Assessing Political Actors' Brand Equity: Trump and the CDC's 'Slow the Spread' Campaign Card

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between brand equity and public approval of a political actor's performance. The premise of this work is that political actors accumulate brand equity over time, much like their commercial counterparts. Positive brand equity is a particularly important asset in polarized political environments; it can help raise government satisfaction, political actors' approval ratings, and re-election chances. Using an online experimental survey, we explore President Trump's brand equity in a national Public Service Announcement (PSA) effort (that is, the 'Slow the Spread' campaign postcard sent to American households in March 2020). To do so, we test whether implicit associations made by subjects between this PSA effort and President Trump are associated with higher or lower approval of his presidency, and his handling of the COVID-19 crisis. We find that Democrat and Independent subjects who associate the PSA with President Trump (rather than other brands presented in the material, namely the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the 'Slow the Spread' campaign itself, and the Coronavirus.gov website) have lower levels of approval for President Trump's presidency generally and his handling of the COVID-19 crisis. More concisely, we find that President Trump's name appears to carry negative brand equity conditioned by partisan effects.

INTRODUCTION

This study conducts an empirical analysis into the relationship between brand equity and public approval of a political actor's performance both generally and in a specific policy domain. The premise of this work is that political actors accumulate brand equity over time, much like their commercial counterparts (Ahmed et al 2017). An established brand plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and influencing electoral outcomes. A strong brand image can enhance a candidate's appeal, build trust, and mobilize support, while a negative brand image can lead to public skepticism and hinder electoral success. Likewise, political branding has become increasingly intertwined with partisan politics, shaping the way voters perceive candidates and their messages. Partisanship significantly influences how individuals interpret and respond to political branding efforts.

Previous studies on the relationship between brand equity in the public sector and public perception have emphasized the branding of places, policies, and agencies. However, within political marketing and branding scholarship, there is a shared understanding that political parties, interest groups, politicians, and campaigns can be conceptualized as "political brands" (Ahmed et al. 2015; Billard 2018; Meyerrose 2017; Speed et al. 2015; Scammell 2015; Smith 2009). Building on this notion, it is commonly posited that a favorable or valuable political brand has a direct impact on a party's capacity to gain or sustain electoral support and votes (Lock and Harris, 2001; Needham, 2005; White and de Chernatony, 2002), mirroring the relationship between a valuable commercial brand and its financial worth. Nevertheless, there exists a dearth of empirical research examining this claim (e.g. Marsh and Fawcett, 2011; Nielsen, 2016).

Therefore, the paper aims to contribute to existing literature by empirically examining how a political actors' – in this case former President Trump's – developed brand might evoke responses on the part of citizens that signal negative or positive brand equity. We also illuminate how brand equity is conditioned by partisan effects.

Accordingly, we test the US public's implicit associations with the Trump administration's branding effort during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, in the "Slow the Spread" campaign postcard

sent to American households in March 2020. We seek to measure President Trump's brand equity by correlating the public's implicit associations of the public health campaign with President Trump's name to their assessments of his job performance—both as president generally and his handling of the pandemic.

The Trump Administration had been criticized for featuring President Trump's name so prominently on the "Slow the Spread" campaign postcard and politicizing the material with the hopes of improving President Trump's standing with the public. However, in turn, the Administration responded that this was done with the confidence that featuring the former President's name would increase public uptake of the public health guidance recommended by the Centers for the Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In other words, there was an expectation that either (1) President Trump's name generally holds positive brand equity (thereby improving uptake of the CDC recommendations) or (2) the postcard campaign would help increase President Trump's approval.

This article begins with a brief overview of extant work on branding in the public sector and of political actors, and partisan conditioning, which rationalize the proposed hypotheses that implicit associations made to President Trump in the "Slow the Spread" PSA are related to the subject's overall approval of his presidency and handling of the crisis. We then evaluate these hypotheses using an experimental survey design which contributes to the scant empirical research on brand equity of political actors in policy implementation, and more broadly in the public sector. Here, we measure implicit brand equity by capturing associations between implicit attention on a public service campaign and the president's approval in both handling a crisis and his general performance. Finally, the findings and their implications are discussed, laying out an agenda for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Branding in the Public Sector

Branding in the public sector has received increased attention in scholarship; however, much of the literature focuses on places, governments, and policies (Pasotti, 2010; Eshuis, Braun, and Klijn, 2013; Eshuis and Klijn, 2012; Karens, Eshuis and Klijn, 2016; Harris, Brownell, and Bargh, 2009; Zavattaro, 2014). Adapting Eshuis and Klijn's (2012) definition of brands, we consider a political actor's brand to be a name or symbol that differentiates them from other political actors. More recent work has introduced the concepts of branding and brand equity to public administration research on agency reputation (Marvel, 2016; Teodoro and An, 2018). Citizens serve as the "consumer" of public goods and services (see Kelly, 2005; Vigoda, 2002). Therefore, the reputation of a public agency or political actor in the eyes of the citizen contributes to the favorability of their brand. This reputation is dependent on the citizens' perception of the agency's or actors' competence and other attributes deemed relevant by the citizen (Carpenter and Krause, 2012) for determining the value of the agency's or actor's actions. Citizens' perceptions are formed on the basis of the values associated with an agency or political actor, whether the value is tangible or symbolic in nature.

In existing literature, two causal mechanisms have been identified to explain what drives brand equity and its effect on citizens attitudes: 1) brand names may convey informational cues to citizens who also use simple heuristics, and 2) brand names may serve as emotional triggers for citizens who are drawn by the values and associations of the brand. Both mechanisms lead to similar expectations of the effects of brands (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012; Teodoro and An, 2018). Public perception does not need to be based on actual knowledge about an agency or political actors' operations or policies. An agency or actor has a brand insofar as citizens implicitly hold perceptions, regardless of whether said agency or actor is actively engaged in branding.

Still, little attention has been paid to the brand equity of key political actors, such as the President of the United States, and its respective effects on public approval (Schneiker, 2019). In this context, citizen-based brand equity can be measured in numerous ways, including through brand awareness, brand loyalty,

perceived quality, and brand associations (French and Smith, 2010). Public agencies can hold positive brand equity which enables effective management, or negative brand equity which leads to lower public approval and trust (Teodoro and An, 2018) and so too do political actors. Similarly, just as an agency's brand equity might vary within different populations of the public (Teodoro and An), so will a political actor's brand equity.

Brand Equity of Political Actors

The conceptualization and examination of political brands has been significantly developed within political marketing and branding scholarship since the seminal work of Lock and Harris (1996). For instance, existing work has examined voters' assessments of party brands (French and Smith 2010; Schneider 2004), the influence of party leader brands on voter behavior (Davies and Mian 2010; Guzman and Sierra 2009; Needham 2005; Scammell 2007), and strategies for creating a valuable party brand (Harris and Lock 2001; Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006; Cosgrove, 2011). Despite this, there is a lack of literature empirically examining the effects of individual politicians' brand equity on electoral support or approval levels, including across parties. Previous work has also explored brand measurement by looking at brand associations of political parties in a similar manner as those made in commercial marketing (Schneider, 2004; French and Smith, 2010). Likewise, Parker (2012) examined U.S. presidential candidate brand equity as measured by brand awareness, associations, loyalty, and perceived quality, and Smith and Spotswood (2013) employed these same four sources of brand equity in their work. Meanwhile, Ahmed, Lodhi, and Ahmad (2015) introduce their political brand equity model (PBE).

Political actors specifically use branding to create an identity that attracts electoral support while simultaneously building voter loyalty over time, and influences public perception (Lock and Harris, 2001; Needham, 2005; White and de Chernatony, 2002). This brand is a symbolic construct that adds value to what is associated with it, and then conveys information regarding the actor's competency, with the resulting reputations being carried in the public's minds (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012; Teodoro and An, 2018).

Former US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama had extensively employed branding in order to enhance their popularity and evoke emotions with voters. For instance, George W. Bush branded

himself as a strong leader. Barack Obama branded himself as a charismatic leader who would bring change and new hope. During his electoral campaign, he was constantly surrounded by brand images that became associated with him, such as his logo displaying the sun with its rays. He and his team were so adept in building a well-recognized brand and image that Obama was named Advertising Age's Marketer of the Year for 2008, a first for a political candidate (Zavattaro, 2010).

Consistent with this, we accept Schneiker's (2019) perspective of political marketing, in which we conceptualize Donald Trump as a product marketed through political branding, albeit one that was formed substantially prior to and successive with his political career in the business and entertainment sectors. A political actor's name can evoke associations and emotions among citizens which cause citizens to perceive them favorably or not. In other words, the brand carries either positive or negative brand equity (Keller, 1993); that is, some level of value derives from citizen perception of the brand name, which is then passed on to any phenomenon with which it might be associated. The level of favorability (positivity/negativity of associations) of a brand grants more positive or negative brand equity. Positive brand equity assists in increasing citizens' trust in and approval of a particular political actor. When citizens perceive a political actor favorably, their approval and support of and trust in this actor increases. A strong positive brand image can also generate emotional connections with voters. Brader (2005) revealed that emotional reactions play a significant role in voter decision-making. A positive brand image that evokes positive emotions, such as hope, inspiration, or a sense of unity, can create a lasting impression and foster support among the electorate. In this same vein, the credibility of political actors with negative brand equity would be undermined (Keller, 1993; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Nai and Walter, 2015). We thus present the following hypotheses related to variation in brand equity:

H1: Implicit associations made to President Trump in the "Slow the Spread" PSA are related to the subject's overall approval of President Trump's presidency.

H2: Implicit associations made to President Trump in the "Slow the Spread" PSA are related to the subject's overall approval of President Trump's handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Partisanship Effect on Brand Equity

Partisan motivated reasoning research suggests that citizens' existing political beliefs influence their attitudes and associations toward government and public organizations (Bækgaard and Serritzlew, 2016; Jilke, 2017). In addition, the brands of public agencies and political actors are inevitably political (James and Van Ryzin, 2016; Jilke, 2017). In the same manner that partisan identification conditions voter behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Zaller, 1992), citizens' ideologies and party affiliations are likely to influence or determine how favorably they view an agency or political actor's brand (James and Van Ryzin, 2016; Jilke, 2017; Kunda, 1990). In turn, partisan bias could lead to implicit associations that directly impact political actors' brand equity effects.

Partisans often exhibit a positive bias towards their own party's candidates and branding efforts. This bias, known as "party cueing," influences how partisans interpret and respond to political messages. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) found that partisans tend to be more receptive to messages and branding that align with their party's values and positions. For example, supporters of a specific party may be more inclined to perceive their candidate's branding efforts as authentic, competent, and trustworthy. Positive brand perception among partisans can reinforce their support and enthusiasm for their preferred candidate, leading to increased engagement and campaign support. Partisanship can also lead to negative brand perception towards candidates and messages from opposing parties. Huddy, Feldman, and Taber (2007) suggest that partisans are more likely to exhibit negative evaluations and skepticism towards opposing candidates and their branding efforts. Therefore, brand equity is conditioned by the effects of partisanship on public opinion (Bartels, 2002; Needham, 2006; Druckman et al., 2013; Teodoro and An, 2018).

Simply put, whether citizens identify as Democrats or Republicans might lead to variations in their responses to a particular political actor's brand (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000; James and Van Ryzin, 2016; Keele, 2007), and subsequently in whether that brand has positive or negative brand equity for those citizens. It is reasonable to anticipate that agencies viewed as being more 'conservative' or Republican political actors hold positive brand equity in the eyes of more conservative or Republican citizens, and negative brand equity among more liberal citizens. Similarly, Democratic political actors and seemingly

liberal agencies are expected to have positive brand equity for Democrat citizens, and negative brand equity among Republican citizens. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis for partisan-contingent brand equity:

H3a-b: The relationship between a subject's implicit association and approval of President Trump (a) or his handling of the crisis (b) is conditioned by the subject's party identification.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this research, we are interested in the implicit association that subjects make between a nationally distributed PSA and President Trump. We test whether the implicit association made to President Trump is associated with higher or lower levels of approval of his presidency generally, and his handling of the COVID-19 crisis. This is in comparison to implicit associations made to other brands presented in the material (that is, the Coronavirus.gov website, the CDC, and the "Stop the Spread" slogan for national prevention guidelines). We also explore how party identification characteristics of respondents are correlated with implicit associations and approval levels.

Data Collection

To test the hypotheses, an online survey was fielded of 1045 US voters provided by a Qualtrics panel balanced by gender, party identification, and ethnicity. Subjects were presented with pretreatment questions about various demographic and ideological characteristics. Aa series of questions related to the crisis were then asked, particularly their relative approval of President Trump's general job performance, as well as his performance handling the crisis. In correlating their implicit associations with President Trump's name to their assessments of his job, President Trump's "brand equity" can be measured.

Measures

Explicit Brand Equity

For the purpose of the analysis, President Trump's brand equity is interpreted as inherently tied to his 2020 reelection campaign and separate from the White House as an institution. The five primary brands that are displayed on the PSA card are the "Slow the Spread" campaign, President Trump, the

Coronavirus.gov website, the White House, and the CDC. To capture the concept of explicit brand equity, we display a summary of the mission statement for both the CDC and President Trump's 2020 reelection campaign and then ask the following two questions to measure both the salience and the valence associated with each:

1. How important is the mission statement of President Trump's reelection campaign [the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)] to you personally?

2. To what extent do you agree that President Trump's reelection campaign [CDC] is an organization that does good for society?

Response options for the first question range from 1 = "not important at all" to 7 = "extremely important." Response options for the second question range from 1 = "strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree."

Here, we offer a more nuanced measurement than has been proffered in experimental studies of the influence of public sector brand equity (Teodoro and Ahn, 2018). We accommodate both the salience and valence of a subject's orientation to a given institution. Individuals with a variety of different pursuits perceive an alignment between their desires and organizational missions because the stated organizational mission either intends to significantly benefit society (i.e., valence) or closely reflects their personal preferences and interest (i.e., salience). We also ask the extent to which the subject was familiar with either Trump's reelection campaign or the CDC.

Implicit Brand Association

After responding to the pre-treatment questions, subjects are presented with the image presented in Figure A (Appendix). The image provides the front side of a public service announcement that was mailed to every US household in March 2020 that provided the COVID-19 guidelines released two weeks prior by the White House Coronavirus Task Force. It is notable that the guidelines are specifically called "PRESIDENT TRUMP'S" over which there was some contention regarding whether labeling the public health guidelines as "President Trump's" came across as overtly political. The backside of the postcard contained guidelines and advice encouraging Americans to take social distancing seriously and practice

good hygiene. It also advises them to "listen and follow the directions of your state and local authorities." We ask respondents to click on the first element that they notice in order to capture the implicit association they make with the purpose of the card.

Presidential Approval

To capture respondents' presidential approval, we ask the following questions:

1. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald J. Trump is handling his job as president?

2. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald J. Trump is addressing the Coronavirus pandemic?

Response options for both questions include "approve", "disapprove" and "no opinion".

Additional Variables of Potential Interest

Variables that are included in additional models may also be of theoretical or substantive interest. First, there could be some concern that the CDC's mission aligns with a respondent's ideological orientation or partisan identification. While we expect this with President Trump's reelection campaign, there is no evidence of an ideological or partisan relationship with the CDC's brand equity in pairwise correlations.

RESULTS

As noted above, we are primarily concerned with whether subjects who implicitly associate the PSA with President Trump are likely to approve of his presidency and his handling of the COVID-19 crisis. As reflected in Figure 1, a significant proportion of respondents clicked on the area occupied by the words "PRESIDENT TRUMP". Approximately, 20.6% of respondents clocked on the words PRESIDENT (9.3%) or TRUMP (11.3%). Combined, PRESIDENT TRUMP ranked second only to the term CORONAVIRUS (26.6%) as the most prominently noticed area of the card. The CDC garnered 8% of immediate clicks, despite being in the lower right-hand corner of the card.

Fig 1: Heat Map of President Trump's Slow the Spread Campaign Postcard

Comparison of Means

Approval of Trump's Presidency

A comparison of mean values supports hypothesis 1, which proposed a relationship between a subject's implicit association and their approval of President Trump's presidency, as portrayed in the "Slow the Spread" PSA. The results of the test supported the hypothesis, suggesting that implicit associations can influence a person's overall approval of a political figure's leadership. In addition, this relationship between a subject's implicit association and their approval of President Trump's Presidency is dependent on their party identification. Moreover, President Trump's name appears to carry negative brand equity for voters with high economic anxiety.
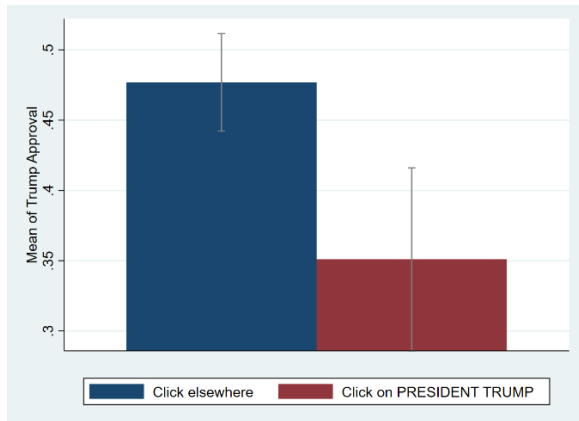
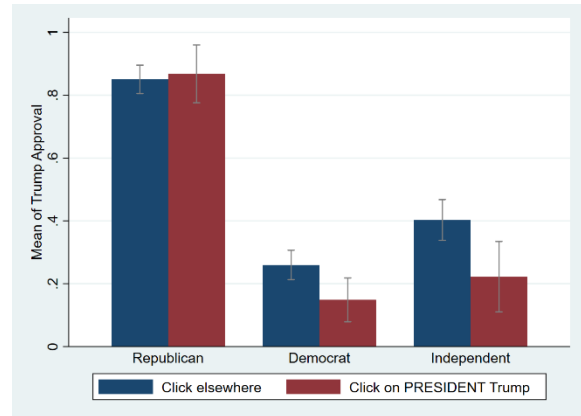Fig 2: General Approval of Trump's Presidency
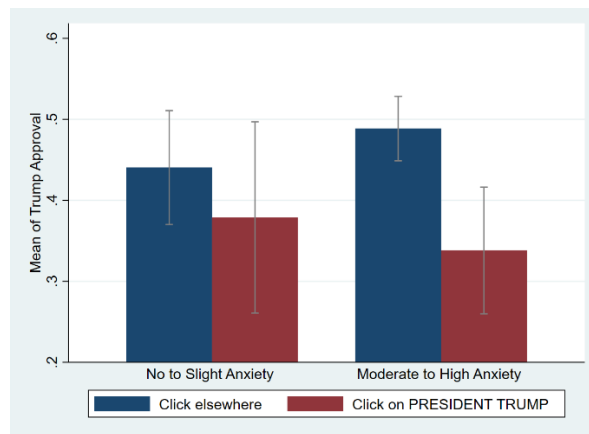

Fig 3: Approval of Trump's Presidency by Party

Fig 4: General Approval of Trump's Presidency by Economic Anxiety Levels

Approval of Trump's Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis

A comparison of mean values supports hypothesis 2, indicating that there is a significant relationship between implicit associations made to President Trump in the "Slow the Spread" PSA and a subject's overall approval of his presidency and handling of the crisis. This suggests that the implicit associations made to political figures can have a significant impact on people's attitudes towards their leadership and actions during critical events.

A comparison of mean values also supports hypothesis 3, which posits that the relationship between a subject's implicit association and their approval of President Trump's handling of the COVID-19 crisis is dependent on their party identification.
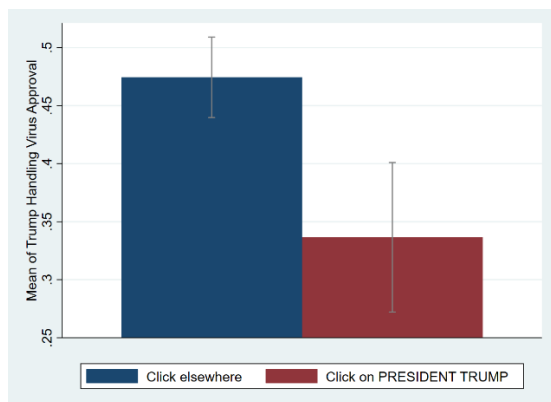
13

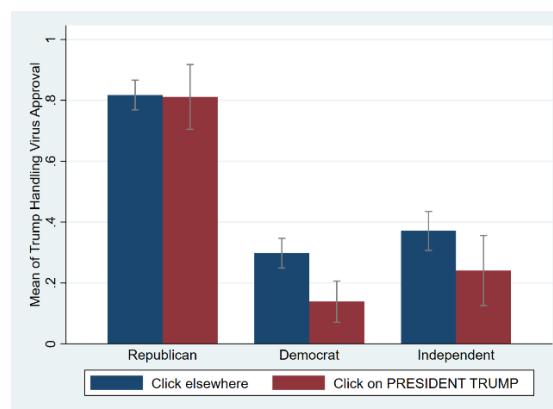*Fig 5: General Approval of Trump's Handling of the Crisis*   *Fig 6: Approval of Trump's Handling of Crisis by Party*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the heatmap analysis offer strong evidence that implicit brand equity is associated with public approval of presidential performance. Moreover, we find evidence in line with expectations and existing work that partisanship conditions brand equity (see for instance Bartels, 2002; Needham, 2006; Druckman et al., 2013; Teodoro and An, 2018), not only of governments largely or public agencies, but also of political actors. In the eyes of both Democrats and Independents, any implicit association of the PSA to President Trump leads to a more negative assessment of his job performance as president generally, and his handling of the crisis. Here, we can observe how voters' partisan identification influences their implicit associations which directly impact the nature and direction of a political actor's brand equity. It is thus unsurprising that President Trump's name carries positive brand equity with Republicans and negative brand equity amongst Democrats and Independents.

Similarly, when comparing respondents with moderate to high anxiety and those with no or slight anxiety in relation to economic positions during the crisis, there is a statistically significant difference between those who associate the PSA with President Trump and those who do not. In other words, President Trump's name appears to carry negative brand equity for voters with high economic anxiety. This result aligns with research highlighting the role of emotional and cognitive factors in shaping brand perception (e.g. Brader, 2005; Huddy, Feldman and Cassesse, 2007; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Economic anxiety can

create a lens through which individuals interpret and evaluate political information, including branding efforts. When individuals have high economic anxiety, they may be more prone to negative evaluations and associations with political actors who they perceive as responsible for or ineffective in addressing economic concerns. The interaction between implicit brand equity, partisanship, and economic anxiety emphasizes the complexity of political branding and its effects on public opinion. These findings highlight the importance of considering multiple factors, such as partisanship and economic anxieties, in understanding how voters perceive and evaluate political actors' brand equity.

Variations in brand equity along partisan lines may lead to deleterious effects for (re)election campaigns. It is reasonable to infer that positive brand equity translates into the ability of a political actor to gain and/or sustain votes given its relation to public approval and trust (Cosgrove, 2011; Lock and Harris, 2001; Needham, 2005; White and de Chernatony, 2002). However, this remains an area for empirical work to further examine. Another clear next step for future studies would be to replicate this current study with other political actors both in the US and elsewhere, particularly at differing levels of government, such as the local, state and federal levels. This would allow for further investigations into variation in brand equity and the degree to which partisanship conditions brand equity, beyond affirmation or rebuttal of this study's findings. In addition, future research can focus on the cognitive processes that develop brand equity in the minds of citizens, and additional factors that might influence its development, such as the media, as well as the distinction between the brand of an individual actor and their affiliate political party.

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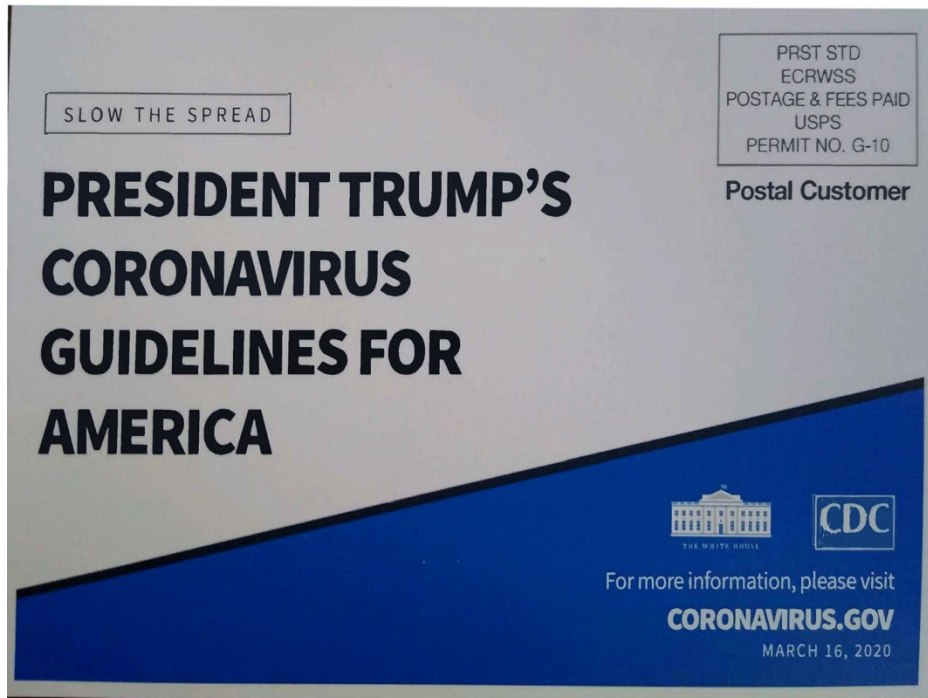
APPENDIX

Fig. A: President Trump's Slow the Spread Campaign Postcard