

Shifting the Blame: Federalism, Media, and Public Assignment of Blame Following Hurricane Katrina

Cherie D. Maestas*, Lonna Rae Atkeson†, Thomas Croom‡, and Lisa A. Bryant§

Federalism sprang to the forefront in public debates about the response to Hurricane Katrina as officials from the national, state, and local government sought to shift blame to other levels of government. Our analysis shows that attempts by national political actors to frame the response as the fault of state government actions were successful, but the size of the effect was conditional on predispositions. Those who were more attentive to coverage were more likely to believe that state failure to call for help had a great effect on the length of time it took for national government to provide aid to New Orleans. The effect was strongest for Republicans, however, suggesting that predispositions mediate acceptance of elite frames that transfer blame.

Assigning responsibility for political outcomes is complex in a federalist system because power is apportioned across multiple levels of government and often shared among actors at different levels. Federalism is designed to enhance representation by allowing citizens a voice through their local, state, and federal ballot boxes. However, federalism also creates potentially confusing layers of bureaucracy and redundancies in services that make it difficult for citizens to identify and hold accountable the responsible government actors (Arceneaux 2005, 2006; Atkeson and Partin 2001). Moreover, in systems where policy in the same area is carried out by multiple levels of government, political actors have incentives to shift blame to actors at other levels, further complicating the public's task in assigning blame to the appropriate targets.

How do citizens form opinions about cause and effect in such a complex system? We address this question by exploring citizens' perceptions of various reasons given by media and political elite to explain the length of time it took for the national government to provide aid to those in New Orleans. Attributions—beliefs

*Florida State University; maestas@fsu.edu

†University of New Mexico; atkeson@unm.edu

‡Florida State University; tc05@fsu.edu

§University of New Mexico; lbryant@unm.edu

in particular causal stories—are important to study because they form the cornerstone of other key political opinions such as evaluations of leaders and preferences for public policy (Iyengar 1989). Attributions formed in times of crisis are likely to be especially powerful in the political arena because catastrophic events command widespread attention, creating a shared national experience, even among those far from the epicenter of the disaster. Consequently, catastrophic events have the potential to become long-standing political symbols that are used in framing a range of policy debates (Jennings 1999).

Studying opinions following Hurricane Katrina affords us a unique glimpse of how citizens sort out blame in the face of competing claims from actors at different levels of government. Disasters inherently require a federalist response and, thus, place issues related to federalism at the center of public attention. Crisis management in the U.S. calls for a “bottom-up response” with FEMA coordinating governmental response at all levels, but only after a state governor has requested federal aid (Birkland 2008; Kweit and Kweit 2006; Schneider 2008). Local and state elected officials are expected to serve as the first line of response and the federal government is to assist local and state authorities.¹ Yet, in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina, this system seemed to fail as government disaster relief from all levels of government fell far short of expectations (Birkland 2008; Schneider 2008).

Recent studies reveal substantial variation in public perceptions of the culpability of each level of government for failures in New Orleans. Some Americans placed blame squarely on the shoulders of President Bush, FEMA, and other federal-level actors, others focused blame on the actions of state and local officials, and still others blamed all levels of government. Research shows that citizens’ total number of attributions and rankings of culpability of local, state, and national political figures are sensitive to individual-level factors such as political sophistication, race, partisanship, and information about the political actors’ office (Huddy *et al.* 2006; Gomez and Wilson 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2007; Malhotra 2008).

Our study builds on this body of research but takes a different tack by considering when and why citizens might transfer responsibility for service failure of one level of government to the actions of a different level of government. Unlike a simple or direct attribution of blame, “transfer attributions” recognize a failure of one actor (or government entity), yet excuse the actor by implicating the actions of another. This type of attribution, we believe, is common to the political landscape where elites often offer justifications or excuses for government failures (McGraw 1991). We expect this type of attribution to be particularly relevant in a federalist system where actors at many levels of government are plausibly culpable. Political actors have incentives to try to manipulate the assignment of blame to ward off political consequences (McGraw 1991), and media have incentives to cover the

resulting political fights. Citizens also have incentives to pay attention to this multmessage conflict to assist them in understanding how their world view informs and is transformed by this information. Thus, this research speaks to larger questions about whether elite efforts to transfer blame are broadly effective or whether such efforts make little difference to public opinion.

In this research, we examine why some individuals blamed the national government's response time in New Orleans to state officials' failure to call for sufficient help. The high salience of the media coverage combined with the partisan dimension of the debates permits us to compare and contrast the effects of individual predispositions and media on the transference of responsibility. Were opinions driven by individual political predispositions to favor some political actors over others? Were they based on knowledge about the responsibilities of different actors? Or, were they driven by individuals' attention to media coverage in the days and weeks after disasters?

National Reaction to the Storm

There is no dispute that coverage of the storm was watched by many. A national random sample survey we conducted in the months following the storm shows that most people (94 percent) were at least somewhat attentive to coverage of the storm and 58 percent indicated that they were very attentive.² Not surprisingly, television was the most important source of news. Nearly three-fourths of citizens reported television was their primary news source and 95 percent reported watching some television coverage. Cable television garnered the largest share of viewers, with 56 percent of our sample watching CNN, FOX, or MSNBC. Alternatively, 17 percent of viewers watched local news, while 26 percent watched one of the three national news network broadcasts.

Media coverage of the storm centered on the failure of government to respond following Hurricane Katrina and much of the coverage underscored the lack of national government aid (Birkland 2008). Not surprisingly, 70 percent of respondents felt that the national government response in New Orleans was too slow. Yet, at the same time, news reporters and political elite offered a cornucopia of reasons for the slow response time, ranging from incompetence of Washington officials and racism, to more benign excuses such as the difficulty of reaching the area. Table 1 shows that many of these explanations resonated with the public. About a quarter to one-third of respondents thought that the characteristics of victims had a "great effect" on the response time of the national government. A similar number of respondents attributed the slow response to the inexperience and incompetence of Washington officials, with many more indicating that these factors had "some effect." Respondents were least likely to say that difficulties in reaching the affected area had a great effect on national government's response time.

Table 1 Frequency of attributing blame to explanations for the length of time it took the U.S. national government to get aid to victims stranded in New Orleans^a

	Great effect	Some effect	Very little effect	No effect	DK/NS
Lack of communication between levels of government.	59.5	27.5	4.7	4.7	3.6
State government failed to call for enough help.	43.7	27.7	10.9	11.2	6.4
The victims were mostly poor.	33.4	19.9	11.6	30.6	4.5
Officials from Washington were too incompetent.	31.2	27.7	12.8	23.1	5.3
Officials from Washington were too inexperienced.	30.3	28.1	11.9	22.6	7.0
The victims were mostly black.	23.7	18.2	11.1	39.2	7.8
The area was too difficult to reach.	20.2	23.4	17.4	35.7	3.3

^aQuestion wording: Now I'd like to know how much you think each of the following reasons affected the length of time it took the U.S. national government to get aid to victims stranded in New Orleans. Did it have a great effect, some effect, very little effect, or no effect?

Notably, respondents were most likely to choose factors related to federalism as reasons for the length of time it took national government to provide aid in New Orleans. Nearly nine in ten (87 percent) of the public thought lack of communication between levels of government had at least some effect. In addition, 44 percent of respondents assigned a great deal of blame to “state governments fail[ure] to call for enough help,” while another 28 percent thought state failure to call for enough help had some effect on national government response time. Taken together, the data present a picture of an engaged nation, riveted by coverage of the crisis, many of whom assigned blame for national government failures to problems associated with multilevel governance.

In the remainder of the article, we turn our attention to explaining the transfer of blame for national government response time to the actions of state government officials. We focus on attribution to state failure rather than on the lack of communication because this attribution indicates the degree to which individuals might “excuse” national government performance by specifically redirecting blame to another level. Lack of communication, while an important explanation, does not offer a clear transfer of attribution to a specific level of government or actor. Our interest lies in assessing how and for whom federalism offers fertile soil to shift blame from one level of government.

Individual-level Factors that Shape Attribution of Blame

Understanding what predicts attribution to state rather than the federal government is important because of the broader political ramifications of attributions. Causal attributions lie at the heart of a process that begins with citizens' receipt of new information and ends with new or updated political evaluations and preferences. Attributions are the primary means through which individuals explain events, identify causes, and, more generally, increase their sense of control over their environment and over future events (Forsyth 1980; Heider 1958). Attributions have special ramifications in the context of political events because, as Iyengar (1989, 879) points out, "individuals tend to simplify political issues by reducing them to questions of responsibility and their issue opinions flow from their answers to these questions." Because causal explanations identify the source of the problem and potential avenues for solutions, they can become powerful forces in setting political agendas (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1997; Stone 1989). Moreover, attributions are a necessary mechanism for the public to hold leaders accountable through elections (Arceneaux 2006; Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Rudolph 2003b).

Early studies of attribution in social psychology explored how individuals construct explanations of the motivations or behaviors of others around them as a function of individual cognition and motivation, while later scholarship examined the role of social context and expanded studies to include attributions for events (Crittenden 1983; Hewstone 1989; Howard 1995; Howard and Pike 1996; Forsythe 1980). Political scientists have drawn from the attribution theory literature to explain how citizens construct attributions for crime and criminal behavior (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Iyengar 1991; Sharpe and Joslyn 2001; Sotirovic 2003), poverty and unemployment (Iyengar 1991), terrorism (Iyengar 1991), disaster preparation and response (Arceneaux and Stein 2006), and economic performance (Peffley 1984; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003; Rudolph 2003b; Rudolph and Grant 2002; Atkeson and Partin 1995). Political scientists have also considered how attribution of blame affects evaluations of leaders and vote choice (Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Arceneaux 2006; Iyengar 1991; Rudolph and Grant 2002; Rudolph 2003b; Atkeson and Partin 1995).

Although much has been learned in recent years, political attribution remains understudied relative to other areas of political attitudes, particularly in light of the effects of attributions on evaluations and political accountability. We draw upon several strands of this research to formulate a set of expectations about how political predispositions, media exposure, and factual knowledge might influence attribution of blame to state government failure following Hurricane Katrina.

Political Predispositions and Attribution of Blame

We begin with the assumption that political attribution is an attitude that is rooted in individual predispositions derived from long-standing beliefs or values. There are two ways in which political predispositions might influence attribution of blame. First, predispositions such as political ideology may set broad expectations for the role of different levels of government in society and, as a result, lead individuals to assign more responsibility to one level compared to another. Second, predispositions such as partisanship may create “in-group” and “out-group” dynamics in the attribution process.

At the most basic level, we expect a connection between political ideology and target of blame because ideology encompasses a set of expectations about the appropriate level of responsibility for various levels of government. Generally, contemporary conservatives embrace decentralization of power, while contemporary liberals believe strongly in the role of national government in protecting citizens. Thus, we might expect conservatives to believe that state and local government bears the brunt of responsibility for caring for citizens, while national government is simply a support player.³ In contrast, liberals are likely to believe that national government bears most of the responsibility and, therefore, cannot be excused by the actions of other levels of government.

Second, we expect partisanship to play a role in the formation of attributions. Previous attribution research demonstrates strong “in-group” and “out-group” effects (Hewstone 1989). Group members tend to attribute positive outcomes to in-group members and attribute negative outcomes to out-group members. For citizens and elites, federalism offers a convenient avenue for assigning blame to another government entity that is controlled by the opposite party of the citizen. Because party control of government can differ across levels of government, the partisanship of citizens comes into play as they form evaluations. Such a perspective is consistent with what we know of other types of opinions about governments in a federal structure. Cole and Kincaid (2006), for example, show that public attitudes about federal government stem, in part, from partisan bias. When Democrats control the federal government, citizens who identify with the Democratic Party see the federal government as more trustworthy and as providing greater value for the money. However, favorable opinions of the federal government dip for Democrats when Republicans control the federal government. We argue that this same type of partisan bias should also drive the formation of attributions of blame following Hurricane Katrina. Attributions that transfer responsibility to an “out-group” satisfy the need to provide a causal explanation for unexpected events but do so in such a way that reduces the responsibility of “in-group” actors. Psychologically, this allows individuals to reconcile negative outcomes with strong prior beliefs about one’s own party and leaders.

Certainly, coverage of the crisis in New Orleans was rife with the type of partisan bickering that could trigger “in-group” and “out-group” reactions. Republican leaders at the national level sought to shift blame for the response in New Orleans to Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin—both Democrats—by claiming that relief efforts depended upon the quality of local leadership, not Washington. They openly criticized Blanco’s handling of the situation, claiming she had failed to properly request the needed assistance. However, state and local leaders in Louisiana laid the blame at the feet of President Bush and national agencies, claiming that the slow response in Louisiana was partisan in nature. They argued that neighboring Republican-run Mississippi experienced equal amounts of devastation by Katrina but, reportedly, had fewer response failures (Associated Press 2006). Because party cues were an important part of the debate and party was clearly tied to different levels of government, we expect citizens to draw upon those cues in forming attributions.

Attention to Media Coverage

Media coverage matters in ways other than simply providing partisan cues. Attentive citizens are continually confronted with new information through media accounts that frame events around causal themes and, as a result, may be swayed by those framed messages. Framing occurs when media select visual images, elite quotes, or journalistic commentary and analysis to highlight some aspects of an issue or event while downplaying others. Framing research, then, focuses on how citizens respond to the presentation of information when constructing their opinions (Druckman 2001; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Iyengar 1991; Miller and Krosnick 1998; Nelson Oxley and Clawson 1997; Scheufele 1999). We explore whether the broad causal arguments that were common in the media following Hurricane Katrina influenced opinions independent of predispositions by exploring whether differences in respondents’ attention to media coverage shaped their attributions of blame.

Most framing research is carried out in a lab setting where frames are manipulated experimentally and researchers know the precise frame “treatment” each subject received. Indeed, much has been learned about the direct and conditional effects of framing from such studies. However, the substantive question at the root of this research is whether framing matters to the formation of opinions about real-time events. So, identifying instances in which media coverage is sufficiently salient and framing is sufficiently clear could offer an important bridge between research in the lab and results in the external world. We argue that Hurricane Katrina provides one such setting. The salience of the blame game and the difference in the amount of coverage devoted to blaming each level of government allows us to formulate a specific hypothesis about the effects of

increased media attention on the transference of blame to state-level actions. Media outlets couched numerous stories in an attribution frame as they sought to identify why relief was so slow to arrive in New Orleans. Thus, attentive watchers received repeated cues to form attributions along with coverage that focused on particular causal stories.

We use respondents' self-reports of attention to news coverage of the storm as a proxy for awareness of causal stories that transferred responsibility for the aftermath of Katrina from the national government to the state government. Our measure asked respondents whether they paid "no attention," "little attention," "some attention," or a "great deal" of attention to media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Attentiveness implies both level of exposure to and level of engagement by the story and thus is more closely related to the reception of media information than more common self-reported media-use measures that ask general frequency of media use.⁴

To justify attentiveness as a proxy for respondent awareness of secondary causal stories, such as the "transfer blame" story, we need to demonstrate that multiple causal stories were present in the media but that the "transfer blame" story was not the dominant story. If these characteristics are present in the coverage, it is reasonable to assume that low attention media watchers would be likely to receive the dominant causal story, but not necessarily secondary causal stories. Thus, low attention respondents are likely to find the dominant story persuasive but be unmoved by the secondary story because they failed to receive it. In contrast, highly attentive watchers would be likely to receive the dominant story, but they would also be more likely to receive any secondary causal stories offered by the media. This, in turn, should increase the likelihood that attentive respondents would be persuaded by coverage of secondary causal stories. If this type of media coverage exists, we would expect highly attentive individuals to be more likely to form transfer attributions than inattentive people because of their difference in the likelihood of encountering the "transfer blame" story in the media.

We examined media coverage using qualitative analysis and systematic word searches of television transcripts for all major networks following Hurricane Katrina over a seven-week period beginning August 29th and ending October 15th.⁵ A substantial number of newscasts across all television stations contained references to blame and responsibility. The proportions are derived from word searches through Lexis-Nexis, by week, for references to variants of "blame" words, including all forms of the word "blame," "fault," "responsible," and "fail." Nearly one-third of broadcasts in week one contained blame references. By week three, blame references appeared in nearly half of all posted transcripts, and this proportion persisted as late as week seven. Individuals tuning into news about Hurricane Katrina would find it difficult to miss coverage of the blame game.

However, the specific frame individuals would most likely encounter was one of national government failure rather than state government failure. Elite interviews, journalists' lead-ins to story segments, and causal framing of events within segments highlighted the failures of national government and national actors such as President Bush, FEMA, and its head Michael Brown and the Department of Homeland Security.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of stories that include "blame" words that also include national or state government actors within ten words of a blame words.⁶ By the third week, national government officials or agencies appeared near a blame word in 60 percent of newscasts making attributions. Although this tapered off across time, the proximity of national figures to blame words exceeds that of state officials at all points in time. Words associated with state officials and Governor Blanco, in particular, are much less likely to appear near blame words in the transcripts. Indeed, state officials appear in close proximity to blame words less than 20 percent of the time across the entire period. Thus, individuals who tuned in to coverage of the storm would be very likely to encounter discussion of federal officials in a story about blame, but much less likely to encounter a story that links state officials and blame.

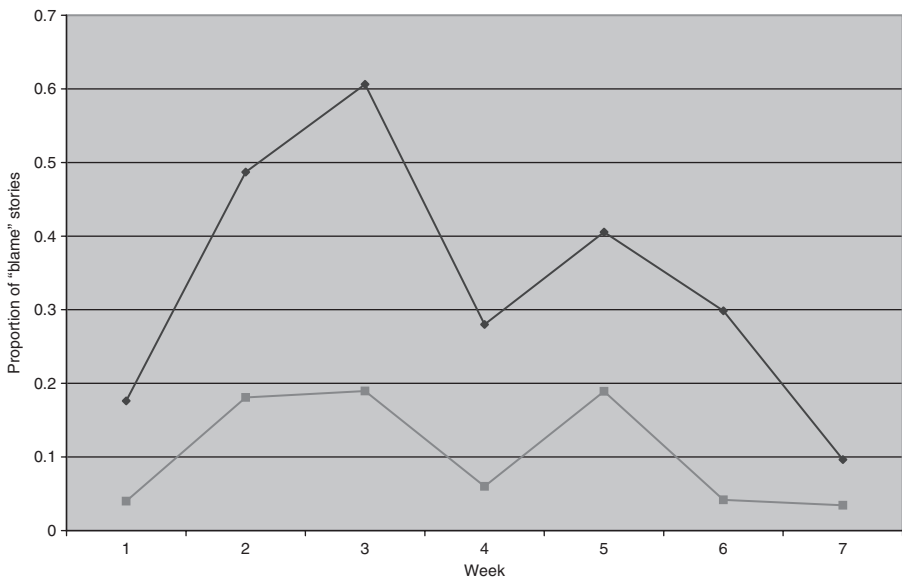


Figure 1 Proportion of stories that link "blame" words to national or state government. (a) Newscasts include evening news programs for ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, and FOX. Cable channels include all major news shows aired during primetime.

Of course, mechanistic word searches can provide misleading information, but a qualitative review of transcripts lends support to these trends. The media scrutiny of the national government's response was intense. Questions about when federal officials, including the president, became aware of the problems associated with the hurricane and what they did in response were common to all networks. Most commentators and journalists concluded that federal government entered the picture too late and with too little aid. The prominence of the national government failure story stretched for weeks after the storm. On September 19, Anderson Cooper provided an introduction to an interview with the following, "It has been more than three weeks now since Hurricane Katrina struck and believe it or not, people are still waiting for aid from the federal government."

Although the national government took center stage in much of the coverage, those who watched a great deal of coverage would have also been exposed to stories about possible state-level errors in the early days of the storm. The role of the state came to the forefront because of the dispute between President Bush and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco over whether she had properly requested federal assistance. This dispute became a central theme in coverage of the storm for several weeks—particularly during the second and third weeks after the storm. Governor Blanco was reported to have told President Bush on August 29, 2005 as Katrina passed, "we need everything you've got" (Glasser and Grunwald 2005). However, by August 31, White House officials were publicly questioning state-level management efforts and secretly debated ordering a federal takeover of operations. While Governor Blanco claimed she was asking for federal assistance in the form of troops all along, White House officials claimed she was declining federal assistance (Glasser and Grunwald 2005). Indeed, several media outlets reported that there was no request for assistance from Governor Blanco, including *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*. However, both later published corrections after noting that Governor Blanco had declared a national emergency on August 26, 2005, two days before Katrina made landfall. Nevertheless, these accusations and retractions perpetuated the blame game and public confusion over responsibility even weeks after the hurricane. Moreover, national political elites and their surrogates continued to question the "quality" of state and local leadership for months after the storm.

So, although national government responsibility took top billing in news coverage, the story about state level failures after Katrina also received attention. Individuals who were highly attentive to coverage of the storm were more likely to register both stories about responsibility, while those who were inattentive might register only the most frequently told story. As a result, we expect the level of attention to news coverage to be positively related to attributing blame to state failure to call for enough help.⁷ Of course, we are making a rather large assumption

that attention constitutes a sufficient condition for acceptance of a particular frame or story. In later sections of the article, we relax this assumption to explore whether acceptance of frames offered in the media is conditional on predispositions, as might be expected given previous findings by Zaller (1993).

Political Knowledge

Of course, factual information should also matter. Arceneaux and Stein (2006) demonstrate that attribution of blame depends, in part, on knowledge about different governments' functional responsibility. Victims of Hurricane Alison who were more knowledgeable about local government responsibilities were much more likely to appropriately blame the county for failing to prepare. Similarly, Gomez and Wilson (2008) show that victims of Katrina who were more knowledgeable, politically, attributed blame to a wider range of actors than those who were less knowledgeable. In light of these findings, we included a general political knowledge variable in the model.⁸ However, we are most interested in domain-specific political knowledge about the storm, such as whether those who were aware that state governors had the authority to order National Guard troops to commence operations in the case of a national disaster were more likely to attribute blame to state officials.

Interestingly, public knowledge of this fact is quite limited. Only 53 percent of respondents could correctly identify the state governor as responsible.⁹ There is some correlation between attention to coverage and factual knowledge, however. One-third (33 percent) of those who watched little or no coverage of the storm knew the correct answer, compared to 56 percent who watched some or a great deal of coverage. This suggests that the media may have played an important role in educating citizens about the various functional responsibilities of each level of government. The correlation sets the bar high for finding effects of knowledge that are independent of attention to coverage. Nevertheless, we expect those who are aware of the responsibility of the functional responsibility of the governor to order action to be more likely to transfer blame for federal response time to actions of state officials.

In addition, a number of studies in social psychology and sociology demonstrate that relatively stable characteristics, such as sex, age, race, social status, and education influence political attributions (Crittenden 1983; Guimond, Bergin and Palmer 1989; Howard and Pike 1986). Therefore, we include controls for these characteristics as well. Finally, because personal experience with the storm or experiences of close friends or family might shape opinions (Arceneaux and Stein 2006), we also control for whether the respondent was directly harmed or knew someone harmed.¹⁰

Empirical Results

Table 2 shows the results from an ordered logit model of attribution of blame for national government response time to state failure to call for enough help. The results support both predisposition hypotheses; both coefficients were correctly signed and statistically significant. Individuals who rated themselves as more conservative on a seven-point ideology scale were more likely to blame state government for failing to call for enough help. Likewise, those who self identified as Republicans were also more likely to blame state government than Democrats.¹¹

Table 2 Ordered logit model of the effect of “state fail[ure] to call for enough help” on the “length of time it took for national government to get aid to New Orleans”

	<i>b</i>	SE
Predisposition hypothesis		
Political ideology (Conservative = 7)	0.120*	0.058
Republican	0.414*	0.191
Independent	0.203	0.227
Specific knowledge hypothesis		
Correctly knew governor’s command of National guard	−0.096	0.161
Media exposure hypothesis		
Attention to coverage of storm	0.479*	0.113
Controls		
Female	−0.216	0.154
Age	0.006	0.005
Income	0.050*	0.022
Black	0.408*	0.230
Other minority	−0.138	0.265
Education	−0.029	0.075
General political knowledge	−0.054	0.111
Directly affected or knew someone affected by storm	−0.347*	0.151
μ_1	0.031	0.484
μ_2	0.791	0.480
μ_3	2.200	0.487
Number of cases	703	
LR χ^2 (12 df)	54.82*	
Log-likelihood	−804.59	

* $P < 0.05$, one-tailed tests.

The dependent variable is a four category response to a question asking whether “state failed to call for enough help” had “no effect” “little effect” “some effect” or a “great effect” on the length of time it took the U.S. National government to get aid to victims stranded in New Orleans”.

The attention to coverage hypothesis was also supported. Greater attention to coverage of the storm increased the odds that a respondent felt that state-level failure had a “great effect” on national government response time.

In contrast, the factual knowledge hypothesis was not supported. Surprisingly, the coefficient is incorrectly signed and insignificant. Moreover, rerunning the analysis after dropping the attention to coverage variable does not alter this finding. Thus, we have no reason to believe that collinearity between the attention and knowledge is driving the null results. What are we to make of this? One possibility is that our finding calls into question the importance of functional knowledge. Certainly, these findings run contrary to other studies that have found that political knowledge helps citizens connect the dots to responsible actors (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Gomez and Wilson 2003, 2008). But, we suggest a more modest interpretation for two reasons. First, our functional knowledge variable is based on the response to a single survey question. Previous research into measurement of political knowledge suggests that an index based on several questions is much more valid (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). Second, we think it is possible that the partisan dimensions associated with this particular attribution may swamp the effects of knowledge. There is no clear way to untangle this question with the data at hand so we must leave this at the level of speculation.

Table 3 demonstrates the substantive significance of key variables in the model by exploring the change in the predicted probability that a respondent would report that state failure to call for enough help had a “great effect” on “the length of time it took the U.S. national government to get aid to victims stranded in New Orleans.” All other variables are held at their mean or mode, while the variable of interest is changed from its low value to its high value. Respondents who rated themselves as extremely liberal had a 0.29 predicted probability of saying state failure had a “great effect.” In contrast, respondents who rated themselves as extremely conservative had a 0.45 probability—an increase in the predicted

Table 3 Predicted probability respondent thought failure of state to call for enough help had a “Great effect”

	X = Min	X = Max	Difference	SE difference
Political ideology	0.287	0.447	0.161	0.077*
Republican	0.363	0.464	0.101	0.046*
Attention to coverage	0.183	0.479	0.295	0.060*
Effect of attention to coverage for:				
● Conservative Republican	0.325	0.665	0.340	0.073*
● Liberal Democrat	0.137	0.393	0.256	0.055*

* $P < 0.05$

probability of 0.16. Similarly, Republicans were predicted to be 0.10 more likely to assign greater blame to state level actions than Democrats.

The greatest influence on predicted probabilities stemmed from the individual's attention to media coverage of the storm. Respondents who watched no coverage of the storm had a predicted probability of only 0.18, while those who watched a "great deal" of coverage had a predicted probability more than double, at 0.48. The impressive jump in predicted probabilities indicates that people who were exposed to more coverage were more likely to shift substantial blame for the slow federal response to the shoulders of the state government. This is exactly what we would expect based on the media coverage patterns outlined earlier. Limited or sporadic attention to media is not likely to expose individuals to coverage that framed the crisis in New Orleans as the fault of state-level decisions. However, close attention to coverage increases the likelihood of encountering the frame and, consequently, the likelihood of making the attribution.

Is the Effect of Media Conditional?

The predicted probabilities in table 3 show the effects of media exposure for the "average" person. However, previous scholarship in political science suggests framing effects might also be contingent on predispositions (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Likewise, social-psychology research on attributions suggests that initial attributions occur quickly, spontaneously, and typically follow from prior beliefs or experiences (Anderson, Krull, and Weiner 1996). Thus, when presented with multiple causal stories, individuals tend to accept causal stories that are most plausible given their predispositions and reject those that seem implausible (Anderson, Krull, and Weiner 1996; Zaller 1992).

There are two ways to explore this. The first approach simply harnesses the inherent interactive properties associated with the functional form of the ordered logit. The effect of attention to media varies depending on the baseline probability as determined by the value of all other variables in the model. Therefore, we can examine how the effect of media coverage differs for those with different baseline predispositions of party and ideology using the model results from table 2. We created two baseline profiles, a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican, by setting the party and ideology to the appropriate value for each archetype and then examined how altering the value of exposure to coverage influences the predicted probability of responding that state failure had a "great effect" on national government response times.

Liberal Democrats who viewed no coverage had a predicted probability of 0.14, while those who viewed a great deal of coverage had a predicted probability of 0.39. The increase in the predicted probability that a liberal Democrat assigned great

blame to state government was 0.26. In contrast, conservative Republicans began with a higher predicted probability of redirecting blame toward the state, at 0.33. However, this jumps to an impressive 0.67 for those exposed to a great deal of coverage. The increase over the range of attention to coverage is 0.34, nearly 0.09 more than the increase among liberal Democrats.

We also ran a direct test of whether partisans respond to media coverage differently by including multiplicative interaction terms between party and attention to coverage in the model. In this model, even if a Democrat and Republican began from the same baseline probability, the effect of attention to coverage would differ for each and, thus, produce divergent predicted probabilities.

Our expectation, of course, is that Democrats will be less responsive to attention to coverage than Republicans. Democrats are likely to be defensive of Governor Blanco—a fellow Democrat—and more likely to hear and adopt the dominant frame that blames the Republican president and his administration. In contrast, Republicans are likely to be defensive of President Bush and his appointed leaders. Accordingly, stories that shift blame from the national to the state level should resonate with Republicans, leading to a greater relative impact on their probability of assigning blame to state government. We expect this effect to be most pronounced for those who watch the greatest amount of coverage. It is unlikely that low levels of coverage expose people to both the state and national story. But, as attention to coverage increases, so does the probability a respondent heard stories of state-level failure. If the “acceptance” hypothesis holds, we should see the greatest separation between Democrats and Republicans who were highly attentive to media coverage.

Because party is measured by a set of mutually exclusive dichotomous variables, we must also include the interaction for independents. However, there is also a substantive rationale for doing so. Independents do not have strong partisan predispositions and, thus, have no reason to filter the frame of state failure so they should be responsive to exposure to the causal story. In this way, independents serve as a type of barometer for the effect of coverage, independent of partisan predisposition. We expect Republican responsiveness to exceed that of independents and Democratic responsive to be less than independents, however, because they have existing predispositions that encourage attribution of blame to the “out-group”. Thus, our expectation is that they will fall somewhere in the middle of the two groups—responsive to media messages because they lack strong filters, but not as responsive as those who seek to protect their “in-group” predispositions by transferring blame.

Table 4 shows the results from the ordered logit model with interactions between attention and party. The coefficient for attention to coverage indicates the effect of coverage for Democrats only on the logit score. For Republicans, the effect of coverage on the logit score is the sum of the interaction coefficient (0.31) and

Table 4 Conditional effect of exposure to coverage on attribution of blame

	B	SE
Conditional effects:		
Attention to coverage	0.298*	0.154
Republican	-0.367	0.547
Attention × Republican	0.314 [#]	0.222
Independent/Other	-0.724	0.783
Attention × Independent/Other	0.382	0.319
Other controls:		
Political ideology	0.118*	0.060
Knowledge of troop control	-0.098	0.162
Female	-0.228 [#]	0.152
Age	0.007 [#]	0.005
Income	0.050*	0.021
Black	0.430*	0.231
Other minority	-0.138	0.294
Education	-0.024	0.073
General political knowledge	-0.048	0.115
Harmed/knew someone harmed	-0.349*	0.152
μ ₁	-0.415	0.508
μ ₂	0.347	0.512
μ ₃	1.759*	0.517
N	703	
Wald $\chi^2(15)$	61.860*	
Log-likelihood	803.350	

* $P < 0.05$. [#] $P < 0.10$, one-tailed tests.

The dependent variable is a four category response to a question asking whether “state failed to call for enough help” had “no effect” “little effect” “some effect” or a “great effect” on the length of time it took the U.S. national government to get aid to victims stranded in New Orleans”.

the attention coefficient (0.30), for a total effect of 0.61—double the effect for Democrats. We see a similar jump in the size of the effect for independents, but with a larger standard error. The effect of attention on attribution is 0.38 greater for independents, all else constant.

We want to know whether the size of the marginal effect of being a Republican or independent is increasing as attention to coverage increases, and we need to know whether the marginal effect is statistically different from zero. Figure 2 graphs the predicted probabilities that a respondent felt that state failure to call for enough help had a great effect on national government response time by party

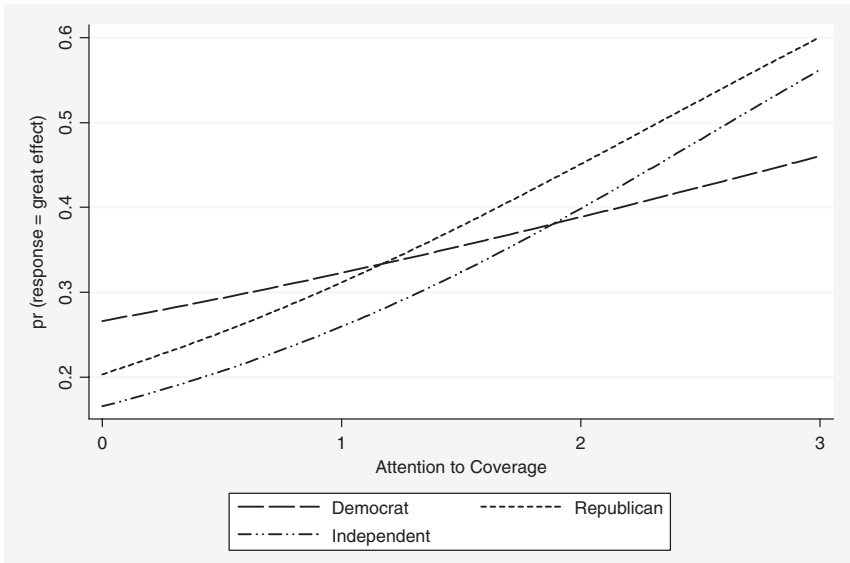


Figure 2 Predicted probability of attribution to state failure based on party and attention to coverage. (a) Probabilities generated from simulations based on model in table 4, all variables held constant at mean or mode except for party and attention to coverage.

identification based on the results in table 4. We have held all other variables constant at their mean or mode, and ideology is set to “moderate” in all three cases. As in the earlier model, increased attention to news coverage leads to an increased probability of blaming state failure for Democrats, independents, and Republicans. However, the effect of a one unit increase in attention to coverage on the predicted probabilities is much larger for Republicans and independents. Democrats and Republicans who paid little attention to coverage (attention = 1) had very similar predicted probabilities of attributing blame to the state level, but the gap widens dramatically as attention increases. At the high end of attention, the gap between Democrats and Republicans is 0.14. Independents have slightly lower predicted probabilities than Republicans but they follow a similar pattern of responsiveness to coverage.

The previous graph is suggestive, but it gives no information about the uncertainty around the estimated marginal effects. Unfortunately, the standard error of the multiplicative coefficient in table 4 is not the standard error around the marginal effect. Following Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006), we use simulations based on the model in table 4 to generate confidence intervals around the marginal effects to determine the substantive and statistical significance of the interaction terms.¹² In figure 3, the solid line shows the marginal effect of being Republican (compared to the baseline, Democrat) for each level of attention to coverage,

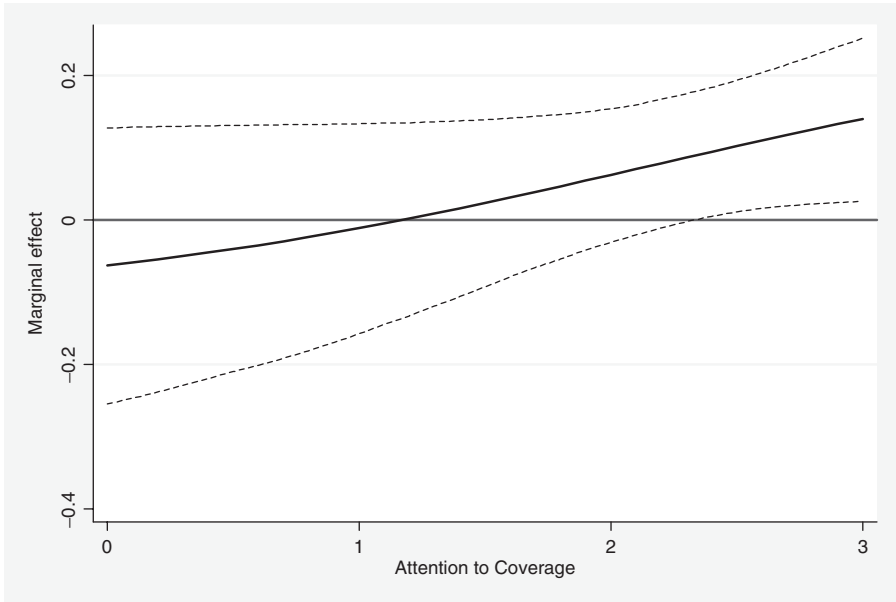


Figure 3 Marginal effect of Republican on attribution of blame, conditional on attention to coverage. (a) Predicted marginal effects and 95 percent confidence interval bounds are generated through simulations based on the analysis in table 4. We hold all variables except party and attention to coverage constant at their mean or mode.

while the dashed lines on either side represent the 95 percent confidence interval around the predicted marginal effect. The “marginal effect” can also be thought of as the first difference in predicted probabilities between being a Democrat identifier and a Republican identifier. For most of the range of attention, the confidence interval brackets 0, indicating that we cannot be certain that Democrats and Republicans attribute blame differently. However, the marginal effect of being a Republican exposed to a great deal of coverage is much larger than the marginal effect of Democrats and it is significantly different than zero. Exposure to stories that frame failures in New Orleans as the result of state errors or inaction does not have an identical effect on Democrats and Republicans because Democrats are more likely than Republicans to resist this story line. Likewise, Republicans may welcome the opportunity to redirect their blame and anger toward state government controlled by opposite party officials.¹³

Discussion and Conclusion

Federalism provides citizens with multiple sources of blame, which can be problematic for responsibility judgments because it allows elite actors to attempt to

manipulate judgments through framing and political accounts (McGraw 1991). The analysis here suggests that such efforts may be successful—particularly among the partisan rank and file whom elites most want to satisfy. Republicans were much more likely than Democrats to shift blame in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to the state level, especially if they had high exposure to the blame game coverage in the media. Our findings comport well with other studies that use experimental manipulations to explore the direct and conditional effects of predispositions on attributions (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Malhotra 2008), but our findings offer rare “real world” evidence of the effects of framing. In a complex, multimessage environment, citizens appear to use party identification as a way to sort out the veracity of different frames.

Our study is substantively significant because it demonstrates that exposure to coverage that highlights federalist themes can have a direct effect on opinions that ultimately serve to alter evaluations of public figures and possibly their vote tallies at the ballot box. The public was confronted with multiple messages that highlighted the complexity of public delivery of services when multiple levels of government are involved, however increased exposure to coverage of the storm served to increase the odds that citizens viewed state failure to call for enough help as having a “great effect” on national government response time.

Overall, our results speak to broader questions of accountability because we show how federalism provides avenues for blame shifts that potentially dilute the accountability of political actors, making it easier for some actors to get off the political hook. This places this research squarely in line with previous literature that evaluates how divided power across institutions of government (specifically executive and legislatures) muddies responsibility judgment (Arceneaux 2006; Arceneaux and Stein 2007; Atkeson and Partin 1995). Our study suggests that this phenomenon of muddied responsibility works equally well across levels of government (from federal to state). When blame can be shifted, elite actors will manipulate the stories in an attempt to alter citizen responsibility judgments. Citizens respond to this manipulation, especially those who are predisposed to accept the alternative judgment, and shift blame accordingly.

Notes

1. After September 11, this chain of command was clearly codified into a set of standardized incident protocols called the “National Incident Management System” found in the “National Response Plan” adopted by the Department of Homeland Security in December of 2004. It focuses efforts on coordinating command and control at the lowest level of government, while maintaining the flexibility to expand to multiple levels of government as need arises. For an in-depth analysis of the structure and function, see Birkland 2008 and Gerber 2008.

2. The data for this study are drawn from a nationwide random sample phone survey of citizens over the age of 18 conducted from September 27 through November 13, 2005 using facilities at the Earl Survey Research Lab, Texas Tech University. The survey was supported by a grant from NSF (SES-0553047). Due to communications problems in the storm-affected areas, the area codes for directly affected areas were removed prior to drawing the sample. The survey was ~20 minutes in length and had a total of 980 respondents. The survey protocol used the “recent birthday” method of randomization within household. The response rate was percent based on AAPOR RR1 formula (AAPOR 2006). The cooperation rate was 27 percent. The rates were calculated using the conservative approach of counting immediate hang-ups as refusals. Frequencies are weighted to account for biases in age and gender. Biases in race were minimized by oversampling areas with high minority populations. Additional details about the study methodology, descriptive statistics and a full frequency report can be found at the study website <http://katrina.unm.edu>.
3. This has historically been true of conservative elites but has recently come under debate. For an alternative view that raises doubts regarding conservative President George W. Bush’s concerns for federalism, see Conan and Dinlan (2007).
4. Measures of frequency of media use, such as self-reports of the number of times watching national or local news have been criticized because they do not provide information about whether subjects paid attention to the news stories and thus are poor indicators of reception of the news (Price and Zaller 1993). Our measure improves upon that because it taps the respondents’ engagement with the story rather than simple exposure to the news.
5. Newscasts included in the search were all evening news programs for ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, and FOX. Cable channels include three shows during primetime seven–ten period. There are a number of challenges in drawing conclusions from Lexis-Nexis searches of transcripts, thus we emphasize the need for caution in inferring too much from the results. Our goal is illustrative and meant to provide summary data in conjunction with our more exhaustive qualitative analysis of transcripts. Conventions for posting transcripts vary by station and, in some cases, vary by newscast within the same station. Some post individual segments or interviews, while others post complete transcripts for the full broadcast. In all cases, we report proportions of total transcripts rather than raw frequencies to mitigate this problem.
6. National actor words included “president,” “Bush,” “FEMA,” “homeland security,” “federal government,” “national government,” “Michael Brown,” and “Chertoff.” State actor words include “Blanco,” “governor,” “Louisiana government,” “state officials,” “state government . . .” Searches that restrict national and state words to just those pertaining to Bush and Blanco produce lower relative frequencies overall but the same pattern of emphasis on national rather than state level.
7. Respondents were asked, how much attention did you pay to coverage of Hurricane Katrina? “a great deal,” “some,” “little,” or “none.”
8. The political knowledge variable was created by summing the correct answers to two general factual questions about government: How much of a majority is required for

- a veto override and who has the responsibility for deciding if a law is constitutional. The measure ranges from 0 to 2 and includes “don’t know” responses as “incorrect” answers. Specific wording and response categories are available at http://katrina.unm.edu/freqreport_06.htm, questions 35 and 36.
9. The survey question asked “Based on your understanding, who is responsible for requesting National Guard troops to begin operations after a hurricane? Is it state governors, FEMA, President Bush, or are you not sure? We coded those who correctly answered the question as 1 and all others, including “don’t know” as 0.
 10. We asked respondents whether they had been directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. We also asked whether they knew someone who had been affected by Hurricane Katrina. We scored respondents who answered yes to either question as 1 and all others who answered both questions “0.”
 11. Party identification with the major parties is included through two mutually exclusive variables, Republican and independent/other. Republican scores a 1 for all those that identified as strong or weak Republican and independents who “lean” toward the Republican Party. Independent scores 1 for all strict independents and those who selected “other” when asked about party identification.
 12. Computer code and other information about the simulation procedure can be found at <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~mrg217/interaction.html>
 13. The marginal effect of identifying as an independent does not differ significantly at any point across the range of attention to coverage. The confidence interval around the marginal effect brackets zero, regardless of exposure to coverage thus the variation within this subgroup is too great to clearly distinguish them from Democrats. It is possible that significant findings would emerge if we had a much larger number of cases.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan I., David J. Lanoue, and Subha Ramesh. 1988. Economic conditions, causal attributions, and political evaluations in the 1984 presidential election. *The Journal of Politics* 50 (4): 848–863.
- The American Association for Public Opinion Research. 2006. *Standard definitions: Final dispositions of case codes and outcome rates for surveys, 4th ed.* Lenexa, Kansas: AAPOR.
- Anderson, Craig A., D. S. Krull, and B. Weiner. 1996. Explanations: Processes and Consequences. In *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles*, ed. E. T. Higgins, and A. W. Kruglanski, 271–296. New York: Guilford Press.
- Arceneaux, Kevin. 2005. Does federalism weaken democratic representation in the United States? *Publius* 35 (2): 297–311.
- . 2006. The federal face of voting: are elected officials held accountable for the functions relevant to their office? *Political Psychology* 27 (5): 731–754.

- Arceneaux, Kevin, and Robert Stein. 2006. Who is held responsible when disaster strikes? The attribution of responsibility for a natural disaster in an urban election. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28 (1): 43–53.
- Associated Press. 2006. Barbour defends state's share of federal money for Katrina recovery. *CNN.com*, Published January 24, 2006. www.cnn.com (accessed December 28, 2007).
- Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Randall W. Partin. 1995. Economic and referendum voting: A comparison of senate and gubernatorial elections. *American Political Science Review* 89 (1): 99–107.
- Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Randall W. Partin. 2001. Candidate advertisements, media coverage, and citizen attitudes: The agendas and roles of senators and governors in a federal system. *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (4): 795–813.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., and Bryan D. Jones. 1993. *Agendas and instability in American politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Birkland, Thomas A. 1997. *After disaster: Agenda setting, public policy, and focusing events*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Birkland, Thomas A., and Sarah Waterman. 2008. Is federalism the reason for policy failure in Hurricane Katrina? *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 38 (4).
- Borger, Gloria (reporter). 2005. Criticism of governmental response to Hurricane Katrina continues, investigation planned. *CBS Evening News* (Television Broadcast), September 8, 2005.
- Brambor, Thomas, William Roberts Clark, and Matt Golder. 2006. Understanding interaction models: Improving empirical analyses. *Political Analysis* 14: 63–82.
- Brickman, Philip, Vita C. Rabinowitz, Jurgis Keruza, Dan Coates, Ellen Cohn, and Louise Kidder. 1982. Models of helping and coping. *American Psychologist* 37: 368–384.
- Brown, Aaron, Anderson Cooper, and Tom Foreman (Reporters). 2005. Hurricane Katrina Aftermath. *CNN Newsnight with Aaron Brown* (Television Broadcast) September 19, 2005. Atlanta, GA: Cable News Network.
- Cole, Richard L., and John Kincaid. 2006. Public opinion on U.S. federal and intergovernmental issues in 2006: Continuity and change. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 36 (3): 443–459.
- Conan, Tim, and John Dinan. 2007. Federalism, the Bush Administration and the transformation of American Conservatism. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 37 (3): 279–303.
- Crittenden, Kathleen S. 1983. Sociological aspects of attribution. *Annual Review of Sociology* 8: 425–446.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1993. Measuring political knowledge: Putting first things first. *American Journal of Political Science* 7: 1179–1206.
- Druckman, James N. 2001. The implications of framing effects for citizen competence. *Political Behavior* 23 (3): 225–256.

- Forsyth, Donelson R. 1980. The functions of attributions. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43 (2): 184–198.
- Glasser, Susan B., and Michael, Grnwald. 2005. Department's mission was undermined from start. *Washington Post*, December 22, page A01.
- Gomez, Brad T., and J. Matthew Wilson. 2001. Political sophistication and economic voting in the American electorate: A theory of heterogeneous attribution. *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (4): 899–914.
- . 2003. Causal attribution and economic voting in American congressional elections. *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (3): 271–282.
- . 2008. Political sophistication and attributions of blame in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 38 (4).
- Griffin, Stephen M. 2007. Stop federalism before it kills again: Reflection on Hurricane Katrina. *St. John's Journal of Legal Commentary* 21 (2): 527–540.
- Guimond, Serge, Guy Begin, and Douglas Palmer. 1989. Education and causal attributions: The development of “Person-blame” and “System-blame” ideology. *Social Psychological Quarterly* 52 (2): 126–140.
- Haider-Markel, Donald P., and Mark R. Joslyn. 2001. Gun policy, opinion, tragedy, and blame attribution: The conditional influence of issue frames. *The Journal of Politics* 63: 520–543.
- Heider, Fritz. 1958. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Howell, Susan E., and Robert T. Sims. 1994. Survey research and racially charged elections: The case of David Duke in Louisiana. *Political Behavior* 16 (2): 219–236.
- Hewstone, Miles. 1989. *Causal attribution; from cognitive processes to collective beliefs*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Press.
- Howard, Judith A., and Kenneth C. Pike. 1986. Ideological investment in cognitive processing: The influence of social statuses on attribution. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 49 (2): 154–167.
- Howard, Judith A. 1995. Social cognition. In *Sociological perspectives on social psychology*, ed. H. S. Cook, G. A. Fine, and J. S. House. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Huddy, Leonie, and Stanley Feldman. 2006. Worlds apart: Blacks and Whites react to Hurricane Katrina. *Du Bois Review* 3 (1): 97–113.
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1989. How citizens think about national issues: A matter of responsibility. *American Journal of Political Science* 33 (4): 878–900.
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1991. *Is anyone responsible?: How television frames political issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jennings, Kent. 1999. Political responses to pain and loss: Presidential address, American political science association. *American Political Science Review* 93: 1–13.
- Kweit, Mary G., and Robert W. Kweit. 2006. A tale of two disasters. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 36 (3): 375–392.

- Malhotra, Neil. 2008. Partisan polarization and blame attribution in a federal system: the case of Hurricane Katrina. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 38 (4).
- Malhotra, Neil, and Alexander G. Kuo. 2008. Assigning blame: The public's response to Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Politics* 70 (1).
- Miller, Joanne M., and Jon A. Krosnick. 1998. The impact of candidate name order on election outcomes. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (3): 291–330.
- Nelson, Thomas E., Elaine Willey, and Zoe M. Oxley. 1998. Belief content, importance, and accessibility in issue opinion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston MA, September 3–6.
- Peffley, Mark. 1985. The voter as Juror: Attributing responsibility for economic conditions. In *Economic conditions and electoral outcomes: The United States and Western Europe*, ed. Heinz Eulau, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. New York: Agathon Press, Inc.
- Peffley, Mark., and John T. Williams. 1985. Attributing presidential responsibility for national economic problems. *American Politics Quarterly* 13 (4): 393–425.
- Rudolph, Thomas J. 2003a. Triangulating political responsibility. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Meetings I Philadelphia, PA, Aug 28–31.
- . 2003b. Who's responsible for the economy? The formation and consequences of responsibility attributions. *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (4): 698–713.
- Rudolph, Thomas J., and J. Tobin Grant. 2002. An attributional model of economic voting: Evidence from the 2000 presidential election. *Political Research Quarterly* 55 (4): 802–823.
- Scheufele, Dietram A. 1999. Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication* 49 (1): 103–122.
- Schneider, Sandra. 2008. “Who's to blame? (Mis)perceptions of the intergovernmental response to disasters”. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 38 (4).
- Sharp, Elaine B., and Mark Joslyn. 2001. Individual and contextual effects on attributions about pornography. *The Journal of Politics* 63 (2): 501–519.
- Sotirovic, Mira. 2003. How individuals explain social problems: The influence of media use. *Journal of Communication* 53: 122–137.
- Stone, Deborah A. 1989. Causal stories and the formation of policy agendas. *Political Science Quarterly* 104 (2): 281–300.
- Storm, Jonathan. 2005. The worst, best of Katrina on TV. *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Features Magazine*. P. E01 September 7, 2005.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.