader (Kosloff et al., 2010). However, the direction of such an influence might also be expected to depend on salient construals of the event or the President’s response to it, such as those conveyed by the tenor of news coverage of the disaster (cf. Jonas et al., 2008). That is, existential concerns evoked by a hurricane combined with news coverage depicting Obama as a charismatic leader would have more positive implications for the President than news coverage emphasizing the scale of the disaster or a feckless government disaster response (e.g., consider the effect of 2005s Hurricane Katrina on the public’s views of then-President George W. Bush).

Of course, President Obama was re-elected, and several politicians, pundits, and operatives pointedly suggested that Hurricane Sandy had halted Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s supposed upward momentum (e.g., Rove, 2012), despite some polling evidence to the contrary (Silver, 2012). Even some liberals propagated the Sandy storyline; TV personality Chris Matthews, an Obama supporter, expressed gratitude that the storm had “brought in possibilities for good politics” (Wemple, 2012; Matthews later apologized for the remark). Others concluded that Sandy had no effect, despite drawing on the same pool of national tracking and exit poll data.

It is not possible to definitively ascertain whether Hurricane Sandy influenced the election, in what direction, or by how much. Tracking polls provide little insight because the polls reflect the influence of multiple factors simultaneously, none of which can be precisely statistically controlled for. The polls, which had begun to reflect some increased support for Obama prior to the storm (Silver, 2012), continued on that gradual trajectory, which could suggest either that the hurricane had no effect, or that it posed a countervailing force against a tendency for Romney to gain support as the election neared (or a countervailing force against Obama’s momentum). Obviously, a perfect experimental analysis is impossible—even if it were ethical to do so, one could not randomly assign voters to be aware (or not aware) of a natural disaster. Any experiments carried out after the election are hampered by considerable external validity problems. However, it is possible to approach the question using complementary strategies, ideally as the event in question unfolds. I adopted such an approach in the research presented here.

If Sandy was a boon for Obama, voters for whom the storm and its coverage were salient events should be more likely to prefer that he be reelected. One obvious limitation to this correlational approach is that the lack of random assignment precludes causal conclusions. However, even if exposure to news coverage of Hurricane Sandy cannot be randomly assigned, its salience can be manipulated—for example, with a subtle priming technique in which survey respondents are either asked or not asked about their exposure to the storm, then polled on their voting inclinations. Of course, even this approach is limited—it is infeasible to obtain a true control condition of individuals totally unaware of the storm. The present study thus employed both correlational and experimental approaches over the period of time after the hurricane hit and prior to the election, using converging, real-time methods to examine the possibility that any influence the hurricane may have had on voters could have changed over time along with the tenor of news coverage.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Beginning in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (October 31) until early morning on election day (November 6), 917 people located in the United States participated via MTurk.com and were paid 50 cents each (see Buhrmester et al., 2011). Participants were excluded from analyses if they did not plan to vote in the election or if they were unsure, leaving 695 “likely voters” (76%).¹ Although not weighted for representativeness to the voting population (the demographics of which vary between the “swing” states that are most important to electoral college calculus), the sample nevertheless reflects an approximate cross section of United States residents; similar to other studies (cf. Simons and Chabris, 2012), compared to the 2010 US census the present sample included a greater proportion of Whites/Caucasians (81%) and Asian-Americans (9%), a smaller proportion of Blacks/African-Americans (5%) and Hispanics/Latinos (4%), and a greater proportion of men (59%). On average, participants were younger than the population (ages 18–82; *Mdn* = 28), and they were also a great deal more liberal: 68% reported that they most closely affiliate with the Democratic party (21% most closely affiliated with the Republican party

¹ Expanding the sample to include all participants regardless of voting intentions does not change the significance or non-significance of any results reported in this article. I chose to report analyses from the “likely voter” subset to maximize generalizability to the voting population.

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