



<https://www.eenews.net>

 A new Washington is taking shape. Stay informed with E&E News. [Learn more \(/election/\)](#)

**7-DAY UNLIMITED
ACCESS**

FREE TRIAL [\(/get-access/\)](#)

Trump initially refused to give California wildfire aid because it's a blue state, ex-aide says

By Scott Waldman, Thomas Frank | 10/03/2024 06:24 AM EDT

Former White House advisers said Trump hesitated as president to provide disaster aid to California because of the state's Democratic leanings.



Former President Donald Trump prepares to give remarks during a visit on Monday to Valdosta, Georgia, which was damaged by Hurricane Helene. Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, former President Donald Trump has blasted the Biden administration for its handling of the disaster — going so far as to accuse Democratic leaders of ignoring the needs of Republican storm victims.

But a review of Trump's record by POLITICO's E&E News and interviews with two former Trump White House officials show that the former president was flagrantly partisan at times in response to disasters and on at least three occasions hesitated to give disaster aid to areas he considered politically hostile or ordered special treatment for pro-Trump states.

Mark Harvey, who was Trump's senior director for resilience policy on the National Security Council staff, told E&E News on Wednesday that Trump initially refused to approve disaster aid for California after deadly wildfires in 2018 because of the state's Democratic leanings.

Advertisement

But Harvey said Trump changed his mind after Harvey pulled voting results to show him that heavily damaged Orange County, California, had more Trump supporters than the entire state of Iowa.

"We went as far as looking up how many votes he got in those impacted areas ... to show him these are people who voted for you," said Harvey, who recently endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris alongside [more than 100 other Republican](https://rbmr.alumni4harris.substack.com/p/over-100-republican-national-security) (<https://rbmr.alumni4harris.substack.com/p/over-100-republican-national-security>), former national security officials.

The exchange — not previously reported — drew a dumbfounded response on social media Thursday from President Joe Biden, who summed up Trump's attitude as: "You can't only help those in need if they voted for you."

"It's the most basic part of being president, and this guy knows nothing about it," Biden [posted on X](https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1841906202155839607) (<https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1841906202155839607>), reacting to a tweet about an earlier version of this article.

Democratic California Gov. Gavin Newsom piled on, [calling the episode](https://x.com/GavinNewsom/status/1841876424132841650) (<https://x.com/GavinNewsom/status/1841876424132841650>), "a glimpse into the future if we elect" Trump.

The Trump campaign did not respond to an E&E News request seeking comment.

Both Harvey and Olivia Troye, a former Trump White House homeland security adviser who backed up Harvey's claim, say Trump is approaching Hurricane Helene with a similar mindset. They say he is politicizing a disaster that has [killed more than 170 people](https://apnews.com/article/helene-asheville-north-carolina-3f812f70c4d2649e2198362e9ae42b06) (<https://apnews.com/article/helene-asheville-north-carolina-3f812f70c4d2649e2198362e9ae42b06>) in six states. And Troye, who has endorsed Harris for president, accused Trump of trying to divert attention from his own political liabilities on disaster responses.

She said if Trump wins the White House again, he will view disasters through a political lens that values personal loyalty over damage considerations.

"It's not going to be about that American voter out there who isn't even really paying attention to politics, and their house is gone, and the president of the United States is judging them for how they voted, and they didn't even vote," Troye said in an interview Wednesday.

Troye, who played a lead role in federal disaster response, said local political leaders regularly called her office begging for help because Trump refused to sign documents approving aid. Troye said she had to repeatedly enlist former Vice President Mike Pence to apply pressure.

Added Harvey: "There's no empathy for the survivors. It is all about getting your photo-op, right? Disaster theater to make him look good."

On Monday, Trump turned a visit to flood-damaged Valdosta, Georgia, into a partisan attack. He falsely claimed the Biden administration — and North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper (D) — were "going out of their way to not help people in Republican areas" and that GOP governors couldn't get the president on the phone.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, both Republicans, confirmed that wasn't true and praised the federal response. Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) also applauded the Biden administration's response to Helene, which damaged the southeastern part of the state.

While Trump is alone among political leaders in accusing President Joe Biden of ignoring the Republican victims of Hurricane Helene, his four years in the White House show that at times he played favorites with disaster response.

'They love me in the Panhandle. ... What do they need?'

In early 2019, shortly after taking office, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida met with Trump at the White House to ask a favor.

Months earlier, while DeSantis was running for governor, Hurricane Michael had caused massive damage in the Florida Panhandle.

DeSantis asked: Would the president order the Federal Emergency Management Agency to pay 100 percent of recovery costs instead of its customary 75 percent?

"This is Trump country — and they need your help," DeSantis told the president, according to the [Republican governor's autobiography](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/03/02/6-environmental-takeaways-from-desantis-new-book-00085283), (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/03/02/6-environmental-takeaways-from-desantis-new-book-00085283>), "The Courage to Be Free."

"They love me in the Panhandle," Trump replied, according to DeSantis' book, published in 2023 as he was preparing to run for president. "I must have won 90 percent of the vote out there. Huge crowds. What do they need?"

On March 9, 2019, [Trump signed an order](https://www.fema.gov/disaster-federal-register-notice/amendment-no-8-77) (<https://www.fema.gov/disaster-federal-register-notice/amendment-no-8-77>) directing FEMA to pay 100 percent of most disaster costs in Florida. As a result, FEMA paid roughly \$350 million more than it would have without Trump's intervention, according to an E&E News analysis.

But less than two months earlier, Trump threatened to veto a disaster-aid measure in Congress that would have FEMA pay 100 percent of all disaster costs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricane Maria killed more than 3,000 people.

The White House said in [Jan. 16, 2019, policy statement \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/saphr268h_20190116.pdf\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/saphr268h_20190116.pdf) that it “strongly objects” to the proposal.

“Cost shares are critical to ensure that work with impacted jurisdictions is collaborative and that both partners have incentives to operate efficiently and control costs,” the Office of Management and Budget wrote.

The legislation failed in the Senate.

Presidents often increase the federal share of disaster costs for the worst disasters. Trump himself increased the federal share following 23 disasters during his administration including after Hurricane Maria, a [Congressional Research Service \(https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47646\)](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47646) report shows.

Trump paid 100 percent for Maria – but only for FEMA funds spent on debris cleanup and emergency protection. Under the legislation Trump opposed, FEMA would have paid 100 percent of all recovery costs for Maria including reconstruction.

The Department of Homeland Security Inspector General issued [eight reports criticizing FEMA's response \(https://www.oig.dhs.gov/taxonomy/term/813\)](https://www.oig.dhs.gov/taxonomy/term/813) to Hurricane Maria in both Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands during the Trump administration. The department oversees FEMA.

[An IG report in 2020 \(https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2020-09/OIG-20-76-Sep20.pdf\)](https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2020-09/OIG-20-76-Sep20.pdf) found that FEMA “mismanaged the distribution” of \$257 million in commodities, which “took an average of 69 days” to reach their destinations.

The report also found that FEMA gave [hurricane survivors in Puerto Rico junk food \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2020/10/02/fema-gave-hurricane-survivors-junk-food-report-010161\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2020/10/02/fema-gave-hurricane-survivors-junk-food-report-010161) including Oreos, Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal and Airheads candy. “Vendors were at capacity in providing nutritional meals following Hurricane Harvey,” the IG wrote, “and could not produce any more to support the effort in Puerto Rico.”

The Department of Housing and Urban Development [Inspector General found \(https://www.hudoig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/HUD%20OIG%20Final%20Report_2019SU0089451.pdf\)](https://www.hudoig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/HUD%20OIG%20Final%20Report_2019SU0089451.pdf) that the White House delayed the release of \$8.3 billion in HUD disaster aid for Puerto Rico that Congress approved in February 2018. HUD officials told the IG that the White House undertook a review process that it “had never before required.”

The money was allocated in January 2020.

The Trump administration also withheld for nearly two years a report that could have helped push Congress to improve HUD's disaster-aid program, [E&E News reported. \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/02/12/hud-sat-on-this-disaster-report-heres-why-it-matters-005482\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/02/12/hud-sat-on-this-disaster-report-heres-why-it-matters-005482) The report, completed in April 2019, was released the day before Trump left office.

Harvey, the former Trump special assistant, remembers trying to push Trump to get money out the door to Puerto Rico.

“It was very much a business deal, like, ‘This a lot of money. What are we getting in return for it?’” Harvey said. “There was still just a whole lot of stall, stall, stall, don't give them what they need yet.”

“It just goes into this pattern of, ‘We're not awarding that, these aren't my people.’ That general sense of, ‘I am here to help my people, and these aren't my people, so I don't have a responsibility to help.’”

Trump's approach to Puerto Rico stands in contrast to how he responded to a separate disaster in Alabama, where he won 63 percent of the vote in 2016.

In early 2019, [days after tornadoes killed 23 \(https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2019/03/06/does-trump-favor-red-states-when-disasters-hit-we-looked-031843\)](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2019/03/06/does-trump-favor-red-states-when-disasters-hit-we-looked-031843) people in Alabama, Trump wrote on Twitter, “FEMA has been told directly by me to give the A Plus treatment to the Great State of Alabama and the wonderful people who have been so devastated by the Tornadoes.”

There is no indication that FEMA gave special treatment to Alabama.

‘Get the politics out of the disaster’

The dim view of Trump's response to disasters isn't shared by all his former officials.

Former Trump FEMA Administrator Brock Long denied that the president slow-walked aid to Democratic areas. He said the evidence was there in the amount of money that went to California for wildfire recovery and to Puerto Rico after Maria.

But, Long said, the agency has too long been subjected to politicization from Republicans and Democrats alike.

Long, who was in North Carolina this week and described the destruction as “generational” damage, said that dragging its recovery into campaign politics would be very harmful.

That's why he wants FEMA to no longer be headed by a political appointee.

"You would hope that in major disasters like this, you could get the politics out of the disaster, and you would hope that we could focus on the people that are hurting," Long said. "Let them be the agency that can function and get the job done without politics on both sides."

Trump approved 89 disasters in states that opposed him, including 17 in California — more than any state, an E&E News analysis of FEMA data shows.

More than 80 percent of the disaster requests that Trump denied came from governors of states that he won in 2016, an E&E News analysis of FEMA data shows.

"There really is no difference that I've seen," Chad Berginnis, executive director of the Association of State Floodplain Managers, said in an interview this week.

"Brock Long, just like Deanne Criswell, are committed emergency managers trying to fill the intent of their agency and are doing as good a job as they possibly can," Berginnis said, referring to FEMA administrators under Trump and President Joe Biden.

RELATED ARTICLES

E&EDAILY (HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/PUBLICATION/EEDAILY/)

Headwinds hit effort to overhaul disaster relief (https://www.eenews.net/articles/headwinds-hit-effort-to-overhaul-disaster-relief/)

BY ANDRES PICON | 06/17/2024 06:44 AM EDT

E&EDAILY (HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/PUBLICATION/EEDAILY/)

Lawmakers stunned as disaster funds left out of stopgap bill (https://www.eenews.net/articles/lawmakers-stunned-as-disaster-funds-left-out-of-stopgap-bill-2/)

BY ANDRES PICON | 09/26/2024 07:05 AM EDT

CLIMATEWIRE (HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/PUBLICATION/CLIMATEWIRE/)

How Project 2025 would treat Helene survivors (https://www.eenews.net/articles/how-project-2025-would-treat-helene-survivors/)

BY THOMAS FRANK, CHELSEA HARVEY | 10/01/2024 06:28 AM EDT

CLIMATEWIRE (HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/PUBLICATION/CLIMATEWIRE/)

They died with the AC off. Why the government pays for heating but not cooling. (https://www.eenews.net/articles/why-the-government-lets-extreme-heat-get-away-with-murder/)

BY THOMAS FRANK | 09/03/2024 06:15 AM EDT

EXPERIENCE E&E NEWS FIRSTHAND

Request a FREE trial to receive unlimited access to

all 5 publications, source documents, and more.

GET ACCESS TODAY (/get-access/)

ENERGYWIRE
The transformation of the energy sector.

[\(/publication/energywire/\)](/publication/energywire/)

CLIMATEWIRE
Policy. Science. Business.

[\(/publication/climatewire/\)](/publication/climatewire/)

E&EDAILY
Congress. Legislation. Politics.

[\(/publication/eedaily/\)](/publication/eedaily/)

GREENWIRE
The leader in energy and environment news.

[\(/publication/greenwire/\)](/publication/greenwire/)

E&ENEWS
Late-breaking news.

[\(/publication/eenewspm/\)](/publication/eenewspm/)

[<< BACK TO CLIMATEWIRE \(HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/PUBLICATION/CLIMATEWIRE/\)](https://www.eenews.net/publication/climatewire/)