

AFTER THE HURRICANES: PUBLIC RISK ASSESSMENTS AND POLICY SUPPORT IN THE U.S. GULF COAST

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The impact of major disasters on social systems may be as significant as that of political, economic and social events. Despite increased examination of the aftermath of disasters, very little is known with regard to the public's role in the adaptive policy processes in impacted communities. This study aims to achieve two distinct goals: First, develop a theoretical framework to explain the public's role in problem identification, risk assessment and policy evaluations in adaptive policy processes that follow crisis events. Second, we seek to identify the internal and external forces operating on gulf coast residents associated with changes in their identification of key issues, assessment of risks and impacts, and support and opposition to various policy options. The institute for Science, Technology, and Public Policy (ISTPP) at Texas A&M University, to which the researchers belong, conducted two national surveys on the U.S. individuals' attitudes, behavior, and policy support regarding global warming and climate changes (GW/CC, thereafter) in 2004 and 2007. The cross time comparisons looked at Gulf Coast residents before and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and Gulf Coast residents and national samples before and after the storms. Analysis showed that the gulf residents came to identify GW/CC as a problem facing the nation more than their national counterparts after the hurricanes and consequently became more concerned with GW/CC. For Gulf Coast residents before the hurricanes, identifying GW/CC as a problem was higher among those who were exposed to the media and believed that they were informed. However, after the hurricanes, it was higher only among those who had trust in the media. Similarly, before the hurricanes, Gulf residents who believed they were informed had higher perceived risk due to GW/CC and yet, after the hurricane, those who had trust in the media had higher perceived risk, regardless of their exposure to the media and their subjective level of being informed. In assessing potential impact from GW/CC, regardless of regions and periods, respondents believed that GW/CC would have negative impact on the environment more than on the economy or health. However, the increase in this projection over time was higher among Gulf residents. Those who identified GW/CC as a problem and had higher perceived risk projected higher negative impact. Media exposure played a significant role in this relationship before the hurricanes but not after. Consequently, gulf residents—particularly, those who identified GW/CC as a problem and had higher perceived risk—became more supportive of proactive policy options to mitigate potential threats due to GW/CC. This change was more salient in Gulf Coast than in the other regions. In sum, Gulf Coast residents became more attentive with regard to GW/CC after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita compared with other U.S. individuals,

resulting in more changes in support for mitigating policy options. In addressing these regional changes in Gulf Coast, climate policy making may need to consider heightened use of and yet reduced trust in the media.

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