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Floods, Relief and the Ballot: Electoral Accountability in Assam after the 2024 Floods

Dimpal Das, *Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Gauhati University, Assam, India*
Rimjhim Saikia, *Asst. Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Digboi College, Assam, India*

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Abstract

Disasters like those occurring in India's flood-prone state of Assam pose a unique challenge to evaluating democratic accountability. While governments have no ability to control rainfall or river flow, they will likely receive credit or blame for how well they prepare for, respond to, and recover after a disaster. In this paper we examine the impact of the 2024 floods on electoral accountability by linking the extreme flooding experienced in 2024 with voter behaviour during the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly election. Our research used two sources of information: the District Level Flood/Relief Data provided by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), as well as our own Election Results dataset, along with a pre-disaster political baseline developed from the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Importantly, our research indicates that there is a conditional nature to how voters evaluate their elected officials' performance relative to the negative impacts of disasters such as those experienced in 2024 in Assam. Specifically, we found that, unlike previous research indicated, voters did not automatically punish elected officials who suffered from recurring disasters. Rather, voters evaluated how their elected official responded politically to the crisis.

Keywords: Assam, floods, electoral accountability, disaster relief, political economy

Flooding in Assam is an environmental event. The destruction of standing crops, damage to roads and schools, disruption of markets, displacement of households and an immediate need for government assistance constitute just some of the ways in which citizens in flooded regions become aware of government activities. As a consequence, floods provide a significant opportunity for assessing democratic accountability. However, identifying the political implications of floods is more complicated than at first apparent. Governments typically bear little or no direct responsibility for rare storms producing abnormally high levels of precipitation. On the other hand, citizens may hold governments accountable for preparing for such events, mitigating the effects of such events and providing adequate support to victims once the storm has passed. As a result, researchers analyzing voter behavior following natural disasters have generated conflicting conclusions. Studies examining various types of natural disasters across numerous democracies have found that

voters tend to punish incumbents for poor preparation and inadequate relief efforts following a disaster. Other studies have demonstrated that voters often reward incumbents with large amounts of support if they appear responsive and deliver sufficient aid to constituents immediately following a disaster. Researchers have identified several factors influencing how voters assess the performance of elected officials relative to natural disasters including party affiliation, attributing responsibility for the disaster, exposure to media coverage of the disaster and whether the disaster occurs close enough to an election date (Cole et al., 2012; Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Healy & Malhotra, 2009; Masiero & Santarossa, 2021; Blankenship et al., 2021; Rubin, 2020).

Assam presents a particularly distinct context for reassessing these assertions. Flooding is a common occurrence in Assam rather than a rare event. Flooding affects large portions of the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley economically and socially. Consequently, the state experiences multiple major floods wave annually. According to ASDMA (2024), there were three major flood waves recorded in 2024. Every single one of Assam's thirty-five districts experienced a flood wave affecting nearly forty-three million individuals across seven thousand nine hundred ninety-four villages. There were one-hundred-twenty-one fatalities due to flooding and landslides. Additionally, the state required approximately five hundred seventy-nine billion rupees under the Final Flood Memorandum for both immediate reconstruction costs and longer-term restoration requirements (ASDMA, 2024).

Therefore, the primary question posed by this paper is as follows: Was increased exposure to flooding during 2024 associated with an electoral backlash against the ruling government in the 2026 Assam Assembly election? What does evidence regarding the pattern of relief distributed by the government indicate about relationships between environmental shock and political accountability? Three contributions exist within this paper. First, this paper introduces Assam into the global comparative literature regarding disaster and elections. Second, this paper illustrates the necessity of establishing a pre-flood partisan base line. Comparing flood severity to election returns would be misleading since regional politics are clearly delineated throughout Assam. Third, this paper separates between hazard and government response. Although a flood can lead to loss of revenue to local economies, relief provided by government can serve as a tangible example of responsiveness from the state toward its citizens. These two possible outcomes can occur independently.

To make it easier for readers to follow the progression of ideas presented in this paper, I have separated this paper into four separate sections. The first section describes disasters and electoral accountability; the second section identifies flood vulnerabilities and political economy in Assam; the third section analyzes flood exposure in 2024 relative to election returns in 2026; and finally, the fourth section evaluates relief provided by government as well as visibility and experience created by government action.

Disasters and Electoral Accountability:

The concept of "retrospective voting" suggests that citizens will assess their elected officials at least partially based on the outcomes of past actions. In theory, if citizens are able to differentiate between the impact of the official's actions and external factors outside of their control, then retrospective voting can act as a form of accountability. However, in reality this differentiation is frequently not made.

It was because natural disasters create uncontrolled events which politicians typically do not create those natural disasters became a focal area for research into the effects of

retrospective voting. Voters who punish elected officials solely due to the occurrence of a drought, earthquake, hurricane, or flood would exhibit a form of "blinded" or "myopic" behavior. Conversely, voters who differentiate between the disaster event and the quality of the government's response to the event could continue to use retrospective voting as a form of accountability.

One influential example of the potential blind nature of retrospective voting is Healy and Malhotra (2009). Through an examination of disaster policy and American election outcomes, Healy and Malhotra demonstrate that while voters were willing to provide electoral credit for visible forms of relief spending during disaster seasons, there existed limited electoral incentives for voters to provide credit to elected officials for expenditures that represented preparation efforts prior to disaster seasons. Consequently, this creates an undesirable incentive structure; the prevention of future disaster impacts may produce greater overall societal benefits than providing assistance after a disaster has occurred; however, prevention efforts are likely to remain less politically salient than post-disaster assistance efforts. A similar body of literature examines the electoral implications of natural disasters and how voters' ability to assign blame for the negative impacts of natural disasters to specific governmental institutions influences these outcomes. Specifically, Gasper and Reeves (2011) examine how the electoral implications of natural disasters are influenced by whether voters have reason to hold local, state or national level government(s) responsible for the negative impacts experienced during a disaster event.

While the body of research cited above contributes to our understanding of how voters utilize retrospective voting when assessing the actions taken by their elected officials in response to natural disasters, it also highlights a broader literature examining how disaster-related assistance can influence voter evaluations of elected officials. Cooperman (2022) provides one example from Brazil demonstrating how emergency relief assistance can become tied to electoral incentives. These types of findings complicate the determination of whether voters are electorally rewarding competent responses to disasters, politicians are electorally incentivizing strategic allocations of emergency relief assistance, or both processes occur concurrently.

Flood Vulnerability and the Political Economy of Assam:

Floods in Assam reflect a combination of the state's monsoonal climate and geography including its location within one of India's most rainfall-rich areas; the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers and associated tributaries; sedimentation; erosion; historical patterns of floodplain settlement; and long-term infrastructural decisions. The State government's 2024 flood report states that Assam lies in one of India's highest rainfall zones, references numerous tributaries entering both the Brahmaputra and Barak River systems, and emphasizes that many sections of the state's existing embankments are aged.

Consequently, neither flood risk nor socio-economic vulnerability are distributed uniformly throughout the state. Spatial variations exist among riverine plains, chars (river deltaic islands), townships, tributary basin locations, and hill districts. As such, variations in flood exposure also result in significant variation in household socio-economic vulnerability. For example, through analysis of over 11,000 households in the Brahmaputra Valley region, Mahanta and Das (2017) found that households experiencing higher flood exposures were significantly more vulnerable to poverty. Furthermore, their study demonstrated that household coping mechanisms varied significantly depending on their institutional access

and available socioeconomic resources. Thus, even though two households may experience an identical physical hazard resulting from flooding; each may experience an entirely different economic shock.

Research conducted since 2020 supports this conclusion. For example, Bhuyan et al. (2024) identified significant spatial variability in flood risk in Nagaon District. Similarly, Baruah (2023) argued that flooding and river bank erosion should not be viewed simply as naturally occurring phenomena since government policies, infrastructure, and broader political economy processes contribute to what Baruah terms a "hazardscape." Additionally, Jain et al. (2025) emphasized the need to consider all three dimensions (hazard, exposure, and vulnerability) in evaluating flood governance.

Research conducted at the household level within flood-prone districts of the Brahmaputra Valley also indicates that institutional accessibility and livelihood diversity affect household resilience. Mixed methods research recently completed in five districts located along the Brahmaputra River (Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Morigaon, Nalbari and Barpeta) indicate substantial variability in household vulnerability to floods and document several institutional constraints on equitable relief delivery, including unequal relief distribution and lack of disaster management infrastructure.

Thus, "flood exposure" is not a singular experience. While for one household it may be characterized by temporary water logging; for another household it may include crop destruction; for yet another household loss of a home/dwelling or repetitive erosion threatening long term displacement. Moreover, government responses vary substantially. Evidence from the 2024 flood season illustrates the extent of this problem.

Table 1: Selected Indicators of the 2024 Assam Floods

Indicators	**2024 cumulative figure**
Districts affected	35
Revenue circles affected	156
Villages affected	7,794
People affected	4,295,611
Flood and landslide deaths	121
Cropped area affected	49,580.43 ha
Relief camps/shelters	866
Relief distribution centres	4,113
People accommodated in relief camps	186,685
Schools reported damaged	1,058
Final memorandum requirement	approx ₹570.92 crore
Rescue/relief component in memorandum	approx ₹241.97 crore
Immediate infrastructure repair/restoration requirement	approx ₹1,227.39 crore

Source: Compiled from Government of Assam, ASDMA, Assam Flood Memorandum 2024 (ASDMA, 2024).

The statistics for the indicators shown in Table 1 demonstrate that the potential for political ramifications for the 2024 Assam flood exists. In excess of 4 million people are likely to be directly impacted by the 2024 flood as a result of their experience. Additionally, the delivery of relief services is likely to be very visible; hundreds of temporary shelters and thousands of distribution centers will operate throughout the State. Damage resulting from

the flood will go far beyond the loss of personal property to include impacts on public infrastructure such as roads, schools, agricultural land, etc. (ASDMA, 2024)
There were three flood waves identified during this time period (ASDMA, 2024) which has political implications. Unlike a one-time or short-term duration event, multiple flooding events can lead to cumulative loss of income and repeated interactions with emergency management personnel. Furthermore, repeated flooding can create new expectations. Therefore, depending upon how voters perceive the response of the government to these flood disasters (in comparison to previous years), versus how they compare it to a hypothetical year without any flood disasters, will determine if there are election implications.

Table 2: Flood Exposure and BJP–AGP Electoral Position in the 12 Most Affected Districts

District	Persons affected, 2024	Villages affected	BJP-AGP leads, pre-flood 2024	BJP-AGP seats, 2026
Dhubri	953,532	753	1/5	2/5
Nagaon	447,865	332	4/7	4/7
Darrang	267,332	226	2/3	2/3
Karimganj/Sribhumi	262,330	455	3/4	2/4
Cachar	241,576	311	6/7	6/7
Lakhimpur	175,031	379	4/5	4/5
Barpeta	170,093	303	1/4	1/4
Morigaon	156,708	305	2/3	2/3
Sivasagar	152,857	251	0/3	2/3
Hojai	126,813	99	2/3	2/3
Golaghat	121,106	226	5/5	5/5
Dhemaji	120,391	343	3/3	3/3
Total	**3,195,634**	**3,983**	**33/52**	**35/52**

Source: Author's compilation from ASDMA flood data, 2024 parliamentary Assembly-segment returns and ECI 2026 Assembly results. ECI's 2026 constituency results confirm the BJP and AGP winners used in the aggregation (ASDMA, 2024; Election Commission of India, 2024, 2026).

Three things can be said about what happened here. First, the three most severely damaged districts (Dhubri, Barpeta and Cachar) were not homogeneously governed before the disaster. In other words, the political influence of BJP-AGP was very weak in Dhubri and Barpeta before the disaster, whereas in Cachar Golaghat and Dhemaji, their position was extremely powerful. Thus, if we look only at 2026 as our time frame, there will be no correct relationship between the damage caused by flooding and how votes were cast because in many of the areas where voters suffered the worst under the disaster voting patterns did not change much after the disaster. Second, there is no real evidence that large-scale loss of seats has taken place among the heavily damaged area. As a matter of fact, the ruling party retained the exact same number of seats as well as the equivalent of Assembly Segments in nine out of twelve of the districts that were hit hard. The ruling coalition lost one seat in Karimganj/Sribhumi, won one in Dhubri and won two in Sivasagar. The governing party represented itself better than before with an additional three seats across the entire state. Their representation went from a lead over their opponents in thirty-three of fifty-two

Assembly segments prior to the floods (or sixty-four percent) to a victory in thirty-five Assembly elections (sixty-seven-point three percent). That represents a gain of approximately three-point eight percent -- which should not be interpreted as a "flood benefit" because there is obviously no comparison possible when it comes to the nature of the contests involved. However, it certainly undermines a strong form of the flood-punishment hypothesis. Thirdly, the overall result of voting throughout the state confirms this finding. In addition to winning eighty-two of Assam's one hundred twenty-six seats in the Assembly in 2026, the BJP won ten more seats through its alliance partner AGP. While the BJP won seventy-five of Assam's Assembly Segments prior to the flood (which accounts for forty-nine percent of all Assembly Seats contested), the BJP won eighty-two of them after the flood. These numbers do not represent direct causal comparisons; but they clearly contradict any interpretation of the events that suggests that the floods produced a massive voter backlash against the government of Assam (Election Commission of India, 2026).

Relief, Visibility and the Experience of the State:

If it is true that the extent of physical damage by itself does not determine election results, then how the state responds to that damage is significant. The Memorandum dated 14 May 2024 provides evidence of a major relief and rescue effort. On statewide level, according to data from the ASDMA, there were 866 relief camps or shelters and 4,113 centres for distributing supplies. During the period of flooding, more than 186 thousand people lived in these camps. The government reported that its estimates indicated an amount of approximately Rs. 241.97 crores for ex-gratia payment and rescue/relief efforts (ASDMA, 2024).



Figure 1: Image of a flood hit village in 2024 Assam floods, Source: North East Digital Desk (Published online on 1 July 2024)

There was considerable variability among the districts in their response to the crisis as would be predicted based on the different levels of need. For example, while the most severely affected districts (i.e., those that suffered the greatest degree of destruction) had many more camps/shelters established in them than other districts, some of which were relatively lightly affected. For instance, in Nagaon, which experienced one of the largest number of deaths due to landslides caused by monsoon rains, there were nearly 70 such facilities. In Cachar and Karimganj there were roughly double that number—202 camps/shelters and 175 respectively. In Sivasagar there were fewer than thirty. However, despite having one of the largest numbers of displaced persons Dhubri had fewer camps/shelters per person compared to other districts.

While this variability has analytical importance in determining why relief was delivered in certain ways, interpreting this causal relationship is problematic. While a large number of camps/shelters might suggest that officials responded effectively to administer relief and aid. Alternatively, it may have been indicative of the fact that so many residents were forced out of their homes. An inverse ratio of centres/population might indicate insufficient delivery of services, larger geographic service areas or variations in types and durations of flooding.

However, regardless of the reasons why relief was distributed in particular ways, the sheer magnitude of these activities makes it unlikely that citizens viewed the disaster solely as something negative — i.e., something destructive.

Flood exposure produces interactions with public administration. In terms of the relationship between Assam's context and the research findings of Cole et al. (2012), Assam's context shares similarities with their research findings regarding India. These researchers' studies found that when governments react forcefully to adverse events, they can mitigate their electoral losses. Similarly, Healy & Malhotra (2009) showed that voters respond to obvious expenditures made after a disaster, rather than before it occurs, in addition to responding positively to vigorous action taken by their elected leaders after a disaster.

It is not necessary for there to be vote buying in order for relief efforts to act as a mechanism whereby citizens develop perceptions about how well their administrative institutions operate when normal daily routines are disrupted. A functioning camp, a rescue operation, food distributions or rapidly restored roads can provide evidence as to whether administrative agencies have sufficient capacity to perform their assigned duties. Similarly, Fair et al. (2017) found in Pakistan that exposure to natural disasters can influence citizens' political engagement depending upon whether their government and/or civil society organizations provide adequate responses that demonstrate institutional capacity.

On the other hand, even though relief efforts can serve as evidence about government capacity, distribution creates issues related to inclusion. Households often compare what they receive with what neighbours receive. Local representatives often claim credit for relief efforts. Opponents use examples of delayed or excluded relief to question actions taken by incumbent politicians. Therefore, relief efforts create a space where meaning attributed to a disaster is constructed via political narratives.

Rubin (2020) states that political discourse is an important mediating factor between natural disasters and retrospective voting behavior after elections. Rubin's argument is applicable specifically to Assam's context. Voters do not perceive "the intensity of flooding" as a statistical variable. Rather, voters perceive damaged roads, flooded crops, breaches to earthen dams, packets of relief goods received, shelter provided in tents or campsites, compensation paid to families whose members died — or lack thereof — and interpret who should bear responsibility for those consequences through existing political narratives. Thus, it is possible for two individuals exposed to identical degrees of flooding will vote in opposite directions at the polls.

Implications for Democratic Accountability and Flood Policy:

Election campaigns do present opportunities to influence voters' perceptions of government performance on issues such as floods. However, there are also broader implications of the findings by Healy and Malhotra (2009) regarding the potential democratic distortion where

voters are more likely to reward their elected officials with votes if they have provided relief after a disaster rather than prior to it through preventative actions. In Assam, which is prone to recurring floods, emergency relief is essential; however, a system of government based upon repeated reliance on rescue and compensation will continue to be more visible in terms of politics than long term investment in resilience.

The 2024 Memorandum indicates that significant infrastructure damage has been caused by the flood events and that significant restoration efforts are required (ASDMA, 2024). Therefore, the issue for the Government of Assam is not simply increasing the number of relief centers available but reducing the extent to which predictable monsoons are converted into recurrent livelihood disasters.

There are at least five ways in which the Government of Assam could focus its efforts in order to achieve this objective:

1. Flood management should be assessed according to outcome-based metrics and not solely the amount spent. Data should include information about how quickly families were compensated, what percentage of affected households received aid and variations across different socio-economic groups.
2. Relief databases should increasingly be made publicly accessible in formats that enable linkage with both election-related and socio-economic data. District level aggregates of current data are useful but typically too large to be used effectively in establishing local mechanisms of accountability.
3. Administrative assessments should differentiate between the effects of short-duration inundations and those resulting from river bank erosions and/or multiple displacements. Both types of impacts result in different types of economic cost to individuals/families and may elicit political responses that differ significantly.
4. Flood-preparedness activities should have greater public visibility. In order for the public to see that their elected representatives are investing in prevention--through embankments inspections, improved drainage systems, elevated shelters, resilient schools and functional early warning systems--the incentive structure of politicians would no longer favor providing relief over preventing future floods.
5. Disaster governance should be recognized as a component of overall social policy. As shown by Mahanta & Das (2017), the impact of floods on poverty creates vulnerabilities. For example, for a family living near the poverty line, long run consequences from crop loss, animal death, or repeated repairs to property can occur even though immediate relief does prevent people going hungry.

Conclusion:

As the first point I would like to make, the 2024 Assam floods represented an extreme economic and humanitarian shock. An estimated 4.29 million people across all 35 districts experienced the impact of the floods with 7,794 villages being impacted, and sadly, 121 people losing their lives. The State responded to the crisis via a network of relief camps and distribution centers but was faced with significant challenges relative to recovery and restoring damaged infrastructure.

However, as we can see from the elections directly before the primary 2024 floods, the outcome of the electoral process for the BJP-AGP governing block in the districts representing nearly three quarters of the total number of people affected by the floods, was not clear cut. The BJP-AGP governing block had led 33 out of the 52 assembly segments in

the districts most severely affected by the floods prior to the elections. In fact, during the next Assembly election held in 2026, this same governing block increased its lead to 35 of these 52 assembly segments. There are several examples of very badly hit districts where there has been no shift in party allegiance; some have shown slight movement away from the governing block; while still other districts have shown significant movement toward the governing block. Therefore, the main conclusion here is that the Assam case does not demonstrate that flooding resulted in electoral benefits for the incumbent, nor does the data demonstrate that providing relief caused electoral support. Furthermore, this study also finds that there is no direct causal relationship between disaster exposure and electoral punishment of incumbent governments.

This study on Assam highlights how important having a true pre-flood baseline is when evaluating post-disaster election results. From an economic perspective, this study also demonstrates how difficult it is to separate the impacts of environmental disasters (e.g., flooding) from how effectively a government responds to such events. Finally, this study has implications regarding flood governance which include recognizing that electoral resiliency should not be equated with successful policies. A government may win an election after a natural disaster and yet many households may continue to experience economic vulnerabilities as a result of the event.

Therefore, rather than simply determining if voters reward or punish incumbent officials based upon performance during and following a disaster, the real democratic question is whether repeated electoral accountability provides sufficient incentive for elected officials to begin shifting from merely responding to floods toward mitigating the vulnerabilities that ultimately cause floods to become disasters.

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