Federalism in Disaster Management in the United States

Summary

In the last 40 years, the United States has confronted disasters, emergencies, and crises for which a coordinated government response was required. American federalism divides responsibility for government functions between the national and the state governments. This division of responsibilities and powers has not remained static since the founding. Different types of crisis events can mean different responses at the state and national levels. Crisis response is complicated by federalism and evolving and changing ideas about how federalism should work. We describe the design of the federal system as it relates to disasters, how changes in federalism doctrine have changed approaches to crisis response, and how similar disasters can have very different types of responses based on the underlying laws that govern those responses. We conclude that one cannot apply one model of federalism to current crisis management in the United States. Instead, we argue that “kaleidoscopic federalism” is the best description of the current state of federalism.