

# Voters care about disaster preparedness just as much as relief

Voters are more interested in disaster preparedness funding than previously understood. Legislators can harness this to better reflect voter preferences and increase their chances of reelection.

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Based on Anderson, S.E., DeLeo, R., and Taylor, K., *Legislators do not harness voter support for disaster preparedness*. Risk Hazards Crisis Public Policy. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12261> (2022).

## The Policy Problem

Current disaster preparedness spending does not keep pace with the escalating severity of climate-fueled natural disasters, leaving communities vulnerable. Legislators typically think that the public cares more about programs that offer help after disasters, over programs that help communities anticipate and prepare for them. This leads legislators to prioritize relief spending, assuming that it will increase their likelihood of reelection. However, research indicates that agencies are underfunding disaster preparedness programs, especially in the face of climate change and because experts estimate that \$1 more of investment in preparedness would mitigate future damages by \$4–\$15. Are legislators correct in assuming that the public is more supportive of disaster relief than preparedness or are they misreading their constituents?

## Key findings and proposed solutions

- Voters prefer increased funding for both disaster preparedness and relief, and legislators should harness this newly-understood support.
- Legislators are responsive to perceived voter preference for disaster spending, but are still more willing to spend on relief than preparedness.
- Past disaster costs at the state level can influence voters to support preparedness spending without modeled estimates for future impact.

## What We Found

In general, legislators think that the public pays little attention to disaster policy. But when surveyed, legislators and the public both expressed interest in increased spending for disaster preparedness and relief. The public said they would like to see 622 percent and 639 percent more public spending on disaster preparedness and relief, respectively. Similarly, legislators said they would like to spend 249 percent and 256 percent more for disaster preparedness and relief, respectively. This highlights an opportunity for legislators to increase investments in disaster preparedness, and gain voter support. Additionally, survey findings indicate that there is no clear benefit to investing in modeling that predicts future costs of natural disasters to justify preparedness spending. In evaluating future costs, the public does not seem to differentiate between disaster preparedness, relief, response, or recovery. This indicates that disaster preparedness and relief policies should be messaged as customized, locally-specific programs that approach natural disasters through a climate adaptation lens. This frame of messaging could increase voter awareness and support of disaster policy even when a natural disaster does not occur.

## What We Did

We developed two surveys to understand whether disaster funding perceptions and preferences of legislators and members of the public are barriers to disaster preparedness spending. The first collected responses from over 200 U.S. state legislators over the summer of 2017. The survey of the public, executed in 2019, included 1,055 individuals that represented U.S. demographics. Both surveys asked questions about state disaster budgets and national spending averages, presented as vignettes, including how much respondents would like to spend on disaster preparedness and relief. Additionally, the survey framed questions as losses over the past 10 years or predicted future losses to explore whether previous disaster relief spending motivates support for disaster preparedness and relief spending.

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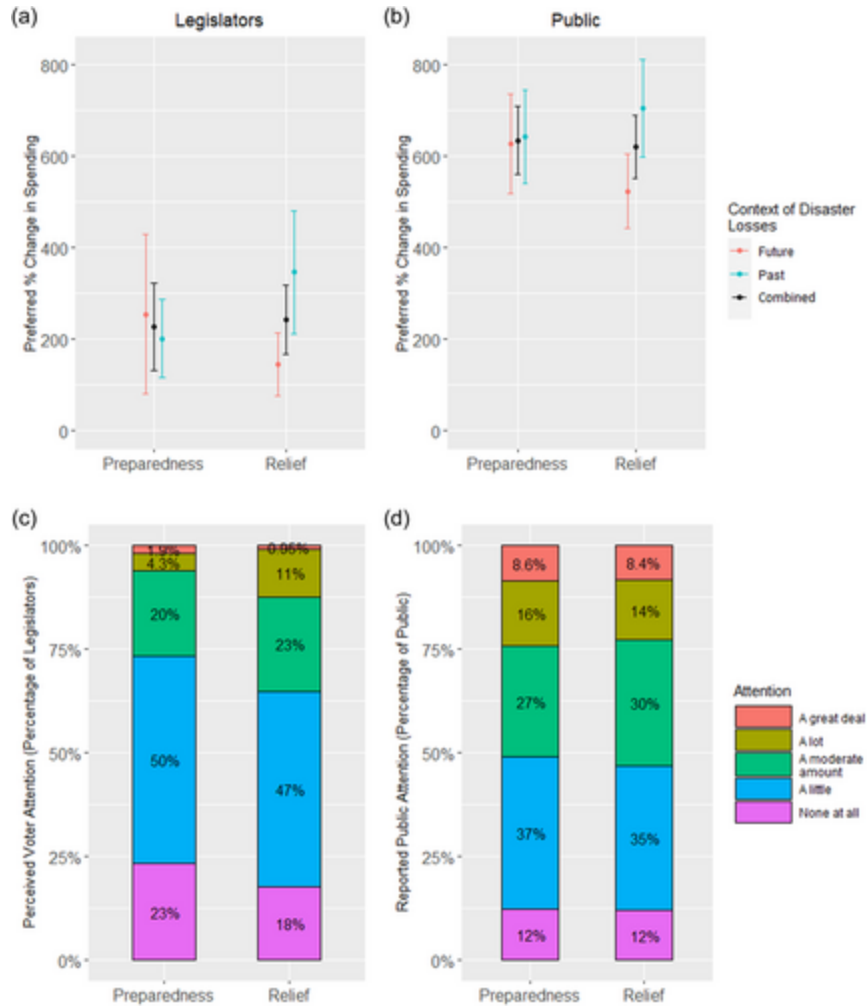


Fig. 1 Legislator and public preferences for spending and attention to preparedness and relief. Both legislators and the public indicate a preference for increasing spending on disaster preparedness and relief. Legislators' perceived voter attentiveness for disaster preparedness and relief do not align with public reporting about how much the public pays attention to disaster preparedness and relief. Legislators perceive that a majority of the public pays a little or no attention to disaster preparedness and relief; however, public reporting indicates that half of the public pays a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal of attention to disaster preparedness and relief.