

Compassion has won out when it comes to Canadian support for COVID-19 financial aid

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Most of us would rather not rehash our experiences from the early stages

of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, for many this worldwide health crisis remains top of mind and continues to factor into everyday decision-making.

The pandemic taught us a lot about ourselves: how much risk we can tolerate, what we believe on questions of individualism versus community and our preferences about how to redistribute resources across society. [Our research](#) reveals that even though we may be divided in our experiences and our political affiliation, we can become united in times of threat.

Extensive lockdown measures and perceived risk of infection were each routinely positioned in the media [as threats to physical and mental well-being](#). But beyond [health concerns](#), the pandemic also cast light on the vulnerability of individual and household finances.

The federal [government](#) was quick to respond by implementing the [Canada Emergency Response Benefit](#) (CERB) and the [Canada Emergency Student Benefit](#) (CESB) along with [other direct financial policy measures](#) geared towards the elderly, people with dependents and students, among others.

These initiatives were controversial. [While many praised](#) the government's efforts to support Canadians, [others argued](#) that the CERB and related financial supports were inadequate.

In contrast, some conservative leaders and pundits criticized the [CERB for its negative impact on businesses](#), declaring that employees were unnecessarily leaving minimum wage jobs to receive the CERB and other benefits.

Pundits aside, understanding Canadians' responses to these changes in [government support](#) can tell us something about how members of society

evaluate their own financial concerns as well as those of their neighbors in a time of financial need.

Support for government assistance

In June 2020, we collected [survey data](#) to establish whether people's concern for their own or for others' financial well-being—or both—would drive support for policies that supported government financial aid.

We asked respondents to rate whether they thought the federal government had done a good job handling the financial aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing CERB and CESB as examples of these efforts.

Our analysis showed that those who expressed concern for the financial well-being of others were more likely to approve of the federal government's handling of the financial aspects of the pandemic.

By contrast, people's concerns about their own financial struggles had no effect on whether they approved of the federal government's actions.

In other words, people were more likely to support the [federal government](#)'s helping hand if they recognized other people were dealing with financial struggles, no matter their own economic situation. This was regardless of political affiliation.

Since CERB and other associated measures may have been tied to existing support for the Liberal government, we also asked participants about their attitudes on a broader range of government interventions, such as education support as well as credit and mortgage relief.

As a country that has [experimented with universal basic income \(UBI\)](#)

[measures](#), but [never fully bought in](#), we were also curious about whether the pandemic may have created the conditions for citizens to support UBI in Canada.

We found that people's own financial struggles as well as their concerns for others drove support for these policies—even after controlling for other factors like income and political affiliation. But their compassion for others had a much larger effect on support for a UBI.

An opportunity for big change?

Crises by definition are not "business as usual" in politics or the personal lives of citizens. They have long been [windows of opportunity for transformational change](#).

In part, this may be because they expose the weaknesses of the current political and economic infrastructure. But crises also have a profoundly human aspect to them, exposing the vulnerability of citizens who are deeply affected when these systems fail.

The findings from our research suggest that people's concerns for others during a crisis may be more influential than individual needs or [political affiliation](#) in determining [support](#) for certain redistributive policies.

This dovetails with ongoing research on [social trust and empathy](#). What governments do at these junctures—whether they recognize a shift in public opinion and whether that aligns with their policy preferences—is a political question. But our research suggests that, as divisive as crises can be, they can also create some cross-partisan empathy.

Among headlines [of division and conflict](#), expressions of concern for our fellow citizens are a refreshing silver lining on a [pandemic](#) that has not yet fully run its course.

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