

Political Sophistication and Attributions of Blame in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

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The governmental response to Hurricane Katrina was widely perceived to be flawed and inadequate. However, given the number of actors involved in coordinating relief efforts, both in the private sector and at all levels of government, attributions of responsibility vary widely. Drawing on the Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution, we explore the relationship between political sophistication and assessments of blame for the delayed governmental response. Using data from a survey of Louisiana residents, we find that citizens at higher levels of sophistication are less likely to find the federal government chiefly to blame, and more likely to fault actors at the state level. Moreover, less sophisticated respondents tend to focus blame disproportionately on the president, a tendency to which the more sophisticated are not as prone.

On the morning of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a strong “Category 3” storm with sustained winds of over 125 mph, came ashore just east of New Orleans, Louisiana. One of the most destructive storms ever to strike the U.S., Katrina caused widespread devastation across the central Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Yet, the destruction of property that always accompanies a landfalling major hurricane was in this case augmented by a heart-rending human catastrophe, as the breach of New Orleans’s levees and floodwalls inundated over 80 percent of one of America’s most historic cities and left thousands of people in desperate and dangerous situations.¹ In the days that followed, anger built among those directly affected by the storm and among those around the country and the world watching on television, as the response from the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation to a domestic tragedy seemed feeble and chaotic. Nearly 1,000 people were stranded without food or water at New Orleans’s Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, approximately 26,000 residents were sheltered in the Louisiana Superdome without electricity or running water, and looting of stores and homes—even by members of the New Orleans Police Department—was rampant. It was a matter of *weeks*, not days, before a modicum of security and order was restored to

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New Orleans, and before supplies and assistance began to be distributed with relative efficiency. The unnecessary loss of life (over 1,000 casualties in Louisiana alone) and property as a result of this slow, disorganized response was and is a source of considerable bitterness among many Louisianians.²

It was perhaps inevitable that, as soon as the immediate needs of rescue and relief were met, attention quickly shifted to assignments of blame. Why was the response to the hurricane so manifestly inadequate? Which government official(s) “dropped the ball” and hampered relief efforts? Was federal, state, or local government most guilty of failing Louisiana’s citizens in their hour of need? Since there was essentially no debate about *whether* the relief effort was unsatisfactory, all of the retrospective analysis focused on *why* it had been a failure and *who* was responsible.

Clearly, the political dimension of Hurricane Katrina was and is fundamentally about causal attribution. Many governmental actors, from the mayor of New Orleans to the governor of Louisiana to the president of the U.S. to the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), were potential targets for citizens’ wrath. To date, several officials have faced political fallout from the disaster. Most immediately, FEMA Director Michael Brown resigned on September 12, 2005, only two weeks after the storm, amid intense criticism both of his agency’s response to the disaster and of his own qualifications to lead the agency. While New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, who faced a record twenty-one challengers, won a second term on May 20, 2006, four of the seven members of the New Orleans City Council lost their reelection bids on the same day. The poor response to Katrina is widely cited as a component of President Bush’s low approval ratings, which were instrumental in Democratic victories in the 2006 midterms.³ Finally, on March 20, 2007, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco publicly announced her intention not to run for reelection, in large part because of her perceived failures in the storm’s aftermath. As these examples attest, the dynamics of blame assignment are of fundamental political importance for the fortunes of leaders at all levels of government.

While the politics of blame is acrimonious, messy, and fraught with uncertainty, it is also essential for a functioning democracy. If the electorate is truly to act as a “rational god of vengeance and reward” (Key 1964, 568), then attributions of responsibility for socio-political outcomes are fundamental to political choice. This is particularly true in a period of widely acknowledged, large-scale governmental failure, exactly the situation presented by the response to Hurricane Katrina. Yet, parceling out government responsibility can be quite difficult. While citizens overwhelmingly see natural disaster relief as a legitimate function of government (Bucher 1957; Yates 1988), they vary widely in their perceptions of what level(s) of government—not to mention which specific actors—are chiefly responsible (Arceneaux and Stein 2006), particularly when presented with a concrete and

complex situation like Katrina's aftermath. Indeed, a small literature has already begun to develop about attributions of blame for the poor government response to this tragedy, identifying important variables like race, media exposure, and partisanship as factors that shape who citizens hold accountable (Huddy and Feldman 2006; Maestas et al. 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

While these pieces provide valuable insight into the dynamics of attribution and accountability in the wake of a natural disaster, none looks closely at what we believe is a critical explanatory variable: political sophistication. As we have argued elsewhere (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2006a, 2006b), citizens' levels of political sophistication powerfully shape their causal attributions for socio-political events and conditions, in domains ranging from economic voting to racial attitudes. Our Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution maintains that individuals at varying levels of political sophistication attribute responsibility in systematically different ways. Specifically, political sophistication significantly influences both the *number* and the *nature* of individuals' attributional targets. Given the centrality of attributions of responsibility (in this case, blame rather than credit) to the politics of Hurricane Katrina, we believe our theory can be useful in explaining political attitudes in the storm's wake. Thus, our objectives in this article are two-fold: To shed light on the important substantive question of who blames whom for the Katrina debacle and why, and to provide further validation and support for our general political-psychological theory in an interesting and especially appropriate context.

Attributions and the Problem of Many Hands

Attributions of responsibility are a fundamental component of democratic citizenship. For citizens to control government effectively they must not only be informed about the actions of government officials (Hutchins 2005), but also be able to ascribe credit or blame properly for those actions. Yet as Dennis Thompson (1980, 905) has argued, "because many different officials contribute in many different ways to decisions and policies of government, it is difficult even in principle to identify who is... responsible for political outcomes." Thompson refers to this complex attribution environment as "the problem of many hands," and the example of Hurricane Katrina and government's role in providing disaster relief more generally would seem to be a case in point.

Disaster relief efforts in the U.S. are governed by a series of federal laws that attempt to coordinate the actions of local, state, and, if necessary, federal officials (see Birkland 2008; Schneider 2008). Local governments are granted authority for developing and executing emergency preparedness plans for their communities. In this bottom-up process, local officials and agencies are charged, in a sense, with being the first responders when disaster strikes. "Higher governmental levels are not supposed to become involved unless local-level resources are exhausted,"

at which point “the response process moves upward through one level of government at a time” (Schneider 1995, 29). By law, the federal government can only become involved in a disaster relief effort if and when a state or territorial governor makes a formal request to the president for federal assistance. If the president deems the request for assistance to be warranted and issues a federal emergency declaration, FEMA joins the relief effort.⁴ It is important to note that federal intervention does not relieve state and local authorities of their obligations. Instead, the system is “a team effort in which the three units of government have separate but clearly interdependent and continuous obligations” (Schneider 1995, 37–38).

Even under optimal circumstances and execution, public management in crisis situations is a complex amalgam of diffuse responsibilities and sometimes conflicting institutional rules and bureaucratic norms—a quintessential “problem of many hands.” As Sandra Schneider (1995, 38) puts it, “[t]here are simply too many agencies and officials involved in disaster-relief operations. Each has its own set of rules, regulations, and policies. As a result, emergency management officials find it difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to coordinate all this governmental activity.”

For citizens, attributing responsibility in this context—as with most socio-political phenomena—is a difficult cognitive task. Consequently, we believe that individuals who possess ready banks of political knowledge and motivation toward the cognitive task at hand—exhibited by high levels of interest in politics—are likely to attribute responsibility in ways that differ significantly from individuals who do not possess these cognitive resources. In our view, political sophistication, a concept that delineates individuals’ capacities for political thought, is critical for understanding heterogeneous attributional responses.

Political Sophistication and Causal Attribution

Causal attribution is central to public opinion and political choice, powerfully affecting assessments of leaders (Iyengar 1989), candidate preference (Lau and Sears 1981; Feldman 1982), and a wide range of specific attitudes, including racial ones (Gomez and Wilson 2006b). The decision about who to credit or blame for socio-political conditions and phenomena is fundamentally important, not only for the prospects of elected officials, but also in shaping what policies, if any, government adopts in an effort to alter the *status quo*. Not all citizens, however, construct politically relevant causal attributions in the same way. In various contexts, attributional tendencies have been shown to be affected systematically by a variety of factors, including core values (Feldman 1982; Kinder and Mebane 1983), media usage (Weatherford 1983), and—particularly with regard to Hurricane Katrina—race (Huddy and Feldman 2006).

While all of these factors may shape causal attributions on a particular issue or set of issues, we have proposed in previous work a more far-reaching influence on attribution patterns, operative across a wide range of disparate issue domains: political sophistication. Our Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution begins from the premise, well established in cognitive psychology, that the amount, clarity, and organization of relevant information strongly conditions an individual's ability to make complex, distal, and diffuse assessments of responsibility (Zanna, Klosson, and Darley 1976).⁵ Familiar, highly salient agents will figure prominently (and often exclusively) in less sophisticated individuals' constructions of causality. As a result, individuals with different levels of political sophistication will vary in their ability to make associative linkages between problems and their sources—a pattern suggested by Luskin (1987) and Sniderman (1993). Basically, our contention is that unsophisticated individuals (those with low levels of domain-specific knowledge) will tend to focus on single, obvious causes for events or conditions, generally attitude objects who are physically and/or conceptually proximate to the issue at hand. This tendency makes low sophisticates more likely to credit/blame themselves for changes in their own economic well-being (Gomez and Wilson 2001), to credit/blame the president for changes in the national economy (Gomez and Wilson 2003), and to blame the disadvantaged themselves—specifically African Americans—for social inequalities (Gomez and Wilson 2006b). High sophisticates, by contrast, are much more likely to make complex attributions, dividing credit or blame among multiple actors at varying levels of abstraction and searching for less obvious causal agents. This general cognitive theory has proven very robust, not only across multiple issue domains, but in populations from different countries as well (Gomez and Wilson 2006a).

This theoretical approach suggests two specific hypotheses with regard to citizens' attributions of responsibility for the Katrina response debacle. They are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: More sophisticated respondents should be less likely than unsophisticated ones to assign primary blame to the president for the poor Katrina response. A frequent hallmark of unsophisticated political thinking is a tendency to see the president as the sole relevant (perhaps omnipotent) governmental actor in the U.S. political system. Lippmann (1920) finds a similar pattern in the way that relatively unsophisticated citizens viewed World War I—they tended to reduce the entire allied war effort to the actions and decisions of a single man, the most visible Supreme Commander, France's Marshal Joffre. The president is the one political actor in America with whom virtually everyone is at least passingly familiar, and the president-centric view of political events is often reinforced by media coverage (Iyengar and Kinder 1981). In previous work, we have demonstrated (Gomez and Wilson 2001; 2003) that less sophisticated citizens tend to overstate the president's responsibility for economic conditions, to the exclusion of other actors like

Congress and the Federal Reserve. We expect this pattern to prevail with regard to Hurricane Katrina as well. Individuals low in sophistication are likely to focus their attributions of blame narrowly on the president, an obvious actor with whom they are almost certainly familiar. High sophisticates, in contrast, may assign some responsibility to the president but are likely to see somewhat less familiar and salient actors as at least equally to blame.

Hypothesis 2: More sophisticated respondents will be less likely than unsophisticated ones to locate primary responsibility for the poor hurricane response at the federal government level. This hypothesis is related to Hypothesis 1, but is broader. It rests on the assumption that political sophistication is highly correlated with an understanding of federalism, a realization that powers and responsibilities in the American system are divided among multiple levels of government, not always in a strictly hierarchical way. Federalism, of course, is a fundamental feature of governance in the U.S., but few Americans seem fully to appreciate the concept. As one moves from the national level down the political “food chain” to state and local office-holders, citizen familiarity with the players diminishes rapidly.⁶ Indeed, Arceneaux and Stein (2006) confirm that citizen ignorance about the responsibilities and powers of local government with regard to disaster preparedness can allow local officials to evade electoral repercussions, especially among less politically knowledgeable voters. We fully expect these less knowledgeable citizens to point the finger at the most familiar and salient level of government, the national one.

Data and Methods

To explore the relationship between political sophistication and attributions of responsibility in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, we rely on an original statewide survey of Louisiana residents that we conducted in May and June of 2006 in cooperation with the Survey Research Center of Louisiana State University.⁷ We employed a Waksberg-Mitofsky (a.k.a. “random digit dialing”) sampling design to select respondent households, and ended up with 557 completed surveys. In an attempt to mitigate sampling biases, we used the “birthday method,” asking to speak to the registered voter in the household who had most recently celebrated a birthday. Despite this precaution, however, our sample produced the almost inevitable under-representation of males, especially black males. Thus, all data analyses reported here employ an inverse probability weighting by race and gender to make our sample conform to the Census Bureau’s post-Katrina estimate of the Louisiana population.⁸

The key components of the survey measure our two core concepts of interest: political sophistication and causal attribution. Our concept of political

sophistication draws on a definition offered by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991, 21):

Political sophistication is a “bundle” concept. It packs together related, if distinguishable, properties including a tendency to pay close attention to politics, to have ready at hand banks of information about it, to understand multiple arguments for and against particular issue positions, and to recognize interrelationships among those arguments.

This definition incorporates several elements of cognitive complexity, including differentiation, integration, and logical reasoning (Neuman 1981; Tetlock 1983). In practice, previous studies have found that a battery of “quiz” items measuring citizen knowledge of politics is the simplest, most reliable way to capture sophistication in the survey setting (see, among many others, Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Gomez and Wilson 2001). Thus, our survey includes eight political knowledge items, divided equally between the national and state levels, asking people to identify the offices held by Dick Cheney (Vice President; 80 percent answered correctly), Condoleezza Rice (Secretary of State; 54 percent), John Roberts (Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; 16 percent), David Vitter (U.S. Senator from Louisiana; 41 percent), Mitch Landrieu (Louisiana Lieutenant Governor; 40 percent), and Charles Foti (Louisiana Attorney General; 18 percent), and the majority parties in both the U.S. and Louisiana Houses of Representatives (Republican and Democrat, respectively; 68 percent and 44 percent). These combine to form an index running from 0 to 8, which we rescaled to range from 0 to 1.⁹ The modal number of items answered correctly was 3, with a mean of 3.5; 9.4 percent of respondents received the minimum score, while 4.5 percent received the maximum score.

The next key concept to measure is the causal attributions themselves. Typically, survey studies of attribution rely on closed-ended items in which respondents are presented with a list of actors/causes from which they may select one or more. Our own study employs a variant of this approach; we present respondents with five different actors (President Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, local parish leaders other than the Mayor, and FEMA) and ask whether each was responsible for “a lot of the problems, some of the problems, a few of the problems, or none of the problems” surrounding the Katrina relief effort.¹⁰ In addition to these items, however, we believe that it is very useful to capture respondents’ unguided, unprompted attributions of responsibility in an open-ended format. Thus, our survey also includes (*before* the closed-ended attribution items, to avoid priming effects) a question asking respondents “Who was most responsible for the delay in providing necessary relief to the New Orleans area in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina?” Interviewers recorded exactly what was said in response and were specifically instructed to allow and

record multiple answers, if the respondent chose to give them. Thus, we are able in our analyses to examine both a structured, specified set of attribution targets and what we believe to be the even more valuable spontaneous causal attributions offered by respondents.

In addition to these key items tapping sophistication and attribution, our survey includes a variety of important control variables that will figure in our models. First, we believe that it is important to distinguish between those respondents who directly experienced the hurricane and those who did not (as many parts of the state were not directly affected). Thus, we asked respondents whether they had experienced property damage as a result of the storm, and whether they had evacuated their homes. We also include a standard array of demographic controls (race, gender, age, education, and income), as well as political variables measuring party identification and ideological self-placement (measured on standard ANES seven-point scales). These allow for an examination of sophistication's effects net of other correlates, including obvious ones like race, gender, partisanship, and the often-used but poor proxy for sophistication, education.¹¹ One major target for blame (the president) is a Republican, while the others (the governor and mayor) are Democrats; likewise, one target (the governor) is female while the others are male, and one target (the mayor) is black while the others are white. Thus, demographic controls are especially important when looking at blame attribution in the post-Katrina context.¹²

Results

Before turning to multivariate models of attribution, it is useful to look at some basic frequency distributions from the data to provide an overview of the attributions of responsibility that have been meted out in Katrina's aftermath. We begin with an analysis of the open-ended attribution question: "Who was most responsible for the delay in providing necessary relief to the New Orleans area in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina?" Figure 1 presents a graphical tally of respondents' "first mentions" when asked who was most responsible for delays in the relief efforts. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco is the modal

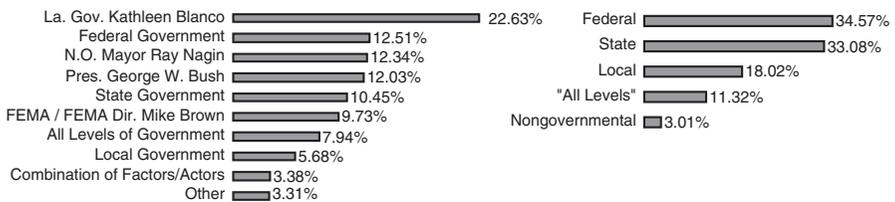


Figure 1 Graphical tally of first responses to the open-ended attribution question.

response by a wide margin. Nearly a quarter of respondents blame the Governor primarily.¹³ The “federal government” was the second most frequent response, followed by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, President George W. Bush, “state government,” and FEMA and its former director, Michael Brown (surprisingly coming in sixth, at less than 10 percent).¹⁴ Clearly, the variable shows that there is considerable dispersion in Louisiana residents’ attributions of responsibility.

Figure 2 presents a similar graphical tally of responses to the closed-ended attribution questions. Here, we report the percentage of respondents who believe that each presented actor was responsible for “a lot of the problems” with the relief effort. The results are similar to the open-ended item in some respects—Governor Blanco draws more criticism than President Bush and Mayor Nagin, and local government leaders other than the Mayor largely escape blame. In one respect, however, there is a striking difference: FEMA, well down the list of respondents’ spontaneously offered blame targets, shows up as the number one villain in the closed-ended items, with nearly half the sample holding it responsible for “a lot of the problems.” It appears that FEMA is clearly viewed negatively by many in Louisiana, but that it does not occur without prompting to most as a primary target for blame. This disparity points to the importance of using both open-ended and closed-ended items to get a complete picture of the dynamics of causal attribution, since the distribution of who citizens can be *prompted* or *induced* to blame may vary significantly from the constructions of blame that they arrive at on their own (and both are significant, in different ways and in different contexts, for politics and government).

We turn now to our first hypothesis, which contends that more sophisticated respondents will be less likely to assign blame to the president for the poor response to Hurricane Katrina. We test this claim with a simple probit model of whether or not the respondent mentioned the president in response to our open-ended attribution query. The dependent variable here codes *any* respondent mention of the president as being equal to 1, not just first mentions (the variable is coded 0 if the respondent does not cite the president at all). This is a coding

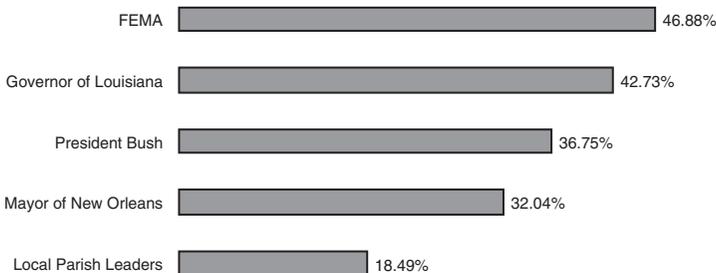


Figure 2 Graphical tally of responses to the close-ended attribution questions.

decision that actually biases the test against our hypothesis. Since high sophisticates tend to offer multiple responses, if they are still less likely to mention the president than low sophisticates, this will provide powerful support for our hypothesis.

We model the probability of assigning blame to the president as a function of personal storm experiences, party identification, ideology, demographics, and, of course, political sophistication. The results of our probit model are reported in Table 1.¹⁵

Several variables emerge as important predictors in this model. Republicans are significantly less likely to blame President Bush than are Democrats, an unsurprising result.¹⁶ Older respondents and those who evacuated as a result of the storm are also significantly less likely to attribute primary responsibility for the poor response to the president. Even after controlling for these effects, however, political sophistication remains a significant negative predictor of presidential attributions. Just as in the case of the economy (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003), it appears that those who have a more sophisticated understanding of the political system are less likely to focus on its most obvious actor—the president—to the exclusion of others. Our theory finds validation in this case, as our first hypothesis is strongly supported by the data. As political sophistication increases, *ceteris paribus*, the probability of blaming the president decreases.

Table 1 Probit model of mentioning the president among those most responsible for poor Katrina response

Variable	β	S.E.
Constant	0.667	0.540
Property damage	0.132	0.225
Evacuated	-0.578	0.236***
Education	0.119	0.092
Age	-0.017	0.007***
Income	-0.038	0.050
Gender (female)	-0.093	0.209
Race (Black)	-0.044	0.257
Party identification (Republican)	-0.193	0.069***
Ideology (Conservative)	-0.027	0.066
Political sophistication	-0.804	0.442**
Pseudo $R^2 = .1505$		
Percent predicted correctly = 87.39%		
Wald $\chi^2 = 35.59(10)$ ***		
$N = 380$		

* $p < 0.10$, one-tailed; ** $p < 0.05$, one-tailed; *** $p < 0.01$, one-tailed.

Our second hypothesis is related but distinct: That politically sophisticated respondents will be much more cognizant of the workings of federalism and, consequently, more likely to attribute responsibility to actors at lower levels of government than their less sophisticated counterparts. As a result, high sophisticates should be less likely to focus primary blame for poor disaster relief on the national government. To test this hypothesis, we code all respondents' first responses to the open-ended item into one of three categories: Local government (e.g., the mayor, parish leaders), state government (e.g., the governor, the state police), or federal government (e.g. President Bush, FEMA).¹⁷ We employ a multinomial logit model of the likelihood that an individual's response will fall into each of the nonfederal categories (that is, federal government is the referent, baseline category for the model). Independent variables are the same as those employed in the previous model, and results are reported in Table 2.

Looking across the columns of the model, several patterns are apparent. First, personal experience of the storm has an effect, but only in a limited way. Those who experienced property damage are more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to focus blame at the national level (though the result is only significant *vis-à-vis* local government). Those who evacuated as a result of the storm, in contrast, do not differ significantly from others in the level of government on which they focus blame. Clearly, more work is needed to sort out the effects of individuals' actual storm experiences on their assessments of blame for the poor response. As in the model of specifically

Table 2 Multinomial logit model of level of government attributions (Base category = federal government)

Variable	Local government	State government
Constant	-2.763 (.953)***	-2.224 (.694)***
Property damage	-0.631 (.438)*	-0.339 (.327)
Evacuated	-0.083 (.470)	0.067 (.341)
Education	-0.018 (.160)	0.065 (.137)
Age	0.010 (.011)	0.009 (.010)
Gender (female)	0.353 (.372)	-0.231 (.287)
Race (Black)	-0.587 (.489)	-0.408 (.408)
Party ID (Republican)	0.233 (.089)***	0.307 (.087)***
Ideology (Conservative)	0.227 (.112)**	0.158 (.099)*
Political sophistication	0.749 (.753)	1.047 (.600)**
Pseudo $R^2 = .111$		
Percent predicted correctly = 53.56%		
Wald $\chi^2 = 70.59$ (18)***		
$N = 351$		

* $p < 0.10$, one-tailed; ** $p < 0.05$, one-tailed; *** $p < 0.01$, one-tailed.

presidential attributions, race and gender do not have any clear, direct effects; while the coefficients (especially for race) are fairly large, they fall short of statistical significance. This is, perhaps, because of another very clear pattern in the model: the powerful effects of partisanship and ideology. Republicans and conservatives are substantially more likely to locate primary blame at the state and local levels than are Democrats and liberals. In part, this may be due to the general conservative and Republican tendency to prefer state and local solutions to federal intervention, and the resulting higher expectations of state and local competencies and spheres of action. More significantly, however, the most salient federal target (President Bush) is a conservative Republican, while the most salient state and local targets (Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin) are both Democrats. Thus, powerful partisan and ideological heuristics for blame assessment were perhaps inevitable (and likely explain the absence of direct race effects, since Louisiana blacks are overwhelmingly Democratic and very few Louisiana whites self-identify as liberals).

Finally, after controlling for all of these other factors, political sophistication—our main variable of interest—once again emerges as an important predictor. Politically sophisticated respondents are significantly more likely to assign primary blame for the Katrina response debacle to sub-national actors—in this case, the state level in particular—rather than looking to the national level. The effects of political sophistication in the state versus federal portion of the model are very strong and clearly significant; in the local versus federal portion, a large standard error causes sophistication's large and correctly signed coefficient to fall short of statistical significance. Our second hypothesis, therefore, receives important, if qualified, support in this analysis. Political sophisticates are substantially more likely than low sophisticates to assign primary responsibility to non-federal actors (though, based on this model, we can only say this conclusively with regard to state-level officials). That this effect survives controls for the powerful partisan and ideological heuristics at work in the post-Katrina politics of blame is a testament to the pervasive and enduring effects of sophistication on causal attribution.

Such strong support for the Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution is even more remarkable given the population under study. Our sample of Louisiana citizens actually provides an extremely difficult test of our theory because these individuals have not only had direct experiences with the events and governmental actors in question, but they have also had the greatest exposure to national and local news coverage of the Katrina aftermath (Birkland 2008). This “saturation” exposure to Katrina-related information and discussion could well mute the differentiating effects of political sophistication and make Louisiana citizens inherently more likely to attribute blame to actors below the federal level.¹⁸ Indeed, Birkland (2008) shows that while national media coverage tended to focus on federal officials, local news media gave substantial coverage to the failings of state and local actors. The New Orleans *Times Picayune*, for example, was highly critical of both Mayor Nagin and Governor

Blanco in the aftermath of the storm. Nevertheless, even among this group of citizens, we find that differences in political sophistication significantly condition individuals' propensity to attribute responsibility for governmental action (or *inaction*, as the case may be) to the president and the federal government more generally.

Conclusion

The delayed, chaotic, and inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly in the New Orleans area, is almost universally regarded as a failure of government at some level. Given the unanimity of this consensus, the key political question becomes not *whether* blame should be assessed, but *toward whom* that blame should be directed. Our survey of Louisiana residents, conducted about nine months after the storm, shows that while certain actors (most notably the Governor) do get singled out for particularly widespread criticism, there is nothing approaching a consensus on who is most responsible for the failures.

At the same time, however, certain aspects of this diffusion of blame are systematic and predictable. Clearly, ideology and partisanship strongly color people's judgments of who to hold most accountable. When the potential targets themselves vary on these dimensions, such a pattern is almost inevitable. Even when those factors are taken into account, however, citizens' levels of political sophistication play a powerful and consistent role in shaping their causal attributions.

These results have important implications for federalism, particularly for the accountability of office-holders at the sub-national level. Natural disaster relief is perhaps the paradigmatic case where national, state, and local governments all have some responsibilities, and must work together efficiently if a satisfactory outcome is to be achieved. There are many other circumstances, however, in which citizens must apportion blame between actors at different levels of government (e.g., changes in local economic conditions, crime rates, environmental conditions, etc.). Our results suggest that state and local officials looking for re-election should be much more attentive to the needs and preferences of more politically informed voters, since those voters may assign them a much larger share of the credit or blame for observed outcomes than their less sophisticated counterparts. Given that political sophistication varies significantly with race, gender, and income (i.e., whites, men, and the wealthy score higher on sophistication indicators than minorities, women, and the poor—these data are available in Supplementary Material at *Publius* online) this creates potentially troubling incentive structures that may skew the dynamics of representation and policy responsiveness at the sub-national level. These tendencies, suggested by the patterns of blame attribution in the wake of Hurricane Katrina documented here, certainly merit further examination in other contexts and issue domains.

While Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath were unique and unprecedented events in many respects, the politics of blame in its wake were not. The same patterns that exist with regard to economic assessments (Gomez and Wilson 2001) and racial attitudes (Gomez and Wilson 2006b) have clearly asserted themselves here as well. Once again, we must appreciate the importance of citizen political sophistication if we are truly to understand the dynamics of responsibility attribution, the “politics of blame,” and the roots and limits of governmental accountability.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *PUBLIUS* Online.

Notes

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1. According to the draft final report of the Army Corps of Engineers’ “Interagency Performance Evaluation Taskforce” (IPET), Hurricane Katrina’s storm surge caused 50 major breaches in New Orleans’s hurricane protection system, severely damaging “168 of the system’s 350 miles of protective structures, such as levees and floodwalls” (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2006, 3).
2. Throughout this article, we will focus our attention on the effects of Hurricane Katrina on southeastern Louisiana, and especially New Orleans. This is not meant to downplay either the significant damage that Katrina did to Mississippi and Alabama or the devastation that Hurricane Rita visited on southwestern Louisiana soon after. However, it was in response to Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans that governmental rescue and relief efforts were seen as most tragically inadequate, and it was this failure that became most salient in the public mind. Therefore, both in our survey and in our discussion here, we focus on attributions of responsibility for that particular failure.
3. Numerous polling and news agencies cited the events following Hurricane Katrina as negatively affecting President Bush’s job approval rating; one recent scholarly study, however, disputes this account. Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo (2006) argue that Bush’s declining approval ratings were primarily a function of the increasing U.S. death toll in the Iraq War. While Hurricane Katrina does have a negative effect on Bush’s approval rating, its magnitude is not statistically significant according to Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo.
4. Our overview of the disaster response process draws heavily on Schneider’s (1995) more thorough description of the federal emergency relief system. Readers who are interested

in learning more about public management in crisis situations are encouraged to consult Schneider's excellent study.

5. For the fullest presentation of the Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution, see Gomez and Wilson (2001). What follows here is a summary of the theory's most essential elements, particularly as they apply in the case of Hurricane Katrina.
6. Our own survey, for example, confirms that people are much more likely to identify correctly the Vice President than the Lieutenant Governor. We do not test identifications of specific parish leaders, but suspect that those would be lower still.
7. Some might ask why we chose to do a sample of Louisiana residents instead of a national sample or a sample of all affected states (Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama). The first and easiest answer is that it was within the purview of the L.S.U. Survey Research Center, whose assistance with this project was substantial and invaluable. Beyond that, however, Louisiana was the only state in which national, state, and local political leaders all received intense scrutiny in the storm's aftermath, and in which citizens might reasonably hold all three accountable for the rescue and relief failures. In addition, several national surveys measuring attitudes about the response to Katrina already exist, so a survey of the state most dramatically affected by the storm serves as an interesting point of comparison.
8. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's *American Community Survey*, Louisiana's post-Katrina (October–December 2005) population was 47.2 percent male (down marginally from 47.4 percent before the storm) and 28.5 percent black (down appreciably from 31.6 percent before the storm). This results in a joint probability distribution of 37.8 percent white females, 33.7 percent white males, 15.0 percent black females, and 13.5 percent black males. Our sample, in contrast, is 51.4 percent white females, 25.4 percent white males, 17.1 percent black females, and 6.1 percent black males, necessitating a weighting of the data by race and gender. We ran all of our models with weights based on both the pre- and post-Katrina census estimates and, as no substantive differences emerged, report only the models with post-Katrina weightings here.
9. Factor analysis confirms that all of the knowledge items load on a single significant factor (eigenvalue = 2.29), with factor loadings ranging from 0.43 (Louisiana House control) to 0.64 (Condoleezza Rice identification).
10. This question wording and set of attribution targets mimics a series of questions contained in a Wisconsin Public Radio/St Norbert College survey of Wisconsin residents about Hurricane Katrina done in the fall of 2005. A later phase of this project will compare the attributions and perceptions of Louisiana residents with those of outside observers at some distance from the tragedy.
11. For a discussion of why education is a poor and sometimes misleading proxy for political sophistication, see Luskin (1987) and Gomez and Wilson (2006b).
12. Given the reluctance of some respondents to provide full demographic information (especially relating to income), some case loss is inevitable in these models. Cumulatively, over 100 respondents drop out of the analysis because of missing demographic data.

13. While Governor Blanco actually made a formal request for a Federal Disaster Declaration from the president on the day prior to Katrina's landfall, critics frequently cite two other decisions by the governor as a source of delay in the relief effort. First, on CNN's Larry King Live program (September 2, 2005), American Red Cross president Marsha J. "Marty" Evans stated that the governor's office blocked her organization's efforts to enter New Orleans to deliver food, water, and other provisions during the immediate aftermath of the storm, because the governor did not want to create an incentive for people to stay in the city. Second, the governor reportedly asked President Bush for twenty-four hours to consider his offer to federalize National Guard troops under the Insurrection Act—a move that would have allowed active duty troops to perform law enforcement duties, such as arresting looters (Luo 2005). The governor would later refuse the president's offer.
14. Of course, it is possible that some of the 13 percent who responded "federal government" may have had FEMA at least partially in mind as well. It is also possible that FEMA's salience as a blame object had receded somewhat by the time of our survey (nine months after the storm), particularly given Michael Brown's departure.
15. Because our dependent variable is skewed toward zero (only 13.5 percent of respondents attribute some level of responsibility to the president), we checked the robustness of our results by estimating the model using skewed logit or Scobit (Nagler 1994). The Scobit model provides only a negligible improvement in model fit, while our substantive findings are unchanged.
16. This strong partisan effect likely accounts for a major difference between our own findings and those of Huddy and Feldman (2006). In this model, race is not a significant predictor of blaming the president, likely because any apparent racial effects are subsumed by Louisiana blacks' overwhelming propensity to be Democrats (only 6.4 percent of the African Americans in our sample identify as Republicans, even if we include "leaners"). Racial differences in political sophistication (see supplementary material online) may also attenuate the direct effects of race in our models. Thus, while black and white assessments of blame in Katrina's aftermath clearly differed, the causal pathways appear to be indirect (through partisanship and sophistication) rather than directly attributable to race *per se*.
17. Respondents who offered no attribution, along with those whose response are not clearly codeable as federal, state, or local (e.g., "everybody") and those few who offer a nongovernmental primary blame attribution (e.g., "the people of New Orleans"), are omitted from this model. In total, this is 112 respondents.
18. See McGraw and Pinney (1990) for a discussion of how personal experience with governmental action affects political memory and judgment.

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