
Grading the Katrina Recovery

How Gulf Coast leaders rate the President and
Congress four years after the storm



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Grading the Katrina Recovery

Introduction — Katrina Recovery: Keeping our Promise?	3
Findings — Survey Results and Grades	
Obama Administration	5
Current (111 th) Congress	6
Bush Administration	7
Previous (110 th) Congress	8
By the Numbers — Katrina Recovery Index	9
About the Institute for Southern Studies	13

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INTRODUCTION

Katrina Recovery: Keeping our Promise?

For many people in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, the election of President Barack Obama to the White House last November brought a sense of renewed hope — or at least an opportunity to change the course of the region’s stalled recovery.

“It means a chance for a do-over,” James Perry, executive director of the Americans for Gulf Coast Recovery, told *Southern Exposure* magazine after the election. “Katrina fatigue had become the norm, but this new administration has said Gulf Coast reconstruction is a priority.”

Indeed, President Obama had made the federal government’s obligation to Gulf Coast rebuilding — and the Bush administration’s failure to fulfill that promise — a centerpiece of his campaign and agenda.

“Let New Orleans be the place where we strengthen those bonds of trust, where a city rises up on a new foundation that can be broken by no storm,” Obama said on a campaign stop in New Orleans in August 2007.

Obama returned to New Orleans in February 2008 — shortly before the state’s presidential primary — and repeated his commitment: “The broken promises did not start when a storm hit, and they did not end there ... I promise you that when I’m in the White House I will commit myself every day to keeping up Washington’s end of this trust. This will be a priority of my presidency.”

GRADING THE PROMISES

But many Gulf Coast leaders today say that they don’t think the Obama administration has lived up to that pledge.

For this report, a diverse group of more than 50 community leaders were asked in August 2009 to grade the Obama administration’s efforts for Gulf Coast recovery in eight key areas.

The respondents came from Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, and represented a wide range of constituencies, including faith, community and environmental organizations.

This report’s findings reveal ongoing frustration in the Gulf Coast over the scope and pace of federal initiatives — and even a belief among many that, to date, little in Washington has changed:

- **Gulf Coast leaders give the Obama administration’s recovery efforts a grade of “D+.”** The only area where Obama ranked higher than a “D” was in the administration’s willingness to “publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities,” which earned a “C-.” [For the full report card, see page 5.]
- **The Obama administration scored lowest on tackling some of the biggest recovery priorities,** scoring only a “D” for efforts to help displaced families return home, revitalizing infra-

structure, increasing coastal hurricane protection and creating living-wage jobs and business opportunities.

- Surprisingly, **Gulf Coast leaders didn't report much improvement over the previous administration:** The Obama's grade of "D+" was only slightly higher than the "D-" grade for President Bush.

The Obama administration, while submerged in policy battles over economic stimulus and health care, argues it remains committed to the Gulf Coast. Officials point to "shaking loose" \$1 billion in appropriated federal funds, moving people out of temporary housing and creating an arbitration panel to handle disputes that have hamstrung rebuilding projects.

LESS STIMULUS FOR THE GULF

But Gulf Coast advocates view the president's \$786 billion stimulus bill passed this spring as another missed opportunity.

According to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the White House announced before the Congressional vote that the bill "would create or preserve fewer jobs in Louisiana's 2nd Congressional District than any in the nation, chiefly because the calculations were based on the district's storm-depleted population."

Congress and the president also passed on proposals for a Gulf Coast Civic Works program for "shovel-ready" green rebuilding, and a recommendation from President Bush's Gulf Coast advisor to inject \$1.5 billion into stalled Gulf projects.



A CITY STILL STRUGGLING: Blighted lots are a symbol of New Orleans' ongoing recovery. Nearly one out of three residential addresses remain vacant, like this house on Banks Street. (PHOTO: Madeline Fox/Creative Commons)

This may help explain this report's findings that the current Congress receives similarly low grades from Gulf advocates:

- **The current 111th Congress received a "D" grade for Gulf recovery** — the highest grade (a "D+") again earned only for members' willingness to "publicly acknowledge challenges."
- **The "D" grade awarded to the current Congress is almost identical to that given to the previous (110th) Congress, which also scored a "D."**

Clearly, many Gulf Coast leaders believe that — whatever the reasons — the current leadership in Washington has not lived up to its pledge to strengthen recovery efforts in the region.

If the President and Congress are to keep their promise — and regain the confidence of community leaders — they must signal a more focused commitment to renewal in the still-struggling Gulf Coast.



FINDINGS

Grading the Obama Administration

Leaders of over 50 faith-based, community, environmental and other organizations working in the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina were asked to grade the Obama administration’s recovery policy in eight key areas. Here are the composite grades Obama received in each area:

How would you grade the Obama administration’s Gulf Coast recovery efforts in these areas:	GRADE
Publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities?	C-
Create necessary programs and appropriate needed funds for long-term recovery?	D+
“Shake loose” money tied up in federal bureaucracies to reach vital projects?	D+
Help displaced families voluntarily return to their communities?	D
Revitalize infrastructure in your community to promote safety and dignity?	D
Increase coastal hurricane protection and prepare for and mitigate against future natural disasters?	D
Create living wage jobs and promote local businesses in your community?	D
Provide education and training opportunities in your community?	D+
OVERALL GRADE for Obama administration’s Gulf Coast recovery efforts:	D+

Source: Institute for Southern Studies analysis of survey data collected from community-based organizations in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, August 2009.



FINDINGS

Grading the current Congress

Leaders of over 50 faith-based, community, environmental and other organizations working in the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina were asked to grade the current 111th Congress (2009-2010) in eight key areas. Here are the composite grades Congress received in each area:

How would you grade the current Congress' Gulf Coast recovery efforts in these areas:	GRADE
Publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities?	D+
Create necessary programs and appropriate needed funds for long-term recovery?	D
"Shake loose" money tied up in federal bureaucracies to reach vital projects?	D
Help displaced families voluntarily return to their communities?	D
Revitalize infrastructure in your community to promote safety and dignity?	D
Increase coastal hurricane protection and prepare for and mitigate against future natural disasters?	D
Create living wage jobs and promote local businesses in your community?	D
Provide education and training opportunities in your community?	D
OVERALL GRADE for current Congress' Gulf Coast recovery efforts:	D

Source: Institute for Southern Studies analysis of survey data collected from community-based organizations in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, August 2009.

FINDINGS

How do Obama and Bush compare?

President Bush was widely criticized for his administration’s handling of the Katrina disaster and recovery. One of his biggest critics: Barack Obama, who in a February 2008 campaign speech castigated “a President who only saw the people from the window of an airplane.” But in this report’s survey of Gulf Coast advocates, President Obama’s first eight months don’t rate much higher than the Bush presidency.



Then-Sen. Barack Obama paints a Habitat for Humanity house during a 2006 trip to New Orleans. On the campaign trail in 2007, Obama told a city audience that he had an “absolute commitment” to recovery. (Photo: Habitat for Humanity)

How would you grade the Bush administration in these areas:	GRADE
Publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities?	D
Create necessary programs and appropriate needed funds for long-term recovery?	D
“Shake loose” money tied up in federal bureaucracies to reach vital projects?	D-
Help displaced families voluntarily return to their communities?	D-
Revitalize infrastructure in your community to promote safety and dignity?	D
Increase coastal hurricane protection and prepare for and mitigate against future	D-
Create living wage jobs and promote local businesses in your community?	D-
Provide education and training opportunities in your community?	D
OVERALL GRADE for Bush administration’s Gulf Coast recovery efforts	D-

Source: Institute for Southern Studies analysis of survey data collected from community-based organizations in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, August 2009.

FINDINGS

How does the current Congress compare to the previous one?

Since Katrina struck in 2005, Congressional leaders have sought to affirm their commitment to Gulf recovery. As Speaker of the House Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said a trip to New Orleans in August 2008:

“While we have made progress in the last three years, we recognize that key needs remain in the Gulf Coast that must be addressed. House Democrats pledge to continue working with the region in a partnership to spur the economic recovery of the Gulf Coast region, fund innovative initiatives, and ensure that the basic needs of its residents are met.”

However, the Gulf Coast advocates surveyed for this report don’t rate the current Congress much better than the previous one. As the below grades reveal, the scores given to current members of Congress are virtually identical to those given to the previous Congress.



House Speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)

How would you grade the previous Congress in these areas:	GRADE
Publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities?	D+
Create necessary programs and appropriate needed funds for long-term recovery?	D
“Shake loose” money tied up in federal bureaucracies to reach vital projects?	D
Help displaced families voluntarily return to their communities?	D
Revitalize infrastructure in your community to promote safety and dignity?	D
Increase coastal hurricane protection and prepare for and mitigate against future	D
Create living wage jobs and promote local businesses in your community?	D-
Provide education and training opportunities in your community?	D-
OVERALL GRADE for previous Congress’ Gulf Coast recovery efforts	D

Source: Institute for Southern Studies analysis of survey data collected from community-based organizations in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, August 2009.



BY THE NUMBERS

Katrina Recovery Index

Displacement and Demographics

Estimated number of U.S. residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina: 1 million

Rank of Katrina's among all diasporas in U.S. history: 1

Estimated number of people displaced by Katrina still living in Houston today: 100,000

Percent of New Orleans' pre-Katrina addresses that are actively receiving mail today: 76.4

Percent receiving mail in the largely African-American and working-class Lower 9th Ward: less than 49

Percent of households with children in New Orleans before Katrina: 30

Percent shortly after the storm: 18

Percent two years later: 20

Percent of New Orleans' pre-Katrina population that was African-American: 67

Percent three years later: 61

Number of abandoned residential addresses in New Orleans today: 65,888

Proportion of all residential addresses in the city that number represents: 1/3

Rank of New Orleans among all U.S. cities for the rate of abandoned residences: 1

Number of 2010 federal census questionnaires slated to be hand-delivered to homes in south Louisiana in an effort to ensure an accurate count: 300,000

Average amount of federal funds states receive over a decade for each person counted in the census: \$12,000

Housing

Of the abandoned New Orleans residences surveyed by a homeless advocacy group, percent that showed signs of use, such as the presence of bed rolls: 40

Estimated number of total homeless in New Orleans today: 11,000

Estimated number of homeless people squatting in abandoned buildings in the city: 6,000

Number of federal housing vouchers New Orleans' homeless advocacy group UNITY has received to house people in need: 752

Number of people on UNITY's housing waiting list who have died: at least 16

Percent of New Orleans landlords in a recent study who either refused to accept Section 8 federal housing vouchers or imposed insurmountable requirements on their use: 82

Length of time in September during which the Housing Authority of New Orleans will accept new applications for Section 8 vouchers: 1 week

Number of years since it last accepted applications: 6

Percent by which rents in the New Orleans area have climbed since Katrina: 40

Percent of Louisiana homeowners who received assistance from the state's Road Home rebuilding program that was inadequate to cover needed repairs: 69

Percent in New Orleans: 81

Average gap between Road Home funding received and amount needed: \$36,000

Average gap in the largely African-American and working-class Lower Ninth Ward: \$75,000

Work and Economy

Unemployment rate for the New Orleans metro area in May 2009: 5.9 percent

Unemployment rate for the area in June 2009: 7.3 percent

Unemployment rate nationally: 9.5 percent

Increase in demand on food pantries in 23 south Louisiana parishes due to under-employment and rising prices: 35

New Orleans' rank among U.S. cities for wage theft: 1

Percent of New Orleans recovery workers surveyed who reported wage theft in one survey: 80

Amount in stolen wages reported by a 2008 survey of 300 day laborers in New Orleans: \$400,000

Number of congressional sponsors of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act to create a New Deal-style program creating green jobs in the region: 30

Number of organizations that have endorsed that legislation: 240

Estimated number of prevailing-wage jobs the act would create: 100,000

Amount of money in the recent \$786 billion economic stimulus package that went to Louisiana: \$3.3 billion

Number of congressional districts where the

stimulus package created fewer jobs than Louisiana's 2nd district, which includes New Orleans: 0

Coastal Restoration and Hurricane Protection

Rank of design flaws among the causes of New Orleans' federal levee failures: 1

Intensity of flooding that New Orleans will be protected from by levee improvement work currently underway: 100-year flood

Amount by which Katrina's flood levels exceeded 100-year elevations in some areas: 15 feet

Amount of money that has been authorized or appropriated for that work: \$27 billion

Amount appropriated for coastal restoration: \$7 billion

Month in which the National Academy of Sciences blasted the Army Corps of Engineers for lacking a comprehensive, long-term hurricane protection plan: 7/2009

Amount of Louisiana's coastal land lost every day due to erosion: 38 football fields

Additional amount of land it's expected to lose by 2050 if no action is taken: 500 square miles

Percent of the state's coastal wetlands loss that can be traced to oil and gas drilling activities: 40 to 60

Number of critical coastal restoration projects in Louisiana the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers identified four years ago: 5

Of those 5 projects, number scheduled to begin construction before 2012: 1

Number of those projects eligible for economic stimulus funding for "shovel ready" initiatives: 0

Date when the Army Corps of Engineers expects to complete a plan to restore ecosystems damaged by the now-closed Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet shipping channel: 3/2011

Number of months by which that exceeds the congressionally mandated deadline: 34

Education

Percent of total pre-Katrina school enrollment in the New Orleans metro area as of this past spring: 78

Percent growth in enrollment at New Orleans' colleges and universities since spring 2008: 5

Percent of children in New Orleans' public school system who now attend publicly-funded but privately-operated charter schools: 60

Month that Stanford University released a study finding charter school students in Louisiana outperform their peers in traditional public schools over time: 6/2009

Number of children who have not returned to public school in New Orleans since Katrina: 30,396

Percent of all public and private school enrollment that black children accounted for in New Orleans pre-Katrina: 49.1

Percent as of spring 2009: 42.8

Percent of New Orleans school enrollment accounted for by Hispanic children pre-Katrina: 3.6

Percent as of spring 2009: 5.6

Percent of school enrollment accounted for by white children pre-Katrina: 44.3

Percent as of spring 2009: 48.3

Health care

Rank of New Orleans' Charity Hospital among facilities serving low-income residents before Katrina: 1

Percent of its patients who were low-income: 85

Number of soldiers who got Charity up and running immediately after Katrina, before Gov. Kathleen Blanco ordered that it not be reopened: 150

Cost of the new hospital complex that Louisiana State University wants to build in New Orleans instead: \$1.2 billion

Year when the groundbreaking for that project is set to occur: 2013

Number of people who will be displaced by the hospital's construction: 600

Percent of New Orleans' medical facilities that have reopened since the disaster: 57

Proportion of New Orleans residents who now report chronic health problems: 2/3

Percent increase in that number since 2006: 45

Percent increase in people suffering from mental health problems since Katrina: 300

Percent increase in the city's suicide rate: 200

Number of New Orleans hospitals currently providing in-patient mental health treatment: 1

Date on which that hospital is scheduled to close: 9/1/2009

Amount of federal Medicaid stimulus funds to expand temporary coverage to families rejected by Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal: \$9.5 million

Louisiana's rank among U.S. states for overall health care quality: 50

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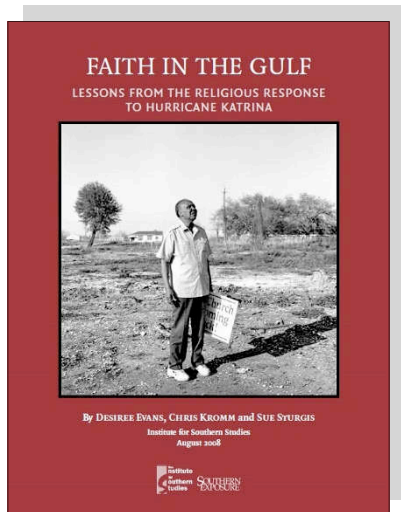
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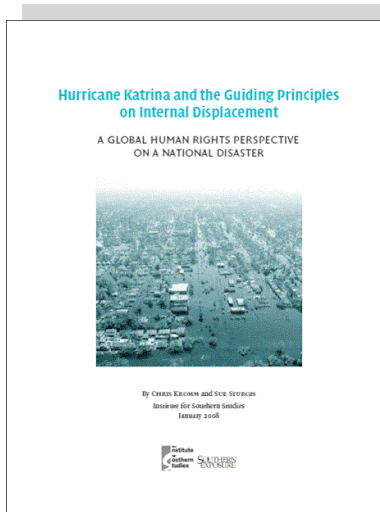
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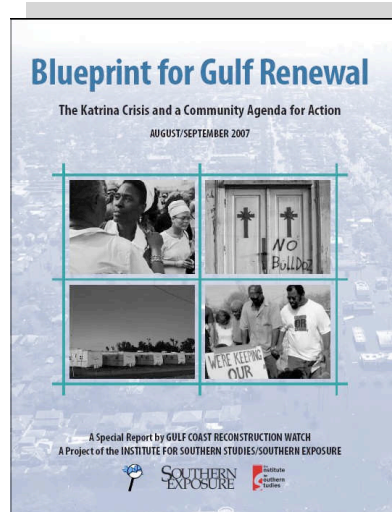
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