

FOR ONLINE PUBLICATION
Supplemental Material (SM) for
“A ‘Terrific Symbol’: Physical Personalization
of Pandemic Relief Enhances Presidential Support”

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Contents

1	The survey	1
1.1	Survey methodology	1
1.2	Wording of question yielding the dependent variable	1
1.3	Summary statistics and balance table	1
2	Estimated distribution of stimulus payments by type	3
3	Additional robustness checks and interpretation	4
3.1	An unknown omitted variable correlated with both check receipt and Trump support?	4
3.2	Rewarding for check receipt or punishing for check delays?	4
3.3	Results from ordinal logistic regression with population weights applied . .	6
3.4	Physicality itself?	6
3.5	Analysis excluding all who did not receive any form of payment, by priors .	8
4	Human subjects research	9

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1 The survey

1.1 Survey methodology

Respondents were drawn from YouGov America’s ongoing online survey panel in the US. They were initially recruited into the panel through through web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, partner sponsored solicitations, telephone-to-Web recruitment (RDD) sampling, and mail-to-Web recruitment based on voter registration. YouGov selected a sample of 2000 people designed to be nationally representative by matching panelists on standard demographics (age, gender, race, education) to a nationally representative frame sampled from the American Community Survey taken in 2016. The selected respondents were sent an email invitation to participate in the survey, and upon acceptance respondents took the survey online wherever they chose. YouGov calculated a propensity score that weights respondents to achieve valid estimates for the nation as a whole (national representativeness). This weight is used for estimating frequencies and, only where explicitly reported, some econometric models.

1.2 Wording of question yielding the dependent variable

“If you were to vote in this year’s general election in November 2020, how likely would you be to vote for the following: President Donald Trump.” Respondents were presented with a six-point scale of response options, defined as: 1. certain, 2. very likely, 3. somewhat likely, 4. somewhat unlikely, 5. very unlikely, 6. impossible. To create the dependent variable, the order was reversed so that higher scores correspond to greater self-reported likelihood of voting for Trump.

1.3 Summary statistics and balance table

Note on balance tables: As Table SM2 shows, the only statistically significant imbalances between the mailed check group and the baseline no-payment group involve income and Republican partisanship. In the analysis, income is addressed through income controls and income fixed effects, and Republican partisan identification is addressed by including this variable as a control and showing, in SM Section 3.1, that the effects do not extend generally to Republican officials other than the president. Table SM3 shows that the only statistically significant imbalances between the mailed check and the direct deposit groups involve income and race. This is as discussed in the main text: access to electronic financial services tends to be lower among nonwhites and less wealthy populations. These

Table SM1: Summary statistics for variables used in the analysis

Variable	Number obs.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
Likelihood of voting for Trump	2000	3.107	2.145	1	6
Received check in mail	2000	.086	.28	0	1
Received electronic payment	2000	.505	.5	0	1
Income	1712	6.315	3.459	1	16
Family income under \$40k	2000	.306	.461	0	1
White	2000	.646	.478	0	1
Democrat	2000	.368	.483	0	1
Republican	2000	.249	.433	0	1
Higher education	2000	.62	.486	0	1
Female	2000	.536	.499	0	1
Age	2000	48.488	17.643	19	94
Rural	2000	.199	.399	0	1
Eligible for stimulus payment	1712	.917	.276	0	1
Likelihood of voting for governor	2000	3.66	1.812	1	6

Table SM2: Balance table. Column (1) reports the mean value of the given variable among people receiving no transfer at all, column (2) reports the mean among people receiving a mailed check, column (3) reports the mean among people receiving an electronic transfer (direct deposit), column (4) reports the difference between columns (2) and (1), and column (5) reports the difference between columns (3) and (1), * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Income	6.311 (3.916)	5.671 (3.285)	6.427 (3.120)	-0.640* (0.340)	0.117 (0.179)
White	0.593 (0.492)	0.538 (0.500)	0.707 (0.455)	-0.055 (0.041)	0.114*** (0.022)
Democrat	0.345 (0.476)	0.409 (0.493)	0.381 (0.486)	0.065 (0.040)	0.036 (0.023)
Republican	0.213 (0.409)	0.287 (0.453)	0.273 (0.446)	0.074** (0.035)	0.060*** (0.020)
Higher educ	0.604 (0.489)	0.567 (0.497)	0.642 (0.480)	-0.037 (0.041)	0.038* (0.023)
Female	0.533 (0.499)	0.491 (0.501)	0.546 (0.498)	-0.042 (0.042)	0.013 (0.023)
Age	45.455 (18.218)	46.842 (18.530)	51.221 (16.566)	1.387 (1.536)	5.766*** (0.815)
Rural	0.209 (0.407)	0.211 (0.409)	0.189 (0.392)	0.001 (0.034)	-0.020 (0.019)
Observations	818	171	1,011	989	1,829

considerations are addressed in Section 4 of the main text.

Table SM3: Balance table 2. Column (1) reports the mean value of the given variable among people receiving a direct deposit, column (2) reports the mean among people receiving a mailed check, column (3) reports the difference between columns (2) and (1), * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Income	6.427 (3.120)	5.671 (3.285)	-0.708** (0.291)
White	0.707 (0.455)	0.538 (0.500)	-0.118*** (0.038)
Democrat	0.381 (0.486)	0.409 (0.493)	0.045 (0.039)
Republican	0.273 (0.446)	0.287 (0.453)	0.041 (0.035)
Higher educ	0.642 (0.480)	0.567 (0.497)	-0.058 (0.039)
Female	0.546 (0.498)	0.491 (0.501)	-0.049 (0.040)
Age	51.221 (16.566)	46.842 (18.530)	-1.800 (1.411)
Rural	0.189 (0.392)	0.211 (0.409)	0.013 (0.032)
Observations	1,011	171	2,000

2 Estimated distribution of stimulus payments by type

Table SM4: “Have you received a coronavirus economic relief payment from the federal government?” (Percent of respondents, May 4-11, 2020)

Answer	All respondents	Among eligible for payment
Yes, through electronic transfer of funds	50.55	55.41
Yes, in a check that was mailed to my home	8.55	8.98
No	35.40	31.40
I am not sure	5.50	4.20
<i>N</i>	2000	1570

Note. In this table, “eligible for payment” excludes anyone who did not self-report being in an income category eligible for a stimulus payment as discussed in the main text. The excluded thus include two types of respondents: (a) those who indicated “prefer not

to say” on YouGov’s pre-study measure of participants’ family income level (N=288), and (b) those who did answer the family income question and whose answers to this question put them in an ineligible category according to the criteria discussed in the main text (N=142).

3 Additional robustness checks and interpretation

3.1 An unknown omitted variable correlated with both check receipt and Trump support?

Concerns might still linger about “unknown unknowns,” the possibility, however remote, that some unknown population characteristic correlated with the receipt of mailed checks might also correlate with political preferences favorable to Trump and thus be confounding the results presented so far. If this is the case, we would expect such a variable to predict other, related political behaviors. One can test this possibility because the survey asked respondents how likely they were to vote not only for Trump, but also for “your incumbent governor if they were up for reelection this year.”¹ If some variable were being captured by receiving CARES checks powerful enough to influence support for Trump, we would expect it to predict support for other executive authorities generally or at least from Trump’s party. On the other hand, if we are truly picking up an effect of physically personalized stimulus checks, we should not find a strong pro-governor effect—even for GOP governors—since governors’ names were not on the checks. Table SM5 reports no discernible effect of receiving stimulus checks in the mail on the likelihood of voting for one’s sitting governor (models 1 and 2) or sitting Republican Party governors (models 3 and 4).

3.2 Rewarding for check receipt or punishing for check delays?

Some might wonder, does this check effect represent a president appropriating political dividends from federal payouts or might it be that voters who have not yet received checks are punishing him for the delay? That is, a positive correlation between check receipt and Trump support is also a positive correlation between check non-receipt and political non-support. There is good reason to believe we are observing the former more than the latter. If voters are primarily punishing late payments, we would expect not only the non-receipt of mailed checks, but also the non-receipt of electronic transfers to be correlated

¹For residents of the District of Columbia, they were asked about their mayor.

Table SM5: Effect of receiving coronavirus stimulus check bearing president’s name by mail on likelihood of voting for incumbent governor in all states and GOP-governor states only (6-point scales), May 4-11, 2020 using unweighted OLS and ordinal logit (Ologit) models, standard errors in parentheses, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Gov OLS	Gov Ologit	GOP-gov OLS	GOP-gov Ologit
Check mail	0.20 (0.17)	0.21 (0.17)	0.36 (0.23)	0.43 (0.26)
Direct dep	0.12 (0.10)	0.12 (0.10)	0.10 (0.14)	0.11 (0.15)
Income	0.07** (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Under \$40k	0.14 (0.16)	0.14 (0.16)	0.10 (0.22)	0.18 (0.24)
White	0.12 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)	0.29* (0.14)	0.28 (0.15)
Democrat	0.54** (0.11)	0.54** (0.11)	-0.47** (0.15)	-0.53** (0.16)
Republican	-0.07 (0.12)	-0.08 (0.12)	0.97** (0.16)	1.03** (0.18)
Higher educ	0.03 (0.10)	0.04 (0.10)	-0.17 (0.13)	-0.16 (0.15)
Female	0.15 (0.09)	0.15 (0.09)	0.04 (0.13)	0.05 (0.14)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Rural	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.11)	0.07 (0.15)	0.10 (0.17)
Constant	2.64** (0.25)		2.34** (0.36)	
N	1570	1570	691	691
R2	.038		.158	
Pseudo R2		.012		.047

with non-support for Trump. Indeed, while electronic transfers are instant when they occur, many cases were reported of snafus causing delays, and the deadline for registering for direct deposit (May 13) had not yet passed by the time of the survey (WABC, 2020). Yet the study frequently fails to rule out the null hypothesis that receiving electronic transfers is uncorrelated with Trump’s support.

Additionally, if the detected voter behavior were about punishing rather than rewarding Trump, we would expect the effect to be strongest among people who would otherwise be more likely to vote for him. That is, for people to withdraw support, there has to be some support to begin with. These priors should be well captured by partisanship and self-reported voting behavior in 2016. Table 2 in the main text shows that the effects are primarily among groups without strong pro-Trump priors, further indicating that the story told here is about rewarding check receipt rather than punishing for check non-receipt.

3.3 Results from ordinal logistic regression with population weights applied

Table SM6 presents two more robustness checks, performed for readers who may want to see the ordinal logistic models when adjusted to the population as a whole—model 1 (without controls) and model 2 (with controls). Because estimating average marginal effects for each cutpoint using ordinal logit with weights gets very complex, the table presents only the straight logit coefficients, not average marginal effects as with the tables in the main text. While model 1 here shows that the results are robust to ordinal logistic regression when YouGov’s propensity scores are applied (that is, weights adjusting to the U.S. population), adding the controls here (model 2) results in p values that fail to clear standard statistical significance levels. The effects detected in the other models presented in this study should thus not be treated as having eliminated all possible doubt. That said, even in model 2 here, the sign on the coefficient still points in the expected direction for the mailed check, and both the coefficient and significance level are considerably greater than for the electronic payment, consistent with the argument that receiving a physically personalized check is more strongly related to presidential support than receiving a direct deposit.

3.4 Physicality itself?

It also bears discussing whether these effects might owe to the physicality of the payment itself rather than the fact that these payments had Trump’s name on them. Could it be that some experience of literally handling a stimulus check and somehow hand-depositing

Table SM6: Logit coefficients reflecting effects of receiving a coronavirus stimulus check bearing the president’s name by mail on the likelihood of voting for him (6-point scale) May 4-11, 2020, as estimated using ordinal logit with propensity weights (Ologw), standard errors in parentheses, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

	(1)	(2)
	Ologw	Ologw
Check mail	0.31*	0.25
	(0.14)	(0.23)
Direct dep		0.09
		(0.12)
Income		-0.03
		(0.03)
Under 40k		-0.01
		(0.20)
White		0.26*
		(0.13)
Democrat		-1.27**
		(0.14)
Republican		2.25**
		(0.16)
Higher educ		-0.21
		(0.12)
Female		-0.32**
		(0.11)
Age		0.01
		(0.00)
Rural		0.26
		(0.13)
cut1	-0.43**	-0.47
	(0.06)	(0.34)
cut2	0.05	0.22
	(0.06)	(0.34)
cut3	0.19**	0.43
	(0.06)	(0.33)
cut4	0.54**	0.99**
	(0.06)	(0.34)
cut5	0.92**	1.60**
	(0.06)	(0.33)
N	1570	1570

it could be generating support specifically for the president independently of this check’s explicit presidential personalization? However unlikely this may seem, we have no way of isolating the effects of physicality itself from the effects of Trump’s name print because the name was on all mailed checks. Such effects might, of course, also work in combination. In theory, experimental research could sort this out. But in practice, this could not be done using actual federal stimulus payments during a real pandemic, leaving open validity concerns. Indeed, one of the advantages of the present study is that it examines the impact of real payments in real time. Nevertheless, the findings do establish that the method of transfer delivery matters for credit-claiming while also demonstrating a need for future research not only into the political behavior ramifications of different forms of pandemic relief and credit-claiming methods, but also into how tactile experience might moderate these effects or even independently shape political behavior.

3.5 Analysis excluding all who did not receive any form of payment, by priors

The following table essentially replicates Table 2 from the main text except that it (a) drops from the analysis all who did not receive any form of payment and (b) drops the variable for receiving an electronic transfer because this is now the baseline category. As with Table 2, a full set of controls is included but not reported here. As can be seen, the effect of receiving a physically personalized check instead of a direct deposit is a statistically significant increase in Trump support among non-Republicans, Democrats, people who belong to neither major party, people who did not vote for Trump in 2016, and people who voted for Clinton in 2016. The lone category in which this general pattern is (barely) not statistically significant by the strict 95-percent standard consists of people who reported voting for neither Trump nor Clinton in 2016, where $p=0.053$. Overall, this strongly supports the argument that there is something special about receiving a pandemic relief transfer in the mail with the president’s signature on it that draws in more new support for the president than does receiving a pandemic relief transfer of exactly the same amount by impersonal direct deposit.

Table SM7: Effect of receiving physically personalized check with President Donald Trump’s name on it (by mail) relative to receiving the same amount by direct deposit on the likelihood of voting for Trump (6-point scale) among groups with different priors (Republican “R”, not Republican “NoR”, Democrat “D”, not Republican or Democrat “NoR-D”, Trump voter “Tvot”, not Trump voter “NoTvot”, Clinton voter “Cvot”, not Clinton or Trump voter “NoC-T”), May 4-11, 2020 (OLS model, unweighted, full set of controls included but not reported here, standard errors in parentheses, + $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	R	NoR	D	NoR-D	Tvot	NoTvot	Cvot	NoC-T
Check in mail	0.10 (0.22)	0.67** (0.18)	0.46* (0.20)	0.84** (0.31)	0.24 (0.19)	0.37* (0.17)	0.46* (0.18)	0.53+ (0.27)
R2	.227	.152	.125	.110	.165	.274	.154	.234
N	163	537	266	271	174	481	215	266

4 Human subjects research

This study was reviewed and determined exempt by the George Washington University Committee on Human Research’s Institutional Review Board under study number NCR202465. It was conducted in line with the Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research approved by the American Political Science Association Council. The subject pool for the survey reported in this paper was designed to be nationally representative (not disproportionately representing any group). Individuals in the pool were invited from YouGov America’s ongoing online panel. Members of YouGov panels receive “points” upon taking a survey (including this one) that can, when panelists take enough other surveys, be applied to claim certain rewards, like a gift certificate.

References

WABC (2020, April). Stimulus check problems: What to do if check goes into wrong account, IRS ‘Get My Payment’ portal shows error. *ABC7 New York*.