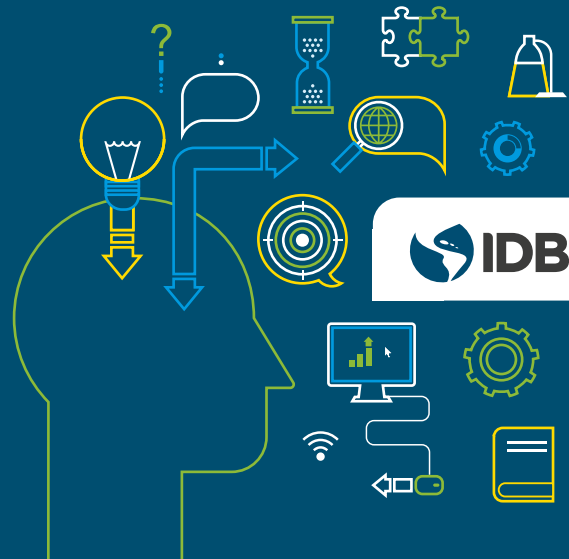


How Do Natural Disasters and the Efficacy of Disaster Relief Efforts Affect Political Trust?

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- ➔ The 7.1-magnitude earthquake in Mexico City in 2017 led to an 11% drop in general political trust.
- ➔ Proximity to relief efforts was found to potentially mitigate the negative impact on political trust.
- ➔ Disaster prevention and management can provide a critical trust-building opportunity.



CONTEXT

Political trust is essential to the functioning of democracy, as representative democracy rests on delegation, which requires trust. Trust increases public demand for welfare-enhancing policies and facilitates social cohesion, which in turn enhances trust, and trust is crucial in times of disaster when private-public collaboration is necessary for effective recovery. Trust in political institutions is fragile, however, and can be significantly influenced by governmental responses to crises. Large-scale disasters can lower general political trust via two paths: stressing state capacity and increasing avenues for corruption. Efficient and transparent disaster relief could buffer this impact.



PROJECT

This project evaluates the impact of a magnitude 7.1 earthquake in September 2017 in Central Mexico, which resulted in 369 deaths and approximately 2,000 injuries. The earthquake also toppled dozens of buildings and damaged thousands of structures. This study's core data come from two waves of a survey of adult residents of the Greater Mexico City area: one immediately before the earthquake and another two months later. Using data on aid distribution centers' locations and people's access to them, we investigate the potential mitigating role of disaster relief efforts on trust in politicians and civil servants.



RESULTS

The earthquake led to an observable decline in political trust, shedding light on the sensitivity of public confidence to government actions during crises. The findings indicate an 11% drop in general political trust, emphasizing the vulnerability of trust in the face of natural disasters. This decline, however, was not uniform, as proximity to disaster relief efforts significantly influenced trust levels. As shown in the [figure 1](#), those closer to aid centers exhibited less erosion in trust, suggesting that direct observation or receipt of aid could mitigate negative perceptions.

The analysis considered both self-reported proximity to aid distribution centers and objectively verified locations, finding a complex relationship between aid presence and trust restoration. In addition, media and public discourse had roles in shaping trust post-disaster. While government-provided aid had an impact on trust, the source of aid—governmental or otherwise—did not alter the positive correlation with trust.

Key Concept

POLITICAL TRUST



The public's confidence in the government and political institutions.

These results are particularly notable considering the study's context—a metropolis with a history of disaster response challenges. The research added a new dimension to the understanding of political trust, suggesting that aid distribution, even in complex urban environments, carries significant potential to restore public confidence.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings are relevant for policymakers, particularly in disaster-prone regions. The evidence that disaster relief can help sustain or recover political trust indicates that authorities should adopt enhanced preparedness and responsive disaster management strategies. This could involve investing in infrastructure resilient to natural disasters, transparent aid distribution mechanisms, and ensuring equitable access to relief. As rapid and efficient disaster relief responses are crucial to maintaining or restoring public trust in political institutions, policymakers should prioritize trust-building measures in disaster management to foster resilience in governance.

Key Concept

DISASTER RELIEF

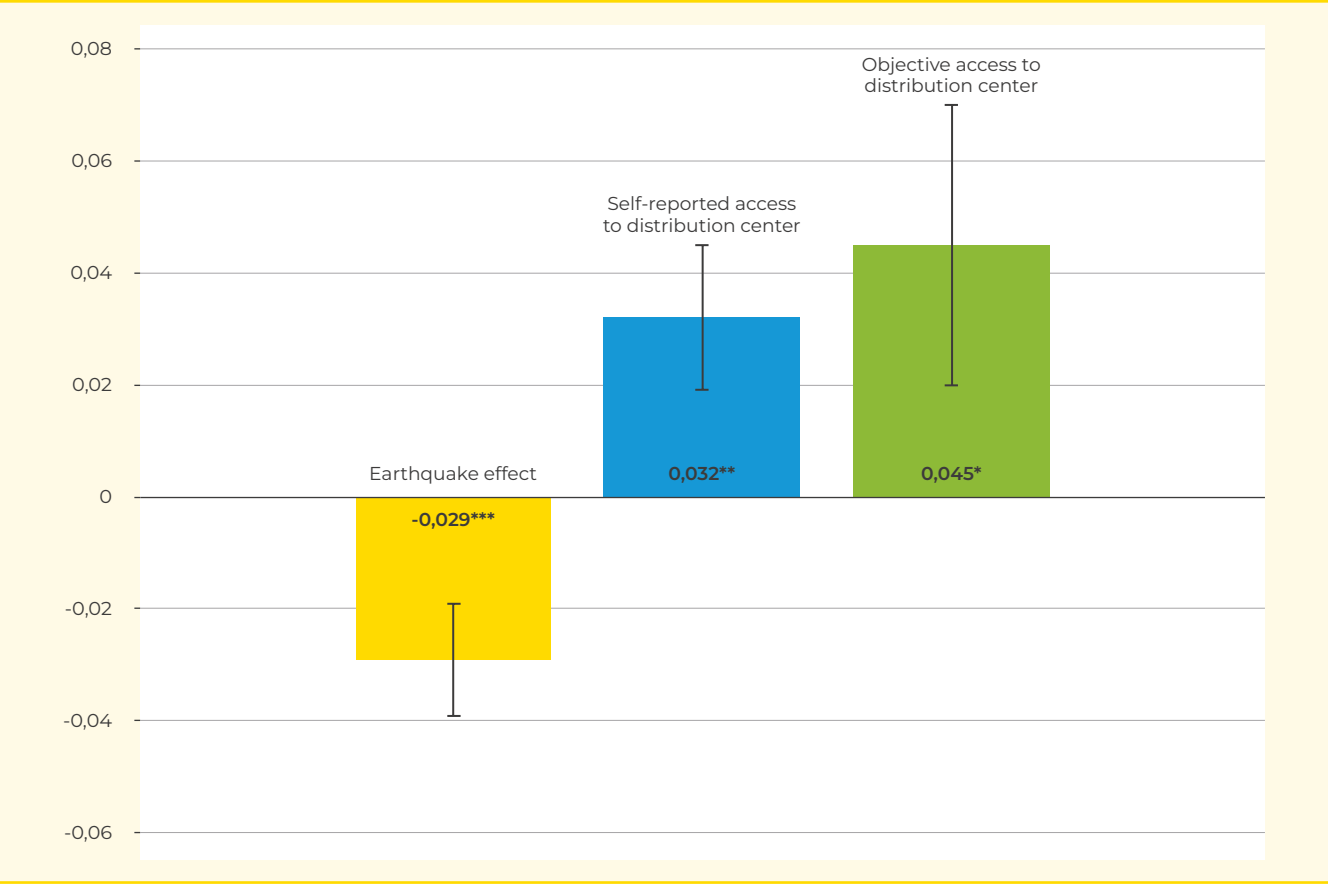


Assistance provided to individuals and communities affected by natural disasters.

Moreover, governments need to prioritize building trust proactively, not just as a response to crises. Strategies like involving communities in disaster preparedness plans, ensuring accountability in aid distribution, and fostering a collaborative relationship between public institutions and citizens could be vital. Furthermore, communication plays a vital role in disaster preparation and response, as clear and consistent messaging about aid programs can help maintain trust during tumultuous times.

In essence, disaster management is not only a logistical challenge, but also a critical trust-building opportunity. It should be approached holistically, considering disaster response's long-term political and social ramifications. **For international agencies and national governments, these insights could guide the allocation of resources and the development of policies that reinforce the social contract between the state and its people, even in the face of adversity.**

FIGURE 1. Effects of Earthquake and Access to Aid on Political Trust



Note: The figure reports the results of the earthquake, and self-reported and objective distribution centers on general political trust (separate regressions). Regression controls include Gender, Age, Education, Household size, Children in the household, and Regional fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p<0.01.

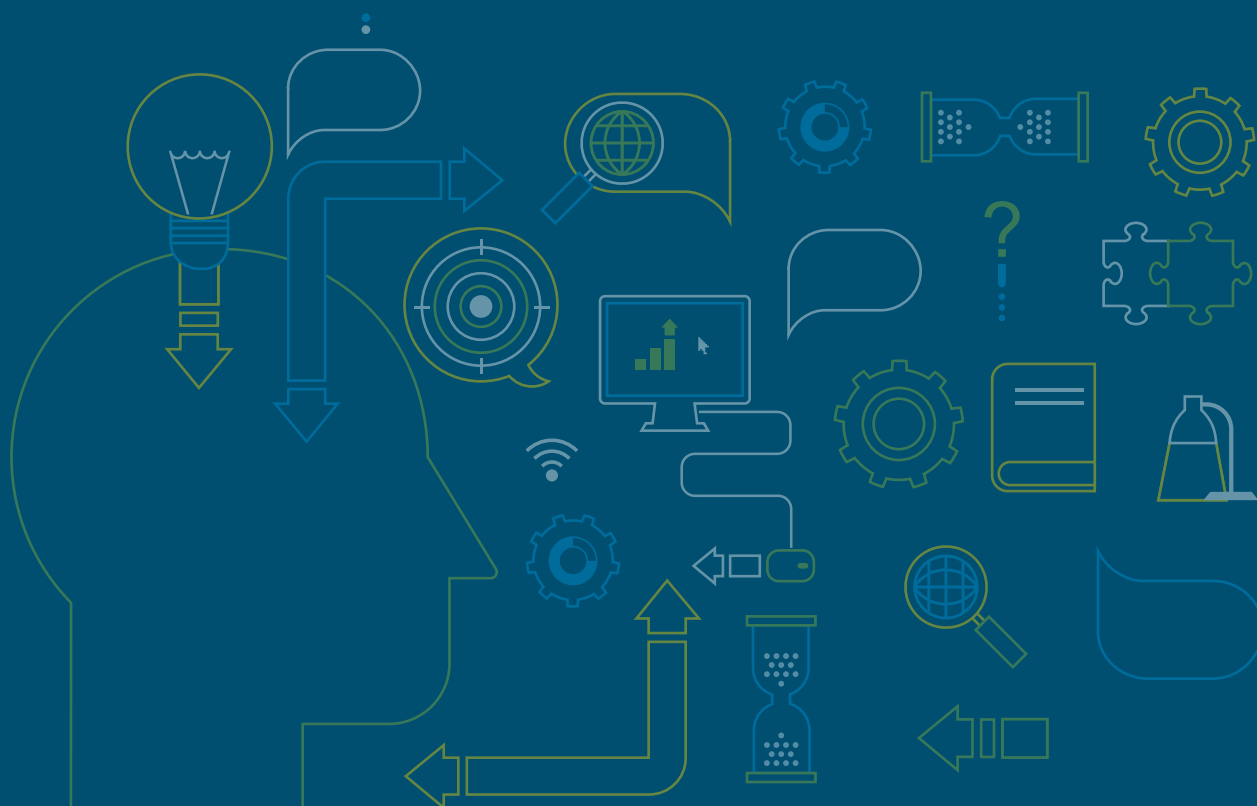


FULL STUDY

Frost, Margaret, Sangeun Kim, Carlos Scartascini, Paula Zamora, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2024. “Disaster and Political Trust: A Natural Experiment from the 2017 Mexico City Earthquake.” IDB Working Paper No. 1192. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0005511>.

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