

DISCRETIONARY DISTRIBUTION OF DISASTER RELIEF FUNDS IN MEXICO

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Context and Hypotheses. Mexico’s federal government reformed the institutional framework of natural-disaster relief funds (DRF) in the 1990s, with the goal of avoiding the partisan allocation of these resources. Nowadays, the president is somewhat “tied” in his ability to use disaster-relief funds for electoral purposes; however, allegations of bias are still prevalent, as the most recent series of earthquakes in the country in 2017 demonstrated. Do political factors shape the distribution of disaster-relief funds in Mexico? If so, how?

Recent research on fiscal federalism (Diaz-Cayeros, Flamand) and security policy in Mexico (Rios, Ley) shows that municipalities in states where governors are co-partisan with the president are favored with more resources for electoral purposes. In Mexico, governors are the key actor in the distribution of DRF: when there is a natural disaster, mayors request DRF from governors, who decide whether to forward them to the president. Importantly, the president then approves each of these on a municipality-by-municipality basis. This institutional structure allows for a large degree of discretion in the distribution of these funds. As such, we posit that DFR serves as a political reward at different levels of government. The president is more likely to approve disaster relief requests for municipalities in states where the governor is co-partisan, and governors are more likely to include disaster requests from municipalities where mayors are co-partisan. We expect two sources of heterogeneous effects: 1) temporally, this effect should be much stronger in years of state and federal elections; and 2) spatially, such dynamics should be more visible in more competitive municipalities. In summary, we expect DFR to serve as an electoral boost for state and federal incumbents.

Data source(-s). Electoral data dates back to 1990 and comes from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional Electoral. As mentioned before, one of the key goals of the paper is to estimate the extent to which the distribution of resources deviates from a “need-based” approach. On damage estimates, we have official statistics from the Ministry of Interior, data from independent agencies like the National Institute of Ecology and Climate Change (for example geo-referenced data on the pathway of hurricanes), and information from NASA on flooding and droughts (from the North American Drought Monitoring). The actual data on DFR is publicly available, and we submitted a FOIA request act to get the entire time series since 1990.

Data units, level(-s) of analysis, and preliminary empirical strategy. Our level of analysis will be at the municipal level. We can test the hypothesis of a discretionary use of reconstruction funds in two different ways: 1) by comparing the actual levels of damage with the requests approved by the governor; and 2) evaluating the approval probability for proposals from municipalities where the mayor is co-partisan or where the governor is co-partisan. We could examine both election year and non-election year disasters to see if there is a significant difference in the way the federal government allocates resources during different parts of the political cycle. We could also potentially look at a single election, as some parts of Mexico hold elections at one time, while others do not.

Relevance. This question is important for a variety of reasons. First, if disaster relief funds are being utilized with political objectives in mind, rather than to assist the people who are most in need, this would represent a significant abuse of power worth drawing attention toward. This is particularly the case given that there is a federal election coming up this year, and Mexico was recently hit by two powerful earthquakes in different parts of the country. Additionally, from a political science perspective, natural disasters are frequently examined simply because they are viewed as exogenous to the outcome of interest. However, from a historical perspective, it is clear that these disasters also have their own enduring effects. In fact, it is quite possible that fall out from natural disasters may in some ways serve as a main driver of changes in political attitudes. Our research would seek to investigate this more.