
Katrina: Federalism And Hurricanes

Federalism divides powers, roles and responsibilities of the government between the federal government and state and local governments. The principle of federalism features prominently in ideas and language in the United States Constitution. Federalism impacts all areas of the government from simple, local government functions up through the federal government level. While federalism has advantages and disadvantages, when it comes to communication and federalism ideally they would work together, such as in a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina. In that disaster, and several others, this is not the case.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the largest hurricanes recorded to have touched land in the United States. When Hurricane Katrina struck land on the southern coast of the United States on the morning of August 28, 2005, windspeeds were recorded at 125 miles per hour. The impact was devastating and caused significant and widespread damage. Death toll estimates from the event range from approximately 1,200 people to nearly 1,800 people, depending on the source. Further, the hurricane caused over \$81 billion in property damage and approximately \$150 billion in economic impacts.

Hours after the hurricane touched land, communication shut down completely. Three million phone lines and 1,000 cellular towers were damaged, knocked over, or completely out of service. Many of the residents of the impacted areas could not contact their family members, emergency services or their local government officials because their cellphones and landlines were not working.

During the video of "The Storm" it was repeated several times that it was unclear at the time who was in charge to handle the effects from the disaster. The first response was to blow the levees that were holding the rising water to divert the flow of it. This accomplished the objective of diverting the water. However, there was still substantial damage in poor and majority black communities around New Orleans like the Lower 9th Ward and St. Bernard's Parrish. Hurricane Katrina exposed numerous flaws in the Federalistic approach to natural disasters at each level of government and how the public messaging from the federal government did not reflect the reality on the ground in areas most impacted from Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina exposed how unprepared each level of government was to communicate efficiently and effectively and coordinate with the federal response to get things done. At the time, federal and local officials focusing on blaming each other, suggesting other agencies and branches of government (beside their own) had failed in their responsibilities. In the article Mega Disasters and Federalism it states, "In the face of terrible emergencies, the serving grace of federalism is supposed to be its greater flexibility, responsiveness, and capacity to mobilize mutual aid".

However, critical factor in the ability to mount a coordinated federal, state and local response depends on interoperability. Interoperability is when PCs or programming can compatibly trade and utilize data; this is an important function in situations like natural disasters. The federal government's position is that it is unnecessary to share all, or most, of their data with the state governments. Further, state-wide and local systems are not always compatible with the federal

governments systems in order to share data. The communication breakdown in Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that we ought to reconsider interoperability and federalism to facilitate cooperation, coordination and communication between the federal government and state and local entities. As stated in the chapter "Crisis Communication" from the book *Public Relations Writing: Form and Style*, "Communication with the public is a one-way street: information is supposed to flow from officials to the public via warnings sent out over TV, radio and other media".

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, oversees distributing aid to the states and helping officials to take care of catastrophic disasters. The federal government's response to Hurricane Pam in the summer of 2004 foreshadowed the poor response to Hurricane Katrina. The failures and problems encountered during that disaster (poor communication, slow relief, etc.) occurred again when Hurricane Katrina hit the following year. Key reforms at FEMA were not made between the two events, planning decisions were not made, and subject matter like better communication strategies were not addressed or announced. Further, a lot of things could have been learned from practice drills, such as disaster preparedness best practices and efficient evacuation procedures. Because of their mismanagement, many people blamed FEMA for contributing to the trouble caused by Hurricane Katrina, including President Bush.

President Bush believed that FEMA's relief and rescue operations were poorly managed and wanted to dissolve this agency from the Homeland Security department and establish a larger and more powerful "National Protection and Response Authority". FEMA was known to be slow, disorganized, ineffective and wasteful at times. However, it should not be.

The core problems within FEMA can be solved by more than one approach. For example, they can work on issues of deploying slowly by working on more timely and effective communication practices. Utilizing timely and responsive communication with compatible systems would allow them to get information to those who need it faster, in order to coordinate relief efforts and respond to the disaster of the moment. The poor communication during Katrina contributed to the slow response and was one of the biggest issues during the disaster. Further, FEMA struggled with disorganization. This contributed to the negative public perception after Hurricane Katrina. To fix the issue of disorganization, they had to perform a careful review of roles and responsibilities. They also need to do extensive interviews of the candidates wanting a job with FEMA.

At the time of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush was also slow to respond. He had been vacationing in the days prior to the disaster. On his way back to the White House, his plane flew over the disaster. The photographers traveling with the president took a picture of Bush's face looking grim as he observed the scene below him. When the photo was later released, it memorialized his distance and seeming surprise over the devastation he witnessed below the safety of his plane. Later, when he was invited to visit the area, he initially declined, saying he didn't want to disrupt the rescue and recovery efforts.

He eventually did visit the affected areas, but in his book 'Decision Points,' Bush wrote, 'That photo of me hovering over the damage suggested I was detached from the suffering on the ground. That was not how I felt. But once that impression was formed, I couldn't change it.' It has been widely written that his reputation never recovered. People were extremely disappointed in him. Celebrity Kanye West accused him of being racist and "not caring" for the well-being of black people. At the time, President Bush used his power and position to attempt

to convince the public things were going well, going so far as to praise the director of FEMA at the time. Unfortunately, FEMA, with their reputation for disorganization, did not rise to the occasion in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and President Bush's praise for FEMA would eventually haunt him and contribute to the perception that he was out of touch and uninvolved.

Many lessons were learned from tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. A primary takeaway was that communication and coordination between federal and local government needs to be improved. Some experts believe we may never be truly "ready" for something that big to happen, but we may want to consider how well our institutions are prepared for these kinds disasters or events that require coordinated communication at all levels of government. Secondly, a significant percentage of the population did not know how to evacuate properly or what to prioritize when evacuating, so practicing and knowing where to go when a situation like this occurs can make things run more smoothly. Finally, the government (at any level) should prioritize communicating how people can help each other in a moment of crisis, such as Hurricane Katrina.