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Not My Fault: ‘Seismic shift’, ‘blue tsunami’, and the semantics of applying hazards terms to politics

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Seismic and tsunami terms were featured prominently on last Wednesday’s “PBS Newshour” from anchors Geoff Bennett and Amna Nawaz and numerous guests

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Tsunami, seismic shift, an ‘extinction level’ event and other hazards words were plastered throughout the media following Tuesday’s election. Florida Governor Ron Desantes announced in a day-after press conference, "It's the political equivalent of a meteor strike that went all around the United States, blue states, red states, everything in between." Political metaphors evoking catastrophes were everywhere after the election.

It's not a new trend and I first became aware of the habit when I started teaching a natural disasters class in the 1990s. I kept a list of all the non-geologic applications of earthquake and tectonic terminology out of curiosity. Earthquakes and volcanos were most frequently invoked but after the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, ‘tsunami’ became appended to nearly every difficult problem from social security and the elderly to immigration.

Watching the PBS Newshour last Wednesday, I counted eight references to disasters in the first five minutes of the broadcast. The initial segment began with ‘Seismic Shift’ on the screen behind the anchors and was followed in rapid succession by blue tsunami, democratic tsunami, tidal wave, extinction event, and meteor strike. I became so annoyed that I felt the need to dig a little deeper into the history of invoking natural phenomena into political rhetoric.

Flood is arguably the oldest of the disaster metaphors. It's found in Mesopotamian literature as a metaphor for an overwhelming military victory or dynastic change. Taming floods recurs frequently in ancient Chinese writings as the "Mandate of Heaven" and a sign of dynastic legitimacy. Greek literature is filled with flood and seafaring disaster imagery, where the 'Ship of State' may founder in rough waters. The ancient Greeks found plenty of opportunities to sprinkle in earthquakes and eruptions into politics as well.

Romans were far more literal than the Greeks. I found a 2009 master's thesis by Christopher Higgins at Ohio University who documented the imperial and public response to earthquakes during the Roman Empire. He found plenty of references to earthquakes but they were never used as a metaphor for other problems. For emperors, language was a tool of control, and they use disasters to take full responsibility in managing relief and support and portraying themselves as the structural pillar of society.

The first documented references I could find for political disaster metaphors in more modern times is in the 16th and early 17th centuries. It's an era of societal change that is unimaginable today, driven by literacy, the Protestant Reformation, global exploration, and increased participation of the people in electoral politics. In 1500, roughly 10% of men could read in Western Europe. By 1750, male literacy had risen to 60% in England. The Reformation in the 16th century and the printing press brought about the rise of political pamphlets. By the early to mid 1600s, the political tract had become a mainstay of electoral politics in England and much of Europe. The age of exploration changed nearly every aspect of European life from diet to the rise of capitalism and fueled much debate in the printed tracts.

Earthquake and volcano metaphors pop up in a variety of philosophic and historic writings in this time window. The colonial destabilizing of the Incan society in Peru is described by Garcilaso as a terremoto (land of earthquakes), and philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote that the English Civil War as an "earthquake from within." Newspapers used the volcanic metaphor of popular anger erupting from an underground chamber to describe the 1647 Naples Uprising.

Newspapers were available in the 17th century but were expensive and only available to elite classes. The 'Penny Press' era in the mid 1800s spurs a boom in print media with one cent newspapers. The easy availability of newsprint ushers in mass marketing, bitter competition, and lurid headlines. It doesn't take long for disaster metaphors to become a common feature and the newsprint of the second half of the 19th century is clogged with them.

'Landslide' is so commonly used today to describe an election outcome, that I didn't put it at the top of my metaphoric disaster term list. The first time it was used in a political sense was not in the sense of an overwhelming electoral victory. A New York Evening Post edition in August 1856 wrote of John C. Fremont, the first presidential nominee of the brand-new Republican Party as generating a landslide movement of support. It wasn't until the 1872 presidential election when Grant was re-elected by a wide margin over publisher Horace Greely that landslide become synonymous with an overwhelming victory.

Tidal wave entered the political metaphor lexicon in 1874. The post-civil war era in the U.S. was a turbulent time, and the Republican Party was firmly entrenched. But corruption scandals and the economic panic of 1873 that triggered the first great American depression caused the most significant midterm party switch in U.S. history with Democrats gaining 94 seats and control of

the House of Representatives for the first time since the Civil War. Newspapers around the country dubbed it the "Tidal Wave."

Prior to 1868, the term tidal wave had nothing to do with disaster or what we now call tsunami. 'Tide' first appears in 14th century England to mean the rhythmic rise and fall of the sea and around 1820, wave is added, and tidal wave is used to describe the predictable surges caused by the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. We can blame the media for misapplying the term after two major tsunami events in 1868. The Kaʻū earthquake in April is estimated to have a magnitude of 7.9, the largest in Hawaii's recorded history, spawned surges nearly 45 feet high, and killed 77 people. Writers labeled the event a "terrible tidal wave." Four months later, an earthquake of M8.5 struck northern Chile, killing at least 25,000 and producing a tsunami 60 feet high. News articles around the world emblazoned "tidal wave" in large bold lettering to describe the disaster.

There are many other geologic and disaster terms that have found their way into political metaphors. Epicenter first appeared at the beginning of the 20th century to denote any center of power, magma pops up to describe latent popular anger, rifts and tectonic movements are found frequently after the plate tectonics become accepted in the 1960s and 70s.

The media and the vernacular have not always coopted a geologic term. On at least one occasion, it happened in reverse. Until the 19th century, upheave was a common word meaning to lift or raise. 'Upheaval' appeared in a political context to describe the1834 silk workers revolt in France, one of the earliest worker revolts of the Industrial Revolution. It's used again in England the same year after passage of the New Poor Law which triggered massive protests where journalists describe the result as political upheaval. Prominent geologist Charles Lyell adapted the term a few years later to describe the uplifting of land.

I became deafened by the glut of disaster terms last week. They were everywhere and not confined to left- or right-leaning outlets. I give kudos to Friday's Washington Week panelists on PBS who bucked the trend and never once cheapened their discussion of the election and potential outcomes by referring to natural hazards. The result was a more serious discussion of a politically important event.

Some may think the use of hazards words trivial or amusing. I think it denigrates both the political significance of the election and geologic disasters. What happened in the midterm elections had nothing to do with physical forces beyond our control and, regardless of your political bent, didn't kill thousands or turn cities into rubble in an instant. Bantering these words about so lightly turns earthquake and tsunami into kneejerk terms, designed to engender fear and a gut emotional response, not natural phenomena that we can learn to safely live with.

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