Who’s to Blame? (Mis)perceptions of the Intergovernmental Response to Disasters

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This analysis shows that the intergovernmental response to Hurricane Katrina collapsed because those involved in the process did not have a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities or how the entire governmental response system should operate. New data are presented which demonstrate that citizens’ attitudes about intergovernmental responsibilities coincide quite closely with how the disaster response system is designed to function, but they differ from the way public officials involved in the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts thought the process should work. This mismatch between what various levels of government are expected to do and what activities they actually perform in emergency situations has contributed to extremely negative impressions within the American public about governmental performance during natural disasters.

In the United States, government is viewed as the only institution with the resources, authority, and capabilities to help citizens cope with large-scale cataclysmic events, like natural disasters. So, it is not surprising that the government assumed a major role in the response to Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast in 2005. This hurricane represents one of the most intense and destructive storms to ever hit the United States (Blake, Rappaport, and Landsea 2007). Katrina affected 90,000 square miles of land across 138 counties and parishes in 4 states, created flooding conditions in 80 percent of the city of New Orleans, and led to the relocation of more than 800,000 residents (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2006). Katrina was responsible for more than 1,800 deaths, and over $100 billion in damages (O’Keefe 2007). Consequently, any governmental response, no matter how well orchestrated, would probably encounter serious difficulties dealing with such a large-scale, catastrophic event.

But, the problems which have surfaced in the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina are not solely explained by its scope and magnitude. There have been other events very large in scope—for example, the 1993 Midwestern floods that affected millions of acres of farmland in nine states (Larson 1993)—which were handled much more smoothly and efficiently (Claiborne 1993; Ingwerson 1993;
U.S. Senate 1994). Nor, are the problems which surfaced following Katrina the inevitable by-product from the use of pre-established, bureaucratic policies and procedures to guide and co-ordinate governmental actions (Schneider 1992, 1995, 2005). Instead, the failure of the government’s relief efforts following Katrina are tied more directly to the collapse of the intergovernmental framework upon which the entire system is based (Walters and Kettl 2005; Schneider 2005).

In this article, I will examine the causes and consequences of intergovernmental breakdowns in disaster relief. First, I will describe how the intergovernmental response process is supposed to operate. Then, I will show how the process collapsed following Hurricane Katrina because of misperceptions within the governmental system about the roles and responsibilities of national, state, and local emergency management agencies. I will also present data on citizens’ perceptions of intergovernmental policy activity. The general public views the responsibilities of various levels of government similarly to the way the system is designed to operate. This indicates, once again, that there was a mismatch between what happened during Katrina and how the process is expected to work. These misunderstandings about intergovernmental functions can be extremely destructive. They can produce situations where no official is willing to take responsibility for his/her actions (or inactions); instead, others are blamed for not meeting their obligations. In addition, they can facilitate the widespread perception of public-sector incompetence and failure which has lasting consequences for governmental performance.

How the Intergovernmental Response to Disasters is Supposed to Work

The United States’ intergovernmental response to natural disasters is designed to work from the bottom up. Disaster response begins at the local level and follows a series of pre-specified steps through the state and, ultimately, to the national government (Schneider 1995). If they do become involved, higher levels of government are not supposed to supersede or replace the activities of the lower levels. Instead, all three levels of government continue to work together while implementing disaster-relief policies.

Local Responders Initiate the Process

Municipal and county governments are the first link in the chain (Schneider 1992). Their job is to deal with emergencies that occur within their jurisdictions, before asking for any outside assistance. Local governments develop basic emergency preparedness and response procedures to inform citizens about potential hazards and identify the procedures for evacuating local populations in the event of an actual emergency. Local emergency management plans also specify how rescue and response activities will be co-ordinated within and across jurisdictions, as well as how local
governments will obtain assistance from higher authorities if events exceed their capacity.

Towns, cities, and counties establish local emergency preparedness agencies, offices, or units to administer disaster assistance policies. The most tangible product of these agencies is a plan identifying the duties and responsibilities of all local officials during emergencies. These plans are prepared by local officials to meet the needs, conditions, and situations of particular communities, but they also conform to certain guidelines imposed by the state and federal governments (Drabek and Hoertmer 1991; Schneider 1995; Col 2006). Higher governmental levels provide money and technical advice to help local officials prepare and maintain their emergency management plans (Scavo, Kearney, and Kilrol 2007).

Official US policy specifies that many, if not most disasters, will be handled entirely by local response organizations (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). Higher governmental levels do not need to become involved unless local resources are exhausted or overwhelmed. When that occurs, the response process moves upward through one level of government at a time. In practice, this means that local officials can look elsewhere for guidance and assistance if they are unable to handle an emergency. Recently, regional compacts and cooperative agreements have developed between jurisdictions as an additional source of redress for local governments. In most cases, however, local authorities ask state-level officials and organizations for assistance.

**State Mobilization**

Generally speaking, states mobilize additional resources and larger scale organizations to deal with situations that local personnel cannot handle on their own. The official responsibilities and obligations of the state government are set forth in a state emergency preparedness/response plan (Schneider 1995; National Emergency Management Association 2004, 2006). These plans vary somewhat from one state to the next, but they do tend to have a number of common elements. Most state plans provide a framework to guide the deployment of state-wide resources and support for local disaster relief operations. In addition, they identify the responsibilities of various state officials (such as emergency preparedness personnel, law enforcement officials, and so on) in disaster situations.

Each state tailors its plan so that it can address its own priorities and needs. The response mechanisms that seem to be most effective for dealing with hurricanes are not necessarily those that are best suited for earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or blizzards. Thus, the state plans introduce a degree of flexibility into the respective response systems. The objective of the state’s response plan is to ensure that there is an effective system for co-ordinating and supporting all emergency relief efforts within that state.
The key state-level contacts with the federal government are the state’s emergency management agency, the governor of the affected state, and the governor’s authorized representative for a particular disaster situation. According to federal guidelines, a single state agency must be made responsible for coordinating all state-level activities and insuring that the state maintains a coherent and effective system for dealing with disasters (National Emergency Management Association 2004). This state emergency management agency also serves as the main liaison between local units and any federal relief organizations which become involved in the process. Indeed, one of the major tasks of a state emergency agency is to coordinate the actions of local governments with state-level efforts, while also serving as the intermediary between national and sub-national organizations. State emergency management organizations are involved in funding and dispensing disaster relief operations. They distribute financial aid to local governments for emergency preparedness and response, they enter into mutual aid agreements with other states in order to consolidate their resources, and they are the conduit through which federal funds can be channeled to local-level jurisdictions.

The governor also plays a key role in the disaster response process (Schneider 1995; Waugh 2007). Although there is some variance from state to state, most governors are granted fairly expansive powers during emergency situations. They can: declare a “state of emergency” either through executive order or by proclamation; order evacuations (mandatory or voluntary) of local communities; mobilize the state’s National Guard; and identify how important resources (e.g., utility repair services, power generators, water supplies, medical equipment, etc.) will be used to help local jurisdictions (National Emergency Management Association 2004). In addition, the governor must make the formal request for additional assistance if state and local resources are overwhelmed or exhausted. Once a major disaster is declared, the governor of the affected state appoints a state coordinating officer. This individual is responsible for organizing and mobilizing state and local relief efforts and for coordinating these efforts with those of the federal government. This official is also empowered by the governor(s) of the affected state(s) to submit all necessary documents which might be needed to obtain federal aid. In theory, these three contacts should facilitate communications and interactions between state and federal officials as well as the overall implementation of disaster relief through the intergovernmental system (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004).

Federal Involvement

The process leading to federal involvement in a disaster situation is sometimes called the “pull” system of intergovernmental relief. Local governments must first exhaust their own resources before they call upon state governments to respond. Similarly, state governments must meet the needs of local governments with their own
resources before they request federal assistance (Townsend 2006). Thus, lower levels of government successively pull resources and assistance from the next level up in the hierarchy of the federal system.

The conditions under which the federal government can intervene are specified through statutes (i.e., the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988, the 1994 Amendments to the Stafford Act, the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000/2000 Amendments to the Stafford Act), executive directives (e.g., President Carter’s Reorganization Plan #3, and President George W. Bush’s Homeland Security Directive #5), and administrative actions (the 1992 Federal Response Plan, the 2004 National Response Plan, the 2005 Catastrophic Incident Supplement, etc.). In general, these policies lay out the specific responsibilities of the national government when a major disaster strikes and outline the ways that federal officials are to work with public and private emergency management personnel throughout the intergovernmental system.

For the vast majority of situations, the national government is *not* expected to get involved in a relief effort on its own initiative (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). Instead, the federal government only steps in when a state or territorial governor makes a formal request for assistance (pursuant to the provisions of The Stafford Act). The governor’s request is reviewed and evaluated by emergency management officials at the national level. Based upon their reading of the situation, federal personnel prepare a recommendation for the president (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008a). The president must decide whether the magnitude of the crisis really is beyond the capacity of state and local governments. If so, the president issues a formal disaster declaration (Sylves 2006).

A presidential disaster declaration has far-reaching consequences because it opens the door to all other federal assistance (Sylves 2007). The declaration specifies the geographic boundaries of the disaster area. In this manner, it delineates who is eligible for relief. The presidential declaration also contains an initial statement about the kinds of assistance that will be provided to the stricken areas (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008b). This is extremely important because it determines whether disaster victims will receive direct cash grants, housing supplements, emergency medical care, or some combination of these resources and services. When a major disaster is declared, the federal government must appoint a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) to coordinate all subsequent response/recovery efforts. The role of the FCO is identified in federal statutes, regulations, and plans (e.g., The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Assistance and Emergency Relief Act as amended, Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008c, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). But, the specific responsibilities of the position are not explained in detail (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

In most major disaster situations, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has the task of mobilizing the broader resources of the federal government.¹
FEMA performs a number of important functions in the nation’s response system. One of its main roles is to link disaster victims with other federal agencies so they can obtain needed assistance. FEMA can call upon the U.S. Army, state National Guard units, and the U.S. Department of Transportation to get critical materials (like plywood, plastic sheeting, safe drinking water, and so on) into affected areas. FEMA also administers several programs on its own (Bea 2005b). The agency can make temporary housing provisions, such as tents, mobile homes, or rent money, for people whose homes have been damaged or destroyed. It can distribute cash grants to individuals and families who are in need, but ineligible for other types of aid. FEMA can also make funds available to government agencies, private companies, nonprofit organizations, and Indian tribes in order to restore/replace public facilities, remove debris, and establish emergency protective services. Finally, FEMA plays a key role in getting federal aid physically into disaster-stricken areas. One way it does so is by bringing in relief workers (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008c). (For a detailed description of recent changes in FEMA’s mission and functions, see Birkland and Waterman 2008).

Changes in Federal-level Involvement

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed and placed in charge of the nation’s emergency management operations. The DHS Secretary was named the principal federal official responsible for “coordinating federal operations within the United States” (White House 2003) and was given the task of initiating a comprehensive, Nationwide Incident Management System (NIMS) that establishes standard protocols and procedures for all those involved in emergency response activities. The DHS Secretary can designate a Principal Federal Official (PFO) who can represent the DHS Secretary as the lead federal official in a disaster situation. If a PFO is not appointed, then the FCO is in charge of directing the efforts of the federal government, as well as the coordination between federal, state, and local government actions (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). Federal officials are to work directly with state (and local) officials to assess the severity of the situation and determine the type of assistance that is needed.

The role of the federal government is also supposed to change when extraordinarily complex or severe situations occur (White House 2003). Such events are referred to as “Incidents of National Significance.” The defining criteria for Incidents of National Significance are where there are sustained national impacts over a prolonged period of time, when the resources of state, local, and private-sector authorities are exceeded, or when there are significant interruptions in governmental operations which threaten national security. All catastrophic events—those which result in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption—are automatically to be identified as Incidents of National Significance (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004).
In order to address these situations, the DHS establishes an interagency incident management system as quickly as possible—even before a potentially devastating disaster has occurred. This entails the immediate creation of unified command teams at the onset of any disaster, starting at the lowest jurisdictional levels and moving up through the process as necessary, in order to insure cooperation among all organizations involved in the event. The incident management team is to identify the immediate problems of a disaster-stricken area, develop appropriate plans to meet these needs, and implement them swiftly and effectively.

The PFO has the task of overseeing the implementation of incident management structures and guiding the nation’s emergency relief operations. During such difficult and complex situations, the federal government assumes a more proactive, commanding role in the response process (White House 2003). The DHS Secretary is placed in charge of the governmental response to catastrophic situations with the PFO serving as the Secretary’s main representative/liaison to the area experiencing the crisis (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). This enables federal resources to flow more quickly and easily to severely stricken communities.

**Basic Assumptions of the Intergovernmental Response System**

The intergovernmental response system for natural disasters involves a very complicated, widespread structure. The viability of this structure is based upon several crucial assumptions about the nature of disaster situations and the responsibilities of governmental organizations and personnel within the entire framework.

The first and most fundamental assumption is that disaster preparation and response is best handled at the local level (Bea 2005a; Col 2006; Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008c). City and county officials are uniquely positioned to anticipate and meet the needs of their constituents; they should only look elsewhere when disaster-related events exceed their capabilities. Of course, it is anticipated that some situations will require the involvement of state and national governments. But, the scope of the disaster clearly should exceed the capacities of lower governmental units before requests for additional assistance move up to the next level of government (Schneider 1995; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004; Federal Emergency Management Agency 2008c). The response should start at the national level only when a catastrophic event arises or is likely to occur. Such extreme situations do not happen frequently. Hence, the federal government should *not* take the leading role in most disaster responses.

A second crucial assumption is that all three levels of government are supposed to participate as partners, rather than as superiors and subordinates, in the nation’s emergency preparedness and response system (Carson and MacManus 2006; Scavo, Kearney, and Kilroy, 2007). No single level of government should dominate or control the entire process (Schneider 1995). Even when the state and national
governments become involved in a disaster situation, they do not supersede or overpower the actions of lower levels. Instead, all three levels of government should work together to provide emergency relief and assistance to disaster-stricken citizens. Thus, the effectiveness of the entire response depends heavily upon intergovernmental communication and cooperation (Comfort 2007).

Third, all governmental units must take seriously their emergency management functions and obligations. This means that each level of government must possess the administrative and technical resources necessary to perform its own disaster relief responsibilities (Schneider 2005). Local, state, and federal officials must set aside funds for disaster-relief purposes; they must hire appropriate staff to develop and administer plans; they must possess the requisite equipment and technical expertise to handle emergency situations; and they must have effective leadership to implement disaster relief policies (Lester and Krejci 2007). Lower levels of government can usually obtain some assistance from higher levels. But, all three levels of government must still maintain a fairly high level of administrative capability and expertise of their own.

The final, and perhaps most critical, assumption is that the public officials who are directly involved in the process must understand the structure and operation of the governmental response system during all kinds of emergency situations. For the vast majority of disasters, the entire process should operate according to the “pull” system introduced earlier. Local emergency management officials are to provide the first response. State personnel are to stand by, so that they can organize and manage broader state-level resources if they are called upon to do so. And, federal officials should view their general role as supplemental and supportive, assisting the efforts of lower governmental units. If federal resources are requested (i.e., officials “pull” the assistance from the national government), state and local governments continue to play a pivotal role in the process: they identify the needs of disaster-stricken communities and articulate those needs to federal officials (Townsend 2006).

The system also assumes that public officials understand their responsibilities during Incidents of National Significance. During such extreme, rare situations, the federal government does not wait for a state-level request. Instead, it takes on a proactive, leadership role, and it “pushes” its resources and aid into the affected areas. Even during these circumstances, however, local and state officials are not left out of the process. They continue interacting with federal entities to insure timely and effective emergency relief (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004). In sum, all relief officials must be knowledgeable about their own roles and responsibilities; they must be aware how their actions relate to others who are involved in the emergency management process; and they must understand what they are supposed to do during both “typical” disasters and more extreme Incidents of National Significance.
The Disaster Response System in Practice

We have just seen how the intergovernmental response to disasters is supposed to function. At least on paper, there exists a well-coordinated, integrated management system that can handle each and every emergency, no matter when or where it occurs. However, the governmental response does not always unfold so smoothly or effectively. Some disasters generate unusually severe, disruptive, and complicated conditions. During such circumstances, emergency management personnel and agencies are unable or unwilling to perform their pre-assigned responsibilities and duties. As a result, public officials at the local, state, and national levels fail to react in appropriate ways, and the entire response is slow, haphazard, and misguided. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened during the intergovernmental response to Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana during the summer of 2005.

Katrina in Louisiana: Intergovernmental Misunderstandings

The traditional bottom-up response process was already underway before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Local officials advised residents to evacuate and they set up shelters to facilitate this process. At the state level, Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency and mobilized relevant assets. Responding to state needs, the federal government was also involved before the storm hit. FEMA called a “full alert” and sent emergency supplies into areas that lay in the predicted storm path. At the request of Governor Blanco, President George W. Bush issued an emergency declaration on August 27 and then declared a federal state of emergency in Louisiana on August 29 (the morning before the storm hit the Louisiana Coast). At this early stage, public officials across all three levels of government seemed to have a fairly clear understanding of their roles in the process and how they were supposed to perform their emergency management functions.

But, the bottom-up process collapsed almost immediately. Everyone involved in the response appeared to be stunned by the severity of the situation. The worst conditions developed at the local level, particularly in the city of New Orleans (Forman 2007). The city’s emergency management plan was not implemented, and many personnel were so overwhelmed that they could not fulfill their obligations as first responders (Baum 2006; Horne 2006). This made it impossible for the process to begin at the local level and flow upward through the intergovernmental framework.

At the next level, state emergency management officials did not stabilize local conditions or mobilize additional resources in an effective manner (Treaster 2005). Governor Blanco refused to declare martial law, and she declined a proposal from the White House to put National Groups troops under the control of the federal government (Luo 2005; Shane, Lipton, and Drew 2005). The media described the governor as “shell-shocked” and “bewildered;” federal officials characterized her as “dysfunctional;” and local leaders expressed little confidence in her abilities.
Other state personnel exhibited similar behavior and did not act quickly or forcefully to implement key emergency response and recovery operations (van Heerden and Bryan 2006). For example, the Louisiana National Guard was unable to stabilize local conditions even when they were deployed into the most devastated locations (Anatomy of a Disaster 2005). Afraid of the growing crowds of stranded people, the troops actually retreated from the area, saying that they were not there to restore “law and order” (Roig-Franzia and Hsu 2005; Brinkley 2006). Overall, key state officials did not seem to understand their emergency management roles and responsibilities.

The situation was not any better at the national level. DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff delayed declaring Katrina an Incident of National Significance until the day after Katrina made landfall. As a result, the normal “pull” system of intergovernmental relief had already been initiated by that point. So, federal officials assumed the normal stance of waiting for requests (i.e., the pull) from lower level governments before they responded. Unfortunately, lower level officials were already overwhelmed in their efforts to deal with the disaster. The traditional “bottom-up” response process simply did not fit this situation.

Some federal officials in the field immediately realized the severity of the situation and the need for a more proactive stance by the national government and took it upon themselves to initiate a top-down, push system as quickly as possible. But, this required working outside the normal channels (U.S. House of Representatives 2006). Consequently, federal aid was further delayed and only implemented in an ad hoc, uncoordinated manner (Cooper and Block 2006; Brinkley 2006).

Other federal-level decisions and actions also occurred far too slowly. Secretary Chertoff convened an interagency incident management team (IIMG)—an important component of the national response plan—on Tuesday, August 30, almost 36 hours after Katrina hit the Louisiana coast. But, the IIMG is supposed to be created immediately when (or even before) an incident of national significance occurs. By delaying more than a day, the federal government missed an important opportunity to pre-deploy emergency response teams and mobilize federal resources into the area before the storm hit. As the Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina states, “we will never know what the IMMIG would have done” if it had been created at an earlier point (U.S. House of Representatives 2006, 134). But, it is possible that it would have accelerated federal involvement, created better plans to evacuate the stranded residents from the Superdome and Convention Centers, and led to more effective search and rescue operations.

There was also a great deal of confusion about who was actually in charge of the federal response. Secretary Chertoff appointed FEMA Director Michael Brown as the PFO in charge of the governmental effort. As the PFO, Brown was to coordinate the overall management of federal activities (U.S. Department of Homeland
Security 2004). But, he did not have the legal authority to direct the activities of other federal agencies or commit the expenditure of federal funds for this disaster. Instead, those powers fell to another federal official—William Lokey who had been appointed as the FCO for the Louisiana disaster. This meant that, during the initial critical days of the response, there was no single, unified command structure for governmental operations (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

Two weeks later, Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen was appointed as both PFO and FCO. At that point, leadership was consolidated and the lines of authority were clarified. But, the long delay in taking this key step exacerbated the already chaotic situation. It prevented the federal government from organizing its own resources and coordinating its operations with those of state and local emergency management agencies. In sum, it “degraded” the relief effort in serious ways (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

It is clear that officials across all levels of government misunderstood key elements of their responsibilities during the response to Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. At the local level, parish and city officials expected the national government to step in and take charge of the situation (Brinkley 2006). As Representative Charles W. Boustany Jr. (R-LA) stated, “we needed direct federal assistance, command and control, and security—none of the three were present” (White and Whoriskey 2005, A01).

At the state level, Governor Blanco made broad decisions but apparently did not understand that additional actions were necessary to implement them. For example, she requested federal aid but did not identify the specific types of assistance that were needed (Brinkley 2006). Similarly, the governor identified resources that would be useful for relief activities (e.g., school buses), but she did not issue executive orders to move them into the stricken areas (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

The most serious misunderstandings occurred at the federal level (Derthick 2007). Part of the problem was due to the new elements of the national response plan, adopted in 2004. Katrina was the first declared incident of national significance. The federal government had not yet developed policies and guidelines to implement the process. Therefore, officials were operating in uncharted territory during Katrina; they simply did not know what they were supposed to do. This uncertainty about responsibilities permeated the entire system (U.S. House of Representatives 2006). Adding to the confusion, many federal officials continued to act as if the bottom-up system were still in place—even after it was superseded by the push process for an incident of national significance (van Heerden and Bryan 2006).

All in all, the federal government did not seem to understand its role in the response process. It did not take proactive steps to help residents and communities prepare for the impending hurricane; it did not act immediately to provide emergency assistance to disaster victims; and it did not mobilize the operations of other public or private disaster assistance organizations. President Bush and Secretary Chertoff did try to jump-start the response by appointing a new director of FEMA,
creating a White House Task Force on Hurricane Katrina Response to review governmental actions, and implementing an incident management system. FEMA also modified its policies and procedures to expedite the delivery of emergency aid and to facilitate the recovery efforts (Blumenthal 2006; Eaton 2007). But, many of these decisions were not made in a timely or consistent manner. When actions were taken, they often bypassed existing policies and procedures. This created greater confusion and further disruptions in the government’s relief operations (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

Stated simply, the intergovernmental response to Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana did not match the premises upon which the system was developed. Given the severity of this situation, it was impossible to follow the traditional bottom-up response process. Local, state, and national governments were not equipped to perform their pre-assigned functions, and they were unable to work with one another in a coordinated or collaborative manner.

More importantly, perhaps, those who were involved in the process did not understand their own responsibilities or how the entire system was supposed to operate. These misperceptions and misunderstandings played a major role in the collapse of the government’s relief efforts. They also contributed to an atmosphere of criticism and recrimination within the intergovernmental framework. Public officials at one level of government blamed those at the other levels for not responding quickly or effectively. An intergovernmental game of blame developed (ABC News 2005; Barr 2005; “Fire Every FEMA Official!” 2005; Walters and Kettl 2005). No one seemed willing to assume responsibility for what was happening or to take steps to rectify the situation. In turn, this contributed to the general impression of governmental incompetence, nonresponsiveness, ineptitude, and failure.

**Public Impressions of Intergovernmental Policy Responsibilities in Disasters**

So far, the discussion has focused on the contrast between how the intergovernmental response system is supposed to operate and what actually happened when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Louisiana in August 2005. But, it is also important to view governmental efforts from the vantage point of the general public. After all, the success or failure of governmental performance in any policy area is heavily determined by citizens’ assessments of the process (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The public must believe that governmental action is necessary and appropriate (Hetherington and Nugent 2001), and citizens must be able to communicate their preferences to the appropriate public officials (Putnam 1993). At the same time, the public must have a sense of which governmental units at the local, state, or national levels should be responsible for addressing particular problems. If citizens mistakenly attribute responsibility to one level of government and that level of government does
not act in an effective manner, it can lead to intense criticisms of public-sector responsiveness and effectiveness (O’Toole 2000; Hetherington and Nugent 2001).

Citizen perceptions of intergovernmental policy responsibilities are particularly important in the area of disaster relief. Here, the public must react to a wide range of policy activities across all three levels of government—i.e., local government requests to prepare for emergencies, state government orders to evacuate homes and communities, federal efforts to co-ordinate large-scale emergency response and recovery operations. Consequently, citizens must believe that the actions of organizations and officials at various levels of government are appropriate (Schneider 2005). If not, this can have major consequences for the public’s general feelings about the success or failure of governmental efforts (National Research Council 2006).

On a very general level, we know that the American public does pay close attention to natural disaster situations (Birkland 2007). For example, a majority of respondents in the Pew Research Center’s “News Interest Index” (a weekly survey which gauges the public’s interest in, and reaction to, major news events) indicate that they closely follow stories about disasters (The Pew Research Center 1997, 2007). Indeed, the public pays more attention to disasters than any other type of policy issue or problem. This is particularly true for large-scale, catastrophic events. Over 70 percent of respondents to the Pew Public Interest Survey conducted in October 2005 said that they carefully monitored what was happening during the Hurricane Katrina and Rita disasters (The Pew Research Center 2005).

The public is also quite willing to evaluate the performance of governmental officials and agencies in disaster situations. A large number of public opinion surveys were conducted during and after the period in which Hurricane Katrina existed. Therefore, we have a great deal of information about citizens’ general reactions to the governmental response and recovery efforts. There are several consistent findings across all of these surveys. A majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina (The Pew Research Center 2005); they are particularly critical of how President Bush and FEMA handled this situation (Fletcher and Morin 2005; Jones and Carroll 2005; AP/IPSOS 2005b, 2006; CBS 2005); and they are skeptical about the government’s ability to respond to the next natural disaster as a consequence of the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts (AP/IPSOS 2005a; CBS 2007; Frankovic 2007).4

While the public was (and still is) definitely dissatisfied with the response to Katrina, it is not clear how citizens believe the response process should operate. This is important to determine the roots of public dissatisfaction. Misunderstandings about governmental responsibilities could perhaps be rectified through public information campaigns. On the other hand, negative performance judgments could have detrimental political consequences for those involved. So, what do people think the national, state, and local governments should do when disaster strikes? Are citizens’ preferences for intergovernmental consistent with the traditional bottom-up
process of disaster response? To shed some light on these questions, I will look at unique survey data taken from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is a collaborative project involving research teams from over 30 universities. All researchers involved in the CCES have access to a common content of questions which contain a wealth of information on respondents’ political attitudes and key demographic characteristics. Each research team also develops its own set of questions on topics of their own choosing which are then administered to a nationally representative subset of 1,000 respondents.

The 2006 CCES included a number of items which asked people directly about their feelings regarding the responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments in dealing with natural disasters. First, let us consider very general public beliefs about who should be in charge of the relief process. Respondents were presented with the following question: “Do you think the national government, the state governments, or the local governments should take the lead in trying to help victims of natural disasters—e.g., floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.?”

A majority of respondents (58 percent) think that the national government should take the lead helping victims of natural disasters. Slightly more than 30 percent want state governments to take the lead, while only about 10 percent of the survey respondents express a preference for leadership by local governments.

At first glance, public opinion appears to be inconsistent with the bottom-up nature of the response process. However, there is an important caveat which must be considered: the CCES data were collected in Fall 2006, just one year after Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana coast. Furthermore, the quality of the federal response was a salient issue in the 2006 congressional elections (VandeHei 2005; Morin and Deane 2006). Therefore, responses to questions about the general relief process may have been contaminated by public memories of Katrina-related events. Of course, we cannot completely eliminate this possibility. But, we can probe the nature of public opinion by asking more detailed questions.

The CCES included the following batter of items, designed to tap citizens’ feelings about different stages of the response process:

“First, think about the time period before a natural disaster occurs. Who should take the lead in dealing with problems during this time period (for example, evacuating people)?”

“How about the time period when the natural disaster is occurring? Who should take the lead in dealing with problems during this time period (for example, helping people in imminent danger)?”

“Finally, how about the time period immediately following a natural disaster? Who should take the lead in dealing with problems during this period (for example, making sure that damaged structures and facilities are repaired)?”
For each of these questions, individuals were asked to select from among the following responses: the national government, the state government, the local government, the military, organizations like the Red Cross or the Salvation Army, churches and religious organizations, private companies and businesses, or individual citizens.

Figure 1 provides graphical displays summarizing responses about leadership during three phases of a disaster situation—before, during, and after the event occurs. The most striking pattern in these data is that a sizable majority of citizens (from 81 percent to 90 percent) prefer governmental leadership during all phases of the response cycle. Some respondents (slightly over 10 percent) want greater military involvement but only while a natural disaster is actually occurring. A relatively small percentage (around 8 percent) believe that other sources of redress, such as individual citizens, nonprofit organizations, private charities, or religious groups, should be in control during any stage of disaster relief.

Figure 1 Public perceptions of who should take the lead during three stages of a natural disaster situation.

Data Source: The 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Number of observations used to create the figure is 991. Respondents who indicated that they did not know were included in the other category.
But, it is also clear from the data presented in figure 1 that the public believes different levels of government should be responsible for different phases of the process. Most citizens want local and state governments to be in charge before and during a disaster (80 percent and 68 percent, respectively). But, a solid majority (73 percent) thinks that the national and state governments should provide the leadership that is needed after a natural disaster strikes.

On the one hand, these findings are encouraging. They indicate that citizens are capable of reasoned reactions to intergovernmental disaster assistance policy (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). The data presented in figure 1 suggest that citizens have a relatively clear understanding about the capabilities and functions of the three levels of government in the disaster response process. Local and state governments are in the best position to help people prepare for emergencies and provide immediate assistance when they occur. But, the national and state governments have the necessary resources to help citizens respond to and recover from natural disaster events. The public clearly believes that all three levels of government should be involved in nation’s emergency management system, with higher levels of government becoming involved once a natural disaster has taken place.

On the other hand, these findings are somewhat troubling. They suggest that public uproar over the response to Katrina was not due to fundamental misunderstandings or misperceptions among the American public about how the response process was supposed to operate. In fact, American citizens appear to have fairly reasoned notions about what they expect the three levels of government to do when disaster strikes. Moreover, their ideas are reasonably consistent with the basic structure of the intergovernmental response system, which is designed to start at the local level prior to the onset of the disaster and only work its way up to the state and national governments as events unfold. The findings presented in this article seem to confirm other evidence indicating that Americans have become more cynical about the effectiveness of governmental performance, both generally (Rozario 2007; Jones 2007; The Pew Research Center 2007) and with respect to natural disasters in particular (CBS News 2005, 2007; The Pew Research Center 2005a; ABC News 2005). Popular dissatisfaction with governmental activity appears to represent a conscious negative judgment about the behavior of government agencies and officials. Citizens are more likely to criticize or blame the government when governmental actions do not conform to citizens’ prior expectations.

**Conclusion**

This study shows that the response to Hurricane Katrina collapsed because misunderstandings developed within the intergovernmental system about the roles of local, state, and national government agencies in the relief effort. These misunderstandings played a major role in preventing emergency management personnel at all
levels of governments from addressing the conditions created by this disaster in an expeditious or effective manner. They slowed the emergency response; they led to massive confusion during the relief operations; and they continue to produce serious problems for the long-term recovery of the Gulf Coast region.

Ironically, the misunderstanding apparently does not extend to American public opinion. Instead, the general public’s beliefs about the responsibilities of local, state, and federal governments in disaster relief show a reasonable match to those outlined in the national response framework. Citizens want lower levels of government to take the lead before and during a disaster situation, but they want the national government with assistance from state officials to step in and help after a disaster has occurred.

So, what are the broader implications of these perceptions about intergovernmental activity? First, it is important to point out that misunderstandings about intergovernmental responsibilities can have a negative impact on public-sector operations. When the response process works fairly smoothly and effectively, there are few complaints about intergovernmental operations and capabilities. However, when the process encounters serious difficulties or breakdowns, this can develop into an intergovernmental game of blame. Local officials criticize the state for not mobilizing additional resources; state governments complain that the national government does not respond to its requests for essential equipment and assistance; and the national government blames local and state governments for not being adequately prepared to handle the disaster. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened when the intergovernmental response to Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana broke down. Each level of government blamed the other two for not performing their roles and responsibilities in the system.

The second implication to be drawn from this study is that governmental activity must also coincide with public perceptions about intergovernmental responsibilities. Based on the data presented in this study, the American public expects local and state governments to help them prepare for emergencies before and as they develop, but they want the national and state governments to take charge of the situation after a disaster occurs. However, the public also believes that all three levels of government should play an important role throughout the response process: no single level of government is viewed as the sole leader for any phase of emergency relief operations. Overall, citizens have a fairly clear view of intergovernmental capabilities and policy responsibilities (Schneider and Jacoby 2003; Arceneaux 2006). In fact, public opinion more closely mirrors what governmental units at the local state, and national levels are supposed to do when disaster strikes, than how those involved in the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in Louisiana actually carried out, their emergency management responsibilities.

Finally, it is important to recognize that misperceptions about intergovernmental activity can have longer range consequences for the broader political system.
Those who were involved in the Hurricane Katrina relief effort at the local, state, and national levels were unwilling to assume responsibility for their actions or confused about what those responsibilities were. As a result, the intergovernmental process collapsed. In addition, the response to Katrina did not conform to public expectations about what local, state, and national governments should do when disaster strikes. This produced the overall image of governmental incompetence and failure (Rozario 2007). It will be extremely difficult to erase this impression from the American psyche no matter what public officials do to correct the emergency response process (Waugh 2006; Kettl 2006). And, it is also possible that such negative evaluations will be generalized to broader assessments of governmental performance (Malhotra 2008; McClam 2005; PBS 2005). After all, if the government cannot address the problems created by Hurricane Katrina, how is it going to handle other, perhaps even more difficult, emergency situations which are quite likely to occur in the future?

Notes

1. When FEMA was moved into the Department of Homeland Security, it joined with emergency management units from several other departments (i.e., the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services). It was also placed in direct competition with another DHS unit—the State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness Office—for emergency mitigation and disaster recovery funding (Harrald 2007).

2. President Bush issued a major disaster declaration for the State of Louisiana on August 29, 2005—the same day that Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. Pursuant to the provisions of the Stafford Act for the declaration of a major disaster, William Lokey was appointed as the FCO for the Louisiana recovery effort. Lokey served as the FCO in Louisiana for only a brief period of time. On September 9, 2005, Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen was placed in charge of the federal relief effort, and he assumed the positions of both FCO and PFO. Lokey stayed in Louisiana as the Deputy FCO for the Louisiana recovery effort until September 30, 2005; then he became the Chief of the Operations Branch in the Response Division within FEMA.

3. One of the most glaring examples of the federal government’s difficulties involves its efforts to provide housing assistance to the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina. FEMA did provide the money which enabled thousands of families to move into government trailers and apartments as temporary solutions to the housing shortage. But, the government’s housing programs were seriously hampered by bureaucratic bumbling and red tape. In order to obtain assistance, storm victims had to go through a lengthy, cumbersome, and contradictory application process (Blumenthal 2006; Eaton 2006). Even those families who obtained aid, could lose assistance without understanding why or having a reasonable recourse to appeal the decision. A federal district court judge
found this process to be so convoluted and confusing that he likened it to something out of a Kafka novel. He ordered the government to restore housing assistance to those whose benefits had been denied or terminated (Dewan 2006).

4. For a good summary of the public opinion survey results on citizens’ attitudes toward disaster preparedness and relief, see PollingReport.com (http://pollingreport.com/disasters2.htm).

5. The news media focused a great deal of attention on the problems of the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina. The titles of these stories indicate the tone and substance of these reports. See, for example: “System Failure” (Time 2005); “An American Tragedy” (Time 2005); “After Katrina” (Newsweek 2005); “Anatomy of a Disaster” (U.S. News and World Report 2005); and “Katrina: Why it Became a Man-Made Disaster” (National Geographic 2005). Similarly, congressional investigations of this disaster situation were also quite critical of governmental performance—e.g., A Failure of Initiative (U.S. House of Representatives 2006) and Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared (U.S. Senate 2006). For an excellent analysis of the impact of media coverage on public perceptions of intergovernmental accountability, see Maestas et al. (2008).

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