

# Governors as Opportunists: Evidence from Disaster Declaration Requests

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## Abstract

How do political forces shape the behavior of governors and the president as they interact after a natural disaster? Federal disaster aid provides dollars to states and potential votes for each official. We examine whether governors opportunistically leverage their states' electoral importance to the president when requesting aid. We also consider if governors' requests are influenced by the partisanship of the president. Do governors avoid requesting aid from an other party president because of electoral concerns? Analyzing monthly declarations requests from 1972 to 2006, we find that political variables influence governors to ask beyond objective measures of need. Specifically, we find that only reelection eligible governors behave opportunistically. We find no evidence of partisan effects; governors from battleground states request without hesitation from other-party presidents. While previous research has focused solely on presidents, we find that requests for disaster aid are a function of both presidential and gubernatorial motivations.

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Since the New Deal, the roles of the state and national governments have become increasingly intertwined. The president and the fifty state governors, as executives of the centers of U.S. political power, often engage in formal and informal negotiations. Billions of dollars flow between Washington, DC and the fifty state capitals. How do the political forces that independently shape the behavior of the two officials interact when they deal with each other? One policy that involves extensive federal and state cooperation is the presidential disaster declaration process where governors formally request federal aid directly from the president. In this paper, we consider the extent to which political factors shade decisions to request above and beyond need. We argue that some governors consider their strategic electoral importance to the president when requesting resources from the federal government.

After a governor makes a formal request for aid, the president has unilateral authority to grant or deny it and is not required to provide cause or explanation. These pleas for assistance may come after events ranging from a massive hurricane to relatively minor floods or thunderstorms. If the request is approved, federal funds, and often presidents themselves, arrive at an affected area to offer support. Conventional political wisdom and academic studies alike contend that disaster declarations are electorally beneficial to presidents. For example, one Democratic Party operative described disaster relief as “an amalgam of ambulance-chasing and pork barrel” that, once delivered by politicians, is “rewarded with votes” (qtd in Mathews et al., 1992). Studies have found that presidents target disaster declarations with electoral concerns in mind (Garrett and Sobel, 2003, author citation). These studies focus on the presidential act of granting a request without considering the electoral motivations of governors in making the request.<sup>1</sup> There is also evidence at both the county (Gasper and Reeves, 2011) and state (author citation) level that voters reward presidents for declarations.

Despite the electoral benefits of disaster declarations, we find that, for some governors, objective measures of damage are the only indicator of requests. Yet for other governors, political considerations cause them to request aid above-and-beyond need. For this subset, governors’ requests are determined by political factors. Specifically, these governors consider their strategic electoral importance to the president when deciding to request. We refer to this behavior as *opportunism*. The primary observable implication of opportunism is that governors from battleground states will

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<sup>1</sup>Both Author Citation and Garrett and Sobel (2003) control for gubernatorial partisanship, and find no effect.

be more likely to request help from the president. We consider several implications of this behavior. First, we argue that only governors facing particular incentives will be opportunistic. Namely, we hypothesize that only reelection eligible governors will engage in opportunistic behavior because they are especially driven to maintain balance between taxation and spending (Besley and Case, 1995; Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose, 2011); federal aid, in the form of disaster declarations, supports this aim by offsetting costs from severe weather events. Battleground state governors not bound by term limits face incentives to seek more resources for their states and will do so by leveraging their electoral importance to the president when requesting federal aid.

In addition to maintaining fiscal balance, governors, as party leaders, are trustees of the reputation of their political party (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005) and want to help elect their party's presidential candidate. With this in mind, we hypothesize that party may influence the choices of governors to request. Given the electoral benefits of a disaster declaration, governors may be eager to request from same-party presidents in order to invite them into the state to woo voters and support the party. At times, governors face conflicting incentives. Consider the case of a governor requesting aid from an other-party president. If the governor is from a battleground state, they are well placed to request aid because they are electorally important. Yet they also risk inviting a hostile campaigner-in-chief into their state. Few things are worse for a party leader than enabling the victory of an other-party president. This is the risk that a battleground state governor takes by requesting aid from a president of the other party. It follows that battleground state governors most acutely feel these partisan influences and that they are heightened during a presidential election year. Governors act to fulfill numerous goals while in office, and the goal of obtaining resources for their states may conflict with helping their party win the White House.

In the sections that follow, we study gubernatorial disaster declaration requests for every month in each state from 1972 to 2006. We detail how governors behave as opportunists and how this behavior is influenced by the partisan and electoral incentives of the governor. Ultimately these findings speak to the political motivations of the behaviors of governors. To preview our results, we find that governors are opportunistic but only if they face reelection. This suggests that the electoral motivations of governors, more so than presidents, drives the politicized disaster declaration process described in other studies. When party concerns and resource opportunities conflict, reelection-eligible governors leverage their state's electoral importance for resources in spite of party.

# 1 Disasters and electoral incentives

Instances of severe weather provide an ideal opportunity for studying responses of political actors. Severe weather events are exogenous to the political system; however, the responses of politicians may be a direct function of political considerations. Other scholars have used disasters to study the ways that voters (Achen and Bartels, 2004; Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Gasper and Reeves, 2011) politicians (Garrett and Sobel, 2003; Sylves and Búzás, 2007; McCarthy, 2010; Salkowe and Chakraborty, 2009, author citation), and political parties (Barnhart, 1925) respond to these acts of mother nature.

Presidential disaster declarations are the first step in the federal response to severe weather damage. When severe weather strikes, a governor may request federal assistance.<sup>2</sup> This request is initiated by the governor and made directly to the president. Once the president receives this request, it is his decision alone whether to grant or deny it. This is a sequential process with the governor having unilateral control over initiation and the president having unilateral control over accepting or rejecting the request. The stimulus for action is exogenous to the political system, and the responses are those of the governor and president alone; legislators, for instance, have no statutory authority when it comes to requesting or granting a disaster declaration. A state that receives a disaster declaration can expect federal dollars, access to loans, and other resources provided by the federal government.<sup>3</sup>

One illustrative example is the case of Hurricane Andrew. In mid-August 1992, as the presidential campaigns were raging, Hurricane Andrew, a category 5 hurricane, struck the southern part of the United States. The storm was historic and ranks as the second costliest U.S. hurricane, exceeded only by Hurricane Katrina.<sup>4</sup> Most affected was Florida, a state that in just over two months would deliver its 25 electoral votes to either President George H. W. Bush or Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. The hurricane's damage was extensive. Dade County alone saw fifteen deaths and nearly a quarter of a million residents were left homeless.<sup>5</sup>

The governor of Florida was Lawton Chiles, a Democrat elected in 1990. President Bush, a

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/pa/pr\\_declaration.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/pa/pr_declaration.shtm), accessed 15 April 2010.

<sup>3</sup>In fiscal year 2009, FEMA distributed over six billion dollars to states, the bulk of which went for disaster relief (US Census Bureau, 2010, p. 10).

<sup>4</sup><http://www.iii.org/media/facts/statsbyissue/hurricanes/>, accessed Feb 13, 2011.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/1992andrew.html>, accessed Feb 13, 2011.

Republican, was eager to deliver aid to Florida. Because of the historic scope of the disaster, there was little doubt that there would be substantial federal aid to the state. But, at least initially, the Governor was reluctant to request all that President Bush was offering. The two men engaged in “a little belly-bumping match” as the President offered additional federal resources, which the Governor refused to accept because he was “sensitive to old-fashioned political ideas like not truckling to Washington” (Mathews et al., 1992). In addition to being President, Bush was also the rival-candidate to Bill Clinton, who, like Chiles, was a Southern Democratic governor for whom Chiles was actively campaigning. The Bush campaign saw the potential for votes. Mathews et al. (1992) reports that a Bush campaign aide “joked that it wouldn’t be so bad if Andrew blew on up ‘to Kentucky and the rust-belt states’ where Bush was behind in the polls.” The disaster relief process was infused with politics and Chiles felt those pressures.

Chiles’s reluctance to request aid soon gave way. The Governor soon asked for the “extraordinary” amount of \$9 billion (Anderson, Kim, and Merzer, 1992) and for the federal government to waive Florida’s entire cost-sharing obligation for the federal aid (Nickens, 1992). If the waiver was not granted, Chiles said that it “would break the state’s budget” (Marcus and Gugliotta, 1992). In the face of the unexpected cost from Hurricane Andrew, Chiles became proactive in seeking resources for his state.

Presidents and governors have to work together, and both offices face a separate set of aims and constraints. Governors must manage state finances and most are bound by balanced budget amendments. Maintaining fiscal balance is especially crucial for governors, like Chiles, who are facing reelection. Governors are also party leaders who take active roles in promoting their party and electing their party’s presidential candidate. In the case of Hurricane Andrew, we see the cross-pressure between partisan loyalties and the incentives to act opportunistically to receive disaster aid. As Chiles was considering requesting aid, he was sensitive to his state’s role in the oncoming 1992 election. His initial reluctance to accept all federal aid that was being offered hints at a desire to limit George Bush’s use of Hurricane Andrew to get votes. While we see Chiles initially reluctant perhaps as a result of partisan considerations, he ultimately requests unprecedented amounts of disaster aid.

In the case of Hurricane Andrew, one of the costliest disasters in U.S. history, there was little doubt that Chiles would seek aid from the federal government. Even in a context where the damage

was historic, we see political tensions. We examine every request made by governors for federal disaster aid from 1972 to 2006. While some of these requests come in the aftermath of massive carnage, most do not. We examine whether the tensions we observe in the case of Hurricane Andrew are systematic to the disaster declaration requests between the governor and president.

We leverage the disaster declaration process to better understand the motivations of governors as they interact with the president. Federalism leads governors and presidents to interact on many policies beyond disaster declarations. Typically, this interaction involves many actors in addition to the president and governor, most notably legislators. The disaster declaration process is a context where there is minimal involvement by these outside actors. This provides a relatively direct test of the motivations of the governor and president.

## 2 Gubernatorial incentives

We systematically examine whether governors request above and beyond need as a function of their states' electoral importance. The null hypothesis is that governors request only as a function of need without regard to political variables. While actions not taken are often not reported, we do see governors eschewing disaster declarations arguing that they are not needed.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, we propose that governors will leverage political factors when requesting. As Governor Chiles of Florida decided to pursue federal assistance, he found himself well-positioned to ask. Florida was important for the President's reelection, and Bush was eager to deliver aid. To the extent that Chiles leveraged this electoral importance, he was behaving opportunistically. We hypothesize that this relationship will be especially powerful among those governors not bound by term limits, who are especially driven to maintain fiscal balance. But Chiles was also a party leader who was actively campaigning for Clinton, the presidential nominee of his party. Chiles's decision to accept federal resources could potentially come at the cost of depriving the Democratic Party the presidency. We hypothesize that partisan dynamics influence the extent to which governors behave opportunistically as they request disaster declarations.

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<sup>6</sup>For instance, in September of 2010, Idaho Governor Butch Otter told the Idaho County Board of Commissioners that he would not request a presidential disaster declaration in response to an increase in the wolf population in his state. In a letter to the Commissioners, Otter, a Republican, argued that a disaster declaration was not necessary because of existing state capacities.

## 2.1 Opportunistic incentives

We argue that governors are opportunistic, that is when governors ask for federal aid, they anticipate their state's electoral importance to the president. More generally, opportunism is when an actor leverages her strategic importance to another actor when requesting resources. While all governors are sensitive to the amount of destruction caused by a disaster, some governors request federal aid above and beyond damage as a function of political concerns. We see analogous opportunistic behavior in international relations. For example, Kuziemko and Werker (2006) finds that a seat on the U.N. Security Council brings more U.S. and U.N. aid and this amount increases when important events come before the Council. In this context, a nation may leverage its strategic diplomatic importance to the U.S. in order to request more aid. To the extent that governors are opportunistic, they will leverage their states' electoral importance to the president when deciding to request. The more crucial their state is for the presidential election, the more likely the governors will be to request. In what follows, we define electoral importance, posit a necessary condition for opportunistic behavior, and detail how partisan concerns influence opportunistic behavior.

While all governors request as a function of need, opportunistic governors request because they anticipate the president will be more likely to give them aid. This expectation is based on states' electoral importance to presidents. Given conventional political wisdom supported by academic research, we assume that an opportunistic governor acts with the knowledge that presidents use disaster declarations to gain votes; this will cause these governors' requests to be influenced by presidential electoral incentives. Because of the nature of the electoral college, competitive states are particularly important and readily identifiable. The all-or-nothing allocation of electoral votes means that states that are competitive are disproportionately important to the president (Brams and Davis, 1974; Bartels, 1985). Even though a candidate may win only a plurality of votes, he still receives the state's entire block of electoral votes.<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, other studies have found evidence that presidents curry favor with competitive states that are important for an electoral college victory. For instance James (2000) argues that the development of the regulatory state was dramatically influenced by the Democratic Party targeting a block of electoral votes at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Wright (1974) examines the New Deal

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<sup>7</sup>Today this is true for all states except Nebraska and Maine. These states allocate their electoral votes based on a district system.

era and finds that the distribution of federal spending can, in part, be explained by “a process of maximizing the expected electoral votes” (p. 30). Author Citation and Garrett and Sobel (2003) specifically examine disaster declarations and find that the presidential electoral competitiveness of the state is associated with an increased number of awards. Opportunistic governors realize this, anticipate the president’s response, and take advantage of their states’ strategic importance when considering whether to request aid.

The opportunistic governor will leverage her state’s electoral importance during a presidential election year because this is when the president responds most directly to electoral concerns. Since voters tend to be myopic, considering only recent events in their evaluations of incumbents, incumbent politicians may redouble their political efforts during the campaign season. Scholarly findings both on the behavior of voters (*e.g.* Kramer, 1971; Fiorina, 1981) as well as the response of politicians (*e.g.* Tufte, 1978; Bartels, 2008) support this view. Given this understanding of presidential electoral incentives, we develop our main hypothesis. If governors are opportunistic, then governors from electorally important states are more likely to request a presidential disaster declaration than other governors. We call this the *opportunistic hypothesis*.

We can refine our expectations of opportunistic behavior further by considering other political factors. First we introduce and describe the *reelection hypothesis*. We hypothesize that governors who are reelection eligible will be especially motivated to act as opportunists. This is because reelection eligible governors are particularly sensitive to maintaining state fiscal balance between taxes and spending. Besley and Case (1995) examines state-level spending and taxation from 1950 to 1986 and finds that term-limited politicians “care less about reputation” and therefore “reduce the effort expended to keep taxes and expenditures down” (p. 781).<sup>8</sup> This previous research also examines state budgets in the aftermath of natural disasters and finds that “only governors who may run for reelection. . . change their behavior in the face of a natural disaster” by adjusting state finances (p. 789). While Besley and Case (1995) examines state budgets, we hypothesize that the effect of term limits will exert a similar force in gubernatorial negotiations with the president. In addition to being an implication of existing research on the topic, it provides leverage on a competing mechanism. One concern is that any relationship is driven, not by the governor, but by the president. Governors could request only as a function of need, but presidents may be more

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<sup>8</sup>For similar findings from a more recent time period, see Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose (2011).



likely to approve the request of an electorally important state. If this is so, we should observe no difference in the effect of competitiveness for term-limited governors and those who can run again. If presidents are driving the relationship then they will not care whether the governor can run for reelection. Presidents would only care that an electorally important state is at stake.

## 2.2 Partisan incentives

In addition to electoral incentives, we hypothesize that the partisan dynamics between the governor and president may influence the probability of a request. As we have already described, a governor's disaster declaration request may influence the probability that an incumbent president or his party wins the state in the next election. Given this, battleground state governors may be eager to request from same party presidents and hesitant to request from other party presidents. This reflects a framework where parties are teams and may coordinate activities in order to help each other achieve their goals and keep the party brand strong (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). By working to elect a copartisan president, governors may also be acting strategically to procure additional funds after the presidential election. For instance, Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2006) finds evidence that presidents reward same party governors with federal dollars.

If governors are influenced by these partisan incentives, they should be especially felt by governors of battleground states during presidential election years. While ideally positioned, a governor requesting of an other-party president invites the other party's standard-bearer into the state to woo voters in the aftermath of a disaster. This scenario creates conflicting incentives for a governor. She experiences a partisan cross pressure against the incentives to behave opportunistically. Battleground state governors are strategically well positioned to ask but at a higher risk of hurting their party by inviting a hostile campaigner into the state. In presidential election years, partisan and opportunistic incentives for a reelection eligible governor collide.<sup>9</sup>

We hypothesize that in presidential election years battleground state governors will use the disaster declaration process to help their party's presidential candidate and request more from

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<sup>9</sup>For a related, although slightly different scenario, consider the reaction of Republican governors to Reagan's 1981 veto in order to achieve additional cuts in domestic spending. Broder (1981) reports that governors "applauded nervously" as their president was seeking to diminish their fiscal resources. There existed a tension between partisan and resource seeking motivations as "the 20 Republican state executives, most of whom will be on the ballot next year, betrayed strong worries that... reduced federal aid may throw them a curve in their re-election campaigns" (p. A3).

same-party presidents than other governors. Similarly, these battleground state governors will request less from other-party presidents. We call this influence of copartisanship the *partisan hypothesis*.

In this section, we have developed a framework of governors as opportunists. Our main *opportunistic hypothesis* is that governors will request a disaster declaration from a president as a function of their states' electoral importance. Because of the political forces that governors face, we refine our expectations further. We argue that only those governors not bound by term limits will engage in opportunism. We refer to this as the *reelection hypothesis*. Finally, we consider the partisan influences that governors face. In our *partisan hypothesis*, we posit the battleground state governors will be hesitant to request from other-party presidents and be eager to request from same-party presidents. For governors not facing any of the institutional characteristics described above, we expect to see requests only as a function of natural disaster damage.

### 3 Data and methods

We now turn to the empirical analysis of gubernatorial disaster requests. We analyze governors' decisions to request federal disaster aid from the president in monthly data in all states from 1972 through 2006. While controlling for the severity of the natural disasters, we test the hypotheses outlined in the previous section.

Our dependent variable is an indicator of the monthly decision of a governor to request a federal disaster declaration from the president. A case is a given month for a particular state and year. We construct this data based on a list of presidential disaster declaration requests<sup>10</sup> provided by the Public Entity Risk Institute<sup>11</sup> as well as the FEMA website.<sup>12</sup> For each case we include a binary indicator for whether we observe a disaster declaration request. There are months where a governor will request more than one disaster declaration, but these cases are rare. Multiple requests for disaster declarations occur for less than eight-tenths of a percent of the cases during the thirty five years of data.

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<sup>10</sup>The date of the request reflects when the president either approved or denied the request. A government study examining one fiscal year of disaster declarations found that it took governors, on average, about ten days to request a declaration. It then took the White House, on average, ten days between the time of the request and a presidential decision (United States General Accounting Office, 1989).

<sup>11</sup><http://www.peripresdecusa.org/>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.fema.gov/>

[Figure 1 about here.]

We limit our analysis to the approximately 17,000 cases that had nonzero damage over the current month or the previous two months (we describe our measure of damage below) and provide a description of the data with this restriction.<sup>13</sup> With this restriction, ten percent of cases see a disaster declaration.<sup>14</sup> From 1972 through 2006 there were 1,845 requests. No state had fewer than ten requests for a disaster declaration (Wyoming), while the Texas had the most with 107. On average, states saw 37 requests and averaged 1.2 requests each year. Figure 1 is a map of gubernatorial disaster declaration requests from 1972 to 2006, which shows substantial geographic and regional variation in the number of requests.

We measure the presidential competitiveness of a state as the loser's vote share of the statewide vote in the previous presidential general election.<sup>15</sup> This produces a zero to .5 scale indicating non-competitive to most competitive respectively. A score of zero indicates that the loser received no votes in the previous election (zero share of the vote) while a score of .5 indicates that the loser received exactly half of the vote. To test our main opportunistic hypothesis, i.e., that a governor's likelihood of requesting is a function of her state's strategic importance to the president, we examine disaster declaration requests in response to the interaction of presidential competitiveness of the state and the occurrence of a presidential election year. As described in the previous section, we refine our opportunistic hypothesis in two ways.

First, our reelection hypothesis is that only non-term-limited governors will be opportunistic. To test this hypothesis we conduct a split sample analysis where we allow parameter estimates to vary based on whether a governor is term-limited or reelection-eligible. In other models, we include an indicator if the governor is term-limited.<sup>16</sup>

Second, our partisan hypothesis predicts that opportunistic battleground state governors will be sensitive to the copartisan relationship with the president. To test this hypothesis, we include an indicator if the governor is of the same party as the president. We also conduct a split sample

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<sup>13</sup>We also exclude cases where the governor was neither a Republican nor Democrat.

<sup>14</sup>Nearly nine percent of cases see a disaster declaration request without this restriction

<sup>15</sup>Shaw (1999) and Author Citation use a similar measure of competitiveness for presidential elections. Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) also uses a measure based on the outcome in the previous race.

<sup>16</sup>We also consider that the governor may be motivated by the competitiveness and proximity of her own election. To account for this, we include a measure of gubernatorial competitiveness measured in the same way as presidential competitiveness and an indicator for gubernatorial election year. We find no evidence of this relationship and include these results in our Supporting Information.

analysis where we allow parameter estimates to vary based on the copartisan relationship between the governor and president. If this hypothesis is correct, a battleground governor will be less likely to request than other governors from an other-party president during a presidential election year. Similarly, we expect same-party battleground governors to request more than other governors in presidential election years.

We also consider objective measures of need. Damage caused by the event is clearly a factor in a governor’s calculus, and we use damage estimates provided by Spatial Hazards Events and Losses Database for the United States (SHELDUS) (Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute, 2009). This unique dataset draws upon several sources to provide comprehensive county-level measures of disaster damage caused in all U.S. states.<sup>17</sup> These data provide detailed information on the scope of natural disasters on a monthly level for the past several decades. We adjust these figures for inflation and create a per capita measure of disaster damage.<sup>18</sup> Since there is a lag between the time when severe weather strikes, when the governor makes a request for a disaster declaration, and when the president grants or denies the request, we aggregate weather damage over a three month span to include the given month and two previous months. We also include a measure of the per capita income of the state. This allows us to proxy for the amount of wealth in the state and provides a measure of the state’s tax revenue, and hence its ability to respond to major disasters.

To summarize, we perform three different split sample analyses. In the first, we split the sample based on whether the governor is term-limited or not, and include an indicator if the president and governor are of the same party. We also include in this analysis indicator variables for the respective parties of the governor and president in order to account for differences in governing ideologies. In our second analysis, we split the sample based on whether the president and governor are of the same party and include an indicator if the governor is term-limited. In our third analysis, we examine only opposite party officials and split the sample between term-limited and reelection-eligible governors. All analyses are logistic regressions with indicator variables for region-month combinations to capture seasonality as well as specific geographic region heterogeneity. Summary statistics of all variables are included in the Supporting Information.

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<sup>17</sup>The data contains measures of property and crop damage, as well as total fatalities

<sup>18</sup>Damage is expressed in 2005 dollars. Our measure reflects a per capita cost of damage to the areas (counties) affected by the disaster. Severe weather events may involve several counties, with each county varying in population size. We aggregate population over each county that sustained damage in the event. The results presented in the next section are robust to using state population as well.

## 4 Results

We now turn to the results of the empirical analysis described in the previous section. We find support of our opportunistic hypothesis, i.e., battleground state governors leverage their state’s electoral importance to the president. We also find evidence that this opportunistic behavior vanishes if the governor is term-limited. This supports our reelection hypothesis. With respect to the partisan hypothesis, we find no evidence during presidential election years that the partisan dynamic between governors and presidents influences requests of battleground state governors. When the state looks most attractive to a president, battleground state governors ignore partisan considerations and actively request aid from other-party presidents. Moreover, this willingness to offer up the state to a hostile campaigner-in-chief is exhibited only when the governor can stand for reelection.

Table 1 presents the results of a logistic regression that tests the opportunistic and reelection hypotheses. We divide the population into two groups. The first group includes only term-limited governors, and the second includes reelection-eligible governors. We conduct a split sample analysis to gauge the effect of the independent variables under each institutional setting. Term-limited governors have fewer incentives to control taxes and spending, which a presidential disaster declaration can offset. Meanwhile, governors not bound by term limits are found to exert extra effort to keep costs down in their state. Our reelection hypothesis predicts that presidential competitiveness interacted with presidential election year will positively predict disaster declaration requests but only for reelection-eligible governors.

[Table 1 about here.]

The interaction between presidential competitiveness and presidential election years in Table 1 indicates a significant dynamic between presidents and reelection-eligible governors. We see that in presidential election years, presidential competitiveness is a predictor of disaster declaration requests by governors not bound by term limits. We find no such effect for term-limited governors. These results support the opportunistic and reelection hypotheses that governors are leverage their electoral importance but only when facing reelection.

To provide substantive interpretation of the effect of presidential competitiveness, Figure 2 presents simulations of the predicted probability of a disaster declaration request in presidential

election years by reelection-eligible governors. In this figure, we vary the presidential competitiveness of the state from the lowest observed value (.2) to the highest observed value (.5) using software developed and described in Imai, King, and Lau (2009). This figure allows us to gauge the effects of increasing or decreasing levels of electoral competitiveness of a state on requesting a declaration. Ten thousand simulations were run for each level of competitiveness. All other variables were held at their mean or median value, for numeric and dichotomous variables respectively.

[Figure 2 about here.]

The mean probability of a request of a disaster declaration from a governor from a presidentially uncompetitive state is .016, while the mean probability of a request from a highly competitive state is .050. About ten percent of observed cases see a disaster declaration request, and so the baseline probability of a request is relatively low.<sup>19</sup> The differences represented in Figure 2 are relatively sizable, statistically significant, and provide evidence of opportunism among reelection-eligible governors.

While our analysis and discussion focus on the political influences on disaster requests, we note that severe weather damage is one of the most influential variables. It is positive and highly statistically significant in all of our models. In fact, for term-limited governors damage is the only statistically significant predictor of disaster declaration requests. We include an indicator if the president and governor are of the same party, but we find no evidence that this relationship affects requests.<sup>20</sup>

We now turn to the partisan incentives behind gubernatorial decisions to request federal disaster aid. Table 2 presents a split sample analysis. The model in the first column includes cases where the governor and president are of the same party. The second column is an analysis of cases where the president and governor are of opposite parties. This allows us to test the partisan hypothesis described previously. The partisan hypothesis predicts that battleground governors will be more likely to request during a presidential election year when the president is of their party. When the president is of the opposite party, we expect that the relationship would be reversed.

We find no support for the partisan hypothesis in Table 2. The interaction between presidential

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<sup>19</sup>Of our 17,086 cases in the analysis, 1,703 or 10% see a disaster declaration request.

<sup>20</sup>This is separate from our partisan hypothesis. Our P hyp looks specifically at battleground governors during election years.

competitiveness and presidential election year yields the opposite of the hypothesized result. With respect to the interaction between competitiveness and presidential election year, we see a positive although not statistically significant relationship when the governor is of the same party as the president. When the president is of the opposite party, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship. This suggests that when a governor is well-positioned to request, i.e. they are from a competitive state and it is a presidential election year, they disregard their partisan incentives and act opportunistically to procure resources.<sup>21</sup>

Like Figure 2, Figure 3 provides substantive interpretation of the simulated probability that a governor will request a disaster declaration from an other-party president during a presidential election year. If the partisan hypothesis holds, then battleground state governors will be less likely to request aid from other-party presidents when compared to other governors. Again, we consider two scenarios. One where the presidential competitiveness of the state is low (.2) and one where it is high (.5). All other variables were held at their mean or median value, for numeric and dichotomous variables respectively. The mean probability of an other-party request from an uncompetitive state governor is .06, while the probability of an other-party request from a battleground governor is .12. This is the opposite of what the partisan hypothesis predicts.

[Table 2 about here.]

[Figure 3 about here.]

The analysis in Table 2 shows that battleground governors abandon partisan allegiances and request aid from other-party presidents when they are strategically positioned to do so. This suggests that the resource seeking incentives rather than partisan incentives underlie opportunistic gubernatorial behavior. The analysis in Table 2, however, does not account for the role of term-limits or the reelection concerns of the governor. As we described previously, we expect that only reelection-eligible governors to display opportunistic behavior. It follows that if this opportunistic

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<sup>21</sup>Table 2 indicates that battleground state governors are less likely to request of other-party presidents and more likely to request of same-party presidents in years one through three of the presidential term. The positive coefficient of presidential competitiveness for same-party governors in column 1 and the negative coefficient for other-party governors in column 2 indicate this relationship for non-presidential election years. Since competitiveness is interacted with presidential election year in the model, the constituent term for competitiveness can be interpreted as the effect during a non-election year. These relationships remain in models without the interaction effects, which we present in the Supplemental Information.

behavior is causing governors to abandon their partisan ties, we should only observe this among reelection-eligible governors. To provide a clear test of gubernatorial opportunism, we reexamine cases where the governor and president are of opposite parties while taking into account whether the governor can run for reelection. If resource seeking motivations are driving behavior, then only those governors not bound by term limits will be influenced by the electoral importance of their state when requesting aid.

Table 3 examines resource seeking and partisan motives of governors and divides the subset of governors requesting aid from other-party presidents into those who are and are not term-limited. Under the reelection hypothesis, we should only see opportunistic behavior by those governors who are not term-limited. In the split sample analysis in Table 3, both term-limited and reelection-eligible governors are less likely to request when they are from a competitive state. During a presidential election year, however, those battleground governors who can run for reelection are more likely to request a disaster declaration from an other-party president. Term-limited governors show no significant increase in the likelihood of requesting under this scenario. While partisan forces influence other party governors to request less, these incentives are trumped when the governor is most strategically positioned to ask for aid.

Figure 4 presents simulated probabilities derived from the model presented in Table 3. The density plots represent the probability of a disaster declaration request in a given month by an opposite party governor during a presidential election year. The left panel indicates the simulated probability that a term-limited governor will request a disaster declaration. The right panel presents the same analysis for those governors who may seek reelection. The two lines in each panel represent the lowest and highest observed values of presidential competitiveness of a state, .2 and .5 respectively. Ten thousand simulations were run for each level of competitiveness. All other variables were held at their mean or median value, for numeric and dichotomous variables respectively.

For reelection-eligible governors presidential competitiveness is a positive predictor of disaster declaration requests to other party presidents during election years. The probability of a request from a reelection-eligible governor from an uncompetitive state is .009, while the probability of a request from a highly competitive state is .026. There is no effect of presidential competitiveness on the requests of term limited governors in presidential election years. Notably, presidential



competitiveness is a negative predictor of requests made to other party presidents during non-election years for all governors. Although this is not a prediction from one of our hypotheses, it suggests that partisan influences may be strong among battleground state governors only during non-presidential election years.<sup>22</sup>

The analysis in Table 3 and Figure 4 confirms the dominance of the reelection incentives over the partisan incentives in motivating gubernatorial behavior. We find strong evidence gubernatorial opportunism in the disaster declaration request process even when the partisan hypothesis would predict otherwise. When these incentives conflict we find that governors act as resource seekers in spite of partisan allegiances. When governors can influence either the resources their state will receive or the partisanship of the next president, they choose resources. As we hypothesized, the institutional structure of gubernatorial elections as determined by term-limits activates this opportunistic behavior.

[Table 3 about here.]

[Figure 4 about here.]

## 5 Discussion

Our analysis of all states over thirty five years examines the tensions that we observed as Governor Chiles considered requesting aid from President Bush. We find systematic evidence that governors act as opportunists. This is not a universal behavior, as we also find support for our reelection hypothesis; only governors who face reelection act as opportunists. We also examine the roll of partisan incentives. When the governor's party holds the White House, partisan loyalties are aligned with the goals of the opportunist; however, sometimes the governor must chose between what is best for her political party and what is best for the state's budget. When the reelection and partisan incentives collide, we show that the reelection incentives are dominant. At times, governors are

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<sup>22</sup>This may be a function of loyalism to the party. It may also reflect the close link between the reputation of the national party, the president, and the governor (Peltzman, 1987; Carsey and Wright, 1998; Chubb, 1988; Simon, 1989). Moreover, presidents take a more active role in battleground states governed by copartisans. This in turn may cause battleground governors to be linked more closely with the president and therefore the reputation of the national party. For instance, Oppel Jr. (2002) reports that President Bush "moved aggressively to help Republican governors . . . especially in states that he would like to win in his re-election campaign." Abramowitz (2002) notes that the close bond between battleground governors and copartisan presidents is "widely accepted among politicians and journalists" (p. 701) though finds that this conventional wisdom may be ill-conceived.

ideally positioned to request but at the cost of bringing an other-party president into their state to woo voters. We find no evidence of our partisan hypothesis. When faced with this delicate balance, we find systematic evidence that, like Chiles, governors subordinate party and ask for aid.

Unlike previous studies, we suggest that governors and not presidents are the primary cause of the politicization of the disaster declaration process. In our study, only those governors with an electoral incentive request strategically. A term limited governor from a battleground state requests based on need alone. We argue that it is only when the governor faces reelection that she will opportunistically leverage her states' electoral importance to the president.

Billions of federal dollars are spent annually on disaster relief and mitigation. While events like Hurricane Andrew come along very rarely, most governors find themselves in a position to ask for federal aid at some point during their administrations. While disasters are not caused by politicians, governors are often the first political responder to these events. We find that gubernatorial requests for federal disaster aid are not dictated by need alone. In requesting federal aid, a governor takes into account the electoral importance of her state and also whether she will again face reelection. While the disaster declaration process allows us to observe the electoral motivations of governors and presidents, natural disasters and the governmental response is also an important public policy domain.

Today, governors and state legislatures continue to deal with fiscal emergencies as they balance their ledgers. The effects of the economic recession are acutely felt by governors. As states reconcile their budgets, jobs are lost, benefits are cut, and existing resources are stretched. As states become more desperate for dollars, the motivations that we identify here may be more prevalent. We should notice how governors attempt to leverage their presidential electoral importance as they seek much needed federal dollars.

Because of political posturing, citizens who experience similar levels of damage may see differing levels of federal aid depending on their state's role in the last presidential election or the presence of gubernatorial term limits. The electoral pressures of governors and presidents exert influence over the allocation of resources independent of actual need. They do not negate each other as postulated by Madison in *Federalist* 10. The disaster declaration process is one in which governors and presidents exercise total discretion. Governors, alone, decide to request, and presidents, alone, decide whether to grant the request. Congress and state legislatures are wise to take a proactive in-

terest in the prerogatives of their executives, less gubernatorial and presidential electoral incentives dominant public policy.

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Gubernatorial Disaster Declaration Requests, 1972 to 2006

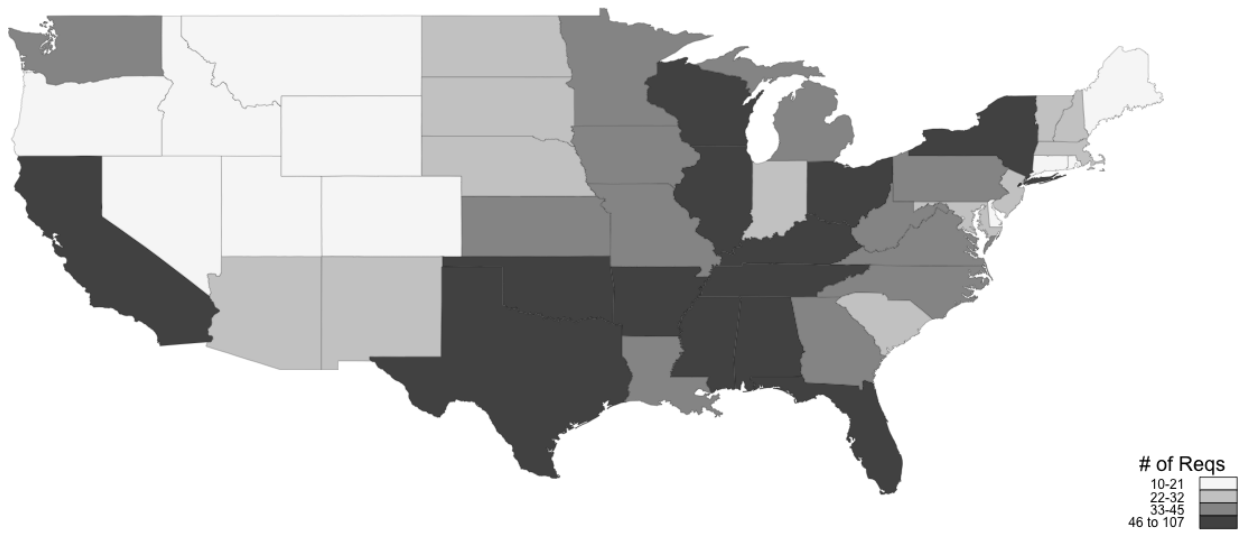


Figure 1: Gubernatorial disaster declaration requests, 1972 to 2006.

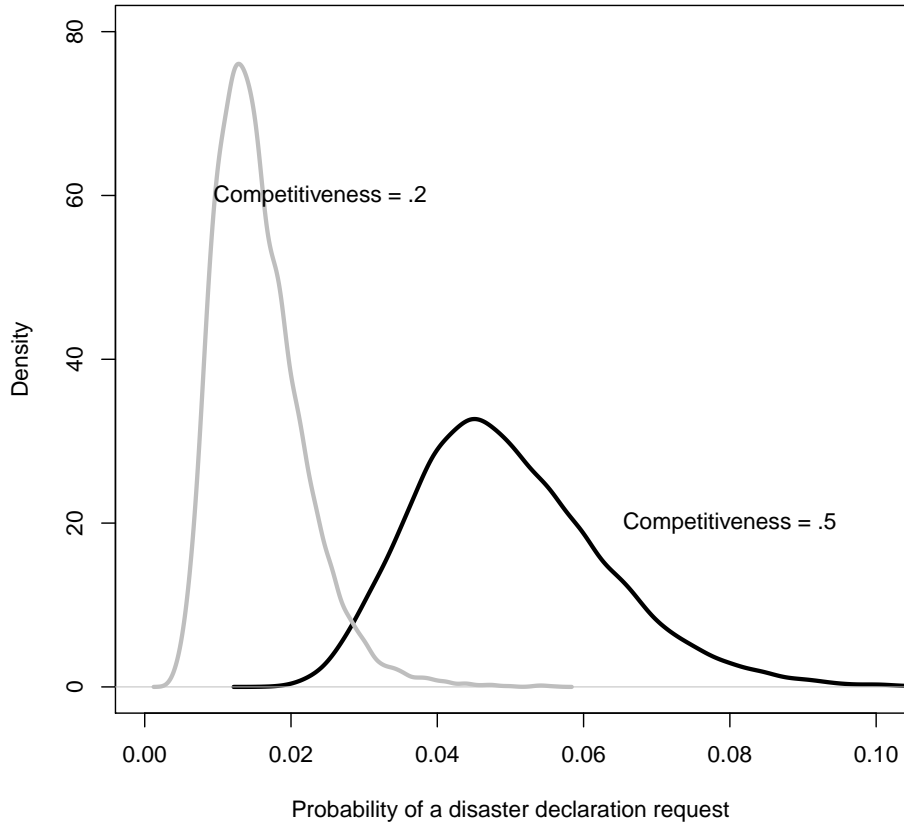


Figure 2: **Effect of election year competitiveness for reelection-eligible governors on probability of disaster declaration request.** Simulations of the probability of a disaster declaration request by reelection-eligible governors in a given month during presidential election years. Differences based on lowest observed value (.2) of presidential competitiveness in the data to highest observed value (.5). All other variables are kept at their mean or median value. Ten thousand simulations per level of competitiveness. The probability of a request from a governor from an uncompetitive state is .016, while the probability of a request from a highly competitive state is .050.



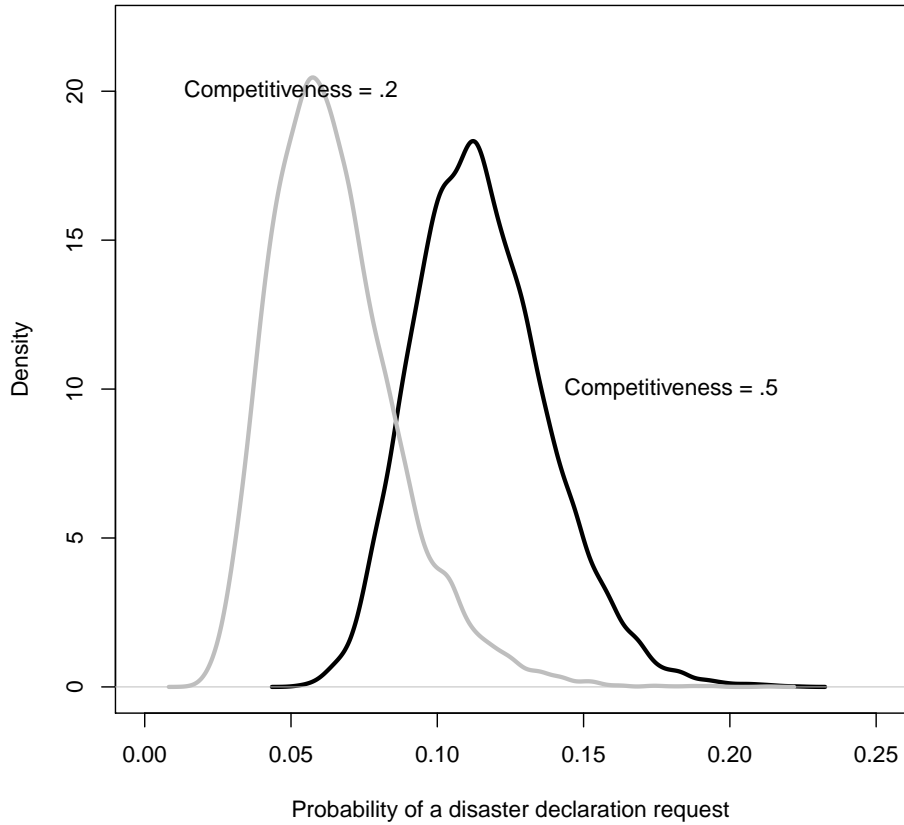


Figure 3: **Effect of election year competitiveness for governors requesting aid from other-party presidents on probability of disaster declaration request.** Simulations of the probability of a disaster declaration request in a given month by those governors that are of the opposite party than the president, during presidential election years. Differences based on lowest observed value (.2) of presidential competitiveness in data to highest observed value (.5). All other variables are kept at their mean value. Ten thousand simulations per level of Competitiveness. The probability of a request from a governor from an uncompetitive state is .06, while the probability of a request from a highly competitive state is .12. This is the opposite of one of the central predictions of the partisan hypothesis.

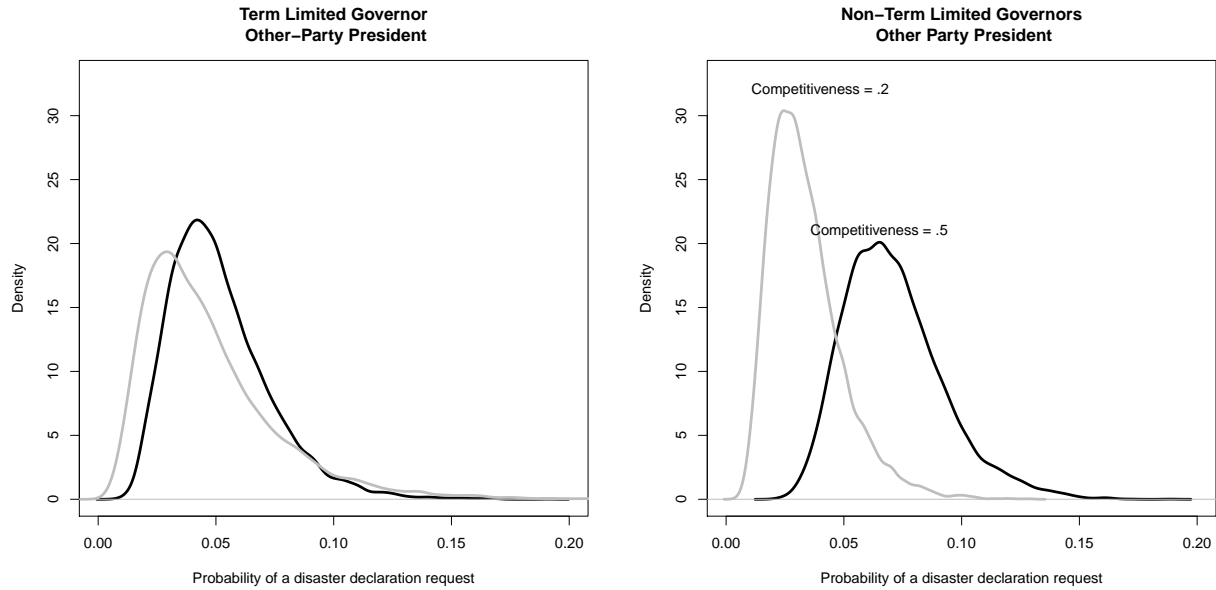


Figure 4: **Effect of election year competitiveness on probability of disaster declaration request by term-limited and reelection-eligible governors, other-party presidents only.** The left panel presents the simulated probabilities for term-limited governors, and the right panel present those for reelection-eligible governors. Differences based on lowest observed value (.2) of presidential competitiveness and the highest observed value (.5). All other variables are kept at their mean or median value. Ten thousand simulations per level of presidential competitiveness. The probability of a request from a reelection eligible governor from an uncompetitive state is .034, while the probability of a request from a highly competitive state is .071. Battleground governors who can run for reelection are more likely to request during a presidential election year. Term-limited governors show no significant increase in the likelihood of requesting under this scenario.

	Term-limited	Reelection-eligible
Pres election year $\times$ Pres Competitiveness	2.285 (1.917)	4.499* (1.357)
Pres Election Year	-1.008 (0.834)	-1.985* (0.588)
Pres Competitiveness	-0.892 (0.983)	-0.625 (0.638)
Damage (logged per capita)	0.303* (0.024)	0.272* (0.015)
Republican Governor	0.132 (0.106)	0.005 (0.068)
Pres same party as Gov	0.070 (0.103)	-0.005 (0.065)
Per capita income	3.608 (10.757)	12.440 (6.819)
Republican President	-0.130 (0.110)	-0.111 (0.067)
Intercept	-5.965* (0.703)	-5.766* (0.449)
$N$	4927	12159
Standard errors in parentheses		
* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$		

Table 1: **A model of gubernatorial requests for federal assistance, 1972 to 2006: Effect of gubernatorial term limits.** Split sample analysis for cases where governors are term-limited and reelection-eligible. We find evidence that reelection-eligible governors take advantage of presidential electoral incentives when deciding whether to request. Estimates are from a logistic regression with indicator variables for region-month combinations, which are included in the model but not reported in the table.

	Same Party	Opposite Party
Pres election year $\times$ Pres Competitiveness	2.288 (1.877)	4.833* (1.380)
Pres Election Year	-1.167 (0.820)	-2.006* (0.595)
Pres Competitiveness	1.924* (0.857)	-2.633* (0.677)
Damage (logged per capita)	0.292* (0.019)	0.274* (0.017)
Republican Governor	0.029 (0.086)	0.169* (0.081)
Not term-limited	0.007 (0.087)	0.155 (0.084)
Per capita income	6.603 (8.194)	14.495 (8.151)
Intercept	-7.191* (0.596)	-5.148* (0.476)
$N$	7691	9395

Standard errors in parentheses

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

Table 2: **A model of gubernatorial requests for federal assistance, 1972 to 2006: A comparison of partisan differences.** A split sample analysis where governors are of the same party as the president and where they are of opposite parties. During presidential election years, battleground governors are more likely to request from other party presidents. This rejects the partisan hypothesis. Although the coefficient is not statistically significant, battleground governors are more likely to request of same party presidents in election years. Estimates are from a logistic regression with indicator variables for region-month combinations, which are included in the model but not reported in the table.

	Term-limited	Reelection-eligible
Pres election year $\times$ Pres Competitiveness	3.942 (2.355)	5.315* (1.715)
Pres Election Year	-1.596 (1.006)	-2.232* (0.742)
Pres Competitiveness	-3.374* (1.254)	-2.513* (0.830)
Damage (logged per capita)	0.318* (0.035)	0.263* (0.020)
Republican Governor	0.348* (0.174)	0.130 (0.094)
Per capita income	34.545* (15.661)	8.427 (9.645)
Intercept	-6.009* (0.919)	-4.724* (0.563)
$N$	2693	6702

Standard errors in parentheses

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3: **A model of gubernatorial requests for federal assistance, 1972 to 2006: Effect of gubernatorial term limits when requesting aid from other party presidents.** A split sample analysis of cases where governors are term-limited and where governors can run for reelection. Battleground governors who can run for reelection are more likely to request during a presidential election year. Term-limited governors show no significant increase in the likelihood of requesting under this scenario. This provides evidence of reelection hypothesis. Estimates are from a logistic regression with indicator variables for region-month combinations, which are included in the model but not reported in the table.