

# Is God good at politics?

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It must have seemed like a good idea at the time: Let God decide how to distribute \$1.7 billion in federal money to clean up Texas after Hurricanes Dolly and Ike.

Rather than use federal data on the actual number of buildings, dams, roads and bridges damaged by last year's storms, let's base the local allocations on where God made the sea surge, the wind blow hard and the land flood from heavy rain.

Measure the acts of God, not the damages to people.

That's what ORCA did, perhaps thinking it would blunt accusations of politics in disaster relief distribution. Don't like the formula? Blame God.

It didn't work.

ORCA in this case is not a whale. It's the state's **Office of Rural Community Affairs**, and it was tasked by Gov. **Rick Perry** with deciding how to divvy out the federal recovery funds for Ike and Dolly.

Choosing an agency with "rural" in its title was, of course, a political decision. We shouldn't be surprised that it would come up with a plan that starts by treating population density as irrelevant.

According to an analysis by Gulf Coast Interfaith, a respected Galveston community organization, ORCA's approach puts Ike's damage factor in Chambers County at higher than either Galveston or Harris counties. Yet Galveston County had 10 times more documented damaged homes than Chambers, and Harris County had 36 times more.

The analysis indicated money available to homes with more than \$8,000 in damage would average \$27,111 in the Houston/Galveston area but \$237,047 in deep East Texas.

Not surprisingly, the **Harris County Commissioners Court** unanimously opposed the plan recently.

Perry had a legitimate reason for what appears to be the strange choice of using a rural agency to distribute funds that come from Washington's **Department of Housing and Urban Development**.

The state agency that normally deals with such funds, the **Texas Department** of Housing and Community Affairs, was excoriated two years ago for its handling of funds for Hurricane Rita.

An audit found that more than two years after the hurricane, only 13 families had been helped of the more than 4,000 that applied.

But just because one bureaucracy blew it doesn't make another bureaucracy the savior.

ORCA said it went to the God model because it didn't have good damage estimates for Hurricane Dolly, which hit the Rio Grande Valley a month before Ike hit Galveston and Houston, among others. **Federal Emergency Management Agency** workers had to leave the Valley to deal with Ike.

But FEMA did a good job documenting damage from Ike, the far greater storm. So it makes no sense to ignore the data from Ike because of poor data from Dolly.

Because it makes no sense, political conspiracy theories abound.

For example, while U.S. Sen. **Kay Bailey Hutchison** led the state delegation to secure a total of about \$3 billion in federal funds for Ike and Dolly, the governor, whom she is challenging in March's gubernatorial primary, is in charge of distributing it.

The resulting plan looks much more like a "spread-the-wealth" plan than a plan based on actual damage.

And Perry's base is stronger in rural East Texas than in the big cities and their suburbs.

The way the money is being distributed is also good for local politicians. It does not require them to follow federal guidelines on spending for housing, allowing them to fund more infrastructure projects.

Infrastructure projects generate more campaign contributions than hiring small firms to fix up the homes of poor folks, most of whom don't vote.

There's more, but I'm out of room.

Suffice it to say the formula may be based on acts of God, but as always the devil is in the details.

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