Background

Catastrophic and shocking moments such as Pearl Harbor, President Kennedy’s assassination, the shootings at Columbine High School, the Oklahoma City bombings, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina all have special meaning in the American psyche. They have become part of a national lexicon used by citizens, media, and policy-makers to debate current events and policies. These and other crises force Americans to confront challenging questions about fundamental values in society such as the role of government in protecting its citizens, the balance between personal freedom and security, and the appropriate division of authority among different branches or levels of government. Often, such crises lead to lasting changes in the political landscape such as the creation of new agencies charged with implementing social, economic, or military policies, the expansion or restriction of presidential authority, revisions of existing policies, and reorganization of bureaucratic agencies. Catastrophes represent periods of extraordinary politics and, unlike normal political events, have a much higher likelihood of prompting citizens to re-evaluate their expectations of government, its leaders, and its policies.

Why are catastrophic events so influential, politically? In short, it stems from the nature of public engagement. The combination of the emotional impact of extraordinary events and the media environment that surrounds them motivates attributions of blame that suggest particular avenues for reform to avoid similarly painful crises in the future. Strong emotions felt during catastrophes - even those experienced only vicariously through media coverage - can be a powerful motivator of public opinion and public activism, particularly when emotional reactions coincide with attributing blame to governmental agencies or officials (Jennings 1999).

Specific Aims and Story

Although this book uses as its case study the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, our goal is to establish a general theoretical framework about attribution formation following extraordinary events and its subsequent effects on other types of attitudes and evaluations. Catastrophes are unique, politically, for two reasons. First, in extraordinary times, the media environment changes, the public is more attentive, and, as we argue, the process of forming opinions differs appreciably from the process in “normal” times. Second, catastrophes are unique because of the public’s expectations for government performance. One fundamental principle of democratic societies is that the government has a responsibility for the safety and well-being of all its citizens. Catastrophes challenge government to uphold its end of the social contract under difficult conditions and under circumstances of intense public scrutiny. Given that citizens have expectations about how government should respond, any expectation gap will likely influence attitudes toward leaders, public policy and government institutions (Smith et al 2005, Waterman et al 1999).

Central to this story is how the media and the public attribute blame for the aftermath of crises. Understanding causal attributions in the wake of extreme or tragic events is especially important...
because, although such events are rare, the collective experience make them long standing political touchstones (Jennings 1999). Disasters and their aftermath open up windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs (Birkland 1997). They can raise salience of disaster related issues, alter perceptions of public figures and agencies, alter the distribution of power between relevant interest groups or government elites, shape political agendas, and even spawn social movements (Birkland 1997, see also Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Wood and Done 2003; Wood and Verdú 2007). Why people adopt certain causal stories rather than others is, therefore, an important area of research. Causal stories provide a baseline from which to understand and infer responsibility. Causal attributions form an important link in a chain that runs from citizens’ receipt of information (i.e. from mass media, elites, friends, or personal experiences) to their issue opinions, political evaluations and, ultimately, political choices.

Our story begins by examining the media coverage surrounding Hurricane Katrina, which generated shock and anxiety in many individuals across the country and heightened attention to the news surrounding the disaster. Emotions are critical to our story because feelings of anxiety produced by the storm and its aftermath create stop and think conditions for individuals that create opportunities to consider new and cognitively challenging or dissonant information. This is important because high levels of affective engagement can lead to new and altered opinions and are inherently an important component of attitude change. As with normal events, extraordinary events produce multiple frames from which to examine them. But, the political stakes following an extraordinary event are extremely high. The combined pressures for media outlets to fill the airwaves to satisfy a voracious public and the need for politicians to manage blame in a high profile incident naturally creates an environment that generates multiple causal claims. The difference, theoretically, between the normal and extraordinary multi-message environment is that viewers are primed to pay attention to the broad menu of choices and to choose among them.

In the case of Katrina, the media presented multiple frames to explain the outcome. These included the nature of the catastrophe, societal break-down, and government failure and people were attracted to different frames based upon their predispositions, but these were moderated by their emotions. Importantly, in normal times, citizens are motivated to select and process information in ways that support partisan biases (Lodge and Taber 2005, Taber and Lodge 2006, Zaller 1992), but in extraordinary times, individuals confront unprecedented events that require assessment and explanation in order for them to cognitively cope with anxiety producing stimuli. As a result, the motivation for an accurate understanding of unfolding events can trump biases that would ordinarily constrain attitudes in normal times.

We argue that the affective response to the crisis alters the way in which information is sought, received, evaluated and incorporated into attributions of blame. Anxiety triggered by the catastrophic events serves to activate an appraisal mechanism where the goals of processing information shift from reliance on standard routines to one that sets aside predispositions to more accurately assess the novel and potentially threatening event (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; MacKuen et. al. 2010). MacKuen, et. al. (2010:441) note that “[w]hen people are in risky and novel circumstances, they are likely to be better off engaging deliberative mechanisms, thoughtful consideration, in order to handle the uncertainty.” In short, directionally motivated reasoning gives way to accuracy motivated reasoning for those driven by an anxious response to the event. We expect and find that the same process applies in the formation or acceptance of attributions of blame for extraordinary events such that anxiety attenuates the strength of any partisan effects on attributions of blame, particularly for those causal frames most likely to cue party predispositions, such as the government blame frames.
From this theoretical framework, we examine how emotion and/or attribution influence a variety of fundamentally important questions in political science including evaluation of leaders, confidence in government, and public policy.

Data

We develop the book in two parts. In the first section, we examine the nature of media coverage following a catastrophe and describe the media context of Hurricane Katrina. In this section, we identify common attribution patterns in the media and we develop and test theoretical expectations about how individuals come to agree with causal attributions in the wake of unexpected events. In the second section, we examine how attributions of blame and the emotional responses during crisis influence key political variables such as evaluations of leaders, confidence in government, and preferences for policy responses.

Our data are primarily drawn from two sources. The first is a national telephone survey to investigate the opinions and perceptions of those outside the areas directly affected by the hurricane, conducted one month after the storm. The second is an analysis of the media coverage on each of the major news stations for the month following the disaster. We examined written transcripts of televised news for 5 networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and FNC) and coded video footage for two, CNN and FNC. The media data provide a contextual picture of the storm and its aftermath and provides an accounting of the messages we examine in conjunction with our survey data of individuals. Combined, the data offer a snapshot of messages and responses to a major and unexpected national calamity.

Chapter Overview

In this book, we draw on several bodies of research including communications, media and politics, social and political psychology, and public opinion to create a framework from which to view the information environment and how it affects the way that citizens process information about novel, anxiety-provoking events. Specifically, we highlight three key mechanisms at work in shaping opinions during catastrophic moments: media driven emotional triggers, emotional engagement of the public, and attributions of blame. Each plays a role in shaping broader opinions about government with long-term ramifications for government institutions and public policy. These theoretical linkages are highlighted in Figure 1.

In Chapter 2, we demonstrate that the media offered numerous visual and verbal emotional triggers, that individuals were emotionally engaged by Katrina’s aftermath, and that those engaged by the event paid greater attention to coverage of Hurricane Katrina. In Chapter 3 we outline the major attribution frames used by the media – frames that are part of a routine of disaster coverage and likely to apply in many catastrophic moments – and demonstrate the limits of partisan “spin” for concrete, real-world events. In Chapter 4, we demonstrate that individual level anxiety stimulated by the coverage attenuated the effects of partisan filters in judging the common attribution
stories. As a result, greater cross-party consensus emerged with emotional Republicans and Democrats both likely to agree with attributions that dominated the media coverage. In Chapter 5, we demonstrate that acceptance of attributions of blame toward government influenced evaluations of the performance of leaders at all levels of government. Moreover, attribution of blame to controllable causes such as government failure stimulates anger, which, in turn, deepens the public’s punitive evaluations of leaders believed to be responsible. Importantly, we find no direct effect of anxiety on evaluations, clarifying the distinct empirical and theoretical attributes of these different emotional states. In Chapter 6, we show the broader consequences of attributions for general feelings about government. Those who blamed government for the aftermath of the storm were less externally efficacious and less confident in government’s ability to manage future crises. Finally, in Chapter 7, we demonstrated that attributions of blame affect preferences for policies that define the authority of government over its people and its leaders. Our conclusion is taken up in Chapter 8. Taken together, these findings offer a complete picture of how a critical moment in American politics permeates public opinions. More broadly, we think this approach provides a framework for how to think about the influence of catastrophic events.

Applying this framework of study to a broader array of crises in the future is important because opinions surrounding extraordinary events have been understudied relative to opinions that surround election events and periods of normal politics. Yet catastrophes, which take on a variety of forms, that engage the public mind happen quite frequently and create a national dialogue. We have seen this most recently with the shootings of Congresswoman Giffords and the BP Oil spill. Catastrophic events are of particular importance because of the attention and engagement of large cross-sections of the public. These events differ from campaigns and periods of normal politics because normal times are meant to activate predispositions and remind voters who they are and where they belong. In contrast, extraordinary events have the capacity to render predispositions less important as citizens are more likely to experience emotions that encourage them to seek out and incorporate new information. Thus, extraordinary events represent one condition that affords the opportunity for greater consensus as well as abrupt and enduring policy changes.

Intended Audience

We believe our book will be of interest to broad audience. The primary audience is likely to be academics and students (upper division undergraduate and graduate students) in the political science subfields of American politics, political psychology, public opinion, media studies and public policy. But, because we draw on literature in communication and social psychology, we believe that there may be interest in our book from those disciplines as well. In addition, because the book explores public reaction to a major catastrophe with far reaching political consequences, we expect the book to appeal to journalists, policy makers and elected officials. For those in the academic world, we offer new insights about the processes that shape public opinion by empirically testing implications of causal mechanisms typically found in lab setting but rarely explored in observational studies. By drawing together insights from research in several fields, we develop and empirically test novel expectations about opinion in the aftermath of catastrophe. However, we attempt to present our analysis and results in such a way that non-academics can fully understand and appreciate the significance of the findings.

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