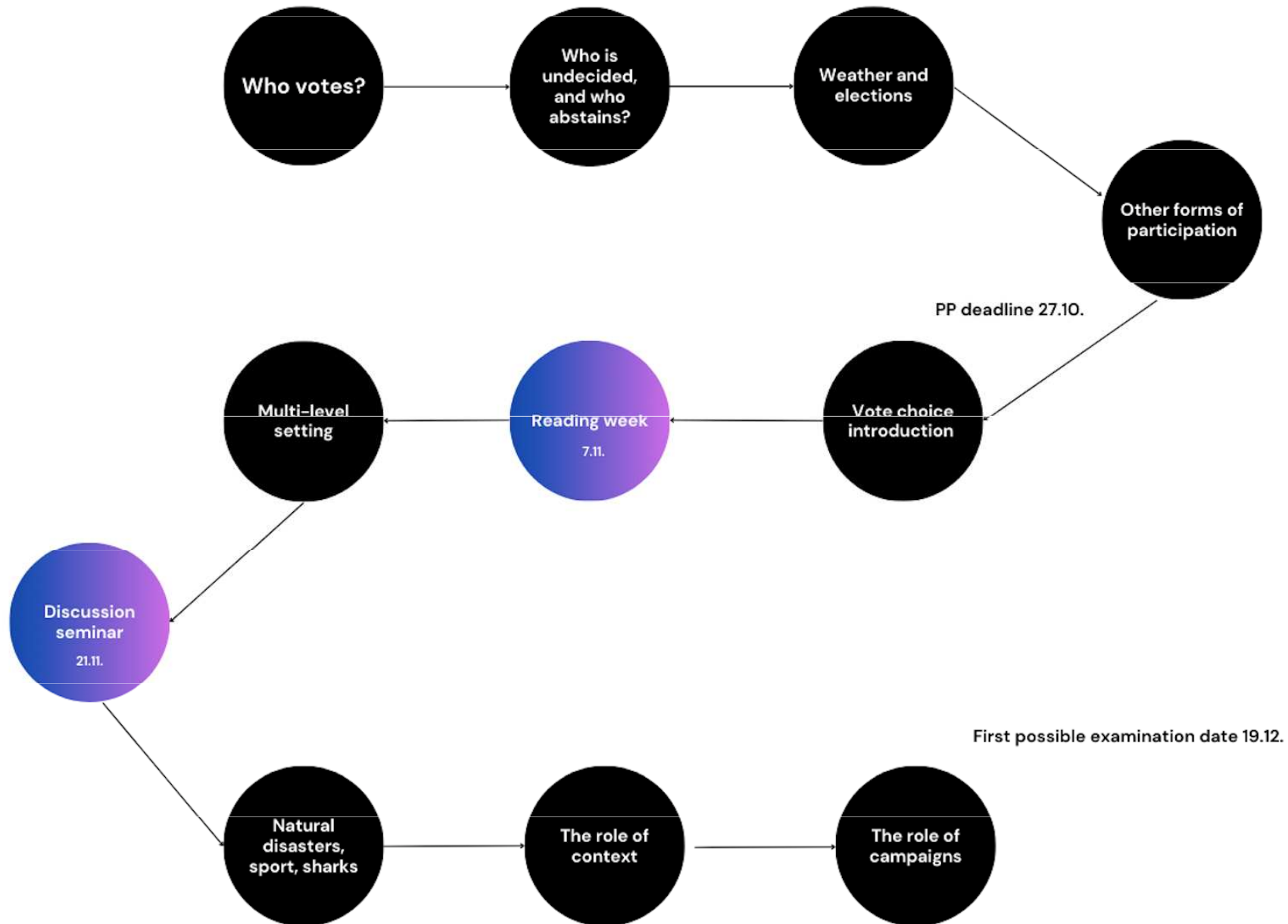


# Elections and electoral behavior



**M U N I**  
**F S S**

## Seemingly unrelated events

Jakub Jusko

# Seemingly unrelated events

- The classic notion that voters should use all relevant information to make a rational decision-making
- However, voters are emotional beings; many things happen between the pre-election campaign campaign to the moment of casting a ballot
- Health problems, life - changing events, and normal events seemingly unrelated to the electoral process
- Associated with a decision to turnout and/or support a certain type of candidate/party

# Voter rationality

- The classic notion of how voters decide who to vote for – rational vs irrational voter
- The question of retrospective vs. prospective voters
- The question of responsive vs. attentive voters
  
- The question of voting-> economic voting  
-Socio-tropic or ego-tropic
  
- The question of voting -> natural disasters voting
  
- The question of voting -> sports matches

# Voter rationality

- Political scientists have long been interested in evaluating **voters' competence** to fulfil their electoral responsibility -> are they sufficiently informed? Are they sufficiently rational?
- Why rationality important -> central to normative debates about electoral democracy; theory often assumes rationality
- Rationality embedded in the theory of **retrospective voting**:
  - Voters base their decisions on an evaluation of the past
  - For example, the performance of incumbents or governing parties
  - Vs. assessments of candidates' or parties' likely future (economic) success -> prospective voting

# Voter rationality

- Two perspectives on voters' understanding of politicians' accountability:

1) The voter is irrational/ignorant - sharks, sports matches...

- retrospective judgments as a direct response to the absolute state of the world
- citizens punish or reward an incumbent party based on the state of the world without regard to the responsibility of the incumbent in shaping it

2) The voter is rational – retrospectively evaluates a politician's performance

- citizens reward a good performance with electoral support for the incumbent government and punish a bad performance by voting for the opposition.

# Responsive electorate

1) The voter is irrational/ignorant - sharks, sports matches...

- studied by Achen and Bartels (2002, 2016) = “blind retrospection”

- random events may determine the fate of the incumbent – outcomes, not policies themselves, are important

- The United Kingdom’s Conservative party losing an election because of a bad harvest

- The pharaoh’s reign being shortened because of drought

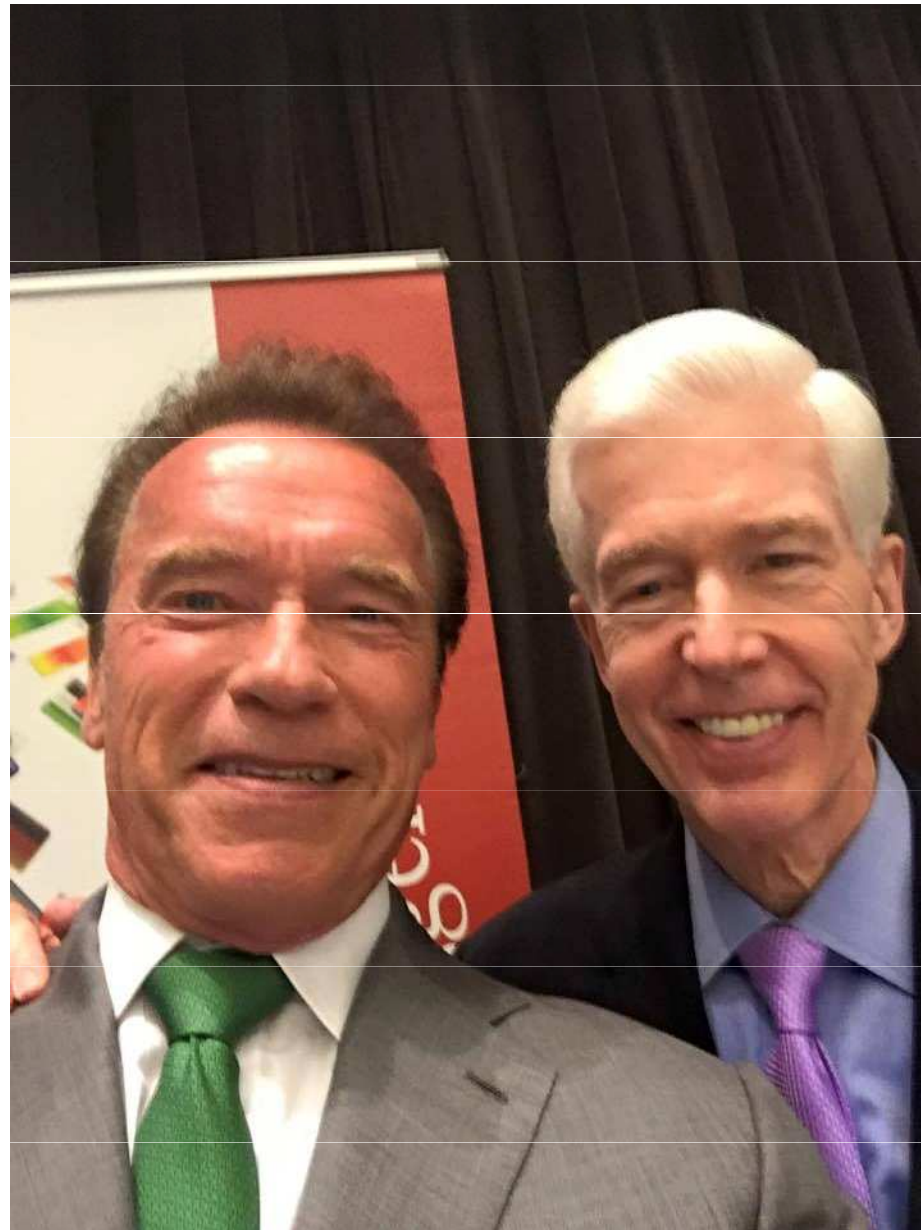
- President Wilson losing votes in New Jersey because of shark attacks

- American presidents losing about a percent of the vote in states that were too dry or too wet

*“...you need two things to be successful.. . . You need rain in the north and a strong economy. And there is nothing you can do about either one.”*

**M U N I**  
**F S S**

# Responsive electorate





# Responsive electorate



# Attentive electorate

2)The voter is rational – retrospectively evaluates a politician's performance

- A politician is held accountable only for his or her efforts to shape the state of the world.
- However, the problem of attribution – who is actually responsible for dealing with the crisis, situation, or event?

Powell and Whitten (1993) – weak relationship between economic performance and the vote in countries in which responsibility for economic policy is blurred between government and opposition, but a strong relationship in countries where responsibility is clear.

# Responsive electorate



Midterm exams

**IT'S THE  
ECONOMY,  
STUPID!**



FSS

# Economic voting

- How the economy affects incumbents' support
- For many, a basis for evaluation of government performance
- **When an economy is doing well (poorly) , citizens are more (less) likely to re-elect incumbents**
- Evidence from all the levels, for different offices (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2008) BUT size and strength differs
  - Shared vs exclusive authority
  - Credit attribution vs. hiding behind institutional opacity (Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas, 2010)

# Economic voting

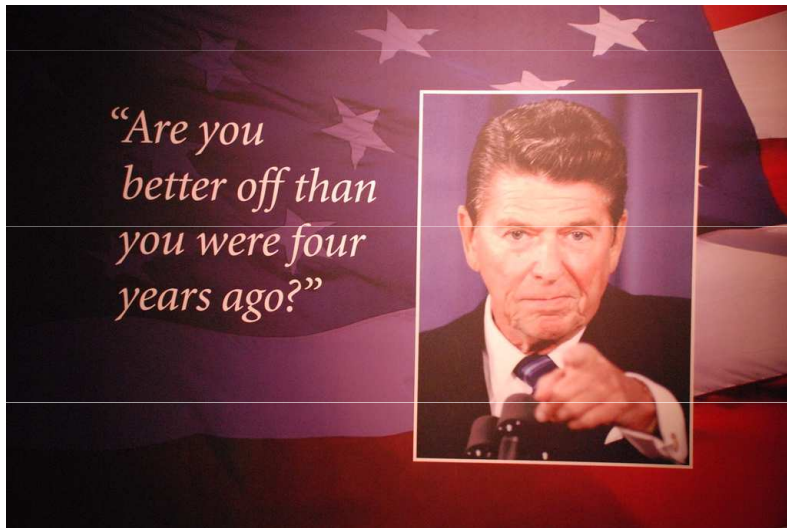
- Determined by how voters take the economy into account:

## 1) Own pocketbooks – “egotropic” voting

- Own finances (Fiorina 1978), loss of employment (Grafstein 2005)

## 2) Well-being of the country as a whole – “sociotropic” voting

- Rates of inflation (Norpoth 1996), consumer prices (Lepper 1974), leading economic indicators (Wlezien and Erikson 1996)
- Possible bias introduced by local conditions, personal finances, political attitudes, demographics, and the media



# Natural disasters





Foto: Dominik Herka







# Electoral turnout

- Rational choice argument - increased costs (more like rain) -> not elected

BUT

- Motivational aspect? - I want to express an opinion on the solution to the crisis -> voting

Different outcomes:

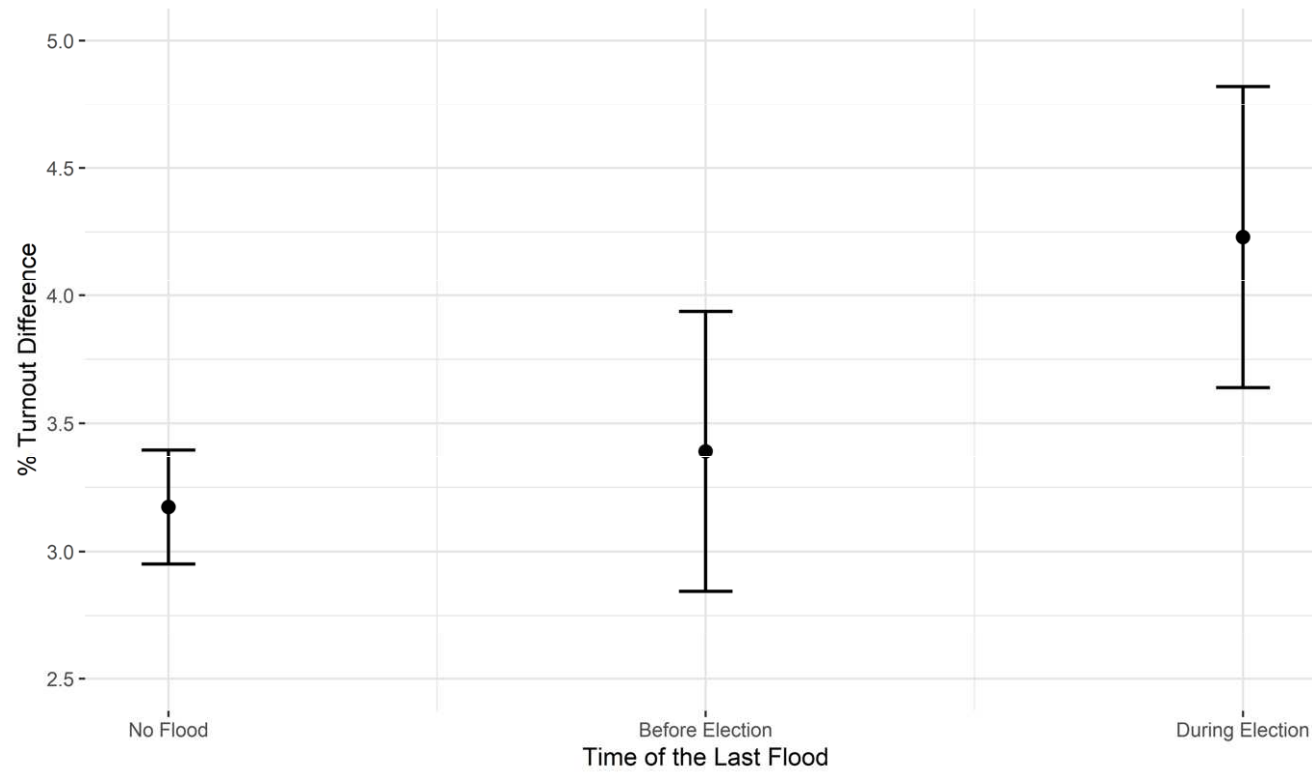
- No effect - Bodet, Thomas and Tessier 2016, Lasala-Blanco et al. 2017
- Negative effect - Sinclair et al. 2011 (BUT more affected areas higher participation),
- Positive effect - Fair et al. 2017, Jusko and Spáč 2024

**Difference in addressing turnout in "normal" weather and natural disaster**

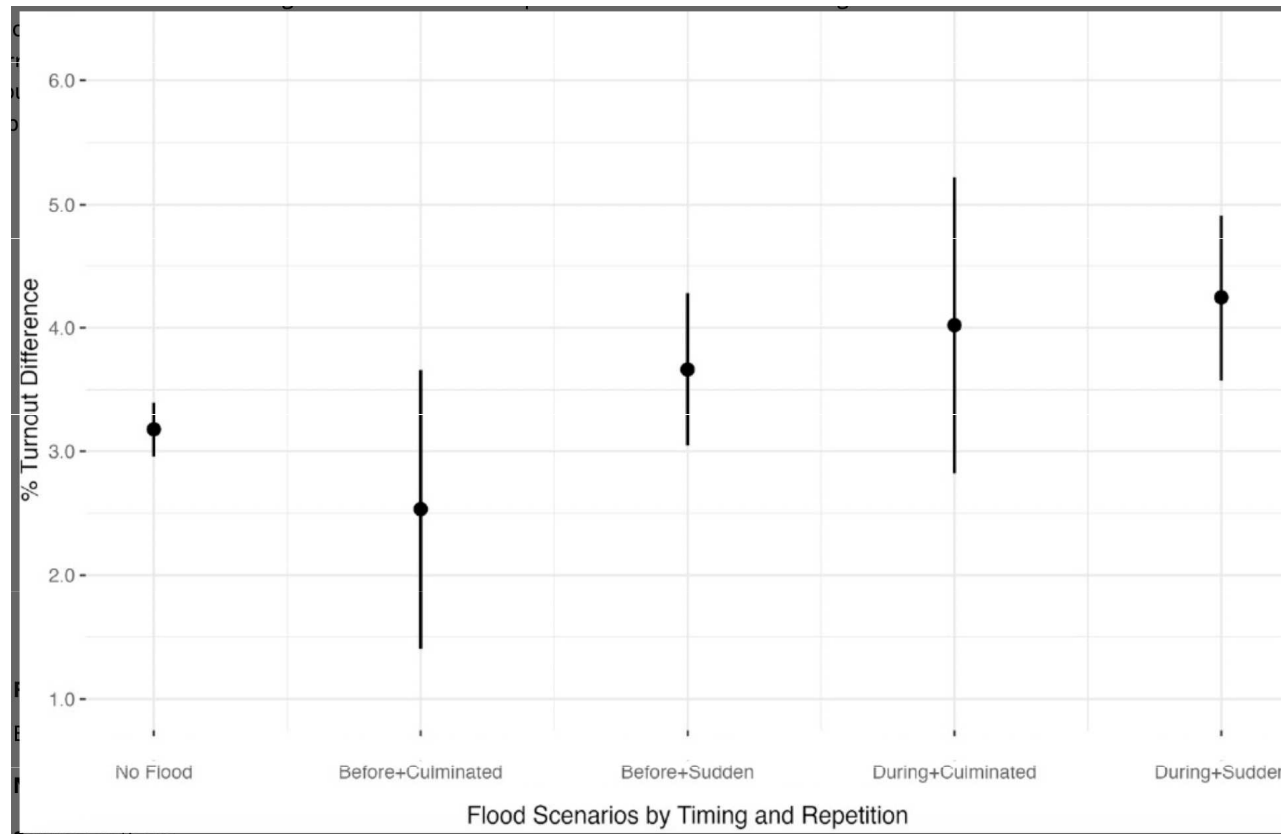
## Note: important mechanisms

- **“Peak and end” heuristic (Frederickson and Kahneman 1993)**
  - Individuals may use heuristics to minimize the costs of becoming informed about political issues
  - Related to political budget cycle and pork barrel politics issues
- **Habituation (Rogers and Frey, 2015)**
  - People repeatedly affected by floods over several years tend to foster resilience to the damaging effects of floods (Garde-Hansen et al., 2017)

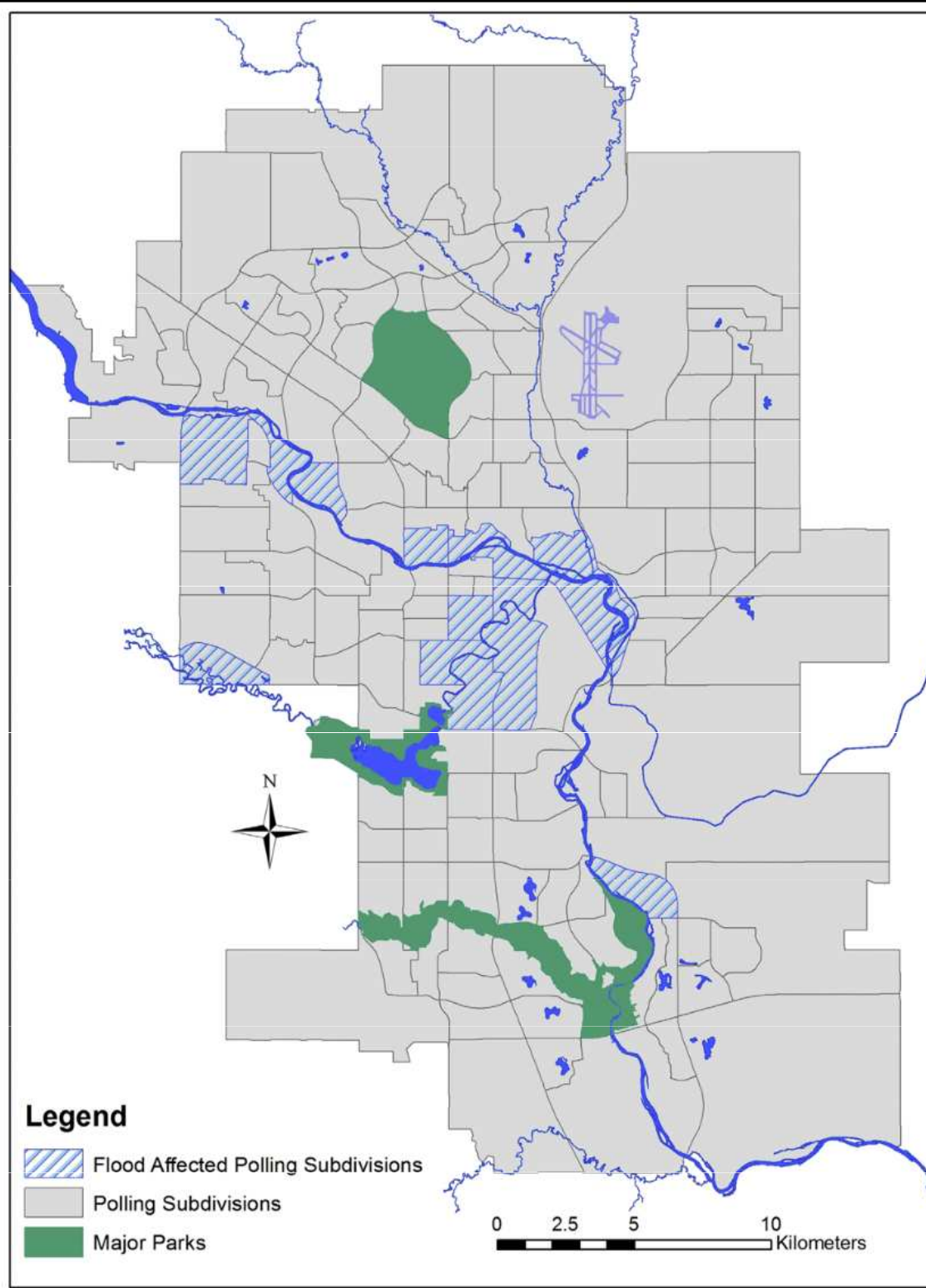
# Jusko and Spáč (2024)



# Jusko and Spáč (2024)







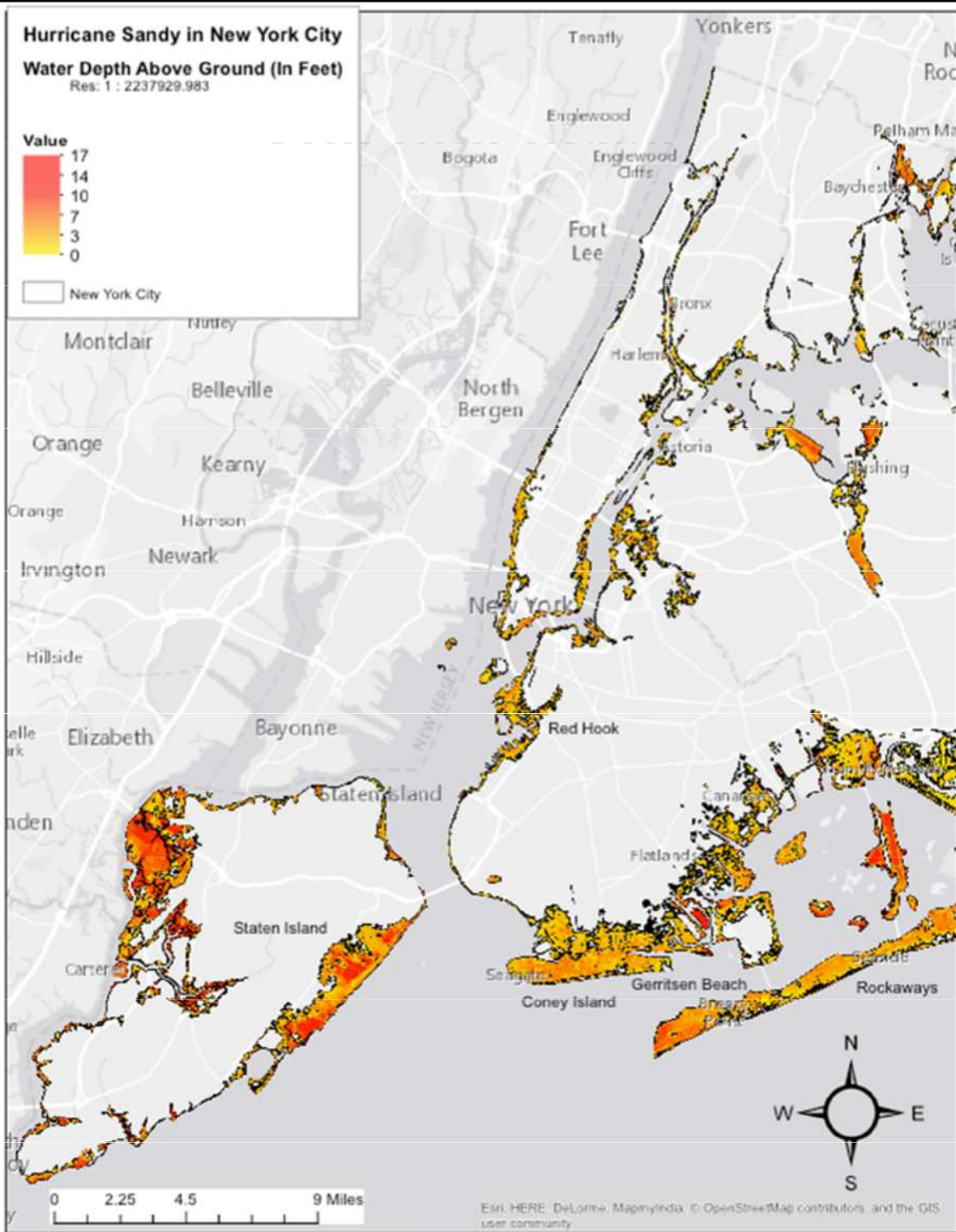
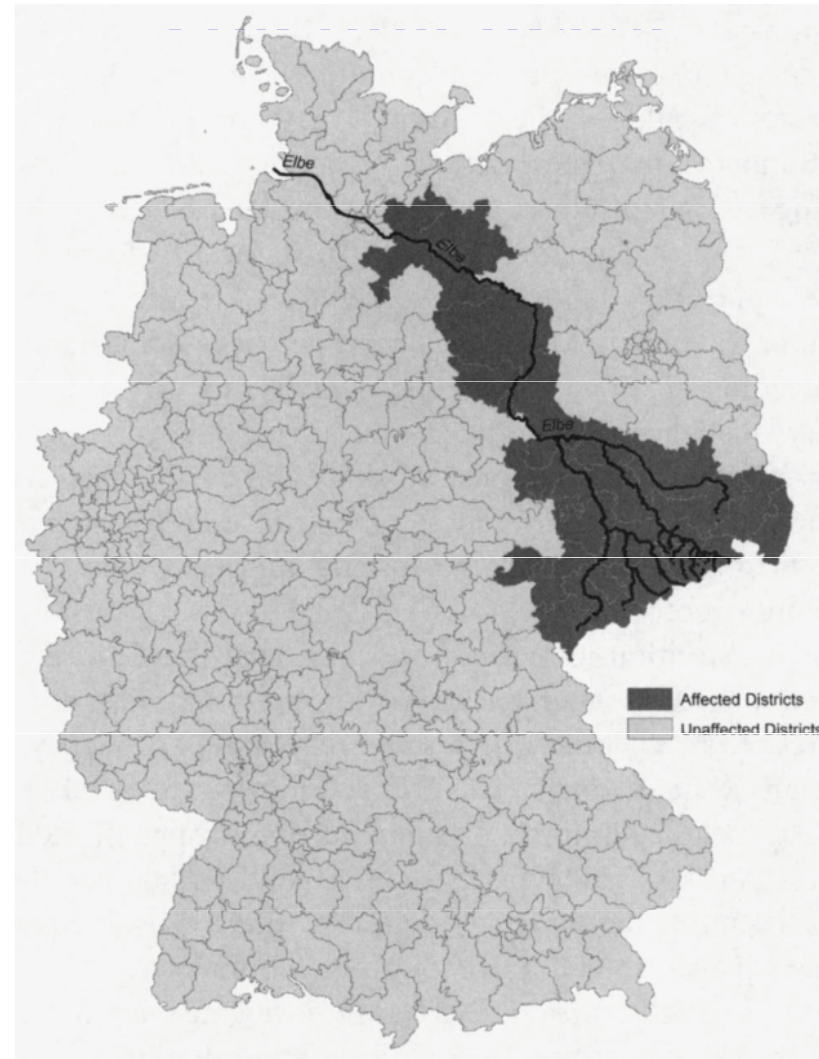


Fig. 1. Sandy inundation in New York City.

**FIGURE 1 Affected versus Unaffected Electoral Districts in the 2002 Election**



*Note:* The map shows the boundaries of the 299 electoral districts in the 2002 German federal election. Directly flood-affected districts (i.e., *Flooded* = 1) are shaded dark gray; unaffected districts are shaded light gray. A district was coded as affected if it experienced at least one of the following events: stabilization or breach of levees, flood warning, overtopping of levee, flooding, evacuation warning, or evacuation. Source: Own computation based on flood report by the International Commission for the Protection of the Elbe River (2002).

# Effect on incumbents and parties

- Two perspectives on voters' understanding of politicians' accountability:
  - 1) The voter is irrational/ignorant - sharks, sports matches...
  - 2) The voter is rational - retrospectively evaluates a politician's performance
- natural disasters can actually provide information about government preparedness and their capabilities, the performance of the entity responsible for dealing with the crisis
- it is not about irrationality but about reflecting political (in)competence -> credit claiming + media attention important
  - + gratitude?
  - + clientelism?
- **Methodologically** - better at examining the effect of government spending (incumbent) on electoral outcomes (like general economic reform)

# Can a natural disaster help a politician get re-elected?

## NO

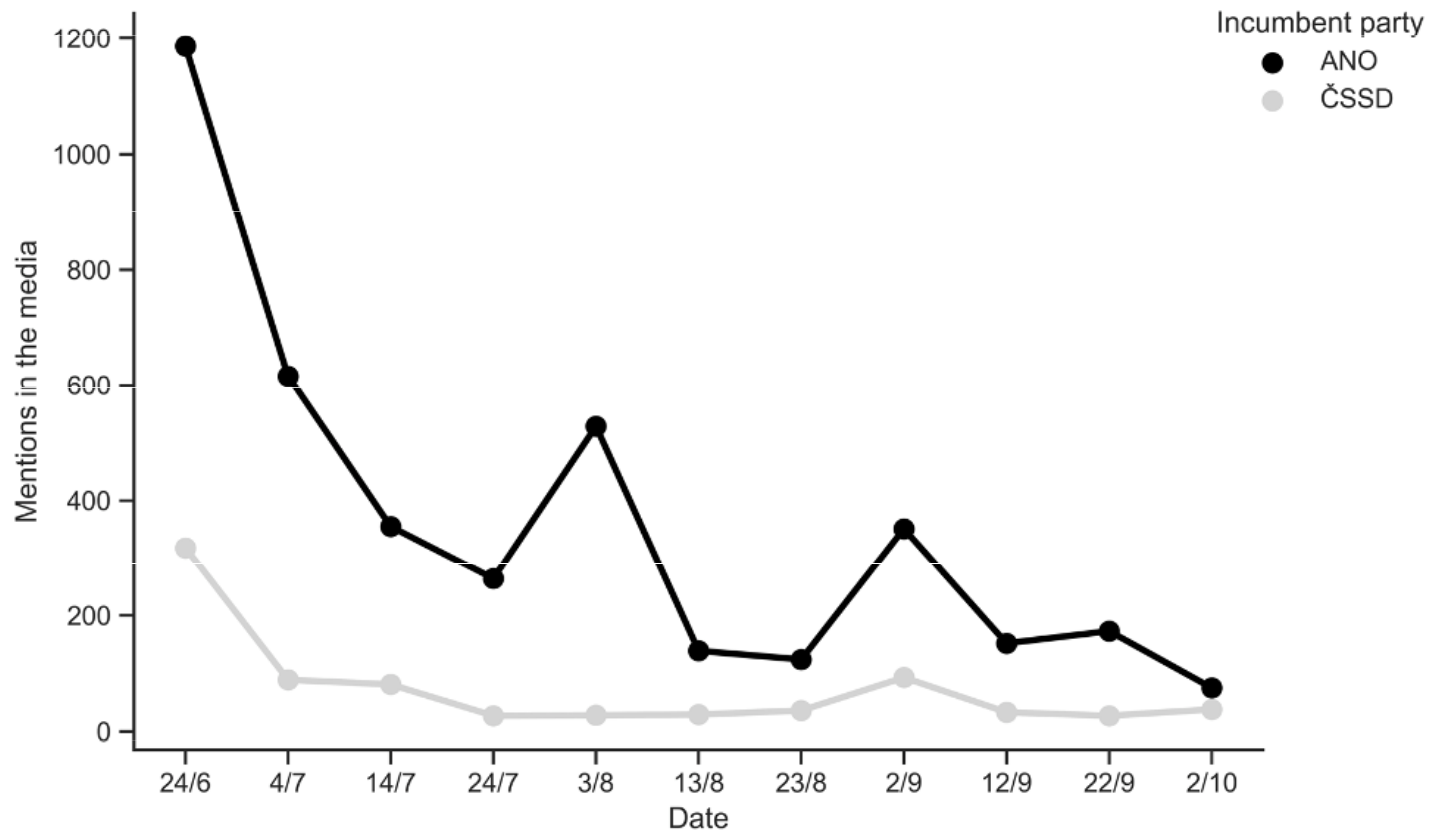
- Abney and Hill (1966), Hurricane Betsy and the Mayors of Louisiana
  - Voters did not factor the hurricane into their vote choice – did not know who to blame
- Bodet et al. (2016), Calgary flooding and mayors
- Bovan et al. (2018), Croatia floods

## YES

- Masiero and Santarrosa (2021), earthquake in Italy and mayors (5 p.p.)
  - Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011), flooding in Germany and SPD
  - Gallego (2018), flooding in Colombia and local elections
- + others -> YES prevails

# Can a natural disaster help a politician get re-elected?

- Major government incumbents (Blankenship et al. 2021) – India
- In an election year more generous (Cole et al. 2012) - India
- Closer at election time -> abuse (Wang 2020) - Taiwan
- Leftist and nationalist parties allocate more \$ (Klomp 2020)
- Disaster-aids are better than prevention (Gallego 2018) - Colombia
- Reward lasts longer (25% of original reward in next election) (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011) - Germany
- Stronger effect in less democratically established countries (Neugart and Rode 2021) - Germany



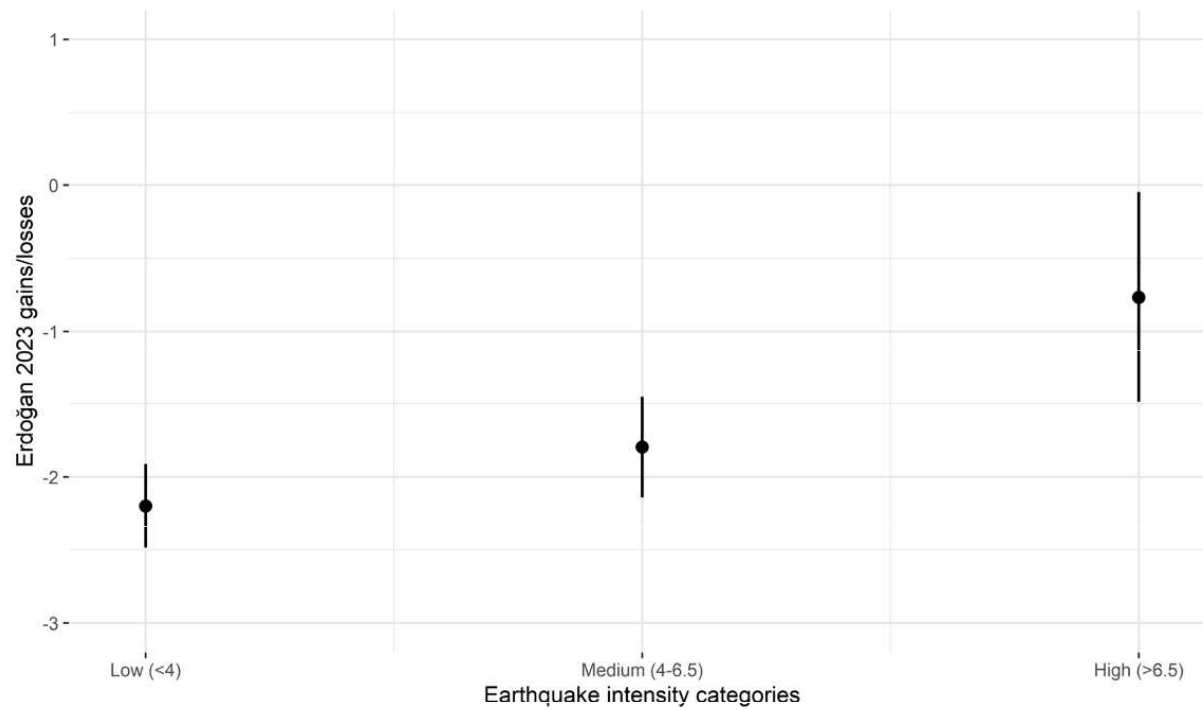
**Fig. 2.** Mentions in the media in the aftermath of the tornado.

## Note: attentive or responsive electorate?

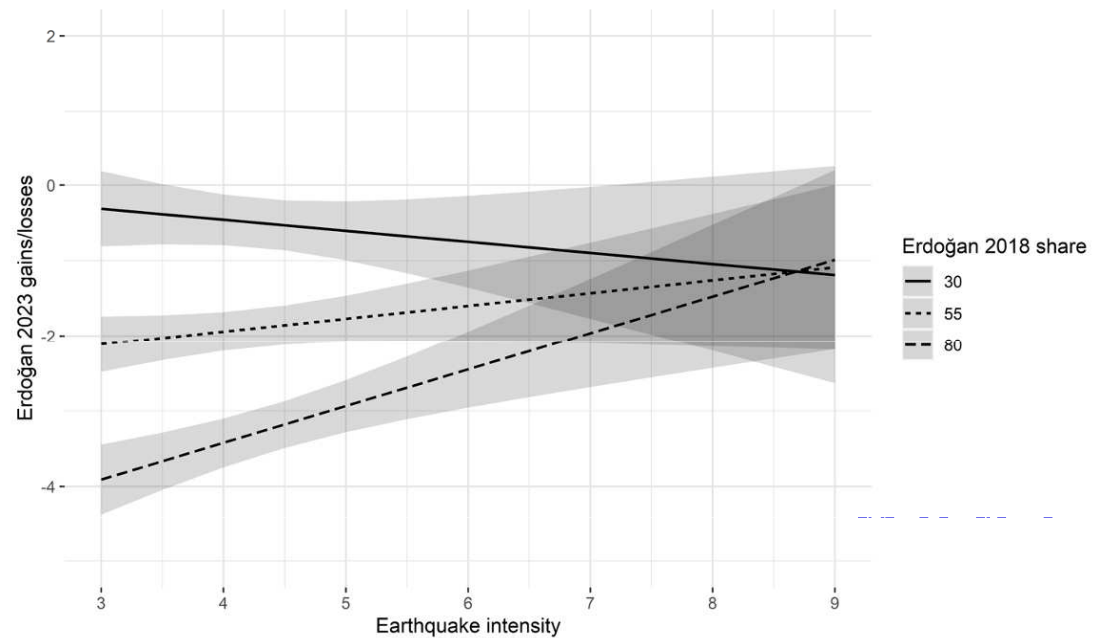
- Healy and Malhotra (2010) and Gasper and Reeves (2011)  
-while voters do punish incumbent presidents for severe weather damage, they also reward them for disaster declarations
- Heersink et al. (2022)  
-Hurricane Sandy 2012 - voters' reactions to disaster damage were strongly conditioned by pre-existing partisanship, with counties that previously supported Obama reacting far more positively to disaster damage than those that had earlier opposed him. => **partisan retrospection**



Figure 3. Effect of earthquake's intensity (Model 2).



Note: grey buffer represents 90% confidence intervals.



Note: grey buffer represents 90% confidence intervals.

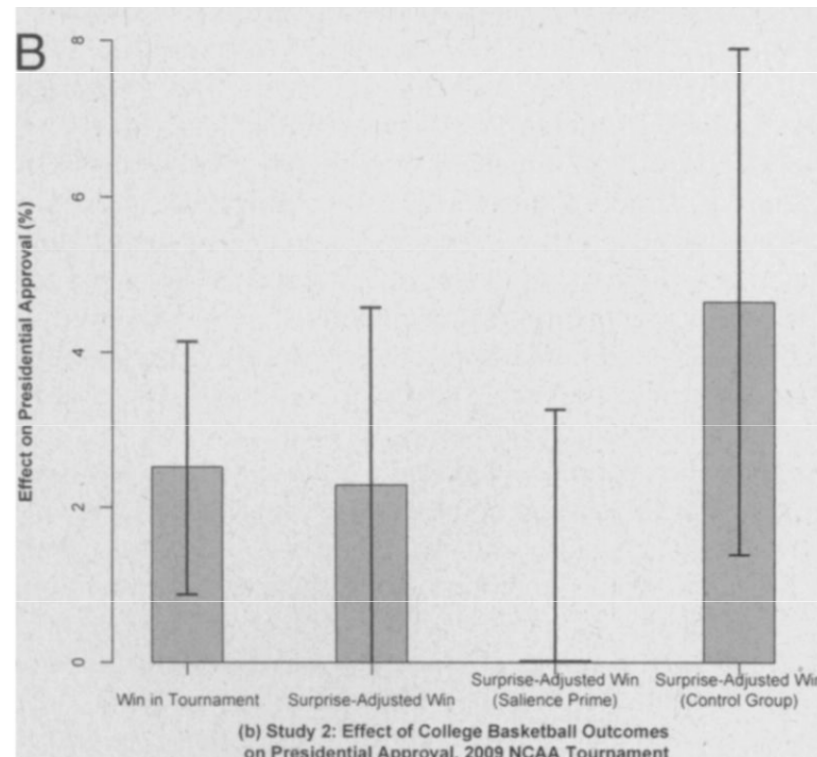
# Sports matches

# Sport

- An important event in a day of a fan – win improves mood (Goetze et al. 2020)
- Improves coexistence, solidarity, local and national patriotism (Misener and Mason 2006)
- The question of durability - Busby et al. 2016
- YES – Healy et al. 2010 (USA), Busby et al. 2016 – (college football game)
- NO – Fowler and Montagnes (NFL USA), Rapeli and Soderlund 2022 (Finland), Muller and Kneafsey 2021 (Ireland)

# Sport

- **Healy et al. 2010**
- The success of the local football team before the elections increase the success of the incumbent in presidential, senatorial, gubernatorial elections in the home county of the team
- Win 2009 NCAA tournament -> President Obama's positive image increased by 2.3% and 5% - among fans who followed the tournament closely => fans reward and punish incumbents for changes in their sentiments.



# Sport

- **Potoski and Urbatsch 2017**

- Monday Night Football (the day before the US elections) as a civic distraction to elections

- “**Time** as the principal cost of voting” – Downs 1957

- leisure more valuable -> opportunity costs higher -> decrease in turnout

- preelection football game quality increase -> 2-8 p.p. decrease in turnout

- effect weaker in those with a higher interest in politics + partisans

# Life changing moments and turnout

- The role of habit vs. costs associated with other circumstances

How strong is the voting habit in the face of different types of life circumstances?

- Experiencing LCHM may:
    - Alter political interest
    - Decrease continuity in the social and personal contexts
    - Introduce new social influences
- ⇒ May cause a person to rethink the importance of politics (updating)

Important factors (Rapeli et al. 2023):

- Divorce
- Relocating (occasional + habitual voters)
- Retiring (increase among habitual voters) => **social connections**

**important**

**M U N I  
F S S**

# Conclusion

- Seemingly unrelated events can have outsized impacts on voter decisions, underscoring the complexity of electoral behaviour.

- Two stories important:

1) Voters often rely on heuristics, emotions, and short-term events when evaluating incumbents.

-Psychological Factors:

- Emotional reasoning (e.g., anger, optimism).
- Recency bias: Voters weigh recent events more heavily.
- Attribution errors: Misplaced blame or credit.

-Contextual Factors:

- Visibility of events in media.
- Timing of events relative to elections.

2) Voters can take some of the events to better analyse the performance of the incumbent

Next...





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