

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

What Every American Needs to Know about Puerto Rico's Hurricane Disaster

Source: Brian Resnick and Eliza Barclay, Vox.com, September 29, 2017

Early on Wednesday, September 20, Hurricane Maria, a powerful Category 4 hurricane with 150 mph winds, made direct landfall on Puerto Rico, bisecting the entire island and drenching it with feet of rain. What's happened since has been truly catastrophic for Puerto Rico.

There's still little power on the island. In many places there's still no water to drink or bathe in or to flush toilets. There's limited food and cell service, and dozens of remote villages have been completely from everything cut off for 11 days.

"Make no mistake — this is a humanitarian disaster involving 3.4 million US citizens," Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló said Monday.

The initial recovery response from the US federal government has been lackluster, and President Trump's comments have not inspired confidence. After dwelling early in the week on the facts that 1) Puerto Rico is an island, and 2) Puerto Rico is in massive debt, the president and his senior officials then went on the defensive, describing the administration's response so far as a "good news story."

This is still a terrible disaster that deserves more coverage and a better coordinated response — and both appear to have been impeded by widespread confusion about Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States and the severity of its current situation.

Here's what every American needs to know:

1) 3.4 million US citizens live in Puerto Rico, and they are entitled to the same government response as any state. But half of Americans don't even know that. According to a new Morning Consult poll published in the New York Times, only 54 percent of Americans know that Puerto Ricans are US citizens. The poll found 81 percent of those who knew Puerto Ricans were citizens supported sending aid to the island. Just 44 percent of those who didn't know said the same.

Puerto Ricans have been citizens of the United States since 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act. Citizens mean citizens. Puerto Ricans can travel freely to and from the continental United States without a passport. They're protected by the same Bill of Rights as anyone else born in the United States. They vote in presidential primaries.

The island does not get electoral votes in general presidential elections. It also does not have voting representatives in Congress. Jenniffer González-Colón serves as resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, a non-voting member of the US House of Representatives. If Puerto Rico were a state, it would be the 30th most populated — with more people than Wyoming, Vermont, and Alaska combined.

"[Puerto Ricans] are entitled to the same response from the federal government as the citizens of New York or Kansas would be if they were visited by a natural disaster on the scale of Hurricane Maria," the editors of America Magazine, a Catholic publication, wrote on Monday. "Although the United States has long benefited from the geographical reach they provide ... [island territories] have been taken for granted and denied full political representation. Hurricane Maria is a reminder that this two-tiered system of American citizenship is neither democratic nor tenable."

2) Hurricane Maria was like a 50-mile-wide tornado that made a direct hit on the island. This hurricane season has been punishing for Puerto Rico. First, it got clipped by Hurricane Irma, a huge Category 5 storm whose eye passed just north of the island. That storm — which had ravaged several Caribbean islands — left 1 million people without power on Puerto Rico. By the time Maria hit, 60,000 people were still without electricity. That means there are many people on the island who haven't had power for 20 days (Irma passed by on September 7).

Maria was a slightly smaller storm, but it was far, far more devastating. That's because it charted a course directly over Puerto Rico, hit near its peak intensity, and passed around 25 miles away from San

Juan, the capital, which is home to about 400,000 people. No nation or territory could suffer such a direct hit without some damage.

“It was as if a 50- to 60-mile-wide tornado raged across Puerto Rico, like a buzz saw,” Jeff Weber, a meteorologist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research, says. “It’s almost as strong as a hurricane can get in a direct hit.” By the record books, it was the fifth-strongest storm ever to hit the US, and the strongest storm to hit the island in 80 years.

“The devastation is vast,” Gov. Rosselló said in a statement. “Our infrastructure and energy distribution systems suffered great damages.”

3) Water, food, and fuel are scarce on the island. The airports are a mess. Power will be out for months in some places. Exact figures on the extent of the damage and the costs of repairs on the island are not yet known. This is partly due to the fact that communications on the island are strained. But it’s also because many roads are damaged and it’s hard to get around. AIR Worldwide, a catastrophe risk consultancy, estimates the storm caused \$40 billion to \$85 billion in insurance claims throughout the Caribbean, with 85 percent of those losses in Puerto Rico.

Photos show whole communities with roofs torn off, second floors of houses ripped apart, water flooding the streets, and people resorting to waiting in long lines for clean water and fuel. In reports, the word “apocalyptic” is used often.

More concretely, we do know that Puerto Rico’s infrastructure is severely crippled. These are major problems that will make living even in an intact house more difficult in the coming weeks and months. The storm knocked out 80 percent of the island’s power transmission lines, the Associated Press reports. And as of Thursday, nearly all of the island’s 1.57 million electricity customers were still without power. Many people have generators, and new ones are being distributed, but most homes and businesses are dark because of the ongoing troubles distributing the fuel to run the generators.

PREPA, the electric company on the island, has a massive \$9 billion debt, as Vox’s Alexia Fernández Campbell has explained, and in July it defaulted on an interest payment. For years, it hasn’t had the money to invest in modernizing Puerto Rico’s electrical systems. Even without hurricanes, power outages are frequent on the island. Making things worse: There aren’t enough workers to fix the infrastructure. Young people have been leaving the island in droves as the economy has tightened, and older workers have been retiring en masse, securing their pensions. Rebuilding the system on the island will be a long and difficult process. Getting the power back on in Puerto Rico “will be daunting and expensive,” the *New York Times* explains. “Transformers, poles and power lines snake from coastal areas across hard-to-access mountains. In some cases, the poles have to be maneuvered in place with helicopters.”

No electricity means no power to pump water into homes, no water to bathe or flush toilets. FEMA said Saturday that 55 percent of people on the island still are without potable water. USA Today reported that Arecibo, a town on the northern shore of the island, had only one source of fresh water: a single fire hydrant. Rescue workers have been distributing bottled water, but it’s safe to assume many people haven’t received any yet.

The storm knocked out 1,360 out of 1,600 cellphone towers on the island. Many communities have been isolated from the outside world for days, relying only on radios for news. National Guard members told the Daily Beast they were struggling to communicate on the ground, making their ability to respond to the disaster exceptionally hard. “There’s no communication, that’s the problem,” said. The cellular outage also means that family on the mainland, or abroad, can’t get in touch with those on the island to find out if they’re safe.

Lt. Gen. Jeffrey S. Buchanan said Sunday that 16 out of 69 hospitals have had power restored. The others are running on generators, and there are serious issues with distributing fuel. So there’s still limited access to X-ray machines, and other diagnostic and life-saving equipment. Few operating rooms are open, which is scary, considering an influx of patients with storm-related injuries.

“Two people died yesterday because there was no diesel in the place where they were... In San Juan, a hospital,” San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz told CBS News in an emotional interview Tuesday. “We need to get our **** together.”

And the health crisis on the island could grow if power is not soon restored, as Vox’s Julia Belluz reports. “Just about every interaction with the health system now involves electricity, from calling a

hospital for help to accessing electronic medical records and powering lifesaving equipment like hemodialysis machines or ventilators,” Belluz writes.

Agriculture is a small part of the Puerto Rican economy, contributing just 0.8 percent to its GDP and employing 1.6 percent of its labor force. But it was decimated — in a nearly literal sense of the word — by Hurricane Maria. “In a matter of hours, Hurricane Maria wiped out about 80 percent of the crop value in Puerto Rico,” the New York Times reports. That amounts to a \$780 million loss. The island imports 85 percent of its food, but the destruction of its agricultural sector is likely to increase prices and exacerbate the scary prospect of continued food shortages on the island.

Weather radar is down, making it harder to forecast new storms

On Monday, the National Weather Service reported that its Doppler radar station on the island had been destroyed. That’s the radar that helps meteorologists see where thunderstorms and other weather systems are moving in real time. “Not having radar does make future storms more hazardous,” says Weber.

Residents of Puerto Rico have had a difficult time evacuating the island. Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport — the island’s main airport in San Juan — reopened to commercial flights Sunday. But residents can expect to wait a long time in uncomfortable conditions if they want a flight. Some airlines reportedly have waiting lists of 20,000 people. There’s no air conditioning in the airport, the Miami Herald reports, ticketing computers are out, and passengers have to be checked in to flights via telephone. And due to damage to FAA radar and fuel shortages, only a limited number of planes can take off and land in San Juan each day.

People wait in line to purchase petrol in Arecibo, northwestern Puerto Rico, on September 22, 2017. Without a working electrical grid, Puerto Ricans have had to turn to gas-powered electric generators for energy. But it’s very, very difficult to get fuel on the island. NPR reports on people waiting for six-plus hours in lines for gas. Other stations are completely out of fuel and have been for days.

“Authorities in Puerto Rico say there isn’t a gas shortage,” NPR reports. “Instead, they say that *distribution* has been disrupted by the storm.”

4) Puerto Rico’s economy is in shambles, and the storm will make it worse. As Vox’s Fernández Campbell explains, Puerto Rico’s government is broke. Its infrastructure is aging and in disrepair on a good day. And it can’t borrow money to fix it. In May, Puerto Rico — which has a \$103 billion economy — declared bankruptcy, and it has since then been trying to restructure more than \$70 billion in debt. The island’s finances are currently controlled by a federal board, which made just \$1 billion available for relief, the AP reports.

Certain US policies have contributed to Puerto Rico’s economic deterioration. One of them is the Jones Act (different from the Jones-Shafroth Act mentioned above), an antiquated law that forces Puerto Ricans to pay nearly double for US goods through various tariffs, fees, and taxes. The act stipulates that any goods shipped from one American port to another must be on American-made-and-operated ships. As Matthew Yglesias explains, it means shipping to Puerto Rico is more costly because there’s little competition among freighters.

It’s a “a shakedown, a mob protection racket, with Puerto Rico a captive market,” as Nelson A. Denis, a former New York State Assembly member and author of *War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America’s Colony*, wrote in the New York Times. On Thursday morning, the Trump administration finally granted the island a temporary waiver from the law’s requirements, which should help somewhat with the immediate disaster relief.

Meanwhile, economic woes have contributed to severe brain drain over the years: The population has dropped by more than 8 percent since 2010. According to the Times: “the cost of living in Puerto Rico is 13 percent higher than in 325 urban areas elsewhere in the United States, even though per capita income in Puerto Rico is about \$18,000, close to half that of Mississippi, the poorest of all 50 states.” The population drain in turn makes it harder and harder for Puerto Rico’s economy to recover. People will likely migrate on account of the storm, which will make recovery more difficult. It’s a classic vicious cycle.

5) Experts believe the death toll could reach into the hundreds. The storm has claimed at least 16 lives in Puerto Rico so far, according to the AP. But John Mutter, a Columbia University

professor who specializes in natural disasters and studied the death toll from Hurricane Katrina, expects in the coming days it could reach into the hundreds.

“Being without power is huge,” he says. “Just how quickly they can get it back is still an unknown thing. But it’s extremely important they get it going to suppress the chances of illness following the storm.” Still, he says, we are probably not looking at a tragedy on the scale of Hurricane Katrina, where 1,400 to 2,000 people (depending on whom you ask) died as a result of the storm.

In Puerto Rico, as in any disaster situation, health hinges on electric power: Dialysis, refrigeration for insulin and other medicine, and nebulizers for people with asthma all need electricity to be useful. But it goes deeper than that: Electricity provides for the sanitation that prevents many illnesses like typhoid from spreading in the first place.

“Across Puerto Rico, people need electricity to get clean water from the faucet and flush the toilet,” Vox’s Julia Belluz writes. “They also need it to keep their air conditioning systems running. Without it, there’s the looming risk of people getting sick from dirty water, waste that can’t be disposed, or heatstroke.”

6) The US government is responding to the disaster, but it’s going slow. Puerto Rico is an island, which complicates recovery efforts. Supplies have to be flown in or arrive via ship. Residents can’t drive to a nearby state or city for shelter to wait out the worst of it. But help is on the island, and more is on the way. Some 4,500 troops and National Guard members are on the ground in Puerto Rico. The Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers are working to reopen more ports on the islands. But on Friday, the three-star general heading up the military response, Army Lt. Gen. Jeff Buchanan, admitted it’s “not enough.”

FEMA has more than 800 people on the ground coordinating relief efforts. It reports that millions of meals and millions of liters of water have been distributed with more arriving each day. On Friday, the US Navy announced the USNS Comfort, a combat surgical hospital ship, was en route to Puerto Rico. Still, the relief efforts will take time to make their way to communities across the island. “I know the FEMA people are working hard and they’re doing their best, so this is a message for President Trump, thank you for calling San Juan yesterday and listening for our mayday call,” San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz told CNN on Friday. “But sir, there’s 77 other towns that are waiting. They’re waiting anxiously and will be very grateful to you and to the American people if you continue to step up to the moral imperative that you’ve taken on all over the world to help those in need. So help us.” And many are arguing that help isn’t coming fast enough, or in high enough quantities.

“Given the size of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the scale of devastation, it may take a task force of 50,000 service members to fully meet the needs of Americans suffering after Maria’s passage,” Phillip Carter, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security, argues at Slate.

7) Trump could be doing much more to help. President Trump approved a disaster declaration for Puerto Rico the day after the storm hit, freeing up federal resources for the recovery. Then for several days through the weekend, he remained silent on the issue, focusing his Twitter feed on a mounting feud with professional athletes. On Tuesday night, he broke his silence with a series of tweets that focused not on the shocking situation on the ground and the need for aid, but on Puerto Rico’s troubled recent history.

On Tuesday, Trump told reporters he’d travel to Puerto Rico on October 3. “It’s the earliest I can go because of the first responders, and we don’t want to disrupt the relief efforts,” he said. He also said the disaster response on Puerto Rico will be tougher than the one in Texas for Hurricane Harvey or in Florida for Irma “because it’s an island.”

Trump also amended the disaster declaration Tuesday, increasing the amount of funds available for recovery in Puerto Rico. And he authorized the waiver of the Jones Act. But as first responders on the ground in Puerto Rico told Fernández Campbell, this isn’t enough. Trump should also ask Congress to pass a relief package for Puerto Rico to give FEMA and the island more money to rebuild. He could deploy more military resources to help with search and rescue operations. The number of troops on the ground should be doubled, as Lt. Gen. Russel Honore, who led the military’s disaster efforts during Hurricane Katrina, argued Thursday on NPR.

“We can’t do this whole thing by ourselves,” Ken Buell, director of emergency response for the US Department of Energy, told her.

8) Other Caribbean islands are hurting too. As Vox’s Julia Belluz summarizes here, many Caribbean islands are going through similar crises after being hit by Hurricanes Maria and Irma. The island of Barbuda has been completely abandoned, and residents still can’t return home. Twenty-seven people died in Dominica. And 48,000 people are still without power in the US Virgin Islands. Throughout these islands, homes are destroyed and people are displaced. And lives will have to start over.

9) You can help. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed and numb in the face of such destruction. In fact, it’s a frustrating psychological tendency inside all of us: When the number of victims in a disaster rises, our compassion doesn’t always rise with it. But remember, “even partial solutions can save whole lives,” as psychologist Paul Slovic has said.

Here’s how you can help, at least in part. My colleagues Dylan Scott and Ella Nilsen have compiled this list of charities accepting donations to help Puerto Rico.

United for Puerto Rico: A charity organization chaired by Beatriz Rosselló, the wife of the governor, to provide aid and support to victims of Hurricane Maria.

ConPRmetidos: The Puerto Rican organization focused on public-private partnership is aiming to raise \$10 million for relief and recovery.

American Red Cross: Usually the first group people think of when giving after a disaster. It says it has a multi-island relief effort underway to help people impacted by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, with thousands of volunteers on the ground.

Global Giving: A charity crowdfunding site that is attempting to raise \$5 million to be used exclusively for local relief and recovery efforts.

Salvation Army: The Christian charity is emphasizing its intentions to help with long-term recovery.

Americares: The nonprofit focused on medicine and health is seeking to provide emergency medical supplies and other basic resources to first responders and others.

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts about the crisis in Puerto Rico? Explain.
- Many of the numbered responses above are factual. Number 7 is an opinion. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Explain.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.