

Core, Swing, or Opposition? Electoral Targeting and the Allocation of Disaster Relief Aid

Massimo Mannino - University of St.Gallen/Stanford University*

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Abstract

Natural disasters provide incumbents with a unique opportunity to improve their re-election chances by providing timely financial assistance to protect lives, relieve the suffering of affected individuals, and promote economic recovery. Which types of electorally motivated strategies, if any, guide the allocation of disaster relief? We argue that incumbents favor core supporters with a high probability of voting when disbursing relief aid. We use county-level data on natural disasters and relief aid in the context of U.S. presidential elections (1992-2012) to empirically discriminate between different types of electorally biased distributions of disaster relief. The results suggest that incumbents channel relief aid to high-turnout counties in which they enjoy strong electoral support even when controlling for disaster damage. We elaborate on the implications of these findings for the literature on political biases in government redistribution and the design of institutions that manage public responses to natural disasters.

*Address for correspondence: Stanford University, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, 616 Serra Street, Stanford, CA 94305-6165. E-mail: mmannino@stanford.edu.