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MESSAGE TESTING CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

FROM:

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TO:

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On behalf of Groundwork Collaborative, Data for Progress conducted a message test around President Donald Trump's handling of the coronavirus epidemic in order to determine the most effective messaging for progressives to use in highlighting the President's responsibility for the public health and economic crises that have arisen due to the pandemic.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Messaging around the coronavirus epidemic matters - across a variety of measures including approval of Donald Trump's handling of the coronavirus, approval of Donald Trump's handling of the economy and overall opinion on the economic health of the country, different messages and framing can move a small but electorally crucial section of the population towards or away from the President.
- ▶ The most effective messages for progressives to use in response to the Coronavirus Pandemic are messages that tie the crisis at hand to larger economic systemic critiques, such as Trump's attacks on the social safety net and his tax cuts + favors extended to rich individuals and corporations.
- ▶ Less effective messages are those that more narrowly relate to Trump himself or the crisis at hand, with messaging around Trump's self-interested handling of the crisis and the impact on the stock market performing on average worse in swaying voters.

Test Design

In order to determine the impact of messages upon voter behavior design an experiment that will allow you to find voters' revealed, rather than stated preferences. To do this, the message testers are randomly assigned one out of a variety of messages to read (known as the treatment), and then asked a series of questions (the dependent variables). By comparing the results of the dependent variables across a large sample of treatments including a control that's used to establish a baseline, it is possible to calculate the Heterogeneous Treatment Effects (HeTE) of various messages across each dependent variable. Doing this produces a methodologically rigorous result which can reliably determine which messages will resonate most with voters.

This message test contained five messages and four treatments, as follows.

Messages: Below find the full wording for each message tested in the experiment.

- ▶ **Safety Net:** "In the midst of a pandemic and economic crisis, Trump slashed the safety net and tightened food stamp requirements, putting 700,000 people at risk of losing food support. He has proposed massive cuts to Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, making it harder for the poor and elderly to get necessary healthcare."

- ▶ **Crisis:** “Trump slashed funding for pandemic prevention and research, all while cutting taxes for the super wealthy and corporations, making our economy and our society more vulnerable to this crisis and less equipped to handle it. Trump’s handling of the crisis is a reflection of failed economic ideas that suggest everyone will be fine as long as the rich are doing well.”
- ▶ **Ideology:** “Trump has prioritized the interests of the rich and powerful while in office. His tax cuts for the rich and corporations increased inequality and undermined broad-based prosperity. His Wall-Street friendly rules have encouraged corporations to take on destabilizing debt. And he’s refused to invest in public protections like healthcare and disease prevention. Now we’re seeing the results.”
- ▶ **Stocks:** “All of the gains of the stock market during Trump’s time in office have been wiped out in the last two weeks and the United States is at the brink of recession. They say that the disastrous way Trump has handled coronavirus shows he isn’t fit to handle the economy and we need a stable leader in the White House.”
- ▶ **Self-Interest:** “Trump slashed spending on pandemic prevention and healthcare, setting the stage for the dangerous coronavirus. They say Trump has prioritized his own self-interest by minimizing the crisis and has slowed necessary testing and that hundreds of thousands of Americans will die because of his terrible leadership.”

Dependent Variables: Below find each variable tested as well as examples of how to read movement in the variables (examples provided in direction most movement from messaging was observed).

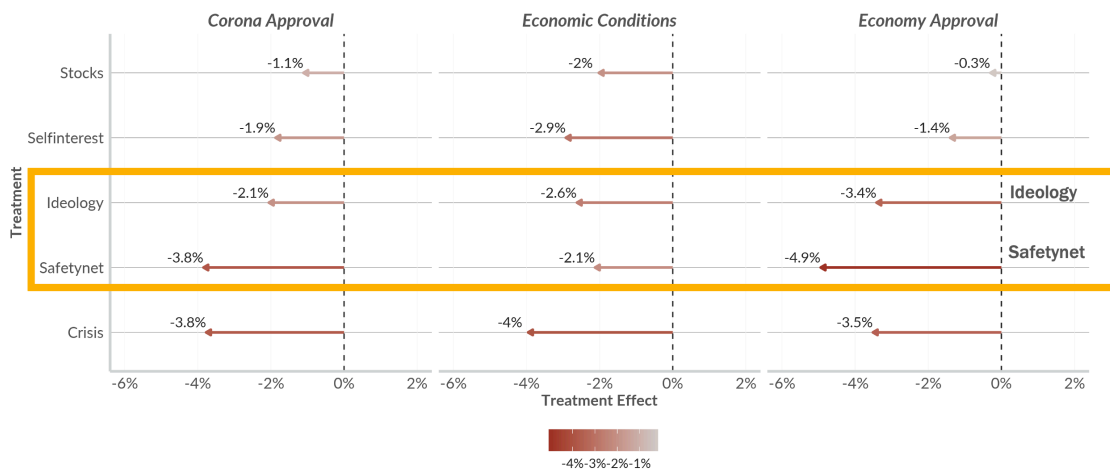
- ▶ **Corona approval:** This variable tested whether voters approve of Donald Trump’s handling of the coronavirus. A decrease of -1 percent represents a movement of one percentage point from approving to disapproving (ie from 44 percent approve 45 percent disapprove to 44 percent approve 46 percent disapprove).
- ▶ **Economic conditions:** This variable tested whether voters think the economy is good or bad. A decrease of -1 percent represents a movement of one percentage point from thinking the economy was performing well to not (ie from 44 percent thinking the economy is excellent or good 45 thinking the economy is fair or poor to 44 thinking the economy is excellent or good 46 thinking the economy is fair or poor).
- ▶ **Economy approval:** This variable tested whether voters approve of Trump’s handling of the economy. A decrease of -1 percent represents a movement of one percentage point from approving to disapproving (ie from 44 percent approve 45 percent disapprove to 44 percent approve 46 percent disapprove).”

Findings

The economic and Trump approval related variables displayed largely the same pattern of effects as the head-to-head matchup, with larger effect sizes on economic variables. It is unsurprising that these variables resulted in larger effect sizes as presidential matchups tend to be among the most resilient indicators to changing in messaging, while other variables see more movement.

The overall strengths and weaknesses of the messages are similar in the economic arguments, with the biggest difference being that Crisis performs moderately better than Ideology across the economic dimension, while Ideology performed better than Crisis in the head to heads. Again, Safety Net is overall the most impactful argument, with the highest impact in Corona Approval and Economy Approval, although slightly weaker in economic condition.

Topline Treatment Effect for Progressive Arguments (All Voters)



Treatment effect = estimated % change in: approval of Trump's handling of Coronavirus, judgement of current economic conditions, and approval of Trump's handling of the economy, among treated population

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