

# Hurricane Sandy no help to Obama in 2012 presidential race, new study suggests

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Josh Hart is an assistant professor of psychology at Union College and the study's author. Credit: Matt Milless

After Mitt Romney was defeated by President Barack Obama in the

2012 presidential election, some political pundits and even Romney himself tried to pin the loss in part on Hurricane Sandy.

Observers, particularly conservatives, believed the [storm](#) was an "October surprise" that allowed Obama to use the trappings of his office to show sympathy and offer support for the victims. The devastating storm hit a week before Election Day, killing hundreds and causing more than \$50 billion worth of damage.

But a new study examining the psychological impact of Sandy on people's voting intentions indicate the storm's influence was basically a washout.

"Results suggest that immediately following positive news coverage of Obama's handling of the storm's aftermath, Sandy positively influenced attitudes toward Obama, but that by Election Day, reminders of the hurricane became a drag instead of a boon for the president, despite a popular storyline to the contrary," said Joshua Hart, assistant professor of psychology at Union College and the study's author.

The study appears in the June/July issue of *Social Science Research*, a major journal that publishes papers devoted to quantitative [social science research](#) and methodology.

Two days after Hurricane Sandy made landfall Oct. 29, Hart began surveying likely voters when it became apparent the storm could impact the bitterly contested race between Obama and Romney.

Over the course of a week, the nearly 700 voters polled were asked about their exposure to the storm and related media coverage, as well as their voting intentions. Hart randomly assigned around half of each day's sample to think about the hurricane before reporting their voting intentions, so he could compare preference for Obama versus Romney

between voters who had been thinking about the storm, and those who had not.

Prior to the positive news coverage for Obama on Oct. 31, there was no influence of Sandy reminders on Obama's vote share. This was also true on Nov. 1, the day after his well-publicized embrace with New Jersey Republican Gov. Chris Christie while touring the hard-hit Jersey Shore. It was that appearance in particular that angered Romney supporters since Christie was a Romney surrogate.

Obama did receive a slight bump in support from study participants on Nov. 2 and 3 who thought about Sandy before reporting their voting intentions, but by Election Day, this trend reversed, when [news coverage](#) of the storm shifted and became more negative, focusing on loss of life, lingering damage and power outages.

"The data suggest that people going to the polls Nov. 6 with the hurricane on their mind would have been less inclined to vote for Obama," Hart said.

Still, that didn't stop a number of pundits from speculating that the storm was a critical factor in Romney's loss by slowing his momentum, despite polling evidence to the contrary. In winning 26 states and collecting 332 electoral votes, Obama received 51.1 percent of the popular vote to Romney's 47.2 percent.

Shortly after the election, Romney insisted Sandy played no role in his defeat.

"I don't think that's why the president won the election," Romney told Fox News, instead blaming his own "47 percent" comments and his inability to connect with minority voters.

Six months later, Romney changed his tune.

"I wish the hurricane hadn't have happened when it did because it gave the president a chance to be presidential and to be out showing sympathy for folks," Romney told CNN.

Hart said his study doesn't reflect the whole of the story on Sandy's effect in the 2012 race, but that the results say more about the pundits than the voters.

"What it says about voters, perhaps, is that it can be difficult to predict or intuit exactly how they are going to process something like Sandy," he said.

"It depends on a number of variables and the effect may change over even shorter stretches of time. Yet pundits tend to seize on certain 'laws' such as presiding over a disaster makes an incumbent look presidential. But each event like Sandy deserves to be studied as a unique occurrence to help answer questions about the impact of unpredictable, large-scale events as they unfold."

In trying to determine whether or how an event affects elections, Hart says that it is important to use experimental approaches to test the influence of "priming," or activating thoughts of different topics, on [voters'](#) attitudes, in addition to more traditional polling methodology.

**More information:** Paper: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...  
ii/S0049089X14000441](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0049089X14000441)

Provided by Union College

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