

How Did Two Hurricanes Affect Mail Voting and Registration?

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Introduction

Hurricane Helene made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane in Florida's Big Bend region on September 26 before sweeping through Georgia, the western corner of North and South Carolina, and eastern Tennessee. The storm carved a path of devastation throughout the Southeast less than seven weeks before Election Day, when citizens were registering to vote, and some voters were already receiving and casting absentee ballots. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declared a disaster in Florida beginning September 23, in Georgia beginning September 24, and in the Carolinas beginning September 25. Hurricane Milton formed as a Category 5 hurricane and made landfall on October 10 as a major hurricane, sweeping across Central Florida. A disaster declaration was announced, beginning on October 5.

As these disasters unfolded, killing over 100 people and destroying property and infrastructure throughout the region, many speculated about the effects they might have on the November 5 election. Did the hurricanes reduce the number of people who were able to either register to vote or to cast a vote by mail? Before, during, and after the storm, we at the MIT Election Data and Science Lab collected near-daily state- or county-level data on voter registrations and mail-in ballot activity in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

As the hurricanes moved through these states, daily updates on voter registrations and mail ballots cast do not show any clear evidence that large numbers of registrations or mail-in votes were lost during either storm. In Georgia, the processing and reporting of overseas ballots showed no clear signs of interruption during Hurricane Helene. In North Carolina, a small dip in the number of absentee ballots requested appeared to quickly be made up by an increase the following week. In South Carolina, while Hurricane Helene appeared to temporarily pause new voter registrations (or at least reporting them), there was a jump in voter registrations immediately after the storm, suggesting that many peoples' registrations were received or processed later than they would have been otherwise. Similarly, in Florida, Milton may have slightly decreased the number of mail-in ballots cast for a few days. Still, immediately after the storm, the most-affected counties appeared to quickly rebound. The impact of Helene and Milton on peoples' lives and livelihoods was severe, and no doubt there are voters whose election experience will be affected by the storms' destruction. And yet, for such destructive storms, there is no clear evidence that they caused any large-scale reductions in voters or ballots.

Georgia

In Georgia, absentee voting started on October 7, and in-person early voting began on October 15, both well after Hurricane Helene drenched the eastern and southern regions of the state. The only mail-in ballots cast during that period would be votes cast by overseas voters under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). While those voters would presumably not have been directly affected by the hurricane, it is possible that the processing, counting, and reporting of their votes could have been affected. Figure 1 shows the number of ballots returned before and after the storm hit: counties where a disaster was declared are displayed in orange, and other counties in purple. The question is whether the trends diverged immediately after the storm hit, with the counties that saw a disaster seeing lower numbers of cast ballots and other counties continuing as before.

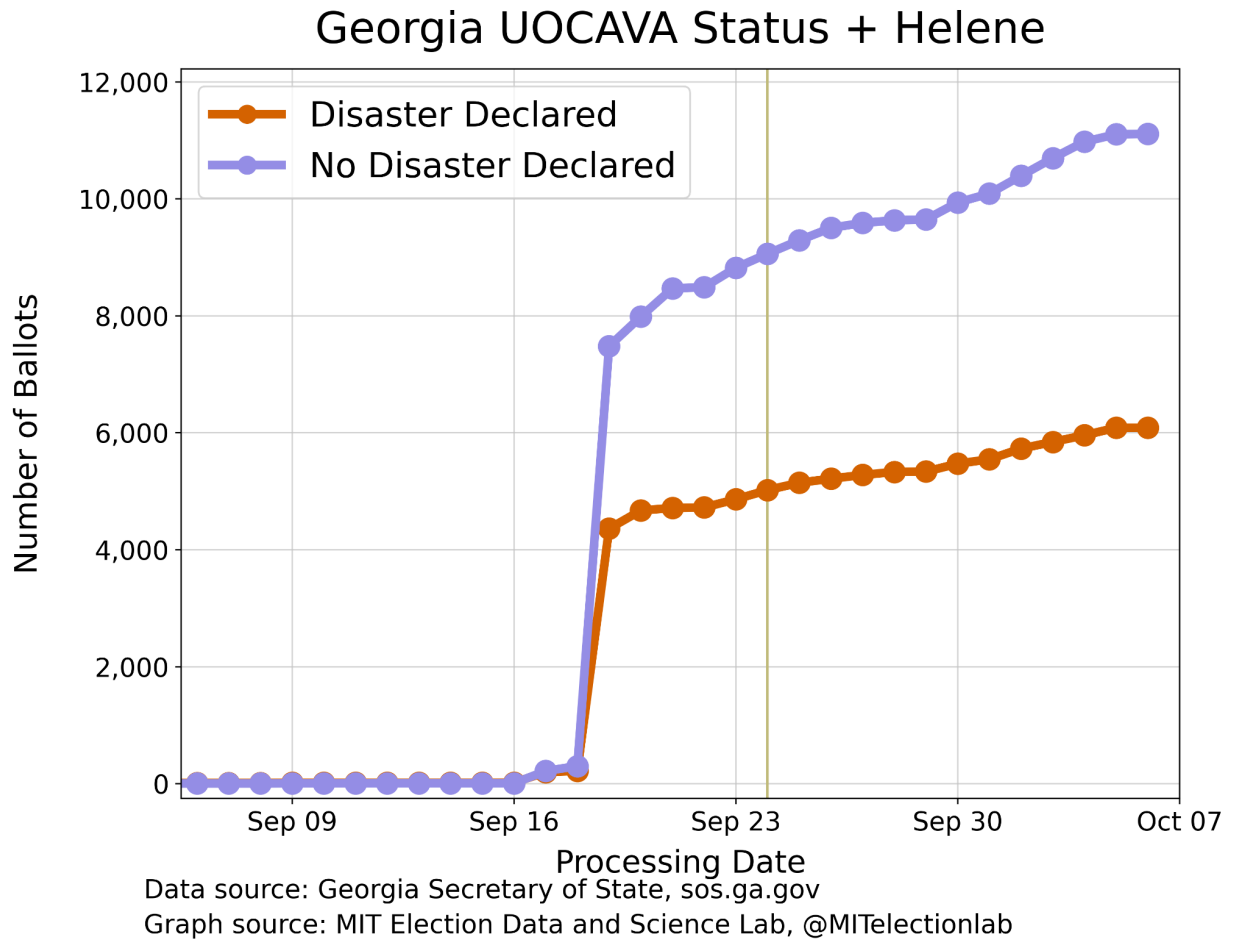
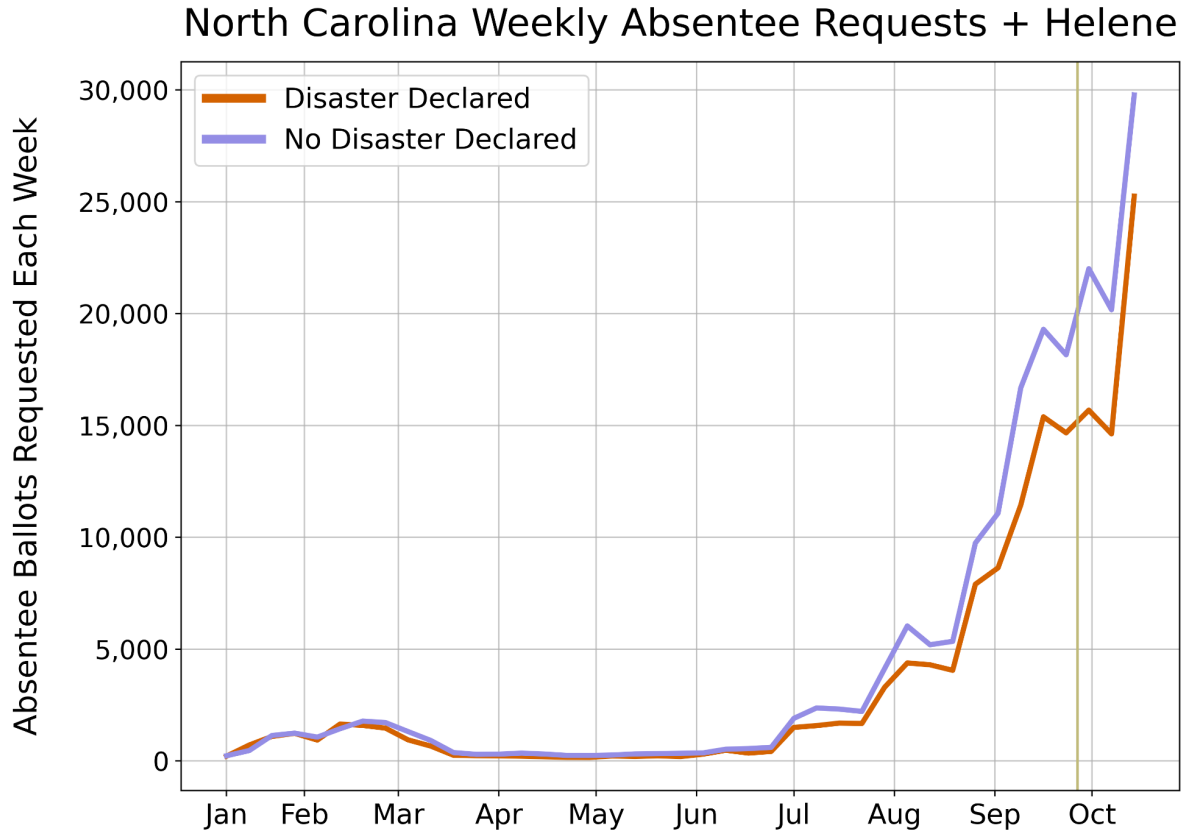


Figure 1: The number of ballots returned in Georgia when Hurricane Helene hit, separating out counties in which a disaster was declared (orange) and counties in which no disaster was declared (purple). The gold vertical line represents when a state of emergency was declared.

Figure 1 shows no clear evidence of such an effect. The trend in affected counties shows no clear break before and after the storm, and is not noticeably different from the trend in counties where no disaster was declared. It is worth emphasizing what this says about the robustness of Georgia’s election administration: even under a disaster declaration by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, election officials processed and reported cast ballots without any evident interruption.

North Carolina

While North Carolina was struck by Helene reasonably early in the absentee voting period, there is a much longer time series of requests to receive an absentee ballot. Figure 2, below, separates counties into those that had a FEMA disaster declaration and those that did not, to again compare the trends between counties with a declared disaster and counties without.



Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections, ncsbe.gov
 Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab, @MITelectionlab

Figure 2: The number of absentee ballots requested each week in North Carolina, broken down into two lines: one representing requests from counties within the FEMA Disaster Declaration zone (orange), and one line for those outside that region (purple). A gold vertical line marks the day of the disaster declaration.

This plot shows the impact of the hurricane more clearly. Before the hurricane, the number of absentee ballots requested in counties with a disaster (orange) generally increased and

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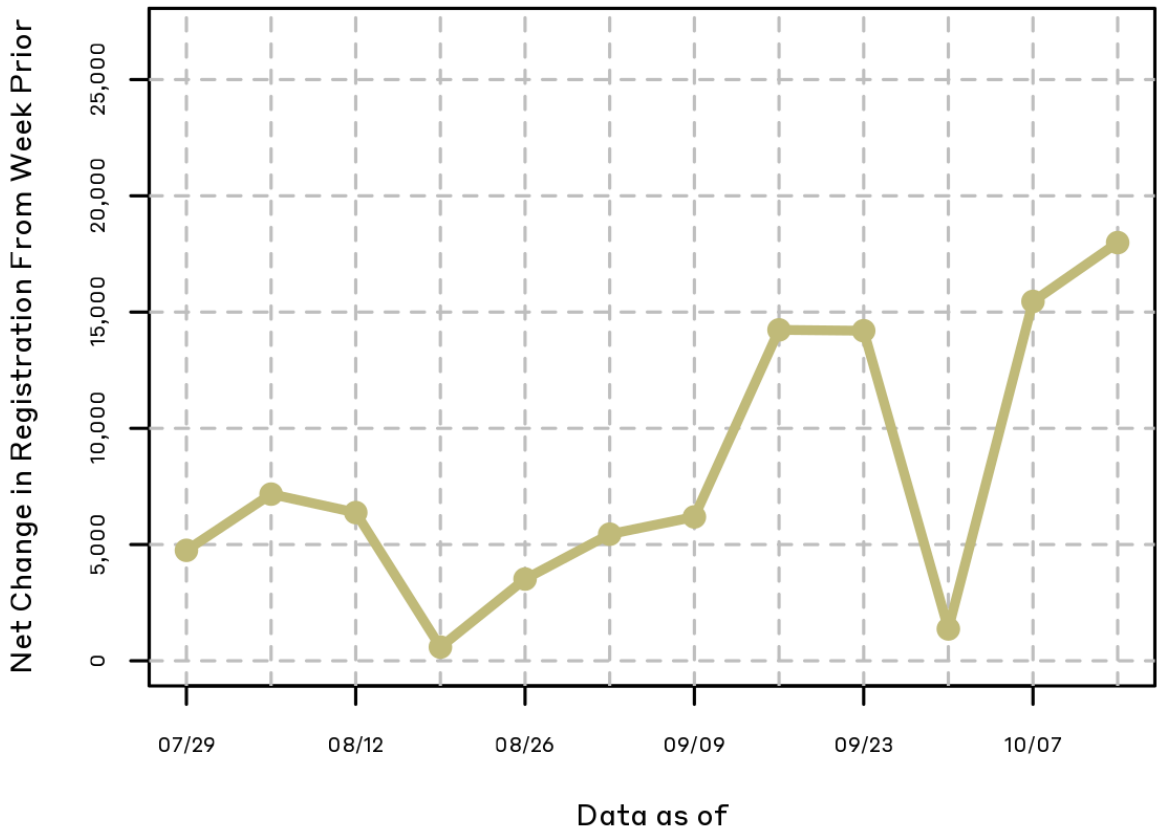
tracked with the number requested in counties without a disaster (purple), and the orange line is consistently lower throughout the summer and autumn months. In the days immediately surrounding the hurricane, however, counties in both categories dropped slightly from the steady increase they had previously exhibited. For four weeks, the affected counties oscillate around 15,000 new absentee requests per week, while the unaffected counties increase from 18,000 requests per week to 22,000.

At a glance, those counties affected by the disaster declaration do seem to have seen absentee ballot requests drop more than counties without a disaster declaration. However, it is worth emphasizing that despite the drop, officials were still processing and reporting tens of thousands of absentee ballot applications. The sharp increase at the very end of the plot also suggests that requests may have quickly caught up to something close to what they would have been without the hurricane. Perhaps a few thousand voters were simply delayed in requesting absentee ballots, or election officials took an extra week to input some requests. Still, it does not appear that a large number of voters were prevented from applying for an absentee ballot as a result of the hurricane.

South Carolina

South Carolina posts daily updates of voter registration data, broken down by county and by several demographic variables, and we have been downloading those updates every day for several months. These data showed the most dramatic change at the moment of the hurricane compared to any election data we examined. Figure 3 shows that change: a sizeable dip in the weekly net change in voter registrations on the week that Hurricane Helene hit South Carolina.

South Carolina Voter Registration 10/15/2024



Data Source: South Carolina Elections Commission, scvotes.gov
 Graph Source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab, @MITelectionlab
 Note: Y-axis represents the week over week change

Figure 3: The week-over-week net change in South Carolina voter registrations from late July into mid-October. There was a substantial decline during the week Hurricane Helene swept through the western half of the state.

Before the hurricane, there were weekly net increases in the number of registered voters in South Carolina of around +5,000 registrations per week, lasting through much of late July and August, with the one exception of August 19, which saw a small increase. Two weeks in mid-September recorded net increases of closer to 15,000 registrations each, followed by a steep drop to 1,500 during the week Helene struck the western half of the state. In the following two weeks, the net change in registrations bounced back to increases of over 15,000 registrations.

Figure 4 shows the *day-by-day* change in the number of registered South Carolinians and separates the change into counties in which a disaster was declared and counties in which no disaster was declared.

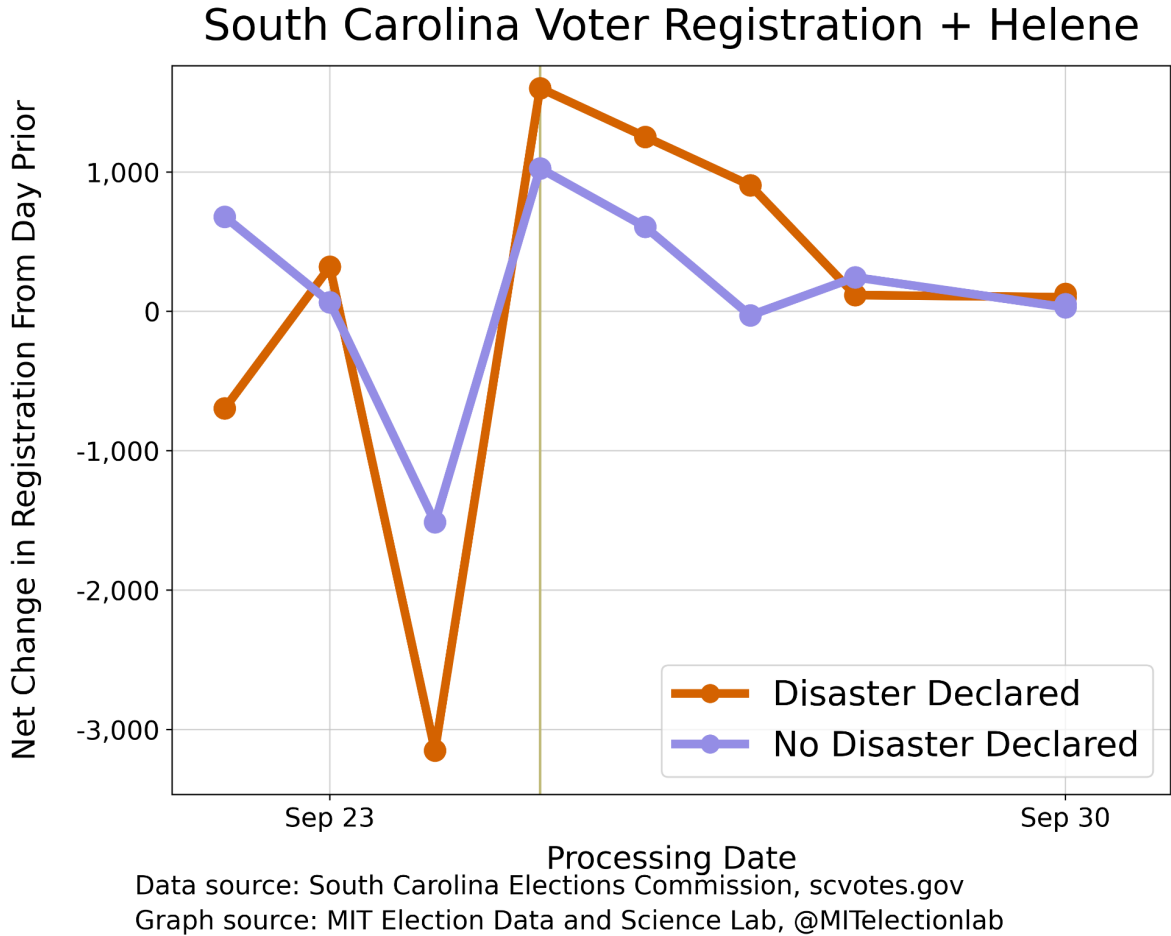


Figure 4: The net change in registrations between each day, 9/22–9/30, and the day prior in South Carolina, broken down into two lines: one representing requests from counties within the FEMA Disaster Declaration zone, one line for those outside that region. The data point for 9/22 is calculated as the change from 9/20 since we did not have data for 9/21.

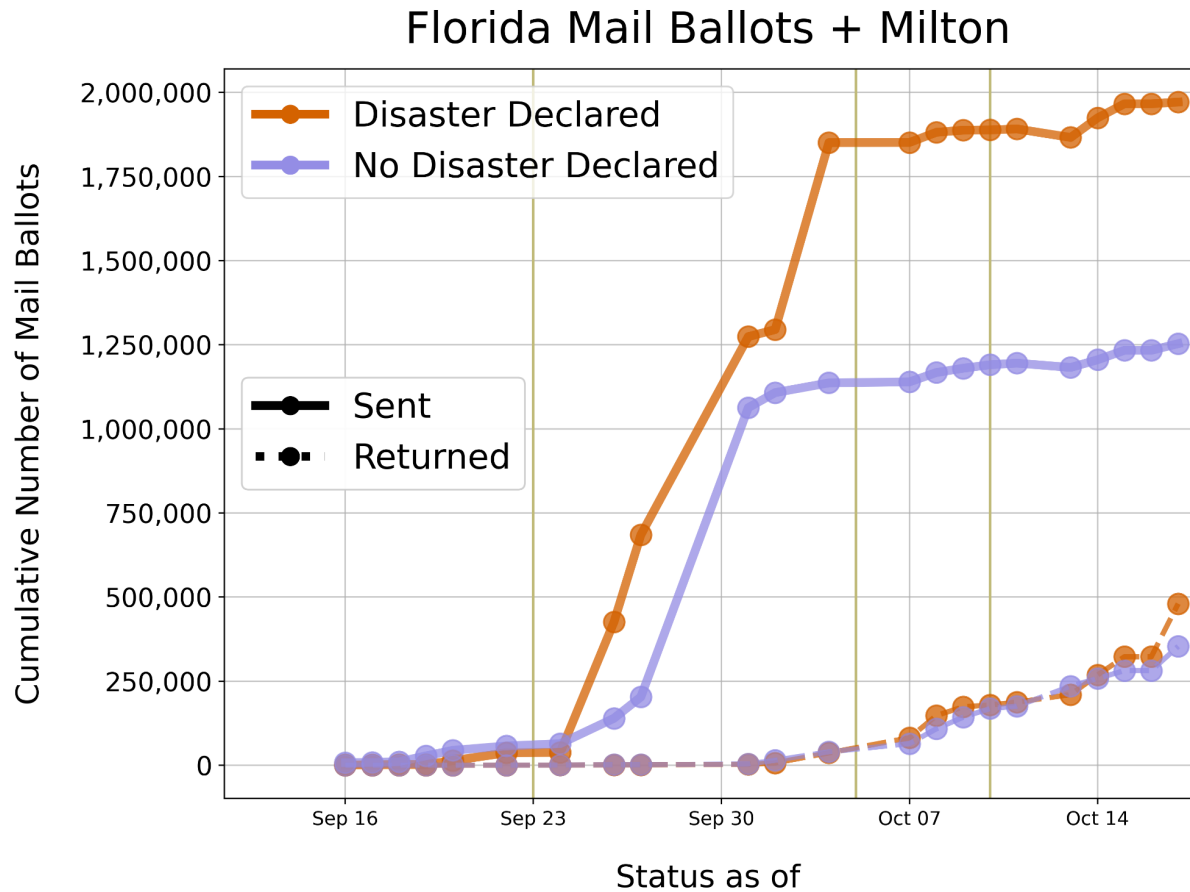
Interestingly, in Figure 4, both curves drop: it appears that the diminished net change in registrations observed during the week Helene struck South Carolina was present in both affected and unaffected counties. On September 24, the day before the hurricane entered the state, registration totals showed a net decrease of 3,000 registrants in the counties that

would later be affected, compared to a decrease of 1,500 in the rest of the state. Both sets of counties saw growth in registration over the subsequent four days.

Of course, there is no reason to expect that the arrival of a hurricane would cause voter registrations to drop, so does this finding mean that the drop is actually unrelated to the hurricane? Not necessarily. One possibility is that there is a certain daily decrease in the number of registered voters due to normal procedural removal of voters from the voter rolls, which can happen for any number of reasons. If that removal continues but a much smaller number of registrations are received or recorded, then the new registrants might not be enough to cancel out the latent removal of registrations. So, a modest net drop in the number of registered voters could be consistent with a freeze or decrease in the number of people registering to vote while they prepare for and weather a hurricane. Over the next few days after the hurricane (seen on the week of October 7 in Figure 3), there is a small bump above the number of people who registered on September 23 and earlier. That bump is particularly pronounced in the counties with a disaster declaration compared to those without. This suggests that there may have been some registrations that were received but not recorded on September 24, which were entered over the next few days, or alternatively, that people waited a few days longer than they otherwise would have to register to vote while the storm passed through.

Florida

Floridians suffered the severe impact of Hurricane Milton well into their state's mail-in ballot voting period, and we collected data every day before and after the hurricane on how many ballots Floridians had requested and cast. Again, we separate counties into those with an official disaster declaration and those without, and Figure 5 visualizes the absentee ballot trends for these two groups of counties.



Data from Florida Division of Elections, countyballotfiles.floridados.gov. Graph from MIT Election Data and Science Lab, @MITelectionlab

Figure 5: The cumulative number of mail ballots requested and sent each day in Florida, broken down into two lines: one representing requests from counties within the FEMA Disaster Declaration zone for Hurricane Milton, one line for those outside that region. The gold vertical lines reference the beginning of the Helene disaster declaration, the beginning of the Milton disaster declaration, and when Milton made landfall on October 10.

Oddly, the curve representing counties inside the disaster zone saw many more ballots sent out to voters during the days immediately preceding landfall on October 10 than were seen in counties with no disaster declaration. The same is true of ballots returned in counties. The data show that election administrators were successfully supplying voters with ballots, receiving voters from ballots, and recording those events, even in the face of a massive oncoming storm. The only hint of a dip induced by the storm is around October 10, in the number of ballots received from voters: counties with no disaster declaration briefly reported more ballots received than the (larger) group of counties with a disaster did, but

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the counties with a disaster declaration again surpassed the other group around October 13. While we cannot know what would have happened without the storm, simple inspection of the curves suggests that the impact of the storm on mail ballots was a small reduction in the number of ballots received from voters in greatly affected counties during the storm's passage, with at least a partial rebound beginning almost immediately after the storm.

Conclusion

These storms killed people and destroyed property and infrastructure. It is reasonable to wonder if they prevented the registration of voters and the return of mail ballots. While we have not performed causal analyses that could precisely estimate the number of votes that will not be cast because of the storms' disruptions, and we cannot speak to the potential partisan effects of the storm and disaster response, visual inspection of voter registration and mail ballot time series reveals a clear pattern of robustness and resilience on the part of the infrastructure and people who administer elections. Across Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, there are no obvious gaps in voter registrations or mail ballots that point to lost votes due to either storm. In every case in which we saw evidence of an interruption, there was at least a partial rebound very soon after, suggesting that the storm was much more likely to shift voter activity or data processing by a few days.