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Prevention or relief? Voters' support for disaster policies

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Abstract

Researchers have argued that preventing disasters is more efficient than providing relief. Yet, previous scholarship has found that voters in the United States reward politicians more for relief than for prevention policies. It is unclear, however, whether they truly favour relief policies or if they are simply more aware of them. In this article we report on an experiment in which American participants read about a fictional community facing a threat of flood and then rated their support for a disaster policy. Across conditions, we manipulated whether the policy is for relief or prevention, and whether the citizens are cooperative or uncooperative with respect to government policies. We found that participants did not support relief more than prevention; in fact, they favoured prevention when citizens were uncooperative. In addition, participants were less supportive of relief for uncooperative as compared to cooperative citizens, while cooperativeness did not affect support for the prevention policy.

KEYWORDS
climate change, deservingness, disaster policy, disaster spending, public opinion

1 | INTRODUCTION

Governments mitigate the harm of disasters with policies that prevent damage and policies that deliver relief after damage occurs. Scholars have stressed that prevention policies are more effective and efficient than relief (Rose et al., 2007; Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Andrews and Ryan, 2022). One study on disaster spending in the United States estimated that each dollar spent on prevention saves approximately USD 15 in future damage, while

spending on relief does not reduce future damage (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). However, this previous study found that American voters rewarded politicians for relief more than prevention, concluding that voters are too myopic to consider fully the future benefits of prevention.

In this article we report on a survey experiment which tests the myopia hypothesis and other psychological theories about how American voters judge relief and prevention policies. A convenience sample of American participants read about a fictional community that suffers annual floods and then rated their support for a disaster policy. Across controlled conditions, we manipulated whether the policy is for relief or prevention, and whether the citizens have been cooperative with the government in responding to evacuation orders. These experimental methods allowed us to test theories about the psychological causes of support, particularly myopia, sympathy, and deservingness. One should note that the standard limitations of such experiments apply, allowing only tentative conclusions to be drawn and cautioning against hasty generalisations (Popper, 1959).

As stated, previous research using observational methods found that American voters reward politicians for relief more than prevention. Analysing the results of presidential elections in the US between 1988 and 2004, Healy and Malhotra (2009) discovered that in counties that received more relief after disasters, citizens were more likely to vote for the incumbent party. That is, they rewarded presidents for relief spending. In contrast, presidents did not win more votes in counties where they spent more money on prevention, such as flood protection, hurricane preparation, and firefighter training. If prevention is more efficient, then voters appear to be irrational in rewarding politicians more for relief than prevention. Indeed, Healy and Malhotra (2009, p. 402) concluded that:

> *Voters are myopic in the sense that they are unwilling to spend on [disasters] before the disasters have occurred. An ounce of prevention would be far more efficient than a pound of cure, but voters seem interested only in the cure … to provide assistance after harm has already occurred.*

Other studies have similarly found that voters reward relief spending, although they did not investigate prevention spending. One study examined hundreds of thousands of citizens in Florida who after hurricanes in 2004 received relief granted by President George W. Bush through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Chen, 2013). Registered Republicans who received federal relief in 2004 (before the election) were more likely to turn out in the presidential election between Bush and John Kerry, whereas registered Democrats who received relief were less likely to turn out. A second study assessed US gubernatorial and presidential elections between 1970 and 2006 (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). When a governor requested relief for a particular county and the president granted it, the governor received more votes from that county in the next election. Governors whose requests for relief were not granted by the president received fewer votes from the relevant county. In a third study which examined a relief programme in Germany delivered by the Social Democratic Party after a major flood in 2002, Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) estimated that in the districts that had been flooded, the Social Democratic Party increased its share of the votes by seven percentage points in the election later that year. And a study of national elections in Japan found that the incumbent party received a greater share of the votes in municipalities where they spent more on relief in response to storms (Fukumoto and Kikuta, 2024). Lastly, a study in France found that voters seem to punish politicians for spending on prevention (Morvan and Paty, 2024): researchers analysed mayoral elections in more than 30,000 municipalities and found that mayors who spent on prevention (by implementing the Natural Hazard Prevention Plan) were less likely to win re-election. Morvan and Paty (2024) concluded that the findings support the hypothesis that voters are myopic, as Healy and Malhotra (2009) proposed.

Why then do American voters reward politicians more for relief than prevention? One explanation is that citizens may know more about relief policies because they are more newsworthy than prevention policies (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). Relief makes for compelling news after disasters, notably stories covering who was injured and what was damaged (Houston, Pfefferbaum, and Rosenholtz, 2012). Relief generates more news when the victims receive aid like shelter, money, food, and medicine. For example, one study found that incumbent mayors in Italy garnered more news coverage than their challengers in municipalities hit by an earthquake, possibly owing to

relief efforts (Masiero and Santarossa, 2021). News coverage of a disaster and relief can create what Birkland (1998) calls a 'focusing event', which mobilises public and political support. In contrast, prevention policies are not as newsworthy since they occur before a disaster strikes. In general, news coverage influences what voters know about policies and leaders and thus affects how they judge politicians (Miller and Krosnick, 2000; Peterson and Allamong, 2022). Therefore, voters may be more likely to reward politicians for relief policies that are visible in the news as compared to prevention policies that receive less coverage.

Another theory is that voters undervalue prevention because they underestimate the risk of future disasters. Their perceptions of the benefits of prevention depend on their beliefs regarding the likelihood and extent of future disasters (see, for example, Dolšak and Prakash, 2018). Research suggests that people often underestimate future risks (Weinstein, 1980; Gifford et al., 2009; Gifford, 2011; Achen and Bartels, 2012; Meyer and Kunreuther, 2017), which could make voters undervalue prevention policies. In one survey, participants estimated the risk of a flood disaster in their area and then reported on the extent to which they would prepare for it, such as keeping a working flashlight (Miceli, Sotgiu, and Settanni, 2008). Participants who perceived a lower risk of flooding were less likely to prepare for a disaster.

A third theory is that voters may not trust politicians who propose prevention policies. Using a formal model, Gailmard and Patty (2019) simulated how voters and politicians respond to disaster relief or prevention. They show that voters cannot be certain whether politicians recommend prevention policies for their personal benefit or for citizens' safety. Under such uncertainty, voters would feel sceptical when politicians push for prevention spending. As a result, they would be more likely to punish incumbents who spend more on preventive measures, incentivising politicians to suggest relief policies instead. Overall, voters may be hesitant to support prevention when they are unaware of politicians' motives.

Lastly, voters might simply value relief more than prevention, independent of risk perceptions or quantity of news coverage. This is our primary hypothesis of interest. One possibility is that relief policies could appeal to voters by satisfying their sympathy for the victims of a disaster. After a disaster strikes, voters can see the damage done and thus feel sympathy for those involved. In contrast, prevention policies aim to help potential victims whose future hardship has not yet materialised. Voters may not be able to envision such future victims as easily, and therefore they may feel less sympathetic. This hypothesis predicts that people favour relief policies more than prevention policies, even when they are equally aware of both of them and accurately assess the risk of future disasters.

Additionally, this theory leads us to a secondary hypothesis about deservingness. If voters support relief because of sympathy, they might also judge carefully who deserves it. Previous research shows that people judge whether welfare recipients deserve help based on their efforts (van Oorschot, 2000; Petersen et al., 2012). People determine that citizens who are 'unlucky' deserve government welfare whereas citizens who are 'lazy' do not (Petersen, 2012). Like government welfare generally, relief policies also provide help and appeal to sympathy, so voters might judge critically who deserves relief. Particularly, we examine citizens' cooperativeness with the government's disaster policies as a contributor to their deservingness. Those who do not comply with government orders could be seen as uncooperative and reckless, which could make the public perceive them as less deserving. For instance, Stone (2012, pp. 207–218) argues that people can portray survivors of disasters as careless or reckless partly to shift the blame on to them, thus changing the causal story of the event to reduce sympathy. If so, politicians may also provide less help to the victims since they tend to seek public approval by favouring groups perceived as deserving (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). In sum, the deservingness hypothesis predicts that participants will be more supportive of relief when the victims are portrayed as more deserving of help.

In our experiment, we test whether participants support a relief policy more than a prevention policy, holding constant their awareness of the two and their expected benefits. Since we assign participants to read about each policy, the relief and prevention policies do not differ in terms of awareness owing to different amounts of news coverage. We also control the expected benefits of relief and prevention by stating them in the scenarios. Furthermore, we test the deservingness hypothesis by manipulating whether the recipients were cooperative or uncooperative with the government's disaster policies. The deservingness hypothesis predicts that participants will be more supportive of relief policies when the recipients are cooperative. Meanwhile, prevention occurs before the damage and

when there are no current victims, so they evoke less sympathy and accordingly judgements of deservingness have less influence. Thus, we expect deservingness to have less influence over support for prevention policies.

2 | METHODS

We recruited participants in the US through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing marketplace, in April 2020. We established a sample size with enough power to detect moderate effect sizes for comparisons between means. Specifically, with an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.5$, a t-test with 64 observations per condition would yield 80 per cent power (alpha = 0.05). We aimed therefore to recruit a minimum of 64 participants for each of the six groups (see below); the final sample amounted to 397. Participants were 66 per cent female and 34 per cent male with a mean age of 37 years (standard deviation = 11). They were 71 per cent White, 11 per cent Hispanic, 8 per cent Black, 7 per cent Asian, and 3 per cent other. Their median income range was USD 40,000–49,999. They were 51 per cent Democrat, 23 per cent Republican, and 25 per cent Independent or other, and they were 56 per cent liberal, 20 per cent moderate, and 24 per cent conservative. Participants earned 50 cents for completing the survey. This experiment was approved by the institutional review board at Stony Brook University.

Participants read a fictional scenario about a disaster that had already occurred or the risk of a future disaster (see Figure 1). In response, the government proposes a relief policy or a prevention policy that would be paid for by a new tax, depending on the condition (as described below). Participants then read a reminder that although they live far away from the disaster, their hypothetical taxes would be affected if the policy passed. Lastly, participants indicated their support for the given policy by answering the following question: 'How likely are you to support this new policy?'. They responded on a five-point scale ranging from 'very unlikely' to 'very likely'.

Using a 2×3 research design, we randomly assigned participants to one of six experimental conditions (see Figure 1). In the relief condition, participants read that a flood had occurred and caused USD 112 million in damage. A tax that raises USD 80 million would allow the government to provide relief to the victims. In the prevention condition, participants read that a flood is coming, and it will cause USD 112 million dollars of damage. A tax that raises USD 80 million could pay for a drainage system that will completely prevent this.

Furthermore, we aimed to make a finer distinction with a third condition that we call the relief-preparation condition. Typically, relief and prevention differ in two ways: the timing of the policy and the kind of public good it provides. We separate these aspects as follows: the policy proposal occurs *before* the flood arrives, but the public good is relief rather than prevention. This allows us to test whether the preference for relief depends on it happening after a disaster strikes, or if it persists for relief that is planned in advance of a disaster.

In addition to the type of policy, we manipulate whether the citizens are more or less cooperative with the government's policy to test the deservingness hypothesis. In the cooperative condition, participants read that the victims were willing to comply with the government's evacuation orders and other preparations. In the uncooperative condition, participants read that the victims are unwilling to take action to improve their situation. Consequently, there are six conditions altogether in a 2 (cooperativeness) $\times$ 3 (policy) design framework. Figure 1 shows the text of each condition.

Table 1 summarises the hypotheses and experimental predictions. Note that the myopia and the sympathy hypotheses make the same predictions in this experiment: voters will support the relief policy more than the prevention policy and relief preparation. As noted, the deservingness hypothesis applies most directly to the relief policy, while making less clear predictions for the other policies.

3 | RESULTS

Figure 2 shows participants' support for each policy. Most people said they were 'very likely' or 'slightly likely' to support each policy. Support for relief policies appears to be less than support for prevention, contrary to what would be expected based on previous research.

FIGURE 1 Policy scenarios. **Source:** authors.

TABLE 1 Hypotheses and predictions for participants' support of disaster policies.

Hypothesis	Predictions
Myopia	Relief > prevention Relief > relief preparation
Sympathy	Relief > prevention Relief > relief preparation
Deservingness	For relief: cooperative > uncooperative For relief preparation and prevention: cooperative ≈ uncooperative

Note: summary of experimental predictions where '>' means 'greater support' for one policy over another. The predictions imply all else is equal. The hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.
Source: authors.

To compare mean support, we coded the likelihood of support as a numeric value ranging from −2 ('very unlikely') to +2 ('very likely'). Figure 3 shows the average support under each of the six conditions. We first compared the three policy types, holding constant citizens' cooperation. When citizens were cooperative, we found no differences in support across the three policies (prevention versus relief, $t(143) = 1.21$, $p = 0.23$; prevention versus relief preparation, $t(144) = 0.83$, $p = 0.41$; and relief versus relief preparation, $t(149) = 0.39$, $p = 0.70$). When citizens were uncooperative, participants were *less* supportive of the relief policy than the prevention policy ($t(121) = 2.95$, $p = 0.0038$), which is the opposite of what we predicted based on previous research. When citizens were uncooperative, support for relief preparation was in the middle and did not significantly differ from relief ($t(106) = 1.48$, $p = 0.14$) or prevention ($t(119) = 1.39$, $p = 0.17$). Thus, contrary to predictions, participants' support for the relief policy is not greater than support for the prevention policy. In fact, support for the relief policy was less when citizens were uncooperative.

Next, we examined our second prediction: participants would pay attention to deservingness when deciding whether to support disaster relief, whereas deservingness would not be as critical for prevention. We compared support for a policy when citizens were cooperative with support for the same policy when citizens were uncooperative, holding constant the policy type. We did not find a difference in support for prevention ($t(136) = 0.16$, $p = 0.87$), nor a difference in support for relief preparation ($t(127) = 0.88$, $p = 0.38$). We did find, however, that participants

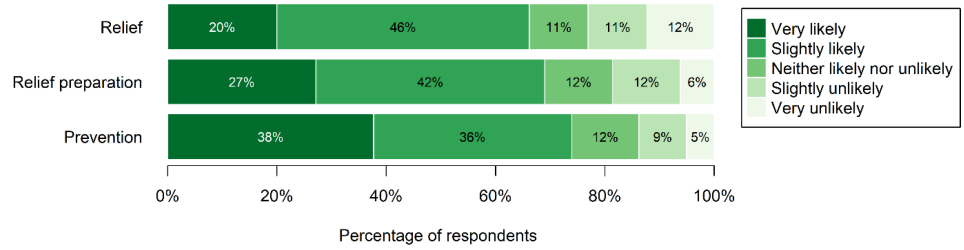

FIGURE 2 Likelihood of supporting the policies. **Note:** the values do not necessarily sum to 100 per cent owing to rounding. **Source:** authors.

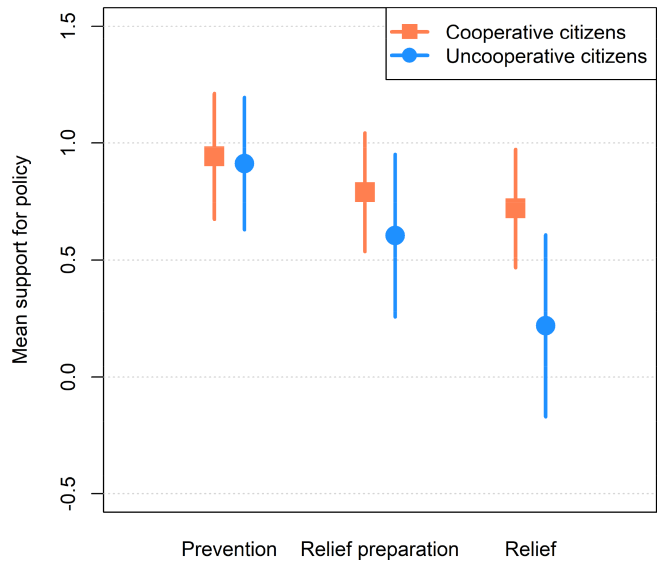

FIGURE 3 Mean support for each of the policies. **Note:** the bars show the 95 per cent confidence interval for each mean. **Source:** authors.

had greater support for the relief policy when citizens were cooperative as compared to uncooperative ($t(128) = 2.26$, $p = 0.026$).

Lastly, we broke down the results in a regression analysis (see Table 2). The dependent variable is, again, support for each policy on a scale from −2 to +2. The model has predictors for the type of policy, particularly relief preparation and prevention, while the relief policy is the reference category. The model also has a predictor for the cooperative condition while uncooperative is the reference category, and it has interactions between cooperative and each policy.

Consistent with our previous analysis, participants were more supportive of prevention than the relief policy (the reference category) when citizens were uncooperative (also the reference category), as indicated by the positive coefficient for prevention. Additionally, the positive coefficient for cooperative citizens indicates that participants were more supportive of the relief policy when citizens were cooperative than when citizens were uncooperative (the reference category). We note too, however, that the interactions between cooperative and the other policies were not significant, so although the effect of cooperation differed across policies in the pairwise tests, we did not find a significant interaction. Hence, while the pairwise tests show that participants attended to deservingness in judging the relief policy, we did not find statistical evidence that deservingness had smaller effects for the other policies despite their non-significance in pairwise tests.

4 | DISCUSSION

We did not find that participants supported relief more than prevention. In fact, when citizens were uncooperative, participants supported relief *less* than prevention. Otherwise, when citizens were cooperative, participants' support did not differ between relief and prevention.

This finding contradicts the hypothesis that voters favour relief over prevention, which stems from previous observational analyses of voting and disaster spending (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). Particularly, this past research suggests that voters are myopic and thus favour immediate relief over preventing damage in the future. The present results contradict this myopia hypothesis because our participants did not favour relief despite its more immediate benefits. These findings indicate that voters may not be as irrational as previously suggested: they do appear to be capable of foreseeing the future benefits of prevention.

Yet, our results are consistent with other interpretations of why only relief spending correlated with receiving more votes. In addition to myopia, researchers have suggested that relief receives more news coverage and consequently makes a stronger impression on voters (Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Masiero and Santarossa, 2021). That is, voters may reward politicians more for relief because they do not hear about prevention in the news. In the present experiment, we eliminated this difference since participants read about both policies and did not rely on the news to learn about them. We suggest, therefore, that the amount of news coverage remains a promising hypothesis for why relief garners more votes.

TABLE 2 Regression analysis of policy support.

	Estimate	Standard error	*t*	*p*
Prevention	0.69	0.22	3.21	0.0014
Relief preparation	0.39	0.23	1.68	0.094
Cooperative	0.50	0.21	2.37	0.018
Prevention × Cooperative	−0.47	0.29	−1.61	0.11
Relief preparation × Cooperative	−0.32	0.30	−1.05	0.29
Constant	0.22	0.16	1.36	0.18

Source: authors.

Furthermore, we tested a secondary hypothesis about deservingness. We found that participants' support for relief decreased when citizens were uncooperative as compared to cooperative. This finding echoes the previous research finding that judgements of deservingness influence support for aid (van Oorschot, 2000; Petersen et al., 2012), while extending these observations to aid in disasters. When voters evaluate a relief policy, they consider the characteristics and actions of the victims. In contrast, participants did not decrease their support for prevention when citizens were uncooperative. This reveals that they did not consider the characteristics of future victims. The finding also indicates that when evaluating welfare policies, voters look beyond the benefits: they consider the human narratives that inform them regarding who deserves help in the aftermath of disasters.

If so, victims viewed as less deserving may receive less help from politicians. Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that politicians strategically provide benefits to groups seen by the public as deserving to gain public approval. Conversely, politicians pay less attention to the needs of groups considered as undeserving. For disaster policies, in particular, politicians may favour relief over prevention if they think the public perceives current victims as more deserving of help than citizens who are not presently suffering from a disaster.

In this experiment, we used a convenience sample recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk website, which means that the results do not automatically generalise to the American public or other particular groups (Stagnaro et al., 2024). In experimental sciences broadly, the goal of an experiment is to test a hypothesis rather than to generalise the results, and generalisations become warranted only after surviving repeated tests, and even then, only tentatively (Popper, 1959). Nonetheless, convenience samples are particularly valuable for testing psychological hypotheses, as in the present experiment. The psychological hypotheses about myopia, the future, and sympathy which we have drawn from previous literature are about human psychology and do not specify particular groups of people to which they apply. This means that they are subject to testing in any sample of participants. Correspondingly, when these hypotheses survive or fail experimental tests, their general credibility extends to the scope of the hypothesis, although always tentatively. In the current experiment, since the hypotheses are about human psychology, we would expect similar results in other groups of participants, although that tentative generalisation remains subject to further tests.

Additionally, this experiment was conducted in April 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic when there were lockdowns and protests. This situation may have influenced participants' judgements of prevention and relief. For instance, lockdowns could be perceived as a preventative policy although they also occurred during the crisis rather than before it could be fully prevented. Note, however, that these influences would affect all conditions equally and thus could not explain the experimental results across these conditions.

One limitation of our study is that we used a hypothetical scenario. This is common in experiments because it provides greater control by isolating participants' judgements from their idiosyncratic knowledge of real events; but participants may have had less sympathy for the imaginary victims, which could have decreased their support for relief policies as compared to a situation with real victims. Future studies could present real victims to test this possibility. Furthermore, actual prevention policies do not usually prevent all damage with certainty like they did in our experiment. However, we designed these hypothetical situations specifically to compare people's support for relief and prevention under equivalent expected values. By holding constant the expected costs and benefits, we could directly test whether participants favoured relief over prevention owing to its greater immediacy, as proposed by the myopia hypothesis. Future research, though, could manipulate the amount of certainty and degree of protection to test how support for prevention depends on these factors, given that they differ from the benefits of relief which are known with more certainty.

Another promising direction is to examine whether a voter's beliefs about the likelihood of disasters increase their support for prevention. In our experiment, we used floods, which occur more frequently than other disasters such as tsunamis. When a disaster is frequent, voters might have greater support for a prevention policy because it will protect the community from future similar incidents (Xu et al., 2018). Yet, if voters believe that a given disaster is rare, they may show greater support for a relief programme because the disaster is unlikely to strike again.

Additionally, in our experiment, we only investigated compliance with evacuation orders to measure cooperativeness; future researchers should investigate other forms of deservingness that may affect people's support.

For instance, participants may judge victims as more deserving if they learn that they volunteered to help others evacuate from hazards. Participants may also extend more support to victims who come from low-income backgrounds because they are less able to invest in, say, flood insurance.

People who live in places more prone to disasters may have different views on prevention and relief (see, for example, Giordono et al., 2023). For instance, we might expect them to put greater value on prevention. One study, though, found that the people who perceived greater risk of disasters were not more likely to prepare for such hazards (Wachinger et al., 2013). Another found that people who had been hit by disasters were no more likely to support preventative measures (Bechtel and Mannino, 2023). Future work can examine this matter further while looking at both prevention and relief.

People's political ideology also influences their support for disaster policies (see, for example, Giordono et al., 2023). For instance, previous research found that political conservatives were more likely than liberals to say that no one is to blame for a disaster, which may reduce their support for related policies (Colvin et al., 2023). Another likely connection stems from conflict over climate change policy. When leaders connect disasters to climate change, conservatives and liberals may fall back on their general positions against and for the relevant policies. Lastly, partisan motives would be expected to make citizens favour the policies of their party while opposing those of their opponents. For example, some Republican leaders blamed Democratic President Joe Biden for flood damage in North Carolina in 2023 while calling for greater relief, and they blamed Democratic Mayor Karen Bass for wildfire damage in Los Angeles, California, in 2025 while calling for greater prevention.

Future research could also investigate how the size of a disaster affects support for prevention and relief. Voters may prefer preventive policies if they think an imminent disaster will cause severe damage (McNeill et al., 2013). Yet, if voters think the damage will be minimal, they may prefer a relief policy that aids the few who were harmed.

Finally, future research could use cash incentives to make participants' decisions have real consequences. Past research has employed economic games to simulate disasters and observe how people make decisions when real consequences are at stake (Milinski et al., 2008; Jacquet et al., 2013; Andrews, Delton, and Kline, 2023). These methods could also be applied to compare voters' support for prevention and relief policies.

In sum, in contrast to previous research using observational analyses, we found that people did not support relief more than prevention. In fact, when informed equally about both, rather than relying on news coverage, participants supported prevention policies as much as or more than relief policies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that we have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported here.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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