

Texas and Puerto Rico both got hit very hard last year by major hurricanes. But the federal government moved a lot more quickly to get help to Texas. In a [new paper](#), I document the difference and explore the reasons. Although I won't go into all the details here, this is a situation people need to know about.

This table gives a sense of the difference, though there's a more extensive table in the paper. (Please go to the [Legal-Planet website](#) if you're an email subscriber and the table didn't come through.)

	Houston	Puerto Rico
Time to send 70 Helicopters	one week	three weeks
FEMA Funding (Day 9)	\$142 million	\$6 million
Permanent disaster work approved	10 days	43 days

FEMA says it poured just as many resources into Puerto Rico as Texas and that the response was hindered because they were already stretched thin by other disasters and had to contend with difficult logistic problems. I am willing to believe they made an equal effort. But an equal effort really wasn't enough — not when Puerto Rico's needs were so much greater. For instance, although the number of direct deaths from Harvey and Maria were similar (and relatively small), estimates are that another 500-1000 people died in Puerto Rico because they were left on their own so long, without access to electricity, drinking water, or medical services.

This table gives a sense of other differences:

	Houston	Puerto Rico
Housing units destroyed or significantly damaged	42,000	400,000
Number without power	280,000	1,000,000
Number without potable water supply	45 water systems in smaller communities	~1.7 million people

Why didn't the federal government rise to the occasion in Puerto Rico and make the effort necessary to muster additional resources and overcome logistic problems? It seems to me there were two basic reasons:

1. **Politics.** It's not so much a matter of FEMA being political as that FEMA is a small agency trying to coordinate a lot of bigger and powerful agencies. Getting those agencies to make an extraordinary effort isn't something FEMA can do without help. It needs outside pressure to make the other agencies jump. But the President was indifferent, Puerto Rico has no vote in Congress and no presidential vote, and the media paid little attention to Puerto Rico's plight.
2. **Planning.** FEMA's disaster plan for Puerto Rico assumed a somewhat smaller storm. More importantly, it did not take account of poor infrastructure and of the ways that state, local, and private responders would be hindered because their own resources were so limited. Puerto Rico's government and electrical utility are basically bankrupt, and the state has a 40% poverty rate.

The worst thing, perhaps, is that so few people on the mainland are paying attention to what's going on in Puerto Rico — let alone how we can better prepare for the future. We all need to take seriously the plight of our fellow citizens.