Perceived Obstacles to Voting following Superstorm Sandy

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The effects of weather on voting have been well-established in voting literature (e.g. Achen and Bartels, 2004a). Though this work gives an important basis for understanding the connection between weather events and voter turnout, research is often retrospective, analyzing data after the votes have been cast. This manuscript provides an important contribution to the literature by examining the attitudes and behavioral intentions of voters in the midst of a major weather event in the days prior to a national election. In October, 2012, days before the national election, Superstorm Sandy caused widespread damage to parts of the Mid-Atlantic and New England portion of the country. In the days between Sandy’s arrival and the election, this research was conducted to investigate how voters were communicating about the weather, obstacles to voting, and their perceptions of how the aftereffects of Superstorm Sandy would affect voting in the election.

While there is a well-established literature examining the effect of weather-related events on elections and voter turnout, much of it is connected to examinations of the rationality of the electorate. For example, Achen and Bartels (2004) argue that, in the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore lost 2.8 million votes to George W. Bush in states that were unusually dry or wet. This claim is advanced as part of a larger argument against the theory of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981). Retrospective voting argues that voters, while not perfectly rational, are capable of functional estimations of the performance of elected officials during their terms of office. This examination is not limited to weather events. Thus, while Achen and Bartels (2004) make their claim about the 2000 election in a section focusing on extreme climactic conditions such as droughts and floods, their focus on voter rationality extends to an examination of the electoral consequences of a series of shark attacks in New Jersey in 1916, and the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918, which since “the crucial attribution of political responsibility was lacking” (p. 30) was a disconfirming case. Such work should be seen in the context of other works by the same authors (Bartels, 1996, 2002, 2008) and others, whose studies of voter rationality take up topics as diverse as the effect of oil price shocks on gubernatorial elections in oil-producing states (Wolfers, 2002) and the effect on the incumbent party of victories by local college football teams in the ten days preceding presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial elections (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo, 2010).

Focusing specifically on natural disasters and weather-related events, others have found that while voters may irrationally punish incumbents for events beyond their control, this effect is outweighed by perceived responsiveness after the fact, especially a disaster declaration (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Based on this finding, some scholars argue that the public is more attentive than critics allow. Public attentiveness, if it exists, has a potential downside in how it may incentivize elected officials to seek out opportunities for credit-claiming, including under-preparedness (Healy and Maholtra, 2009) and political manipulation in the short-term (Tufte, 1978). Such

More straightforward examinations of weather and voter turnout focus tend on inclement, but not disastrous, weather and situate the findings in an ongoing discussion in the literature of the perceived costs of political participation. This area of study is less-developed, but still yields fruitful insights. The standard line that poor weather benefits Republicans by decreasing turnout has largely been confirmed, but with some qualification. For example, since the effect of adverse weather on turnout is greater on less-committed (“peripheral”) voters, DeNardo has argued that there are two effects, one that is pro-Republican and the other that is pro-minority party (1980). Such a finding adds some qualification to the standard account, but for the most part, the historical proverb that poor weather benefits Republicans has been confirmed. One confirming study goes so far as to claim that both the 1960 and 2000 presidential elections could have turned
out differently had the weather been different (Gomez, Hansford, and Krause, 2007). Heavy rain and/or snow in several key states in 1960 could have tipped the presidential race to Richard Nixon, instead of John Kennedy, and a dry day in Florida in 2000 may have led to a Gore presidency, butterfly ballots notwithstanding.

Indeed, the perception that “Republicans should pray for rain” seems to be well-entrenched, even among less-engaged voters. Anecdotally, one of the authors spent time during a class meeting after Sandy hit, but before Election Day, explaining how exceedingly unlikely it was that Sandy could change the presidential outcome in either New York or New Jersey. Once 2008 presidential results in those two states were accessed, and the turnout numbers manipulated to demonstrate just how many voters, even assuming, improbably, 100% of them were intending to vote for President Obama, would have to refrain from voting in 2012 to have such an effect, students realized the unlikelihood of that scenario. Still, that the question was raised shows awareness of the perception.

Concerns about the effect Sandy might have on the 2012 elections were widespread. One set of concerns dealt with polling stations. If new locations needed to be found, then voting machines would have to be moved. If electronic machines were in use, a consistent power supply was needed. If power was still out by Election Day, then other methods of voting, such as paper ballots, would have to be acquired in short order. Related concerns focused on slowed mail delivery, which would delay the counting of absentee and provisional ballots, including the influx of provisional ballots that almost certainly would follow the relocations of a number of polling places.

While there was little concern that the presidential race would be affected for these reasons, numerous accounts did raise the possibility that popular vote totals would be affected, especially in areas where early voting had to be postponed or cancelled. There was greater concern that statewide and down-ballot races could be affected by the lowered turnout Sandy was expected to cause.

Other concerns focused on political implications, specifically how Sandy could affect the dynamics of the candidates’ campaigns. These concerns were more speculative and prone to opportunistic deployment by partisans. One view was that Sandy benefitted President Obama by providing him an opportunity to look presidential, especially in his bipartisan, and mutually complimentary, interactions with New Jersey’s Republican governor, Chris Christie. In line with the arguments of Gasper and Reeves, advocates of this view saw the only downside to President Obama being inaction or an inept response to Sandy. In other words, Sandy provided the president with a golden opportunity.

Also in Obama’s favor was that much early voting had already taken place by the time Sandy arrived. While this benefit would likely be outweighed if Sandy had arrived even closer to Election Day and turnout was significantly depressed along the Eastern Seaboard, numerous outlets posited that the most significant effect was simply the loss of a couple days’ worth of campaign stops and political ads. Republicans were likely to claim this disadvantaged Governor Romney who, in their telling, had his momentum blunted by Sandy, whereas others framed the consequences of Sandy more as a locking in place of the status quo, which showed a small, but stable advantage for President Obama.

Given the widespread media coverage of voting, the national election, and voter concerns, we designed a study to ask college student voters how the weather related events directly proceeding the 2012 national election would affect their ability to vote. Our general
research question followed: How do young voters perceive the effects of Superstorm Sandy will impact the National Election?

Method

Participants

Participants were 48 college students enrolled in undergraduate communication and political science courses at a midsized regional Northeastern university. These data were part of a larger data collection effort on voting. Of the 46 out of 48 total participants who reported sex, 16.7% (N=8) were male and 79.2% (N=38) were female. Most participants self-identified as Caucasian (83.3%), 4.2% African American, 2.1% Asian American, 4.2% other, and 6.3% did not report race or ethnicity. Participants’ ages ranged from 17-23 (M = 19.94, SD = 1.31). Students received extra credit in a course in exchange for their participation. Finally, 50% of participants reported their major in college as Communication Studies, 16.7% as Political Science, 29.1% reported other majors, and 4.2% did not report a major.

Data collection was scheduled for the week before the 2012 Election Day. Nine days before the election, Superstorm Sandy devastated parts of the East Coast including Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. Power-outages would plague these areas for weeks after the storm’s arrival on land. The students who attend the university where the data were collected completed the surveys one to six days after Superstorm Sandy. After administering informed consent, participants were given a questionnaire that asked to indicate why, if at all, Sandy was affecting their ability, or the ability of someone they know, to vote. One participant did not give a reason as to why s/he anticipated voting obstacles and this data was thus excluded from further analysis, resulting in 47 participants for this study.

Procedure and Coding

The data were analyzed for emergent themes by two members of the research team; first independently and then as a pair. Thought category was determined to be the unit of analysis. Independent thematic analysis yielded highly consistent results, and consensus was reached on disparate interpretations of the data through discussion. Data that best represent the patterns of results are presented below. Direct quotes from participants in the results section will include the participant identifying number (Lapinski, Braz, Maloney, 2010).

Results and Discussion

Three dominant themes emerged from the data. First, voting was not perceived to be a priority to college student voters in the aftermath of the storm. Second, student voters were concerned physical damage would disrupt the voting process. Finally, participants shared concerns about friends and family encountering obstacles to the voting process. These themes with supporting data excerpts are presented and discussed below.

Voting not a Priority. Many participants reported that voting was not a priority to them and/or to their loved ones in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. This commentary on voting as a low priority tended to take one of two forms – voting in general was not important, and voting was less important than a specific event that had happened to a loved one. Several participants noted that in general, people had priorities that did not include voting in the national election. P#44 shared that the “Hurricane ruined New Jersey…voting is least concern.” P#46 noted that s/he “May have other more important things to take care of.” Another participant, P#18, reported, “Their hometown has been affected so badly, that they have better things to be doing next Tuesday than go to the voting booth.” These comments reflect a sense that in the midst of damage to the area, voting is simply not important.

Other participants shared more specific reasons why voting was not a priority. These reasons included that people had “no time [to vote] due to cleaning and repair” (P#2), “lost
family members so voting is most likely not a priority for them right now” (P#36), and “Don’t have a home, so they have bigger priorities” (P#23).

These data reflect the tendency for participants to separate the storm’s aftermath from the national election. The general sense from these comments is that voters were not connecting the results of the national election with their response to the storm’s aftermath. The amount of federal aid, and the timeliness with which that aid would be disbursed, would depend directly on who was in the White House and Congress in the weeks and months following the storm. Federal Aid for disaster relief had been an issue on the campaign trail with Romney favoring spending cuts for disaster relief (Romney, 2011).

Student voters seemed not to make this connection as evidenced by the separation of the storm and it’s aftermath from the priority of voting in the national election. The student voters in this study were not alone in their tendency to prioritize other things over voting in the election. New Jersey’s own Governor Chris Christie expressed a similar view, stating “I’m sure that while the national election is obviously very important, that the people of New Jersey, in this moment, would really be unhappy with me if they thought for a second I was occupying my time thinking about how I was going to get people to vote a week from today...So, I don’t give a damn about Election Day. It doesn’t matter a lick to me at the moment. I have much bigger fish to fry than that” (Goldman, 2012).

Students were not inclined to view Sandy through a political lens or to note any political implications to the storm, either in a broader historical context or with respect to the particulars of Sandy’s impact. Regarding the former, nobody referenced Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent controversy surrounding the local, state, and national government response and nobody noted any connection between Sandy and climate change. At the more immediate level, students also declined to make political connections, other than to note the relative unimportance of politics given Sandy’s arrival. When offered an opportunity to comment on how Sandy may affect their ability to vote—or that of somebody they knew—students responded by pointing out more pressing concerns. It is likely that if expressly asked to place Sandy more broadly into a political context, students could have done so. After all, news accounts doing just that were easy to find at the time. However, it is clear that given the chance to reflect on Sandy on a personal level, even with the prompt of “ability to vote,” students were content to let the politics wait for a later time.

**Physical Disruptions to the Voting Process.** The second theme to emerge from the data was physical disruptions to the voting process. Overwhelmingly, college student voters shared concerns about the election related to damage and destruction of utilities, buildings, and roadways, and delays to the vote count. These subthemes are described in subsequent paragraphs.

Not surprisingly, 14 participants reported concerns with power as a dominant obstacle to voting. P#6 noted, “My family lives in NJ and the power will be out for at least 7-10 days.” Likewise, P#34 also reported, “Yes, I am from NJ, major power outages limits my family’s ability to go vote.” Not only did participants have concerns that power outages would affect voting, they also shared concerns that transportation may be an issue. In fact, almost one quarter of the participants (N=10) identified transportation issues as a primary obstacle to voting. Some participants noted vehicles had been damaged, with P#1 simply noting he had “no car” because of Superstorm Sandy. P#28 provided some more detail when she reported, “I know my best friends [sic] car broke down during the storm (parked in her driveway) and she is unable to drive home from school.” In addition to obstacles related to the vehicles themselves, several
participants reported gas shortages may affect the ability to vote. P#22 said, “My family in NJ has no power and gas is scarce. May not want to ‘waste’ gas to drive and vote.”

A related but somewhat separate obstacle facing voters was road closures. Following the storm, downed power lines and tress, as well as physical damage to roads and bridges, made driving difficult in some areas. P#21 anticipated having difficulty voting due to this type of damage, reporting, “Debris making it hard to maneuver” would affect his ability to vote. P#19 reported a similar concern in a neighboring state, saying, “My family in NYC because traffic patterns are shut down.”

Even if participants were able to find gas and access roads to visit voting precincts, participants shared concerns that the voting process might be compromised. P#11 shared that the house she was living in was damaged, forcing her to relocate, “House damage, living out of voting area [with] no absentee ballot [sic].” P#24 also had concerns about her absentee ballot, noting, “Highly concerned my absentee ballot, which must be received the Tuesday before Election Day (but that was during Sandy) will not be processed in time.” Likewise, P#26 also had concerns related to the processing of absentee ballots. Referencing people she knew, she said, “They cannot go to their hometown to vote and they have not filled out absentee ballots.”

Evacuated or Displaced Voters. The third theme that emerged from the data surrounded how the weather events had affected family, friends, and voters themselves. Twenty participants referenced family or friends in the answers they provided. Eight participants specifically identified that they or someone they knew was physically removed from their voting location, either being evacuated or displaced. The evacuated voters were described simply, as P#2 noted, “They were evacuated” and P#4 reported, “Moved from voting district (evacuated) (P#4).” Displaced voters had moved away from the area ahead of the storm and were unable to return home. For example, P#8 reported, “They aren’t allowed to go back to their hometown due to damage and flooding.” P#14 noted a similar experience, “Some are staying with relatives in another state.”

Conclusion

Participants reported three emergent themes: voting was a low priority, physical damage prevented the voting process from occurring, and people were unable to be in the correct area to cast their vote. These themes are reflective of young voters’ concerns heading into the general election. Participants concerns were focused on the immediate impediments to casting a vote and the extent to which these impediments lessened the importance of casting a ballot. Little to no attention was focused on the consequences of the upcoming elections. The clear pattern of de-emphasizing the importance of voting may have more than one explanation. Participants may have rationally concluded that, while important, voting was a regular event that ought to give way in the face of an emergency that created more direct impact. It may, however, also indicate that participants are likely to be retrospective voters, and will determine the political importance of Sandy after the response to it has played out. This is possible, but still speculative reading of participants’ attitudes, and will be better tested with the examination of additional data.
References


