

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SLOW-ONSET DISASTERS: EVIDENCE FROM THE EBOLA OUTBREAK

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ABSTRACT. Health epidemics - the paradigmatic case of “slow-onset” disasters - represent an extreme test of governmental accountability. In this paper, I study the response of the Liberian government to the 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak, and the subsequent effects on citizens’ voting behavior and political perceptions. I combine proprietary data on Ebola cases, novel survey data, and publicly available data on the government’s response and post-outbreak Senatorial election. I first provide evidence of limited governmental relief effort before the arrival of foreign aid, in contrast to improved assistance after aid was provided. I then build a spatio-temporal epidemiological model to estimate the ex-ante optimal allocation of relief effort. I show that resources were misallocated towards swing villages, due to strategic electoral concerns. Voters in turn reacted to the differential response: the incumbent party lost political support in areas hit by Ebola in the first part of the epidemic, while it did not lose votes in areas hit in the second part, and in swing villages. I conclude by discussing the costs to citizens of the political misallocation of resources.

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