



Politics and Disaster Declarations

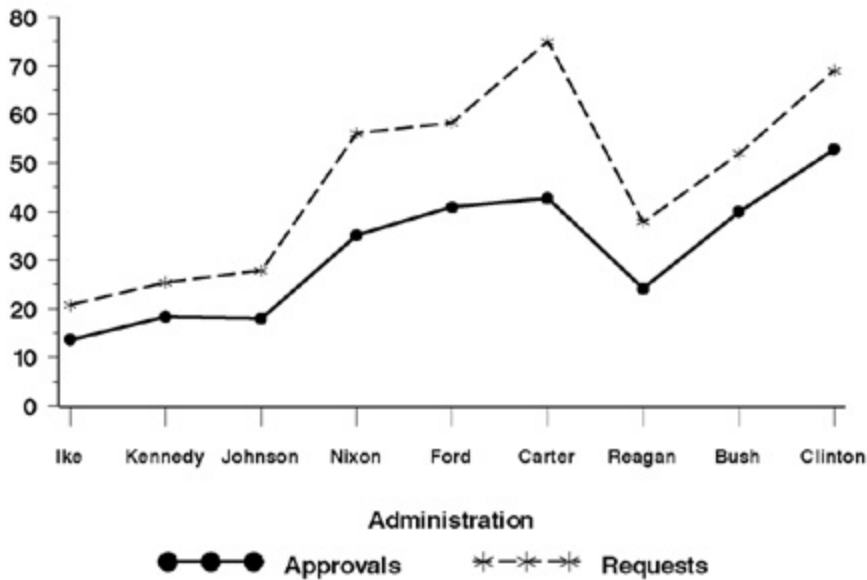
--an invited comment

Despite the Clinton Administration's notable improvements in national disaster policies, a serious flaw remains: the essentially political nature of the presidential disaster declaration (PDD) process. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act provides federal disaster relief to states and local communities that receive a disaster declaration from the president, generally when one or more counties are declared eligible for federal assistance. Declarations are made at the president's discretion, and presidents have differed markedly in their use of that authority. Guidelines governing the president's decision include consideration of a state's ability to respond, but these guidelines are vague, leaving the process open to influence from media coverage, cronyism, and political pressure.

One reason it is difficult to assess the PDD process is the lack of unified accounting for federal disaster costs, which are not tracked in a comprehensive or consistent manner. A complex mix of federal agencies and programs provide the disaster assistance made available by presidential declarations. Consequently, the results of presidential discretion are not subject to the usual scrutiny placed on most government activities.

During the past 20 years, the number and cost of presidential disaster declarations has increased substantially. Figure 1 shows the average annual number of PDD requests and approvals under each administration since Eisenhower. President Reagan (1981-88) averaged 24 declarations per year; President Bush (1989-92) 40 per year; and President Clinton, in his first term (1993-96), 53 per year.

Average Annual Number of PDD Requests and Approvals



To some, including influential policy makers, this suggests an alarming trend. For example, former FEMA Director James Lee Witt attributed the increase in disaster declarations and federal costs to "more frequent and severe weather calamities" (NOAA, 2000). However, others have observed that mounting costs are more a result of increasing population and wealth. Our research suggests that, where federal costs are concerned, an additional factor should be considered: the role of presidential discretion in disaster declarations.

To compare how seven presidents made use of their discretionary authority in the disaster declaration process, we analyzed flood-related PDDs from 1965 through 1997. (A majority of PDDs are related to floods.) Because there is great year-to-year variation in weather and in damage, we also looked at precipitation and flood damage data collected by the National Weather Service (which are independent of the disaster declaration process), as well as several measures of a state's "ability to pay" for its response to a disaster.

Since 1950, criteria for issuing a PDD have required "a finding that the disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments" (P.L. 100-707, sec. 401). Yet, an analysis of declarations for each state from 1983 to 1997 show little relationship to a state's ability to pay.

Table 1 summarizes some of the information used in our study. President Clinton issued the most flood-related declarations and included the most counties. Can this be explained by the fact that national precipitation and flood damage were also at their highest during his administration?

The short answer is "no." After controlling for precipitation and damage, we found statistically significant differences between presidents in the numbers of disasters de-clared. But, perhaps surprisingly, the number of disaster declarations is unrelated to a president's political party. For example, the number of declarations issued by Ronald Reagan differed significantly from the numbers issued by Richard Nixon and the elder George Bush.

Consider the Reagan and Bush administrations in more detail. Average annual flood damage was at its lowest (of the seven presidents considered) during the Bush administration, yet the mean numbers of disaster declarations and sites were substantially higher under Bush than under Reagan.

In 1987, during the Reagan administration, Texas incurred \$700 million (adjusted for inflation in 1995 dollars) in flood damage, but not a single flood-related declaration was issued. In both 1989 and 1990, during the Bush administration, Texas had approximately \$400 million in damage each year and received PDDs covering 103 counties in 1989 and 64 counties in 1990.

President Clinton was generous with disaster declarations and included more counties in his declarations than did the other presidents. The median number of counties per declaration ranged from five under Reagan to 11 under Clinton. Officials interviewed by Richard Sylves of the University of Delaware suggested that California's electoral votes influenced President Clinton's decision to waive the need for

preliminary damage assessments, allowing all counties that applied to be included in the California flood disaster declarations of 1995.

Table 1. Mean Annual Flood-Related Disaster Declarations by Presidential Administration

President	Fiscal Years	Number	Disaster Declarations	Annual Means	
				Counties Included	Damage (millions 1995 dollars)
Johnson	1965-1968	4	11.8	190	1,681
Nixon	1969-1974	6	27.2	393	4,469
Ford	1975-1976	2	26.0	251	5,370
Carter	1977-1980	4	20.0	181	3,478
Reagan	1981-1988	8	14.5	133	3,440
Bush	1989-1992	4	22.3	357	1,469
Clinton	1993-1997	5	32.2	603	7,553

Although the differences among presidents do not follow political party lines, they do correspond to some general policy orientations. President Reagan's small number of PDDs is consistent with his stated goal of reducing the role of the federal government and returning responsibilities to the states. In contrast, President Clinton put a priority on federal disaster response, expanding the role of FEMA and the prominence of its director.

Our research lends support to those calling for more rigor in the disaster declaration process, such as the Association of State Floodplain Managers, which recently declared that "vague and overly generous criteria for formal disaster declarations have created disincentives for citizens, local communities, and states to take responsibility for addressing their flood hazards or protecting their floodplain resource (see the *Observer*, [Vol. XXV, No. 1, p. 7](#)).

The federal government has within its authority and control an ability to dramatically reduce--or expand--the costs it bears for disasters. The presidential disaster declaration process should entail careful trade-offs between needed assistance in disasters and the positive and negative incentives that arise from the availability of that assistance. These trade-offs will be better made in the clear light of accountability for the president's discretionary actions. Without such scrutiny even the best laid policies and plans for reducing federal disaster costs are likely to fall short of their objectives.

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References

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). 2000. "NOAA Reports Record Warmth for January-March 2000, FEMA Re-ports Presidentially Declared Disasters Have Nearly Doubled and Costs Have Skyrocketed," *NOAA News*. The article is available via the Internet at www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories/s412.htm.

The authors present the complete results of this study in the article "Discretion Without Accountability: Politics, Flood Damage, and Climate," which will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Natural Hazards Review*, available from the *American Society of Civil Engineers*, 1801 Alexander Bell Drive, Reston, VA 20191-4400; (703) 295-6163; fax: (703) 295-6278; e-mail: marketing@asce.org; WWW: www.pubs.asce.org.