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978-1-107-02112-9 - Catastrophic Politics: How Extraordinary Events Redefine Perceptions of Government

Lonna Rae Atkeson and Cherie D. Maestas

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Catastrophic Politics

How Extraordinary Events Redefine Perceptions of Government

Shocking moments in society create an extraordinary political environment that permits political and opinion changes that are unlikely during times of normal politics. Strong emotions felt by the public during catastrophes – even if experienced only vicariously through media coverage – are a powerful motivator of public opinion and activism. This is particularly true when emotional reactions coincide with attributing blame to governmental agencies or officials. By examining public opinion during one extraordinary event, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Lonna Rae Atkeson and Cherie D. Maestas show how media information interacts with emotion in shaping a wide range of political opinions about government and political leaders. Catastrophic events bring citizens together, provide common experiences and information, and create opinions that transcend traditional political boundaries. These moments encourage citizens to reexamine their understanding of government, its leaders, and its role in a society from a less partisan perspective.

Lonna Rae Atkeson is Professor and Regents Lecturer of Political Science at the University of New Mexico. She is also Director of the Center for the Study of Voting, Elections and Democracy at the University of New Mexico.

Cherie D. Maestas is Associate Professor of Political Science and an affiliate of the Center for the Study of Democratic Performance at Florida State University.

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Catastrophic Politics

*How Extraordinary Events Redefine
Perceptions of Government*

LONNA RAE ATKESON

University of New Mexico

CHERIE D. MAESTAS

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*For victims of catastrophes, large and small, and especially
those who suffered losses from Hurricane Katrina*

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Acknowledgments

In August 2005, we were at the American Political Science Association (APSA) annual meetings, standing in a hotel lobby, glued to televisions along with dozens of other political scientists. As we watched events unfold along the Gulf Coast, we were stunned by the destruction and desperation of the victims, and we worried for friends and colleagues who might have been affected by the storm. As human beings, we were emotionally jarred by the lack of aid and the victims' suffering. As social scientists, we couldn't help but observe the emotional reactions to this unexpected and tragic event and consider how it related to beliefs about government and its responsiveness in times of crisis.

It is fortunate that we began arm-chair theorizing about the broader public opinion ramifications of the storm, because that same weekend Cherie found herself sitting next to Brian Humes, the political science National Science Foundation (NSF) program director, who had just received word that NSF had Small Grants for Exploratory Research (SGER) funds related to Katrina. After some lively discussions about our nascent ideas pertaining to public reaction to the storm, Brian suggested we submit a proposal for review. Less than a month later, we were in the field with a survey at a time when public emotion was still intense and coverage of the blame game still high. In the early days of this project, we thought of it as a study of a particular catastrophe, but over time we realized that the story is much broader. It is a story about how humans react to unthinkable events and how such events change us as individuals and as a society.

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friends. They were key players in teaching us how to think about the world of politics. The discussions we had with them over many summers and at many conferences about attitudes, cognition, and the formation of opinions in politics enriched us and gave us the foundation to write this book. Watching the care they took in writing their own book inspired us as we wrote ours.

We also want to acknowledge those personally closest to us who have made a substantial difference in our lives and have supported our growth as scholars.

Lonna's acknowledgments: I want to begin by noting the importance of the first woman political scientist in my life who inspired me to consider academics and specifically political science as a career, Barbara Sinclair. Dr. Sinclair, as I knew her then, was one of the first female professors that I met outside of the English and language departments, and her presence made me consider that I too could be a professor, a career choice that I had largely considered male. For me, descriptive representation mattered. I also want to acknowledge my mother, Bonita J. Lee, who has provided continual support throughout my life and gave me the ability to persevere. I also want to acknowledge my beautiful children: William Robert Atkeson Cary, thirteen; Jackson Ray Atkeson Cary, eleven; and Carson Bruce Atkeson Cary, seven. Every day they make my life brighter and make all that I do worthwhile. Finally, it is hard to know exactly how to detail all of the things that my twenty-seven-year relationship with my husband Robert Cary – who more recently goes by the name Bruce Cary – has contributed to my life, but I feel certain that he has been a critical figure in my journey, as well as a strong influence on the woman and scholar I am today. Moreover, he was present for the writing of this book and listened to me discuss numerous aspects of it along the way. Therefore, for all of those things that he gave me over so many years, I am truly grateful.

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