All in this together? A preregistered report on deservingness of government aid during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been met with unparalleled government fiscal action and mass public mobilization. While citizens participated in a massive social coordination effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus, governments around the world engaged in large-scale stimulus spending that far outstripped what was spent during, and in the aftermath of, the 2008 financial crisis. A major portion of this spending has been in the form of cash transfers directly to citizens (Gentilini et al. 2020). These spending measures have been implemented at great cost and with a much-needed urgency. And yet, we have limited knowledge of the types of financial transfers with broad public support. Critical to developing this understanding is research into perceptions of deservingness which underline social welfare policy preferences and political decisions (Petersen 2012). Existing literature suggests that discriminatory attitudes, a ‘hierarchy of deservingness’, and similarity concerns are likely to drive these policy preferences, but we find that during a society-level crisis such as COVID-19 these normal patterns are laid aside in favour of a more universal and collectivist set of preferences. This universal generosity is particularly strong for COVID-19 financial relief, indicating support for universal redistribution during crisis times.

Deservingness in times of crisis

Previous research has shown the importance of both subjective and affective deservingness heuristics for complex policy decisions (Skitka and Tetlock 1993). The extant literature identifies three considerations that are particularly important for untangling when and under what conditions support for social spending is higher: deservingness criteria, discriminatory attitudes, and similarity.

First, deservingness evaluations rely on a set of criteria (Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity and Need, see Oorschot et al. 2017) that explicitly or implicitly distinguish between those who are seen to be deserving of relief and those who are regarded as undeserving (Oorschot 2000). Characteristics commonly associated with “deservingness” include illness, unemployment, and presence of children in the household. Jensen and Petersen
find that those who are sick or require healthcare are typically deemed the most deserving. While evaluations of deservingness of the unemployed can vary based on context, those who are un- or underemployed through no fault of their own are typically perceived as more deserving (Oorschot 2006). Finally, those with (young) children are perceived as more deserving of aid relative to their peers without children (Will 1993).

Not all dimensions of deservingness are based on objective considerations, however. Notably, prejudicial attitudes such as those related to ethnicity and race can significantly modify perceptions of deservingness (DeSante 2013; Hjorth 2016). In Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, race has been shown to be a powerful determinant of public support for redistribution (although effects are contextual and specific racial minority groups are deferentially disadvantaged across national contexts, see Harell et al. 2016). Further, citizenship and immigration status are also important factors, with a body of evidence showing that immigrants are generally perceived as the least deserving group for social spending (Ford 2016; Reeskens and Meer 2019). Kootstra (2016) finds these effects in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. She finds between a 0.2 and 0.35 standard deviation decrease in perceived deservingness for hypothetical Jamaican and Pakistani profiles, as compared to a hypothetical British one. She also estimates a 0.2 standard deviation penalty for non-native born profiles. These effects are modest but persistent across countries and ethnic groups.

These prejudicial attitudes may be compounded by well documented so-called similarity preferences, where support for redistributive policies tends to higher when the beneficiaries of the redistribution are perceived as similar to oneself (Cavaillé and Trump 2015; Fong 2001). Two conceptually distinct motivations are critical to understanding these similarity preferences: social affinity and material self-interest. Social affinity studies find that people care more about the well-being of others with whom they share certain characteristics (Kristov et al. 1992); thus demonstrating that generosity is at least somewhat conditional on the ability to empathize with the potential recipient. Furthermore, the literature
on material self-interest indicates that decisions around deservingness can be influenced by a desire to capture government resources for one’s own group, community, or other set of interests (Campbell et al. 1960). Differentiating between the two mechanisms is challenging. Nonetheless, objective indicators of similarity have been shown to powerfully predict redistributive attitudes (Chong et al. 2001). In a society where one group is larger than others, these similarity preferences can compound already-strong prejudicial preferences and lead to a wide gap in support for policies that benefit majority and minority populations (Ford 2016).

These three explanatory factors generally describe support for redistribution during “normal” times. However, during a time of crisis we have strong reason to believe that the strength of these considerations is relaxed and that a more universal approach towards cash transfers will be adopted. This universalism is likely to emerge for instrumental, collectivist, and structural reasons. We describe each in turn.

The first set of considerations which may increase support for universal cash transfers are instrumental ones — allocations may be higher because they serve an important function in reducing the severity of a disaster. In the case of a pandemic, providing a substitute for employment income reduces the number of people leaving their homes for non-essential reasons and thus can reduce human-to-human transmission. Universality may also be preferred over means-tested or other more complex program delivery mechanisms to ensure rapid response and enable behavioral change.¹

Second, greater collectivism may be produced by a communal sense of loss, deservingness, and vulnerability. As described above, deservingness is linked to perceptions of victimization, particularly when the need for support is linked to events outside the locus of control of the intended recipient (Skitka and Tetlock 1993). During a pandemic, this subjective evaluation of deservingness is likely higher for all subject populations; existing prejudicial attitudes and motivations of material self-interest may be overridden as every-

¹. For example, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was specifically designed to be quickly rolled out (Government of Canada Hansard March 24, 2020).
one is deemed equally deserving. Additionally, the urgent and widespread mobilization required by society may encourage individuals to perceive themselves and their families as at-risk for COVID-19 and thus lead to a more universal approach. These collectivist impulses may be especially true when concerns about national well-being are primed (Olivera Angulo 2014). Empirical research in this area is limited, with previous research on economic crises yielding mixed results. Some have found that crises such as the Great Recession do not shift attitudes towards redistribution in the aggregate (Brooks and Manza 2013; Soroka and Wlezien 2014), while others find that there is some conditional increased support (Rosset and Pontusson 2014).

A third reason why a more universal approach towards cash transfers may be adopted is structural. The nature of existing government response may change the way individuals make social spending decisions. A large and generous response may broadly increase support for such measures. The Canadian government has engaged in the largest direct cash transfer program in its history and a deep literature has repeatedly shown that individuals who reside in institutional environments with more generous and universal welfare states have higher support for non-discriminatory welfare programs (Larsen 2008; Waal et al. 2013; Laenen 2018). It is likely that the existence of these programs can be linked to greater support for universal cash transfers specifically designed to mitigate personal economic loss due to COVID-19.

Certainly, there appears to be more universalism during the pandemic, with governments around the world facing little criticism for unprecedented, large-scale individual transfers, even those targeted at specific populations which may have been perceived as less deserving in the past. We conducted two studies to evaluate the extent to which the

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2. In Canada, the largest of these programs is the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit which is a taxable benefit of $500 per week made available to Canadians who met eligibility requirements (workers who stopped working or whose work hours were reduced due to COVID-19). This is an amount approaching the maximum unemployment insurance benefit in Canada ($573 per week). These benefits were made available for a period of 16 weeks (later extended to 24 weeks). Other cash transfer programs included a one-time increase in the Canada Child Benefit for a total of $300 per child, an increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) credit, and $1250 per month available for students who were unable to find summer employment.
different deservingness, prejudicial, and similarity factors impact preferences during
the COVID-19 crisis. The findings from Study 1 informed the hypothesis and design for Study
2, so we first describe the hypotheses tested in Study 1 and provide those results.

**Study 1: Support for COVID-19 cash transfers**

A preregistered probe into these dynamics consisted of a survey of 2,522 Canadian cit-
izens 18 years and older from the online panel provider Dynata. The survey was fielded
from May 21-27, 2020. National level quotas were set on region (i.e. Atlantic, Quebec,
Ontario, and West), age, gender, and language. Respondents were weighted within each
region of Canada by gender and age to match population benchmarks from the 2016 Cana-
dian census.

We employed a paired factorial vignette design. Each respondent was presented with
two pairs of profiles of hypothetical Canadian residents. These profiles consisted of seven
randomized features: 1) name (including clear ethnicity/gender indicators); 2) citizenship;
3) health status; 4) marital status; 5) children; 6) employment status; 7) and income be-
fore the pandemic. This resulted in 10,088 assessed profiles with 3,072 possible permuta-
tions, each of which was equally likely with no constrained permutations. Following each
pair of profiles, respondents were asked the following for each profile: “How much money
should **Name** receive from the government during the pandemic per month?” , and were
given a slider to report their answer from $0-4000 (slider resting point was at $0)

Details on the exact instrument can be found in the supplementary materials. Similar instru-
ments have been deployed in other research that examines deservingness of government
allocations (e.g. Will 1993; Harell et al. 2016; Hjorth 2016).

We anticipated the results from Study 1 to align with the preponderance of the liter-
ature as described above; allocation of government benefits would follow documented de-

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3. This design uses a single concrete measure as opposed to a more abstract survey measure (e.g. mea-
suring support for spending with an item similar to: *The government should take measures to reduce
differences in income levels*). To test the full range of deservingness, similarity, and prejudicial factors, a
design with a concrete measure is most appropriate.

4. See the preregistration of this design and associated hypotheses at [https://osf.io/2rqwm](https://osf.io/2rqwm)
servingness, prejudicial, and similarity considerations. We expected common deservingness characteristics (young children, pre-existing health issues, lost income and employment due to the pandemic, and those with lower pre-pandemic incomes) to be perceived as the most deserving. We also anticipated existing prejudicial attitudes which would negatively penalize non-whites and non-citizens.

We moreover anticipated that similarity would shape respondents’ redistribution preferences. First, we expected the effects of income or job loss due to the pandemic on deservingness to be stronger among those whose job is at risk from the pandemic, or among those who have already been laid off. Second, we anticipated the effect of children on deservingness to be stronger for those with children. Third, we anticipated the effect of pre-existing health conditions on deservingness to be stronger if they, or someone in their household, has had a recent illness. Finally, we expected the negative effect of pre-pandemic income on deservingness to be stronger among low income respondents, and potentially reverse direction for high income respondents. Details on the similarity variables can be found in the supplementary materials.

Results are found below, with no evidence found for similarity considerations, little evidence for prejudicial attitudes, and mixed evidence of deservingness considerations.

**Study 1 results**

Panel A of Figure [1] provides the marginal means that test unconditional expectations. The average marginal component effects (AMCEs) are found in Panel B. The grand mean of the suggested allocation across all assessed profiles was $1592, indicating respondents were inclined to support a substantial amount of government assistance during the pandemic. Contrary to our pre-registered expectations, there were no significant differences between allocation for whites ($1577) and non-whites ($1597).

Most of our other expectations were met to an unexpectedly small degree. Non-citizens were allocated less assistance ($1484) than citizens, but there was no difference between those who were ($1641) or were not born in Canada ($1656). People with children were al-
Figure 1: Marginal means (panel A) and AMCEs (panel B). Dashed line in Panel A is the grand mean. 95% confidence intervals shown.

located more support than people with no children ($1524), though this was true only for those with children under 5 ($1626) and between 5 and 12 ($1637), but not for those with children over 12 ($1581). People with pre-existing conditions were allocated more ($1645) than those without ($1539). Pre-pandemic income was also negatively associated with deservingness. People earning $30,000 prior to the crisis were allocated more ($1714) than
those earning $60,000 ($1597), $90,000 ($1580), and $120,000 ($1479).

By far the largest effect we found was attributed to employment status. As expected, people who are employed and unaffected by the pandemic were allocated, on average, far less ($1117) than those who lost income ($1728) or employment ($1632). Contrary to expectations, those who were unemployed for reasons unrelated to the pandemic were allocated the most ($1898).

Figure 2 presents the results of our similarity-based tests for employment status and children using sub-group AMCEs since we anticipated sub-group differences in causal effects. We also provide side-by-side comparisons with the sub-group marginal means in this Figure because the interpretation of AMCEs can be sensitive to the choice of reference category (Leeper et al. 2020). We find little evidence that there are any social affinity or
material self-interest dynamics driving allocations. The effects of income and employment loss on deservingness are similar for those whose employment is at risk (or were laid off) and those whose employment is not in jeopardy, contrary to expectations (Figure 2A). The only significant difference is that there was relatively more support for those unemployed for reasons unrelated to the pandemic among those not at risk of unemployment, which we had not anticipated.

![Figure 3: Sub-group marginal means for health status (panel A), income (panel D). Sub-group AMCEs for health status (panel A), income (panel C). 95% confidence intervals shown.](https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2021.10)

Figure 3 shows the same estimates, but for our tests related to health status and pre-pandemic income. The effect of pre-existing health conditions is similar for those in good health and those who have experienced recent illness (Figure 3A). This latter group, however, is more generous on average (Figure 3B). There is some indication that respondent income influences distributional preferences. Figure 3C shows that low income respondents...
appear to be more sensitive in their deservingness evaluations to income, comparatively awarding more aid to low income profiles even while they are less generous than high income respondents across all categories. However, the sub-group AMCEs are not significantly different (Figure 3D). Finally, we ran similarity tests for gender and marital status and find further null results, as shown in the supplementary appendix.

**Study 1 discussion**

Study 1 provides evidence indicating strong support for government cash transfers to Canadian residents among the Canadian population. Critically, we found that ethnic and immigration-based considerations do not strongly drive deservingness (although there is a penalty for non-citizens) and instead where allocations differed, they did so in ways consistent with the deservingness literature: features like pre-crisis income, children in the household and their ages, income loss, and risk for health complications were important. These effects were generally smaller than those found in the extant literature, however. Finally, Canadians do not appear to be allocating support based on similarity concerns. Those who have been more affected by the crisis (whether through job loss, low pre-crisis income, or illness) do generally support larger transfers, but this largess extends to all potential recipients and not only to those like them.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing near universal economic and social dislocation. During this period, support for government aid was high and not subject to previously observed prejudicial or similarity-based considerations and only weak deservingness criteria. How to explain these findings? We consider the possibility that, during times of crisis, people may be primed with concerns about national well-being, and redistributive preferences evidence a powerful collective sentiment. If so, the findings from Study 1 provide nuance to existing literature on how attitudes towards redistribution are informed by prejudice or ethnocentrism, as well as social affinity or material self-interest.

Additional evidence is required to support such a conclusion, however. Are disaster related cash transfers truly different from other government programs? Are deservingness
and similarity considerations weaker for such crisis spending? To do so, we registered a second study featuring a modified conjoint design. We hypothesize:

*Support for COVID-19 cash transfers will be more universal and less subject to prejudicial, deservingness, and similarity considerations.*

**Study 2: Deservingness and direct cash transfers**

Study 2 differs from Study 1 in four important ways. First, respondents were randomly assigned to either a question set focused on the COVID-19 cash transfer or a COVID-unrelated cash transfer (here a Goods and Services Tax rebate, hereafter GST). The precise wordings of each condition are found in Table 1. Second, profile names were sampled without replacement in order to prevent respondents from seeing the same profile name twice. Third, due to concerns about framing effects, we replaced the sliding scale used by respondents in the pilot with a blank text box that respondents filled in with a dollar amount of their choosing.

Fourth, two additional conjoint outcome measures were measured: subjective similarity and a direct evaluation of deservingness (taken from Kootstra 2016). Study 1 suggested a period of unusually high social solidarity where similarity does not drive the allocation decision: we found that objective measures of similarity were non-factors in allocation decisions. However, in the analysis of Study 1, similarity was inferred based on objective criteria whereas respondents may interpret their similarity to the profiles in a different manner that the original model supposed. For example, racial considerations might be the most important for a given respondent while for others the presence or absence of children may be primary.

A second outcome measure was captured that directly evaluates the respondent perceptions of deservingness. The literature suggests that citizenship and ethnicity are likely

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5. A full registered report with the exact design and same analyses using simulated data is available here: [https://osf.io/x9642](https://osf.io/x9642). The features and levels of both experiments are found in the supplementary materials.

6. We had registered that validation for this field would be set at a maximum monthly amount of $9999 to remove malicious responses. The survey as implemented did not include such a validation, so we filtered responses that were in excess of the $9999 amount.
to guide perceptions of deservingness, and both the literature and our pilot suggest that practical considerations such as employment status, number of children, pre-crisis income, and health status are likely to structure decisions about deservingness. The addition of these outcome measures also necessitated a shift from a paired to a single profile design given increased cognitive demands of the task. The order of the outcomes was randomized (either the allocation question first or last) to avoid priming effects.

The second study was fielded from November 22 to December 13, 2020 using the same survey provider as Study 1 on 2501 respondents. Each respondent was randomly assigned either a COVID-19 or a GST condition and received 4 profiles from the conjoint. We screened out those specified in the registration: straight-liners, those who completed the survey less than a third of median completion time, and those who allocate unreasonable dollar amounts to the profile (above $9999 per month and subsequent removal of the top 2% of responses).

**Study 2 results**

We first present findings similar to the Study 1. Figure shows the AMCE results for COVID-19 in Panel A and GST in Panel B. We observe, consistent with Study 1, that common deservingness characteristics (previous income, children, employment, health, and citizenship status) are important consideration for respondents under both the COVID-19 and GST conditions. Also consistent with Study 1, ethnicity, gender, and marital status had no effect on the allocations.

We next consider our main hypothesis for Study 2: support for COVID-19 related spending is more universal as compared to a more general government cash transfer program (here the GST rebate). Formally, we anticipate that deservingness features in the

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7. A third study was run after submission but prior to receipt of peer review suggestions. Space was available in a survey being fielded and we used the design originally submitted for peer review. This survey was preregistered on July 13 (https://osf.io/x9642) and was fielded from July 22 to July 29, 2020, with 2315 respondents meeting the pre-registered attention checks and validation on the cash allocations. The results of Study 2 replicate in this third study despite design changes and different sampling periods, providing additional evidence for these findings. See the supplementary materials for a discussion of the design differences and the full results from this third study.
### Table 1: Study 1 and 2 designs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 1</strong></td>
<td>How much money should name receive per month from the government during the pandemic? ($0 - $4000 bar, with start at $0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the following section, we would like you to read about people living in Canada during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Please read about each person's situation, then tell us how much government support, if any, you think they should receive per month during the pandemic. Name was citizenship. They are currently living in a large Canadian city. They are marital status and have children. Name is employment status. They are Health status. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Name's income was income.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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**Study 2 - random assignment to (A) or (B)**

(A): The COVID-19 pandemic increased Canadian unemployment to a record 13.7%, with millions of Canadians out of work. Over 120,000 Canadians have contracted the disease and approximately 9,000 Canadians have died.

In the following section, we would like you to read about people living in Canada during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Please read about each person's situation, and think about the financial support they may need from the government. After each pair of profiles, we will ask you some questions.

Name is citizenship and is of ethnicity descent. They currently live in a large Canadian city. They are marital status and have children. Name is employment status. They are Health status. Their income in 2019 was income.

(B): The GST rebate is a monthly government tax rebate provided to Canadians. It is not related to special pandemic support, existed before the current COVID-19 pandemic, and there are no plans to cancel it after the pandemic is over.

In the following section, we would like you to read about people living in Canada. Please read about each person's situation, and think about the financial support they may need from the government. After each pair of profiles, we will ask you some questions.

Name is citizenship and is of ethnicity descent. They currently live in a large Canadian city. They are marital status and have children. Name is employment status. They are Health status. Their income in 2019 was income.

(1) In general, how similar is Name to you? (0-10 scale, with 0 labelled very different, and 10 labelled very similar)

(2) How deserving is Name of government financial support (in the form of a government GST rebate OR during the pandemic)? (0-10 scale, with 0 labelled very undeserving, and 10 labelled very deserving)

(3) How much money, if any, should Name receive per month from (the government GST rebate program OR the government during the pandemic)? (Empty box with numeric whole number validation)

Note that respondents received both the similarity and deservingness questions before OR after the allocation question (randomly assigned).

planned conjoint experiment will have stronger causal effects on allocation amount for the GST-condition respondents. Given that the mean allocation for COVID-19 related relief
Figure 4: AMCE results of allocation under COVID-19 cash transfer (panel A) and GST rebate (panel B) conditions. 95% confidence intervals shown.

was higher than that of GST, we show mean-normalized allocation amounts for comparability between the two conditions in Figure 5. The left panel shows mean-normalized AMCE values for both the COVID-19 and GST conditions while the right panel shows mean-normalized AMCE differences between the two experiments. We find that only one feature differentially affects cash allocations between COVID-19 and the GST rebate: the
lowest income category. All other features that matter for allocations equally structure both forms of transfers. We thus find only weak evidence that deservingness considerations structure respondents allocations more for non-crisis related spending.

Figure 5: Results for mean-normalized AMCEs for COVID-19 and GST conditions (panel A), and mean-normalized AMCE differences (panel B). 95% confidence intervals shown.
We report an F-test comparing models with and without interaction terms between the randomly assigned condition and the profile features. We exclude those variables where no effects are expected (gender and marital status). We find an F-statistic of 2.7 ($p = 0.002$), which allows a confident rejection of the null that there are no differences between expected allocation amounts under the COVID-19 and GST conditions (contingent upon the conjoint feature set). Again, it is the income category that drives these results and no other feature.

Next, we examine the relationship between subjective evaluations of similarity and deservingness and the dollar amount allocated to a given profile in both the COVID-19 and GST conditions. Note that similarity and difference are not experimentally assigned, but instead measured within the context of the experiment. Figure 6 shows the correlations between similarity/deservingness and the allocation for both the COVID-19 allocation and the GST rebate. Panels A and C on the left show allocation as a function of deservingness for COVID-19 and the GST rebate, while panels B and D on the right show the same for subjective similarity. We anticipated both deservingness and similarity effects to be registered, with perceived deservingness to be the primary driver of allocation.

We find that deservingness is the far stronger predictor of allocation amount, while subjective similarity is only somewhat positively associated with increased allocations (a relationship that vanishes when controlling for deservingness). Moreover, the relationship between deservingness and the GST allocation is somewhat stronger that that between deservingness and the COVID-19 allocation.

Table 2 presents the formal findings using three model specifications: regressing allocation directly on deservingness and similarity, including individual respondent fixed effects (to account for heterogeneity in government support preferences). Model 1 shows how deservingness and similarity considerations affect allocation for COVID-19 direct cash transfers. Model 2 shows the same for GST rebate. Values in Models 1 and 2 are not normalized or directly comparable, however, Model 3 shows results for both conditions combined
under dependent variable mean normalization. We find, as expected, a positive interaction for \textit{GST x Deservingness} which indicates that deservingness considerations weigh more heavily in allocation decisions for the GST condition. Conversely, deservingness is less likely to structure cash allocations in response to COVID-19, which we attribute to support for a more universal approach during a crisis situation.

These three sets of analyses collectively evaluate the role that subjective deservingness and similarity play in allocation decisions and better explore how those evaluations guide decisions about direct cash transfer assistance. Figure [4] provides evidence that it is practical concerns such as employment status and number of children that drive deservingness considerations both during the pandemic and in general. Figure [5] and the associated F-test provide evidence that deservingness considerations are less relevant for crisis-related cash transfers (but only due income-related factors). Finally, Figure [6] and Table [2] provide evidence that the allocation is powerfully determined by deservingness but not similarity evaluations, and that these deservingness effects are stronger under the GST condition.
Table 2: Subjective evaluations of deservingness and similarity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>COVID-19</th>
<th>GST rebate</th>
<th>Mean-normalized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>594.80 (249.56)</td>
<td>−122.40 (109.86)</td>
<td>−0.17 (0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>−0.44 (0.59)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deservingness (0-10)</td>
<td>202.60 (3.94)*</td>
<td>41.36 (1.55)*</td>
<td>0.18 (0.01)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity (0-10)</td>
<td>−2.98 (4.91)</td>
<td>0.97 (1.95)</td>
<td>−0.00 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GST x Deservingness (0-10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03 (0.01)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GST x Similarity (0-10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R²</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.70</td>
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<td>Num. obs.</td>
<td>4243</td>
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<td>8551</td>
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</table>

*p < 0.01. Linear regression for subjective evaluations of deservingness and similarity, with individual respondent controls and clustered standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: allocation of cash transfer to hypothetical individuals, either under the COVID-19 or GST conditions.

than the COVID-19 one.

Discussion

Governments around the world have provided unprecedented and generally universal support to individuals adversely affected by the crisis. In Canada, these dramatic and broad cash transfers are widely supported by the mass public at levels that compare to those which the government distributed during the first and second waves of the pandemic.

While previous literature has shown that ethnic and immigration-based considerations are important determinants of allocation decisions, we do not find such effects during the pandemic (albeit with small penalties for non-citizens). Rather, where allocations differ they do so in relatively uncontroversial ways, such as giving more to those who are ill, who have children or have lower incomes. Moreover, while objective measures of similarity between respondents and hypothetical recipients has been previously shown to impact allocations, again we find no effects during the pandemic. In two studies, we have shown that neither objective nor subjective similarity matters for either COVID-19 related allocations or more general allocations during the time of the pandemic. At least two possibilities explain the discrepancy with previous literature: 1) the same universal approach to financial
support applies to all government programs in the midst of a pandemic; or 2) the importance of similarity may have faded since previous studies and now is not a relevant consideration guiding generosity towards government assistance recipients. Future research taking place in a post-pandemic world can evaluate these two explanations.

Deservingness, measured either with objective or subjective criteria is found to be important for allocation decisions, however. Health status, children, citizenship, employment status, and income all are relevant considerations for government spending. In Study 1, however, we find somewhat smaller effects for objective attributes of deservingness than we anticipated. Study 2 allowed us to compare the sizes of these effects for pandemic-related spending and for a pre-existing government cash transfer under the expectation that they mattered more for the latter. We find this to be the case, but only for income. The tendency to allocate more aid to lower income profiles relative to the wealthy was considerably stronger among those in the GST rebate condition. We further find that subjective evaluations of deservingness matter more for GST rebate allocations. As expected, the tendency towards universalism is stronger in attitudes towards pandemic-related government aid. Note that this universalism produces a redistributive schema that is net less progressive (in that it applies equally across income categories).

The implication of this finding is considerable. In times of crisis, citizens adopt more universalist attitudes towards redistribution. They are willing to grant a large amount of government aid to individuals across the entire income distribution and are less willing to claw back aid for wealthier individuals. Governments, then, have sizeable scope to adopt large-scale, universal cash transfers with little worry of public backlash in these circumstances.

8. We conduct two non-preregistered analyses in the supplementary materials to provide additional evidence for this more universal but ultimately regressive disaster relief spending. First, we examine the AMCEs and AMCE differences for deservingness. We find that perceived deservingness is very strongly influenced by income of the recipient, with the tendency stronger for the GST condition. Conversely, COVID-19 relief deservingness is relatively less influenced by pre-crisis income. Second, we find evidence of a triple interaction where GST condition x Deservingness x low hypothetical income drives differences in allocation amounts.
There are several important limitations to the above analysis that could serve as a launching point for future research. The conclusions drawn from the observed differences between the COVID-19 and GST allocations rely on two main assumptions that require further testing. First, our experiments were conducted at a time when COVID-19 was affecting every aspect of our respondents' lives. Respondents were likely pre-treated with universalist/collectivist themes from political discourse, which carried into their allocation decisions for both the COVID-19 cash transfers as well as the GST rebate. Further, some respondents may well view the GST rebate as a tool to provide pandemic relief (indeed it has been used to supplement other COVID-19 relief funding in Canada). We took pains to minimize this problem by putting the conjoint experiment at the beginning of the survey, providing information in the COVID-19 aid condition emphasizing the costs of the pandemic, and emphasizing that we were asking about non-pandemic-related government aid in the GST rebate condition. However, we still view the differences we observe as conservative in nature. COVID-19 may have played an even bigger role in changing attitudes towards government aid.

Second, the mean COVID-19 relief allocation was significantly larger than that of the GST rebate and these anchoring effects may have partially driven the AMCE difference observed in Figure 5. In other words, redistributive preferences may differ based on the absolute dollar size of the program. We think this is unlikely for two reasons: 1) mean-normalized AMCEs between the two conditions were generally similar for non-income deservingness categories such as children, employment, health, and citizenship status; and 2) the subjective evaluations of deservingness offer more explanatory power for the allocation under the GST-condition which suggests an underlying dynamic as opposed to measured error induced by anchoring effects. We cannot discount this possibility fully, however, and subsequent research could investigate the extent to which the size of a redistributive program is an important consideration for allocation decisions based on deservingness.

In addition to these two assumptions, we are not able to unpack the causal mechanism
through which COVID-19 affects redistributive preferences. Is the COVID-19 pandemic priming people with universalist/collectivist themes because of a sense of loss that they then lean on when making allocation decisions? Or are there more practical considerations, like using government aid to keep as many people home as possible to minimize the spread of the virus? Future experiments could randomly assign information with instrumentalist or collectivist themes to see how these affect allocation decisions.

During the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, support for government aid was high, universal, and unencumbered by typical considerations such as deservingness or similarity. These findings provide nuance to existing literature on how attitudes towards redistribution are informed by prejudice or ethnocentrism, as well as social affinity or material self-interest. During times of crisis, people may be primed with concerns about national well-being, and redistributive preferences show a powerful collective sentiment that citizens are “all in this together”.

Data availability

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. No author or close relative has received funding from interested parties, nor has any paid or unpaid position of relevant non-profit or profit-making entities. No other party had the right to review the paper prior to its circulation.
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