

When Disaster Meets Relief: Partisan Moderation of Crisis and Aid Effects in the 2020 Election

Lukas K. Alexander
Washington University in St. Louis

Douglas L. Kriner
Cornell University

Andrew Reeves
Washington University in St. Louis
Hoover Institution

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Abstract

How do voters respond when a national crisis imposes harm but also delivers federal aid? The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique test of what considerations voters bring to bear in response to both loss and relief. We theorize that federal spending can mitigate the political costs of disasters, but only under certain partisan and contextual conditions. Specifically, we hypothesize that the electoral effects of pandemic costs and relief will be interactive, and their effects will vary across partisan subgroups depending on whether each factor reinforces or conflicts with partisan priors. Drawing on county-level data and nationally representative survey evidence from the 2020 U.S. presidential election, we find that pandemic costs and relief had the greatest effects on vote choice among independents who lacked strong partisan priors. Among partisans, exposure to pandemic costs was most influential among Republicans and localized relief was most influential among Democrats. Relief spending also shaped the 2020 election outcome indirectly by mobilizing Republican turnout and changing the composition of the electorate. Finally, we find strong evidence that the effects of pandemic costs and relief on political behavior are interactive, with the influence of each varying on the level of the other and across partisan subgroups. These findings advance theories of retrospective voting and distributive politics by demonstrating how crisis exposure, partisan identity, and economic relief jointly shape the electoral consequences of national emergencies.

Crises pose an existential threat to political leaders, but they can also present considerable opportunities. Disasters disrupt lives, economies, and political landscapes. When crises strike, voters instinctively look to political leaders for policy responses that mitigate harm and restore stability. Even when a government has little control over the impact of a disaster, incumbents may still bear the political costs of its consequences. Plagues, failed harvests, and volcanic eruptions have shaped the rise and fall of empires (Büntgen et al., 2016; Gingerich and Vogler, 2021; Gray and Smith, 2022), while democratic voters have punished incumbent politicians for floods (Bodet, Thomas and Tessier, 2016; Heersink, Peterson and Jenkins, 2017), fires (Kronborg et al., 2024), and even shark attacks (Achen and Bartels, 2016).

However, a crisis also offers presidents opportunities to project an image of a leader in command (Neustadt, 1990 [1960]; Heim, 2013) and, perhaps most importantly, to highlight their central role in deploying government resources to respond to the emergency. In the United States, Congress has delegated to presidents extraordinary unilateral powers to respond to national emergencies (Reeves, 2011; Ouyang and Morgan, 2019). More broadly, presidential power expands in times of crisis (Rossiter, 1956; Bryce, 1924 [1888]; Rossiter, 1963) as Congress and the Courts become more deferential (Howell, Jackman and Rogowski, 2019; Epstein et al., 2005) and presidents draw on a broad range of non-enumerated powers (Corwin, 1940). Presidents who seize the moment could reap political gains by skillfully allocating federal resources to provide economic relief from the emergency (Gasper and Reeves, 2011).

But how do voters balance the competing forces of disaster damage and federal relief in the midst of a global pandemic? And how do these dynamics vary across partisan subgroups? To find out, we employ county-level data on relief spending, election returns, and COVID-19 deaths, as well as individual-level survey data, to examine how variation in pandemic severity and the level of federal aid directed into each community shaped Americans' political behavior in the 2020 election. We find evidence that even in this context, voters responded based on their localized experiences; respondents with greater personal exposure to COVID's human costs punished President Trump and voters rewarded him for federal relief according to the scale of federal assistance their local community received. Moreover, we find that this relationship was interactive: the electoral costs of personal exposure to a COVID death declined, and ultimately disappeared, as the level of federal aid to a community increased. Finally, consistent with foundational theories of American voter behavior that acknowledge the profound influence of partisanship on virtually every aspect of

political life, including perceptions of accountability (Campbell et al., 1960; Key, 1966), even in the context of natural disasters (Heersink et al., 2020; Chen, 2013), we find that partisanship significantly moderated the electoral ramifications of pandemic costs and federal relief. When the informative signals sent by pandemic costs or relief challenged partisan priors, they had their greatest effect; when they reinforced partisan predispositions, their influence was negligible.

Disasters, Pandemics, and the Electoral Politics of COVID-19

On January 21, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control announced the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States. By mid-March, the Trump administration had banned international travel first from China and then from Europe, declared a national emergency, and publicly asked Americans to work from home and avoid unnecessary gatherings (Kalogiannidis, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly unleashed economic and social turmoil across the United States and the world. From its onset through March 2023, the US recorded over 100 million cases and more than 1.1 million deaths (Johns Hopkins University, 2024). Beyond the public health crisis, the pandemic triggered severe economic disruptions driven by widespread business closures, supply chain breakdowns, and the economic impact of preventive measures (Walmsley, Rose and Wei, 2021). Small businesses were particularly affected, with many forced to shut down or declare bankruptcy (Bartik et al., 2020; Fairlie, 2020). Estimates place the two-year economic toll of COVID-19 in the US at between \$3 and \$5 trillion (Walmsley, Rose and Wei, 2021). Much of this economic hardship stemmed from government-imposed containment measures, including travel restrictions, bans on large gatherings, and school closures (Kalogiannidis, 2020), which, while aimed at curbing the virus's spread, further strained businesses and the broader economy.

To mitigate the economic hardships faced by individuals and businesses during the pandemic, the federal government enacted a massive relief program unparalleled since the days of the Great Depression (Selgin, 2021). A pivotal moment came on March 27, 2020, with the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (PL 116-136). The bill allocated \$2.1 trillion to support Americans through direct stimulus payments, expanded unemployment benefits, and other relief efforts.

Among these programs, the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) emerged as a cornerstone of the response, providing critical economic support to struggling businesses (GSA 2023). The PPP provided a

direct lifeline to small businesses across the country, offering low-interest loans to help businesses retain or rehire workers and cover essential costs. Most of these loans were eligible for forgiveness provided they were spent on eligible expenses, above all, payroll for workers. Ultimately, the PPP distributed over \$811 billion—an amount comparable in raw dollars to the entire 2009 stimulus package responding to the Great Recession (Congressional Budget Office, 2012; Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, 2024).¹

What were the electoral implications of the pandemic’s costs and the government’s attempts to offset the economic pain COVID-19 caused? For many in the Trump campaign, including his pollster Tony Fabrizio: the answer was obvious: voter dissatisfaction with Trump’s handling of the pandemic cost him the election (Stracqualursi and Acosta, 2021). Fabrizio, Trump, and others are far from alone in reaching such a conclusion. Politicians and politicians have long blamed natural disasters for electoral losses. In his memoir, George W. Bush reflected on Hurricane Katrina’s political impact on his presidency, stating, “Katrina was more than a hurricane. . . it cast a cloud over my second term.” (Bush, 2010, 310). And nearly a century and a half before the 2020 election, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli believed a series of poor harvests led to his government’s defeat in Parliament (Monypenny and Buckle, 1929, 1347).

The study of crises and politics is well-established in political science and public administration.² A wealth of scholarship has found support for the logic underlying politicians’ lament. Crises pose a significant risk to incumbent governments, as voters often attribute negative consequences to those in power, even when they are not directly responsible. As Achen and Bartels (2016, 118) argues, when voters “are in pain, they are likely to kick the government.” Similarly, Gasper and Reeves (2011, 341) describes this form of voter retrospection—where electorates reward or punish an incumbent party based on the state of the world, regardless of the government’s actual responsibility—as characteristic of a “responsive electorate.” This model of reactive voter decision-making is central to theories of retrospective voting (Key, 1966; Kiewiet and Rivers, 1984).

An extensive literature documents the electoral costs that crises can impose on governing coalitions. For example, Hurricane Betsy negatively impacted the incumbent mayor in a subsequent mayoral election (Abney and Hill, 1966), and Barnhardt (1925) documented how rainfall patterns contributed to the rise of populism in 19th-century Nebraska. Indeed, Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita and Friedenberg (2018)

¹According to an analysis, 92% of PPP loans were forgiven (Pfeiffer and Fast, 2023).

²For a review of this literature, see Ang, Noble and Reeves (2021).

observes that unpredictable events, such as natural disasters, can substantially affect the electoral prospects of incumbents. This is especially true when the event occurs in the run-up to an election. Research shows that voters respond more intensely—positively or negatively—to politically salient events when they take place during an election period (Healy and Lenz, 2014; Huber, Hill and Lenz, 2012).

While the devastation caused by a disaster presents significant political risks for an incumbent, it also offers an opportunity for the government to allocate resources to mitigate the disaster’s negative consequences (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Healy and Malhotra, 2009). The role of the government, and of the president in particular, in disaster response has grown significantly over time. While state and local governments historically led disaster relief efforts (Landis, 1998), by the late 20th century, the federal government was covering 75% or more of disaster relief costs (Platt, 1999). This shift underscores the heightened expectations voters have placed on the federal government and its leaders during crises. Underscoring public demand for swift presidential action, Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson (2002) shows that even localized issues—such as crime, traffic, or garbage—can generate dissatisfaction with the president, as citizens interpret them as reflections of broader governmental performance. Consequently, presidents are both compelled and empowered to act decisively in response to disasters. And when they do respond to natural disasters by opening the federal purse strings and disbursing relief, presidents frequently reap benefits at the ballot box (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Healy and Malhotra, 2009).

While a large literature has examined the prospects for electoral consequence and reward in the context of natural disasters (Davies, 2017; Heim, 2013), a limited number of studies offers mixed evidence concerning whether similar dynamics hold for pandemics. Unlike natural disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes, which are acute, fast-moving events that inflict concentrated harm on a relatively small population, pandemics impose a slower, more prolonged form of pain, bringing sickness and death over an extended period and casting a far broader threat across society. At the same time, both natural disasters and pandemics share the quality of being exogenous shocks largely beyond direct political control, inviting voters to grapple with the question of whether and how to hold incumbents accountable. These differences in scope and duration may alter the way voters assign responsibility and weigh relief, making it less clear whether findings from the natural disaster literature will generalize to pandemics.

Perhaps the closest historical precedent, the Spanish Flu of 1918, appears to have had surprisingly muted

electoral ramifications. Abad and Maurer (2020) finds evidence of a modest electoral penalty for Democrats in the 1918 midterms, but the effects were small and disappeared completely by the 1920 presidential race. Similarly, Achen and Bartels (2016) argues that the pandemic received little voter attention despite its scale and, as a result, had little discernible electoral impact. Gutiérrez, Meriläinen and Rubli (2022) examine the electoral consequences of a major pandemic of the 21st century, the 2009 H1N1 outbreak in Mexico. They find a strong and significant negative effect of local outbreaks on voter turnout and electoral support for the incumbent party.

The COVID-19 pandemic was virtually unprecedented in scope and scale. Its global scale and scope dwarfed most of the disasters and even pandemics examined in previous empirical work. Many comparative analyses of the electoral effects of COVID-19 speak to significant electoral effects, with studies finding evidence that pandemic severity depressed turnout in French municipal elections (Noury et al., 2021) and damaged incumbents at the polls in 67 national elections in 56 electoral democracies (Su and Rashkova, 2024).³

By contrast, prior analyses of COVID-19's electoral effects in the United States have yielded decidedly mixed results. Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth (2021) finds a strong and significant negative relationship between county-level COVID-19 case rates and electoral support for President Trump.⁴ Many analyses of survey data similarly find strong negative relationships between local exposure to COVID fatalities, attitudes towards President Trump's handling of the pandemic, and 2020 vote choice (Mendoza Aviña and Sevi, 2021; Miller, Woods and Kalmbach, 2022; Warshaw, Vavreck and Baxter-King, 2020; Clarke, Stewart and Ho, 2021; Shino and Smith, 2021). However, other analyses have yielded either mixed evidence of any linkage (Hart, 2021), or even evidence of a positive relationship (Algara et al., 2024) between local COVID-19 deaths and electoral support for President Trump.

What this literature establishes is how pandemic costs may have influenced the vote. What it does not yet tell us is whether federal relief altered these effects, how the pandemic's human toll interacted with aid to shape electoral outcomes, or how these dynamics varied across partisan lines. Identifying these conditional relationships is the central contribution of our study.

³Though see Yam et al. (2020) for evidence of a rally around the flag effect behind most democratic leaders in the pandemic's early phase.

⁴However, the study finds no relationship between a county's COVID-19 death rate and Trump's vote share.

Taken together, these findings underscore the complex electoral consequences of crises. Disasters have historically imposed political costs on incumbents while also generating electoral rewards when governments provide relief. The unprecedented scale of the COVID-19 pandemic raises important questions about whether such dynamics extend to this context. Existing research offers mixed evidence on whether voters punished or rewarded President Trump based on their local experiences with the pandemic. Moreover, the distribution of government aid—particularly through programs like the PPP that channeled aid directly to millions of workers and thousands of businesses—may have counterbalanced the pandemic’s political costs, altering both turnout and vote choice. By examining these dynamics and how their effects vary by partisanship, our analysis addresses this gap and sheds light on the conditional relationship between crisis severity, government response, and electoral behavior.

Partisanship and the Electoral Interplay of COVID-19 Costs and Relief

Assessing the full electoral costs of a truly *national* disaster like COVID-19 is exceedingly difficult. Voters’ assessments of President Trump’s handling of the pandemic were likely influenced by a range of other factors, complicating the task of isolating the specific effect of the pandemic alone. However, even in a global pandemic, different Americans experienced the scale and scope of the pandemic’s costs differently through the communities in which they lived and the interpersonal networks in which they are embedded. Past research has shown that even in an increasingly nationalized era (Hopkins, 2018), voters still respond to local conditions and the personal implications of national policies (Healy and Lenz, 2016; Park and Reeves, 2020; Reeves and Gimpel, 2012; Karol and Miguel, 2007; Kriner and Shen, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic touched every corner of the country, the human and economic toll varied significantly across different regions (Tan et al., 2021; Polyakova et al., 2020). The allocation of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) relief also exhibited considerable variation (Duchin and Hackney, 2021*a*). These patterns highlight the enduring role of local realities in shaping political attitudes, even amid large-scale national crises.

Decades of research on the power of retrospective voting suggests that localized exposure to pandemic costs provides important information to voters about the state of the world. Voters may make different calculations about the degree of responsibility presidents have for adverse outcomes. However, as voters experience more exposure to COVID-19 deaths, the human costs of the pandemic become more salient and

influential in their evaluations. This, in turn, suggests that voters with greater exposure to pandemic deaths should be less likely to vote to re-elect the incumbent president, all else equal.

Can federal relief spending produce electoral benefits for the president even in the midst of a global pandemic? The literature on natural disasters suggests that it can. Yet there are reasons to question whether these dynamics generalize to COVID-19. Natural disasters are sudden, geographically bounded shocks, while pandemics are prolonged crises that touch every community. In both cases, presidents are judged on their responses, but the pandemic introduced an additional layer of evaluation: not only whether the administration alleviated suffering, but also whether it contained the spread and severity of the disease itself. The scale of COVID-19's human and economic toll may have been so great that relief could not offset its political costs. Moreover, whereas presidents have clear unilateral authority to release federal aid in natural disasters and can readily claim credit, accountability was more diffuse during the pandemic, as Congress played a central role in authorizing relief. Nonetheless, past research shows that voters routinely hold presidents responsible for the distribution of federal spending in their communities (Kriner and Reeves, 2012). Even when members of Congress benefit electorally, those rewards are concentrated among the president's co-partisans (Christenson, Kriner and Reeves, 2017).

Local pandemic relief provides voters with a clear signal of government responsiveness to their economic needs. Voters in communities where federal aid offset most of the salaries of friends and neighbors temporarily out of work because of the pandemic observed a strikingly different image of the energy and efficacy of the federal government than did voters whose communities received little or no funds. Given these clear signals and past research showing that voters hold presidents accountable for the share of federal resources their communities receive, there are strong reasons to expect that voters from counties that received high levels of federal pandemic relief assistance will be more likely to vote to re-elect the president than voters who live in communities that received lower levels of federal pandemic relief, all else equal.

Taken together, a wealth of prior scholarship suggests what we label the "Performance Accountability Hypothesis":

The Performance Accountability Hypothesis: Voters reward incumbents when government actions alleviate suffering and punish incumbents when adverse outcomes occur under their watch. Greater exposure to COVID-19 deaths should reduce support for Trump, while higher levels of local federal relief should

increase support for Trump.

While local exposure to COVID-19 deaths and federal relief programs provides clear information about the human costs of the pandemic and the scale and scope of the government's efforts to ameliorate suffering, even these objective facts are open to competing interpretations. In the US, an extensive body of scholarship leads us to expect that voters will evaluate these localized facts and experiences through partisan filters. Partisanship is the defining lens through which individuals interpret the world around them, shaping perceptions of political events and government actions (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2004; Campbell et al., 1960). Past research suggests that partisanship also affects the politics of disaster relief. For example, Chen (2013) identifies an inverse dynamic in which disaster relief, by showcasing the president's competence and fostering expectations of continued aid, mobilized co-partisans to turn out to vote while simultaneously de-mobilizing opposition partisans. Similarly, Heersink et al. (2020) argues that partisan biases lead presidential co-partisans to rally behind the president in areas hard-hit by a disaster, while leading opposition partisans in devastated areas to become even less supportive of the incumbent.

We build on this past work, while offering a broader framework about how the effects of pandemic costs and relief will vary across partisan groups depending on whether the information each communicates reinforces or conflicts with partisan priors. When a cost or benefit reinforces partisan predispositions, it is unlikely to alter the underlying balance of salient considerations on which voters draw at the polls (Zaller, 1992). By contrast, when information about localized pandemic conditions runs counter to partisan priors—or even more so, when it need not compete with strong partisan preconceptions—it has a greater chance of altering the balance of salient considerations and affecting vote choice. This generates our "Partisan Conditioning Hypothesis":

The Partisan Conditioning Hypothesis: The electoral impact of pandemic costs and relief is conditioned by partisan predispositions. Republicans are inclined to discount the negative information conveyed by local deaths while embracing the positive information conveyed by local relief; Democrats do the reverse. Because independents lack strong partisan anchors, they are most responsive to both types of signals.

Our framework conceptualizes voters' localized experiences with both pandemic-related costs and federal relief as signals of the administration's performance. These signals may shift the salience of competing considerations in vote choice. And this, in turn, provides a rationale for why the electoral effects of pandemic

costs and benefits are likely to be interactive. Exposure to high pandemic costs may reduce the likelihood of voting for President Trump by providing highly salient information that the state of the world has deteriorated under Trump’s watch. However, as the scale of localized relief spending increases, this negative information may be offset and potentially even overwhelmed by the additional evidence that the administration was marshaling the full force of the federal government to respond to the emergency. Moreover, because pandemic costs should be most influential in the voting calculus of Republicans and independents, our theory suggests this interactive relationship should be stronger among these partisan subgroups. This logic underlies our “Conditional Offsetting Hypothesis”:

The Conditional Offsetting Hypothesis: The electoral consequences of pandemic costs depend on the scale of federal relief. Exposure to local COVID-19 deaths should reduce support for Trump by signaling deteriorating conditions under his watch. Yet this negative effect should be offset—and in some cases reversed—when voters simultaneously observe high levels of local relief, which provide a countervailing signal of government responsiveness. This interactive relationship should be strongest among Republicans and independents, who are most sensitive to pandemic costs.

Taken together, the Partisan Conditioning and Conditional Offsetting hypotheses extend past literature on retrospective voting and disaster politics by emphasizing that pandemic costs and relief are not simply independent forces, but conditional signals of presidential performance that are interpreted through distinctly partisan lenses. Both hypotheses highlight how partisan predispositions, interactive information environments, and turnout dynamics jointly condition accountability in the context of a national pandemic.

Measuring Pandemic Politics: Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we analyze the relationships between variation in exposure to the human costs of COVID-19, the scale of federal relief spending in local communities, and electoral support for President Trump. In our first set of analyses, we consider President Trump’s electoral success using county-level election returns compiled by the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL, 2021). Our dependent variable is the change in vote share for incumbent President Trump between the 2016 and 2020 elections, which we calculate by subtracting Trump’s 2016 two-party vote share from his 2020 vote share at the county level. This provides a measure of how Trump’s electoral support shifted over time across the country.

As voters typically weigh recent events more heavily in their evaluations of elected officials (Huber, Hill and Lenz, 2012; Healy and Lenz, 2014), the pandemic and the government’s response would likely have been on the minds of voters during the 2020 election.⁵

We draw our measure of COVID-19 pandemic relief from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) from the U.S. Small Business Administration (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2024). We aggregate funds to the county level and focus on PPP loans distributed between the program’s launch on April 3, 2020, and Election Day, November 3, 2020. During this period, two waves of PPP funding were made available to businesses. The first wave began on April 3 and allowed eligible businesses to request loans covering up to 2.5 months of payroll costs. The second wave, launched on April 27, maintained the same 2.5-month eligibility for most businesses but extended the coverage to 3.5 months for businesses in the accommodations and food services industries. The Paycheck Program Flexibility Act then extended the deadline to apply for PPP loans through the end of the calendar year.

To measure the extent of localized relief spending, we adapt the approach used by Duchin and Hackney (2021a), extending their state- and district-level analyses to the county level. We construct a measure that we term the *payroll offset ratio*, defined as the share of local payroll costs offset by PPP loans. The numerator is the total PPP funding disbursed to each county between April and November 2020. The denominator is an estimate of total county payroll expenses eligible under the statutory criteria of the program. This ratio provides a standardized measure of how extensively federal relief offset local employment costs across counties.

To construct the denominator, or the level of available expenses, we develop county-level estimates of payroll estimates based on the firm-level criteria as determined by the PPP requirement. At the firm-level, PPP loans were available to small businesses, nonprofits, veterans’ organizations, tribal entities, sole proprietors, and certain hospitality and franchise firms, generally limited to those with 500 or fewer employees (with some exceptions by industry or affiliation rules). We are able to approximate the total theoretical eligibility at the county level using data from the US Census Bureau’s 2017 County Business Patterns,⁶ which

⁵In the supplemental information, we present a map of the United States, visualizing the county map of change in President Trump’s vote share between 2016 and 2020.

⁶These data offer detailed payroll information by industry, sector, and business size, which is essential given that PPP eligibility was restricted to firms with fewer than 500 employees (with exceptions in the accommodations and food services sectors). For details on data methodology, see U.S. Census Bureau Methodology Documentation.

we adjust for inflation. Following Duchin and Hackney (2021b), we first summed the annual payroll for all businesses with fewer than 500 employees, excluding those in the accommodations and food services industries. Following statutory eligibility at the firm-level, we included payroll data for businesses of all sizes for businesses in the accommodations and food services industries. These totals were then converted to a five-month proportion for non-accommodations/food services businesses and a six-month proportion for accommodations/food services businesses to reflect the eligible periods for PPP funding. Adding these proportions together yielded a county-level estimate of payroll costs eligible for PPP offset. The resulting coverage variable reflects the ratio of PPP funds distributed relative to the payroll need in each county. To address the presence of outliers, we limit the analysis to include only the bottom 95% of counties.⁷ To visualize the variable, Figure 1 depicts the variation in the extent to which eligible payroll was offset across the country at the county level.

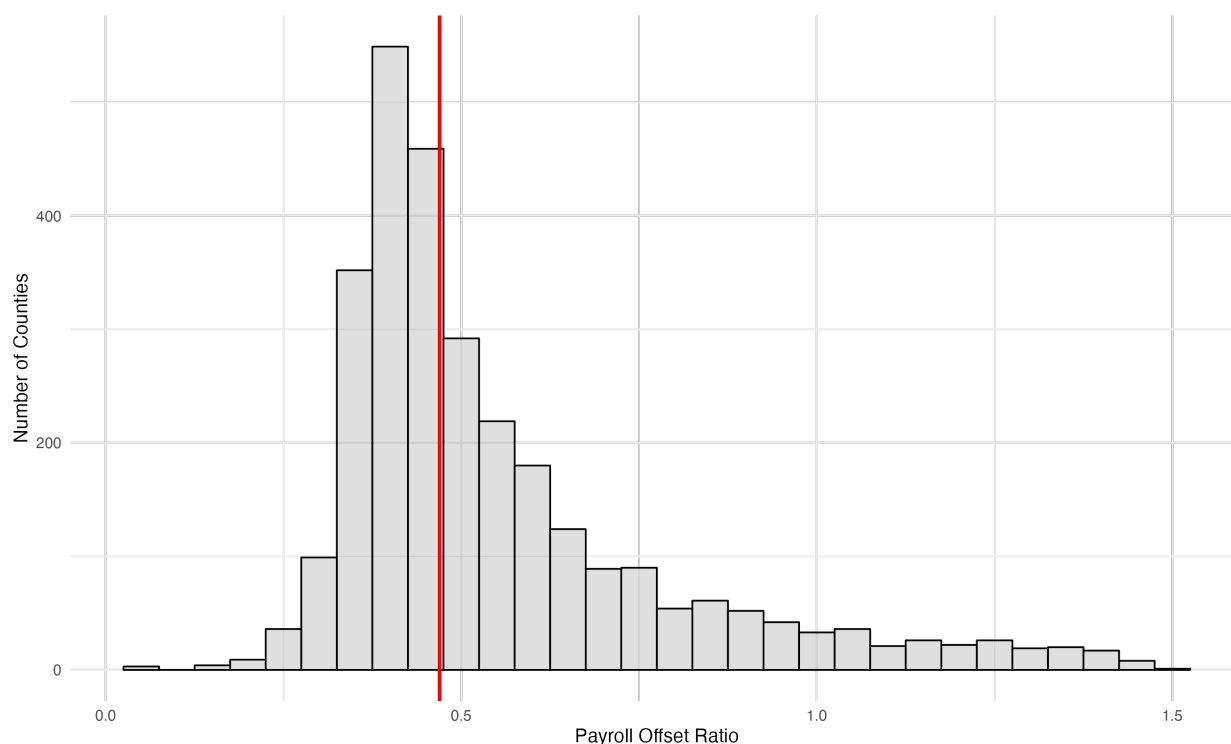


Figure 1: County-Level Histogram of Payroll Offset Ratio

Note: The histogram represents the Payroll Offset Ratio capped at the 95th percentile — the same as we use in the following analyses. The red vertical line indicates the median county-level payroll offset ratio.

⁷Further information about the payroll offset ratio can be found in the appendix. In the supplemental information, we include analyses with alternative specifications of the payroll offset ratio. All substantive interpretations remain the same.

Our initial set of analyses look for evidence consistent with the Performance Accountability Hypothesis at the county level. The dependent variable is the change in Trump’s vote share between the 2016 and 2020 elections. The independent variables of interest are the payroll offset ratio as the independent variable and the each county’s logged COVID-19 death rate per 10,000 residents. We also include several additional control variables including county-level change in per capita income, unemployment rates, and population.⁸ By controlling for these factors, we aim to isolate the relationship between PPP funding and electoral outcomes, ensuring that our analysis accounts for alternative economic and demographic influences. Finally, to account for state-level variations, we include state fixed effects in our OLS regressions. State fixed effects ensure that observed trends at the county level are analyzed within the context of each county’s state, controlling for broader state-level dynamics.

In our second set of analyses, we rely on survey data to examine the relationships between localized relief spending, personal exposure to the pandemic’s human costs, partisanship, and electoral behavior. We utilize data from the 2020 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (Schaffner, Ansolabehere and Luks, 2021), which includes a nationally representative sample of 60,000 Americans. While the dataset does not provide a full representation of every county, its large sample size enables us to assess how federal funding impacted electoral behavior. Individual-level data also allow us to test the Partisan Conditioning and Conditional Offsetting hypotheses that the effects of exposure to pandemic deaths, localized relief spending, and their interaction will vary by partisanship. To measure our dependent variable, vote choice, we use the question that asked respondents, “For whom did you vote for President of the United States?” We operationalize our dependent variable as an indicator coded as one for respondents who said they voted for President Trump and zero otherwise. Our analyses of vote choice are restricted to validated voters.

The individual-level analyses again have two main independent variables of interest: the payroll offset ratio, our measure of geographic variation in federal relief spending, and a more direct measure of variation in personal exposure to the pandemic’s human costs—a question asking whether each respondent reported having a family member or friend who died in the pandemic. No measure of exposure to pandemic deaths is perfect, but this measure has advantages over coarser proxies, such as county-level death rates.⁹ All of our

⁸We follow the approach of (Kriner and Reeves, 2015) in selecting our control variables.

⁹One important concern with self-reported exposure to COVID-19 deaths is that it may be shaped by partisanship. To account for this possibility, in the supplemental information we provide additional analyses considering the relationship between partisanship, community COVID-19 death rate, and knowing a COVID-19 victim. We demonstrate that a respondent’s home county’s COVID-19

	Change in Trump Vote Share	
	(1)	(2)
Payroll Offset Ratio	2.13*** (0.20)	1.19*** (0.21)
COVID Deaths (logged)		0.11 (0.17)
Income Change ('16-'20)		4.09** (1.93)
Unemployment Change ('16-'20)		-0.02 (0.11)
Population Change ('16-'20)		-15.18*** (2.22)
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Num. obs.	2943	2868
R ²	0.36	0.36
Adj. R ²	0.35	0.35

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Table 1: Models of Change in County-Level Trump Vote Share as a Function of Payroll Offset Ratio. Ordinary Least Squares Regression model with standard errors clustered by state.

models also include individual-level control variables for partisanship, education, race, ethnicity, sex, and age. We also include indicators for the state of residence. For party identification, we classify respondents as Republicans (including leaners), Democrats (including leaners), and true independents who do not lean toward either party. We base this measure on the 7-point scale used in the CES.

County-Level Evidence: How Relief Spending Boosted Trump's Support

As an initial assessment of the electoral effects of COVID-19 relief spending, we regressed the change in President Trump's county-level vote share from 2016 to 2020 on the ratio of eligible payroll offset by the Paycheck Protection Program in that county. Table 1, column 1 presents the bivariate relationship between our dependent variable and localized relief spending. The second model includes each county's logged COVID-19 death rate, as well as a range of additional covariates. Both models include state fixed effects.

The first, parsimonious model shows a strong and statistically significant relationship between each county's payroll offset ratio—the share of need that PPP spending covered—and increased electoral support. A county's death rate is a strong and statistically significant predictor of knowing a COVID-19 death, even after controlling for partisan factors.

for President Trump relative to its 2016 baseline. Substantively, this model suggests that meeting 100% of a county's payroll needs would increase support for Trump by 2.13% versus a county that received no PPP aid.

In the second model, we incorporate each county's logged COVID death rate and a host of control variables. After doing so, there remains a positive and statistically significant relationship between the payroll offset ratio and change in Republican vote share. Offsetting 50% of a county's payroll increased support for President Trump by just over half a percentage point. A payroll offset ratio of one—meeting 100% of a county's eligible payroll need—boosted Trump's fortunes by nearly 1.2%.

The table highlights the magnitude and direction of this relationship, showing a clear increase in electoral support as a greater proportion of a county's financial needs are fulfilled. This pattern suggests that the targeted allocation of federal funds functions is an effective electoral strategy, yielding tangible benefits at the ballot box even in the midst of a truly national calamity. This is consistent with the Performance Accountability Hypothesis.¹⁰

However, contra expectations we do not find a statistically significant relationship between local death rates and electoral support for President Trump. This null finding is consistent with previous findings (Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth, 2021) and underscores the difficulty of detecting localized electoral consequences from pandemic mortality, even in the midst of a crisis of this magnitude. One plausible interpretation is that partisanship conditioned responses to pandemic costs so strongly that the direct electoral signal of local deaths was muted.

Finally, several of our control variables were also in the expected direction. County-level income change and population change are statistically significant predictors of electoral shifts: income growth is positively associated and income growth is negatively associated with Republican vote share.

¹⁰In the supplemental analyses, we interact our results with county partisan leanings. The interaction terms are statistically insignificant, indicating that the effect of the payroll offset ratio does not differ by a county's partisan orientation. We also assess whether results vary with local COVID-19 severity by interacting the payroll offset ratio with county-level logged death rates. The interactions reveal no significant differences: counties with higher mortality show similar relationships to those with lower mortality.

Individual-Level Evidence: How Relief Spending and Exposure to COVID Deaths Shaped Turnout and Vote Choice

We now turn to individual-level survey data to further examine how COVID-19 relief spending and personal exposure to pandemic deaths influenced the 2020 election. Specifically, we analyze the relationship between county-level payroll offset ratios, self-reported personal exposure to a COVID death, and electoral behavior.

Vote Choice

Table 2 presents the results of a series of models analyzing the relationship between personal exposure to a COVID death, PPP relief spending, and vote choice for the subset of verified voters in 2020 (i.e., those that the CES verified as having voted from an analysis of voter roll data). Column 1 of Table 2 presents the results for all respondents. Across the full sample, we find evidence of both electoral punishment for the pandemic's toll and electoral rewards for federal relief. Consistent with the Performance Accountability hypothesis, the coefficients on both independent variables of interest are in the expected direction and highly statistically significant. Figure 2 illustrates the substantive effects.

The scale and scope of localized PPP relief spending are strongly associated with vote choice. The median independent respondent in a community that received no PPP relief assistance had less than a .40 predicted probability of voting to re-elect President Trump. Increasing the payroll offset ratio to 50% made the median independent respondent just as likely to vote to re-elect the president as to vote for the challenger, Joe Biden. And when 100% of the eligible payroll was offset, the same median independent respondent had a greater than .60 predicted probability of voting for Trump.

By contrast, the coefficient for knowing a COVID-19 victim is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that personal exposure to the pandemic was associated with a decreased likelihood of supporting Trump.¹¹ Self-reported personal exposure to a COVID death (i.e., knowing a friend or family member who died from the disease) significantly decreased the predicted probability of voting for Trump by more than

¹¹In the Supplemental Information, we address concerns that self-reported exposure to COVID-19 deaths may be a poor proxy for variation in personal contact with the human costs of the pandemic. While other factors, including partisanship, are significant predictors of knowing a COVID-19 death, a respondent's county COVID-19 death rate is a strong, and highly significant predictor as well, suggesting the measure is at least a reasonable proxy for variation in personal exposure to COVID-19 deaths. We also explore whether and find little evidence that partisanship significantly moderates the negative relationship between knowing a COVID-19 death and voting for Trump.

	All	GOP	Dem	Ind	GOP	Dem	Ind
Payroll Offset Ratio	1.32*** (0.40)	0.70 (0.82)	2.02*** (0.47)	1.42** (0.67)	0.56 (0.91)	1.95*** (0.49)	1.02 (0.67)
Know COVID Death	-0.65*** (0.07)	-0.67*** (0.11)	-0.42*** (0.14)	-0.84*** (0.13)	-1.06 (0.74)	-0.61 (0.65)	-1.73*** (0.35)
Payroll Offset × COVID Death					0.93 (1.78)	0.43 (1.42)	2.17** (0.89)
Republican	2.67*** (0.06)						
Democrat	-3.27*** (0.10)						
High School Grad	0.31 (0.21)	0.38 (0.31)	0.30 (0.44)	0.05 (0.23)	0.38 (0.31)	0.30 (0.44)	0.06 (0.23)
Some College	0.11 (0.20)	0.33 (0.31)	-0.01 (0.43)	-0.19 (0.25)	0.33 (0.31)	-0.00 (0.43)	-0.18 (0.25)
2-year College	0.26 (0.19)	0.44 (0.31)	0.01 (0.44)	0.07 (0.28)	0.44 (0.31)	0.01 (0.44)	0.07 (0.28)
4-year College	-0.37** (0.17)	-0.18 (0.30)	-0.67** (0.34)	-0.58** (0.24)	-0.18 (0.30)	-0.67** (0.34)	-0.58** (0.24)
Postgraduate	-0.74*** (0.19)	-0.74** (0.30)	-1.18*** (0.42)	-0.65*** (0.25)	-0.74** (0.30)	-1.18*** (0.42)	-0.65*** (0.25)
Black	-1.48*** (0.17)	-1.22*** (0.27)	-1.24*** (0.32)	-1.86*** (0.24)	-1.22*** (0.27)	-1.24*** (0.32)	-1.87*** (0.24)
Hispanic	-0.31 (0.19)	-0.57*** (0.20)	-0.10 (0.33)	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.57*** (0.20)	-0.10 (0.33)	-0.27** (0.11)
Male	0.20*** (0.05)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.43*** (0.10)	0.32*** (0.09)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.43*** (0.10)	0.32*** (0.09)
Age	0.02*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Num. obs.	36427	13233	19165	4029	13233	19165	4029

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Table 2: Model of Relationship Between Trump Vote Choice, Knowing a COVID Death, and Relief Spending. Logistic regression models with standard errors clustered by state. Models use common content survey weights. All significance tests are two-tailed.

.15. This large negative effect is observed after controlling for partisanship and other factors that commonly influence vote choice.

Many of the control variables were also significant predictors of vote choice, and the relationships accord with expectations from past research. College graduates were significantly less likely to vote for President

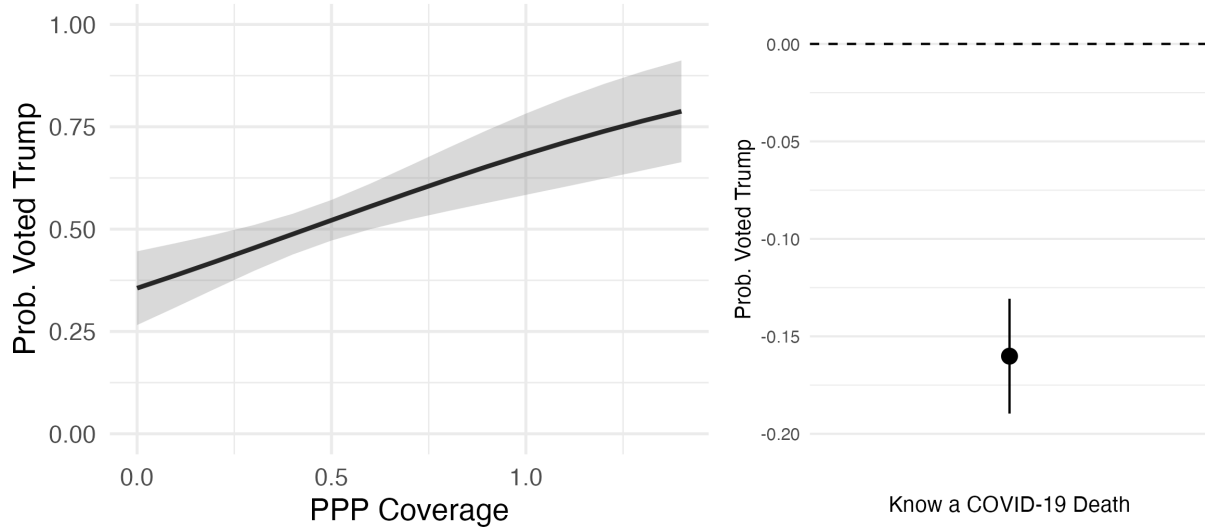


Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Vote Choice, All Respondents

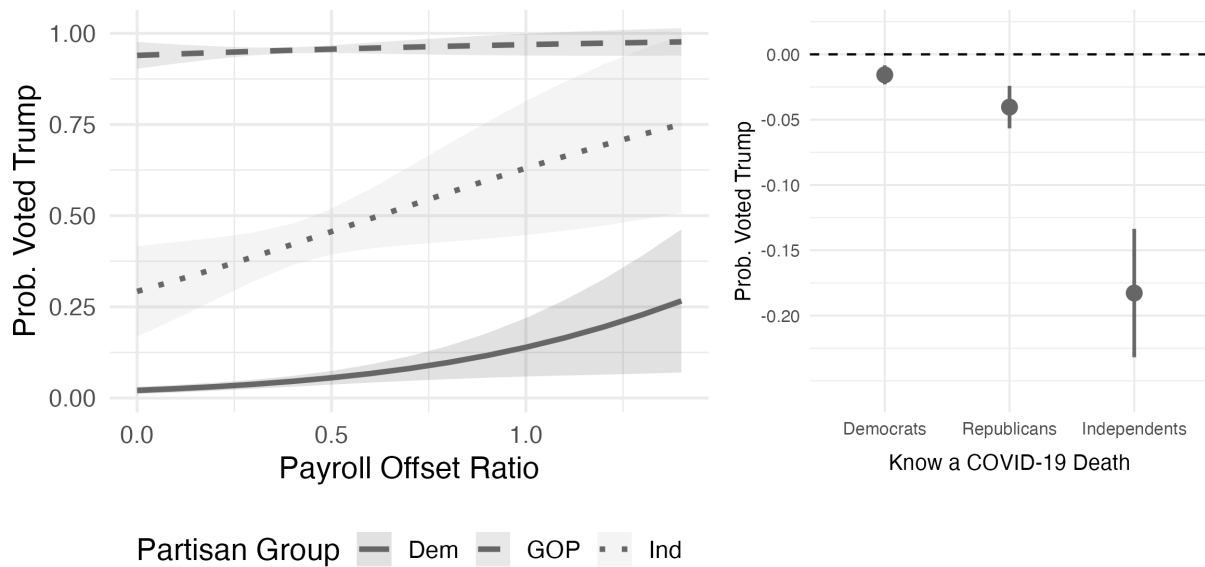


Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Vote Choice, by Respondent Partisanship

Trump than respondents without a college degree, and individuals with a post-graduate degree were even less likely to do so. Black respondents were significantly less likely to vote for Trump, while men were

significantly more likely to do so, all else equal. Finally, older respondents were more likely to vote to reelect President Trump.

To look for evidence of the core observable implications of the Partisan Conditioning hypothesis, the models in columns 2-4 re-estimate the same model specification separately for each partisan subgroup. Figure 3 illustrates the substantive effects. Strongly consistent with theoretical expectations, both personal exposure to a COVID death and relief spending had the greatest substantive effects on independents who lacked strong partisan predispositions that dominated their voting calculus. Increasing the amount of eligible payroll offset by PPP in the median independent respondent's home county from 0% to 100% significantly increased the predicted probability that she voted to re-elect President Trump from .35 to .68. The median independent respondent who reported knowing a COVID death was almost 20% less likely to vote to re-elect President Trump than the median independent respondent who did not have a friend or family member die from COVID, all else equal.

Also consistent with expectations, PPP relief spending was more strongly associated with vote choice for Democrats than for Republicans. The same increase in the payroll offset ratio (from 0-100%) increased the predicted probability of the median Democrat voting for President Trump from .02 to .10. By contrast, for the median Republican it only increased the predicted probability of voting for Trump from .93 to .97. For Democrats, relief spending provided information that could cast the administration's pandemic response in a positive light, challenging their predispositions critical of the president. For Republicans, relief spending reinforced dominant partisan predispositions and had little effect on vote choice.

Personal exposure to a COVID death also significantly reduced the probability of the median Republican and Democrat voting for Trump. And consistent with the Partisan Conditioning hypothesis, the marginal effect on vote choice was significantly greater for the former than for the latter. For Republicans, personal exposure to a COVID death provided salient information that challenged their partisan predispositions; for Democrats, this information reinforced partisan priors. And accordingly, the estimated marginal effect on vote choice for Republicans was double that observed for Democrats (3.3% vs. 1.5%).¹²

The final set of models reported in columns 5-7 estimates the relationship between the interaction of

¹²Testing whether two margins from non-nested models are significantly different from one another is complicated. Instead, we estimated a single pooled model for Republican and Democratic respondents with an identical specification interacting each covariate with a Democratic party indicator variable; the difference in the estimated marginal effect for knowing a COVID death for the median Republican and Democratic respondent is statistically significant, $p < .05$, two-tailed test.

the payroll offset ratio and personal exposure to a COVID death and vote choice across partisan subgroups. Figure 4 presents the results. Consistent with the Conditional Offsetting hypothesis, we see evidence of an interactive effect for Republicans, but not for Democrats. At low levels of relief spending, knowing a COVID death decreased the median Republican’s probability of voting for President Trump by about 10%. As the PPP relief spending increases, this negative estimated marginal effect of knowing a COVID death (i.e., the gap in predicted probability of voting for Trump between those who knew and did not know someone who had died from the pandemic) narrows. When 60% of the eligible payroll is offset, the gap is statistically insignificant, and when 100% of payroll is offset by PPP relief, the gap disappears entirely.

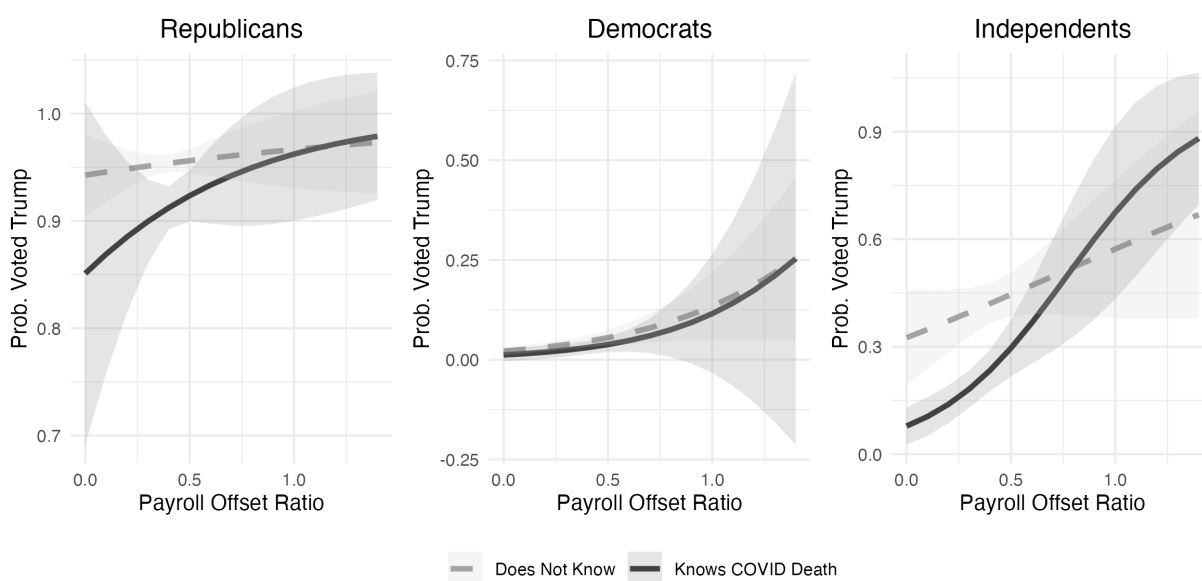


Figure 4: Interactive Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Trump Vote Choice, by Respondent Partisanship

Finally, we observe a similar, but even stronger interactive relationship for independents. At low levels of PPP relief, knowing a COVID death significantly reduced the predicted probability of voting to reelect President Trump by more than 20%. The median independent respondent’s propensity to vote for Trump increases significantly as PPP spending increases. When 60% or more of the eligible payroll in a respondent’s county was offset by PPP relief, the effect of knowing a COVID death is no longer statistically significant.

Taken together, these findings are strongly consistent with both the Partisan Conditioning and Conditional Offsetting hypotheses. The results underscore the strategic role of federal spending in shaping

electoral outcomes. Even among those who experienced the pandemic's human toll most acutely through the death of a family member or friend, President Trump was able to mitigate the political consequences of COVID-19's impact through the local allocation of federal relief funds.

Turnout

The preceding analyses find strong support for our hypotheses that both pandemic costs and relief influenced voters' decision calculus (the Partisan Accountability hypothesis), and that these effects were interactive (Conditional Offsetting hypothesis) and varied by partisanship (Partisan Conditioning hypothesis). We find strong evidence that COVID-19 deaths and relief directly influenced voters' willingness to vote to re-elect President Trump. As a final extension, we now consider an indirect mechanism through which the pandemic could also have affected electoral outcomes: by shaping would-be voters' calculations of whether or not to cast a ballot. The logic underlying the Partisan Moderation and Conditional Offsetting hypotheses suggests that the effects of pandemic relief and costs on turnout should vary by partisanship and be interactive.

Americans headed to the polls (or dropped off their ballots in their mailboxes) in the fall of 2020 amidst a parlous economic situation and a public health emergency still claiming the lives of thousands of Americans every week. These conditions could have discouraged many would-be Republican voters, torn between loyalty to a co-partisan president and dour real-world conditions. An aggressive federal response manifested in significant localized federal relief spending should combat these downward pressures and increase turnout propensity among Republicans.

By contrast, we would not expect federal spending to have a mobilizing effect among Democrats. Most Democrats had been waiting four years to render their verdict on President Trump at the polls, and the grim state of the world likely only heightened their enthusiasm to do so. Significant relief spending could challenge these predispositions, potentially even cooling the electoral fervor of Democrats to vote to oust the incumbent (Chen, 2013)). However, given the unprecedented levels of polarization in partisan attitudes towards President Trump (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018), the sheer scale of the pandemic and its human and economic costs, and the ability of Democrats to credit congressional Democrats for aid provision as opposed to President Trump, we posit a null relationship between spending and Democratic turnout. We lack clear expectations for independents. However, because independents lack strong partisan priors, it is

possible that both personal exposure to COVID deaths and to localized federal relief will provide strong signals of the practical importance of governmental policies and incentivize political participation.

Finally, our theoretical logic also suggests that any interactive effect between localized exposure to pandemic deaths, federal relief, and turnout should also vary by partisanship. Personal exposure to COVID-19 deaths may discourage some Republicans from participating, but relief should counteract that demobilizing effect. This conditional relationship should be strongest among Republicans, for whom deaths generate dissonant information that relief can help neutralize.

To test these final observable implications of our theory, we use voter file-validated turnout data from the 2024 CES, which matches individuals to the administrative voter file records to ascertain whether the respondent did in fact turn out in the 2020 general election. We first examine the relationships between knowing a COVID death, the payroll offset ratio in the respondent's county, and turnout. Column 1 of Table 3 presents the results for all respondents. Figure 5 illustrates the substantive magnitude of each estimated marginal effect. Increasing the payroll offset ratio in a respondent's county from 0% of eligible payroll to 100% of eligible payroll increases the predicted probability she will turnout to vote by almost .10, all else equal, though there is significant uncertainty about the estimates. Personally knowing a friend or family member who died of COVID-19 increased the predicted probability of voting by about .04.

Several control variables are also statistically significant predictors of turnout and vote choice, and these relationships match expectations from past research. Turnout propensities increase with education, with the biggest jumps being between those with and without a high school diploma and between high school graduates and respondents with at least some college. Blacks and Hispanics were also significantly less likely to turn out than other respondents, all else equal.

In Table 3, columns 2 through 4 present separate logistic regression models for each partisan subgroup. Strongly consistent with theoretical expectations, we find that the positive relationship between the county-level payroll offset ratio and turnout is driven almost entirely by Republicans. The coefficient for Republicans in model 2 is positive and statistically significant. In the models for Democrats (column 3) and independents (column 4) the relevant coefficient is substantively small and fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Figure 6 provides a substantive interpretation of these findings, illustrating that while increased payroll offset ratios have little to no impact on the turnout rates of Democrats and indepen-

	All	GOP	Dem	Ind	GOP	Dem	Ind
Payroll Offset Ratio	0.39*	0.64**	0.08	0.27	0.52*	0.00	0.33
	(0.23)	(0.29)	(0.32)	(0.36)	(0.31)	(0.39)	(0.39)
Know COVID Death	0.16***	0.18***	0.11**	0.29***	-0.40	-0.05	0.44
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.11)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.35)
Payroll Offset × COVID Death					1.40*	0.42	-0.38
					(0.71)	(0.72)	(0.86)
Republican	0.78***						
	(0.05)						
Democrat	0.99***						
	(0.06)						
High School Grad	0.54***	0.62***	0.42***	0.72***	0.62***	0.42***	0.72***
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.20)
Some College	1.28***	1.30***	1.12***	1.72***	1.30***	1.12***	1.72***
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.23)	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.23)
2-year College	1.29***	1.40***	1.02***	1.81***	1.40***	1.02***	1.81***
	(0.09)	(0.16)	(0.13)	(0.22)	(0.16)	(0.13)	(0.22)
4-year College	1.65***	1.62***	1.50***	2.26***	1.62***	1.50***	2.26***
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.26)	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.26)
Postgraduate	1.61***	1.59***	1.47***	2.09***	1.59***	1.47***	2.09***
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.29)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.29)
Black	-0.49***	-0.80***	-0.45***	-0.52***	-0.80***	-0.45***	-0.52***
	(0.06)	(0.14)	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.07)	(0.13)
Hispanic	-0.39***	-0.33***	-0.47***	-0.31	-0.33***	-0.47***	-0.31
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.23)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.23)
Male	0.07**	0.08*	-0.06	0.39***	0.08*	-0.05	0.40***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Age	0.04***	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Num. obs.	58258	20262	29202	8794	20262	29202	8794

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Table 3: Model of Relationship Between Turnout, Knowing a COVID Death, and Relief Spending. Logistic regression models with standard errors clustered by state. Models use common content survey weights. All significance tests are two-tailed.

dents, they significantly boost turnout among Republicans. At very low levels of pandemic aid, President Trump's co-partisans were significantly less likely to turn out than were Democrats. However, as localized pandemic aid increased, this gap narrows, and at high levels of pandemic aid the predicted probability of a Republican turning out to vote is even higher than for a Democrat, all else equal, though this difference is



Figure 5: Marginal Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Turnout, All Respondents

not statistically significant. This finding is crucial, as it demonstrates how the infusion of federal funds offset the demobilizing effect of the pandemic on President Trump’s core partisan base and shaped the ultimate outcome of the election by changing the composition of the electorate.

Across all three partisan groups, we find a positive and statistically significant relationship between knowing a COVID-19 death and turnout. Although we did not have strong theoretical priors for this relationship and variation across partisan subgroups, we note that the estimated effect is largest among independents.

Finally, the models in columns 5-7 in Table 3 estimate the relationship between the interaction of the payroll offset ratio and personal exposure to a COVID death and turnout propensity across partisan subgroups.¹³ Consistent with theoretical expectations, the coefficient on the interaction variable is only statistically significant for Republicans. Figure 7 illustrates the results. At very low levels of PPP relief spending, personally knowing a COVID death decreased turnout propensity for the median Republican voter. However, as the payroll offset ratio increased, this negative effect for knowing a COVID death disappeared, and once a certain level of PPP spending was reached (about 50% of eligible payroll offset), those who knew a

¹³ As shown in the supplemental information, estimating the same model specification for all respondents yields a positive, but statistically insignificant coefficient for the interaction variables

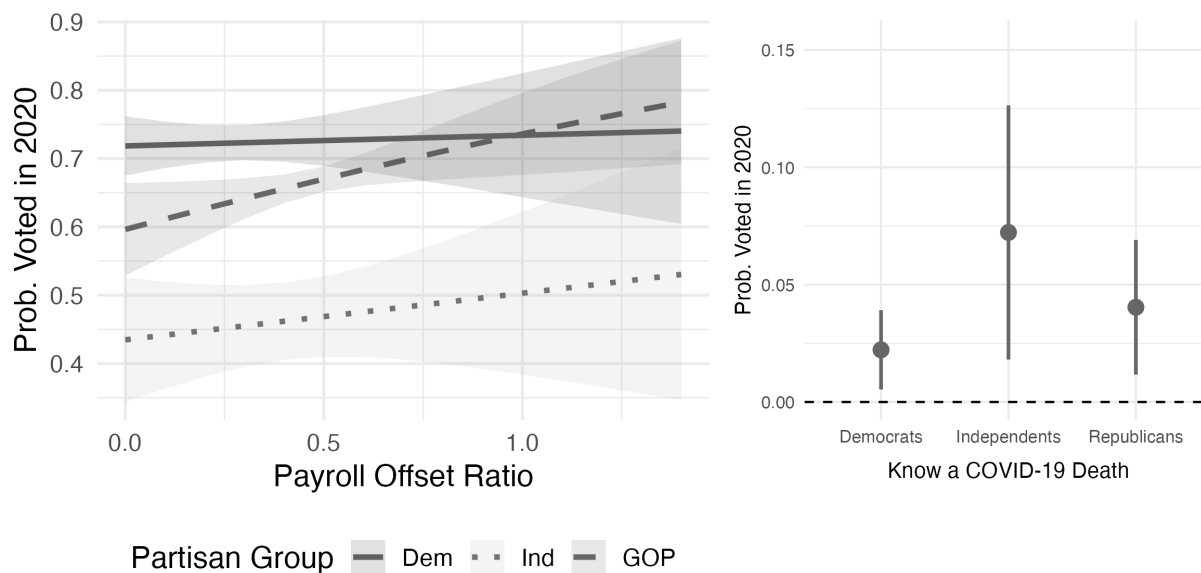


Figure 6: Marginal Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Turnout, by Respondent Partisanship

COVID death were more likely to turnout to vote than those who did not.¹⁴

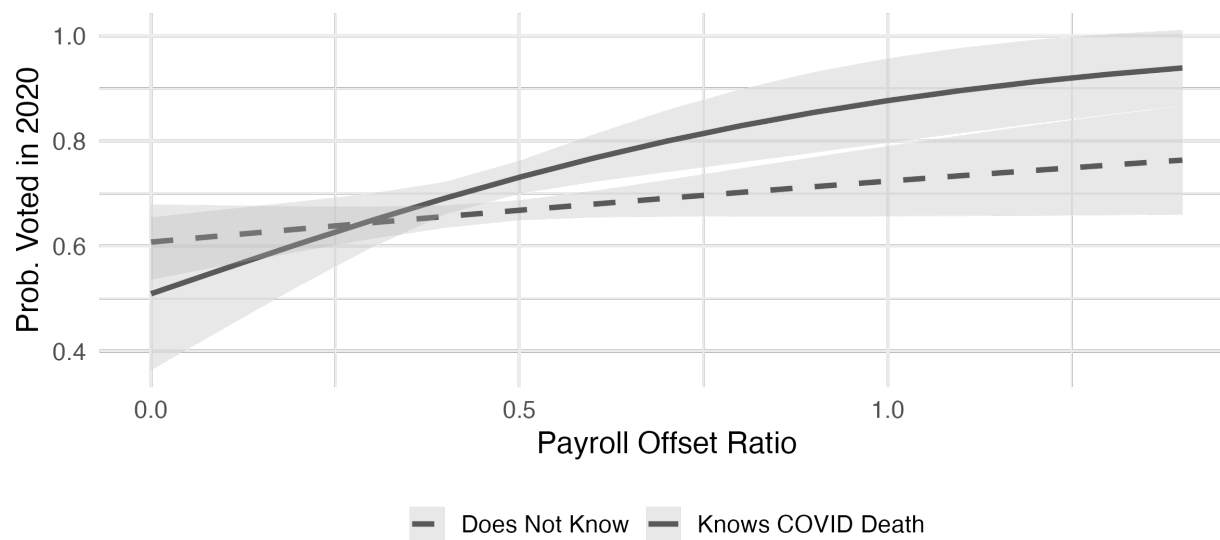


Figure 7: Interactive Effect of Payroll Offset Ratio and Knowing a COVID-19 Death on Turnout Among Republicans

¹⁴Parallel figures showing the null relationships for Democrats and independents are reported in the supplemental information.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sheds new light on the electoral consequences of public health crises, revealing both the promise and the limits of emergency spending as a tool for offsetting the electoral costs of disasters and even potentially turning it into a political gain. By leveraging variation in the local allocation of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds and personal exposure with the human costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, we demonstrate that President Trump both paid an electoral cost among those most directly touched by the pandemic and benefited from targeted relief in the 2020 election. However, these effects were not uniform, but rather varied meaningfully by partisanship and context, shaping both vote choice and turnout. Both pandemic costs and reliefs had their greatest effects on vote choice among independents who lacked strong partisan priors. Among partisans, exposure to pandemic costs was most influential among Republicans, and localized relief was most influential among Democrats. In these cases, pandemic information challenged rather than reinforced partisan priors. Relief spending was also particularly influential on the turnout calculus of Republicans, who may have been demobilized by the scale and scope of the disaster that emerged on President Trump's watch and the constant criticism of the administration's handling of the pandemic. Finally, we also find strong evidence that the effects of pandemic costs and relief on political behavior are interactive, with the influence of each varying on the level of the other and across partisan subgroups.

Our findings speak directly to ongoing debates about the political fallout of COVID-19. Prior work has yielded mixed conclusions about whether the pandemic cost Trump electorally, benefited him through rally effects, or had little net impact. This study helps reconcile those accounts. We show that personal exposure to pandemic-related suffering, such as knowing a COVID-19 victim, depressed support for the incumbent. But that effect was conditional. The electoral costs of knowing a COVID death varied across partisan groups. And where federal aid was substantial, these political costs were neutralized, and in some cases, reversed. COVID-19's electoral consequences, in short, depended not just on the scale of the crisis but also on the federal response.

At the same time, our findings raise normative concerns about executive power in times of crisis. Moments of national emergency often invite expansions of presidential authority. While swift action can be necessary, the capacity to disburse aid selectively also blurs the line between governance and electoral strategy. Relief spending that boosts welfare may also tilt the electoral playing field. The COVID-19 case

thus offers a cautionary tale: as presidents navigate future crises—climatic, geopolitical, or public health-related—the challenge will not only be to respond effectively, but to do so in ways that preserve democratic accountability and institutional balance.

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