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## The Application of Policy Theory to COVID-19 Stimulus Checks

### Abstract

This paper analyzes COVID-19 stimulus checks in a variety of public policy frameworks. Punctuated equilibrium theory is useful in explaining the development and implementation of this policy action. Narrative policy framework provides context for how the stimulus checks were perceived by the public and how that perception influences future policy. The stimulus check policy is also analyzed from the perspective of both a rationalist and critical policy analyst. These three policy frameworks interact with one another to create a feedback loop that informs future crisis policy.

### Keywords

punctuated equilibrium theory, narrative policy framework, rationalism, critical policy analysis, COVID-19, stimulus checks

# **The Application of Policy Theory to COVID-19 Stimulus Checks—**

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## **Introduction**

Policy is not formulated and established in a vacuum. It is the result of clashing opinions, struggling power dynamics, and differing values. The formation of policy is undoubtedly complex, even at times when it is seemingly at its most simple. If the policy process is vastly complicated even in normal times, then consider the layers of complication added when policymakers are operating in a crisis. A crisis is one of the worst times to make policy and simultaneously one of the times when policy is most desperately needed. Thus, policy is frequently generated, debated, and implemented in these severe situations; and the result is usually sloppy, rushed, and inadequate. To improve the effectiveness of our policy response to crisis, it is essential to first understand the frameworks and theories of how policy is generated and implemented in such a stressful and high-stakes scenario.

Our most recent crisis, the coronavirus pandemic, provides a perfect scenario in which to apply the prevailing policy theories to any variety of the government actions taken to ensure public health and provide economic relief. Multiple aspects of the CARES Act serve as excellent case studies for the application of public policy theory. At the time of its passing, this stimulus bill was the most comprehensive and expensive relief package that had ever been passed in the U.S. (Boccia, 2020). A key part of the stimulus involved sending \$1,200 Economic Impact Payments to all Americans who were below a certain income threshold. This aspect of the package was lauded by many politicians, economists, and American citizens as providing needed relief and a jumpstart to the economy (Bhutta et. al, 2020). However, some are beginning to argue that the stimulus checks were not as helpful to boosting the economy as initially considered (Chetty et. al, 2020). Many analysts have not succeeded in evaluating this policy due to a failure in appropriately identifying the political, economic, and social factors that drove its creation.

To truly understand the effectiveness of the initial round of stimulus checks, an understanding of how policy is created is necessary. The theories of punctuated equilibrium and narrativization apply to the creation of crisis policy, while the effectiveness of the policy must be viewed through both a rational choice and critical policy lens. The onset of a global pandemic took most Americans by surprise and as fear of infection and economic collapse began to spread, there was increasing demand for swift policy action. This led to the narrativization of the policy process, which took the form of “the more money, the better for the economy”. While stimulus checks appear to be a rational policy in the face of financial collapse, the fear that defined the early stages of the pandemic provides support for analyzing the creation of this policy from a critical policy perspective. Policymaking in the face of crisis rarely goes as planned; exploring the theories behind policymaking may provide insight into how the process can be adjusted to improve policy generated in future crises, or better yet, create policy that prepares for crisis. The rest of the paper follows the structure of investigating each theory, first providing a theory description and then an application of the theory to the stimulus check policy. The final section concludes and discusses how each of these theories overlap.

### **Show Me the Money: The CARES Act and Stimulus Checks**

The CARES Act was passed on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and included \$2 trillion worth of stimulus. The bill allocated nearly \$900 billion to new small business loans and the expansion of existing loans for businesses and local governments (Amadeo, 2020). Additional funding went toward the purchase of ventilators and unemployment insurance. \$290 billion was earmarked as direct fiscal relief in the form of \$1,200 stimulus checks for eligible Americans (Nygaard et. al, 2020). Americans who made under \$75,000 a year and married couples who file their taxes jointly and make under \$150,000 a year were eligible for up to the maximum amount, with the amount slowly decreasing for those who made beyond the threshold. Concerns arose regarding the lack of targeting seen in the stimulus check policy, with fears that the checks would be sent to

individuals who did not need them, and that not enough would go to families that did need them (Nygaard et. al, 2020). The checks themselves began to arrive in mid-April.

At the onset of the crisis, many individuals called for direct transfer payments as a means of relieving financial hardship from job loss brought on by the pandemic (Amadeo, 2020). President Trump supported these direct transfers early on and advocated for their inclusion in a stimulus package. Previous fiscal stimulus packages provided direct transfers to Americans, albeit oftentimes this took the form of a tax rebate and occurred on a much smaller scale (Parrot et. al, 2020). However, the coronavirus crisis induced a much deeper recession than previously seen in the United States, leading policymakers to advocate for widespread aid, with little consideration given to the implementation of such a policy. Implementation was indeed difficult, as Congress left that aspect of the process in the hands of the Treasury, who struggled to send out so many checks in such a short period (Parrot et. al, 2020). Regardless, when the checks did arrive, they were spent quickly, with many claiming they were used to purchase necessities, while others believed them to be spent on goods of a more luxurious nature.

The Household Pulse Survey, created and administered by the US Census Bureau to measure the US response to COVID-19, provides additional insight into the distribution and use of the stimulus checks. By June 16<sup>th</sup> of 2020, 84% of households surveyed responded that they had either received or were expecting to receive a stimulus check (Garner et. al, 2020). Nearly 60% of all those surveyed used stimulus checks for actual expenses, while a little more than 20% of those surveyed saved their check or used it to pay off debt (Garner et. al, 2020). Of those who did receive a check, 66% reported spending at least a portion of it on food (Garner et. al, 2020). The responses to this survey provide more information on the necessity of stimulus checks and the type of people who received them. The survey also provides information about how these checks were used.

## **Well, That Escalated Quickly: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory**

### *The Theory*

Understanding punctuated equilibrium theory is a key component to understanding the creation of stimulus check policy, and to understanding crisis policy in general. Introduced by Baumgartner and Jones in 1993, this theory holds that while most public policy is characterized by gridlock and little progress, large-scale events can break this stasis and lead to sudden and sweeping policy reform (Sabatier, 2019). This is contrasted by the theory of incrementalism, which argues that policy advances via small and gradual changes to eventually reach a larger end goal (Larimer and Smith, 2018). While incrementalism has defined much of the history of public policy in America, some of the most memorable changes in politics and the policy arena have been the direct result of punctuating events that have deeply resonated with the public. For instance, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was a direct response to the secession of the South and the ensuing Civil War. In more recent history, 9/11 led to the implementation of the TSA and stringent airport security regulations. While the punctuating events that precede policy may sometimes be for the better, such as the decision for *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is not necessarily commonplace. It is more often the case that crises and various other negative events serve as the call to action and a precursor to change. *Figure 1* provides a simplified chart of the basics of punctuated equilibrium theory.

A crisis often succeeds in influencing policy images and policy venues in a way that leads to either the strengthening or breakdown of various political subsystems. The pluralist environment that exists in America has led to the creation of these subsystems that address specific policies. The subsystems are frequently concerned with maintaining the status quo due to the number of individuals who benefit from them (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). The policy image directly relates to how the policy is framed and relies on the public's interpretation of how well the subsystem is performing (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). This is why negative events

tend to be those that are punctuating; because the public will begin to argue that the status quo is not doing well enough to address an issue and the current subsystem must be abolished in favor of a new one. Policy venues also play a role in this theory and are defined as “The institutional locations where authoritative decisions are made concerning a given issue (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993)”. It is the role of the agents for change to frame their policy to different audiences of different policy venues to inspire reform. The more members of the venue that are convinced, often by a punctuating event that changes the policy image, the more likely the odds for reform.

#### *Application to Policy*

Policy created amid the coronavirus pandemic as a response to the ongoing crisis is an excellent application of punctuated equilibrium theory. With headline economic indicators such as unemployment and inflation at historic lows prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, it is likely that economic subsystems that exist to keep the real economy and financial sectors running smoothly were stable in early 2020. Wage increases in 2019 that many felt were a long-time-coming also helped to cement the legitimacy of the current subsystems. However, the start of the pandemic led unemployment to skyrocket and created fears of a deflationary spiral, coupled with financial collapse. The public and policymakers alike quickly became aware of the inability of the current subsystems to handle such a deep recession, at least with the tools currently at their disposal. The relative calm, at least economically, that the country had felt since 2015 led only to minor adjustments in economic policy and had not prepared the US for the swiftness nor the magnitude of the current economic decline.

The crisis entirely shifted the real and, more importantly, perceived state of the US economy and led to instant calls for action. The policy image of a buzzing economy at full employment had left the minds of the public and was quickly replaced by the reality of unemployment and the fear of absolute financial collapse. This shift resulted in the major policy venues that control economic policy to take action. The key policy venues that have responded in

the face of this crisis are the Federal Reserve, Congress, the Treasury, and the Executive Branch. The Federal Reserve and the Treasury were motivated to take immediate action by their mandates of maintaining maximum employment and stable prices. On the other hand, policymakers in Congress and the President were inspired to take action due in part to political palatability.

While initial lending programs implemented by the Federal Reserve and Treasury helped businesses from declaring bankruptcy, more was needed to provide relief to everyday citizens and jumpstart the economy. Direct transfer payments were quickly determined to be the solution, with guidance on how to implement this program coming from similar transfers made in the recessions of 2001 and 2008 (Parker et. al, 2013). However, this program would be much larger than previous programs and would be different because these transfers were delivered directly as checks, and not tax rebates, as had previously been the case (Parker et. al, 2013). The urgency of the pandemic left little time for deliberation, and the decision to mail stimulus checks was hurriedly made and supported by both Congress and the President. The immediate need for relief demonstrates how powerful a negative and sudden economic shock can be, and how it became a punctuating event that led to a quickly passed policy that promised quick access to cash for all Americans. While policies in a similar vein had previously existed, none of them were the same as direct stimulus checks. Only the breakdown of political subsystems due to a change in political imaging and pressure on policy venues could have resulted in this sort of policy action.

### **He Who Controls the Media, Controls the Mind: Narrative Policy Framework**

#### *The Theory*

Controlling the narrative is perhaps the most important component of politics and public policy. According to Smith and Larimer, “Narrative Policy Framework posits that stories, symbols, and images – the basic components of any good narrative – can be studied in an empirical and quantifiable fashion to offer insight into how and why policy change occurs (2018)”. This revolves around the idea that the narrative itself can not only lead to the completion



of policy but can inform policy as well. There are considered to be four components to every narrative, the plot, setting, characters, and moral (Smith and Larimer, 2018). If these four components are combined to form a compelling story, that can result in legitimate policy action, regardless of the details of the policy. In fact, a policy may not be any good at all, as long as it has a compelling story to justify the action presented in the bill, it may pass. This provides reasoning as to why popular policies may fail upon their implementation.

### *Application to Policy*

Crises help to generate emotional and meaningful stories that may make passing policy in a time of crisis easier than passing policy in normal times. The COVID-19 crisis has been framed in a multitude of ways, which story is more attractive to a person is largely dependent on their political affiliation. Speculation about the start of the virus was rampant, with stories ranging from bats sold at a wet market to the purposeful creation of the virus in Chinese labs.

While these narratives succeeded in shifting blame, they did little to advance actual policy discussions surrounding economic relief. While competing narratives regarding the appropriate economic policy to address the crisis did exist, one narrative cemented itself as the most compelling, largely because the four main aspects of this narrative appealed to the emotion of fear and feelings of sympathy felt by many Americans during this time.

The setting of the narrative was provided by the backdrop of a raging pandemic that was wreaking havoc on the economy and causing financial stress to households across America. Members of Congress, the President, and the American people played the main characters in the various narratives that grew out of the economic relief debate. The sides were not necessarily as divided along partisan lines as one would think, many Republicans and Democrats both saw the need for stimulus checks, it was the more fiscally conservative Republicans who were against the checks. Turning against some of his Congressional supporters, President Trump stood with some Republicans and many Democrats in advocating for the stimulus checks.

While the story itself was largely about the desires of the lawmakers to include stimulus checks, the policymakers set to frame the American public as the sympathetic character of the story. The narrative created by advocates of the stimulus checks painted a picture of recently unemployed Americans struggling to scrape by each week with no paycheck. The narrative avoided centering its focus on the impoverished, perhaps because of preconceived attitudes toward this group, and instead focused on the financial burden faced by middle-class families. This helped advocates of the cause reach a wider audience and allowed people to relate better to the story being told. This narrative conveniently leaves out the fact that many of the stimulus checks to be mailed out would still target individuals who made more than \$75,000 a year and would not necessarily be immediate spenders of this stimulus.

The opposing narrative crafted by the more conservative actors jumped at the opportunity to exploit the left-out-fact that many individuals who were considered “upper-middle-class” would also be receiving stimulus checks. This allowed the narrative to be framed as some sort of “socialist” policy, which has historically been a buzzword that has initiated mobilization amongst conservatives. Discussion of how stimulus checks would impact the national debt added to the debate, as advocates against the policy framed the checks as a quick fix for the current generation, but a damning policy for the next generation. The moral of this story revolved around the already massive amount of national debt already incurred, and how by adding more debt via “free money” parents are leaving their children to deal with a looming financial crisis.

### **Are We Rational When We're Scared?: Rational Choice vs. Critical Policy Analysis**

#### *The Theory*

As the brain-child of political science and economics, policy analysis has seen rationalism serve as its foundation since the beginning of public policy as an area of study. Stemming from Laswell's positive approach to studying policy, rationalists attempt to apply a scientific approach to policy analysis and rely heavily on quantitative analysis to measure the

effectiveness of policy, with an emphasis on factual evidence, rather than emotional values (Smith and Larimer, 2018). Rationalists do recognize the subjectivity in ranking specific criteria in policy evaluation and, in an attempt to reduce this subjectivity, often use efficiency as their preferred policy measure (Smith and Larimer, 2018). This concept is rooted in welfare economics and efficiency is often thought of as the Pareto optimal policy bundle, or the point in which one person cannot be made better off without making someone else worse off (Smith and Larimer, 2018). The rationalist approach employs this measure of efficiency, although whether they apply this measure to specific subgroups or general populations remains up to the researcher. Policy that may be rational for one group may be irrational for another group, which is a shortcoming of the rationalist approach that critical policy theorists attempt to address.

Critical policy analysis is a critique of the general nature of the social welfare theory that underlies the rational choice method of policy analysis. Critical policy theorists, as well as post-positivists, argue that all policy analysis inherently has a normative and emotional aspect to it due to its introduction to the political sphere (Smith and Larimer, 2018). Subscribers of this ideology also believe that the rationalist approach fails to address power dynamics and how policies will affect different groups (Diem et. al, 2018). Critical policy analysis addresses how different groups are affected by policy and works to find a policy that does not create drastic disparities between policy “winners” and “losers” by emphasizing policy equity (Diem et. al, 2018). This recognition that not all humans are the same and therefore policy analysis cannot be conducted so generally is essential to critical policy theory. This acknowledgment of differences helps to provide a systematic understanding of what is deemed “irrational” behavior in rational choice theory. Thus, critical policy analysis helps to address the shortcomings of rational analyses that portray a general picture of policy success, but do not discuss the failure of the policy among different groups.

*Application to Policy*

In the face of a global pandemic that led to an unprecedented economic shock, it was clear to members of the federal government that some sort of policy had to be enacted to combat rising unemployment and increasing financial stress. Remember, a crisis does not often breed rational policy. On the surface, however, the provision of \$1,200 Economic Impact Payments appears to be a relatively rational policy. Many businesses were forced to shut down and some of those businesses were declaring bankruptcy due to a huge decrease in consumption. Meanwhile, many families were under financial duress themselves and were in desperate need of cash. The rational option was to provide cash payments to alleviate individual financial pressure while also boosting consumption.

Despite sacrificing some efficiency for equitable distribution among the population, the stimulus policy was largely seen as a success and on a macro level, played out exactly how rationalists expected. According to the BLS report on the Household Pulse Survey mentioned earlier, 81% of all those who experienced income losses over the previous month used their stimulus checks for monthly expenses (Garner et. al, 2020). This statistic implies that the stimulus check did indeed boost consumption and was received and used by those who most needed it. *Figures 2 and 3* also show the positive impact of the policy on disposable income and consumption. A cost-benefit analysis outlines the policy as Pareto optimal by explaining that any increase in the federal deficit due to increased spending is more than offset by the positive effect on consumption and therefore GDP (Bhutta et. al, 2020). Using these numbers as subjective measures of policy effectiveness indicates that the stimulus check portion of the CARES Act was indeed a rational policy. Although analyzing the policy effects using a critical policy framework tells a slightly different story.

Raj Chetty's 2020 work provides an excellent quantitative analysis of stimulus checks through a critical policy lens. Chetty argues that while stimulus checks had a major impact on consumer spending, this spending did not translate to increased revenues for the businesses hit hardest, as only 18% of stimulus check consumption occurred in the in-person service sector (2020). The authors also point out that these checks should have been more targeted, as lower-income workers in high-income areas are struggling significantly more in this recession than any other group (Chetty et. al, 2020). There is a clear difference between a food truck employee in an affluent metro and the financial analyst who frequents the stand. While the food truck employee has likely lost their job with little prospect of regaining it soon, the software engineer continues to work from home and is largely insulated from the economic effects of the pandemic. When comparing the differences between low and high-income workers in this recession, it becomes clear that this policy is not as rational as it originally seemed. A critical policy analysis of the original policy would have helped policymakers to realize a much more targeted approach to the distribution of stimulus checks was necessary.

### **That's All Folks: Conclusion and the Overlap of Theory**

Each of the theories discussed above are not independent of one another. In fact, each of these theories overlap to create the complex relationships and mechanisms that define the study of public policy. The three sections can be thought of as acting in a sort of feedback loop. Narratives play a key role in defining and publicizing punctuating moments that lead to policy changes. As such, narratives constantly shape the perception of what policy is considered the "rational" approach to the problem, as well as inform how a policy's effectiveness should be measured. Punctuating events are often at odds with the concept of rational choice theory, due to frequent overreactions by policymakers in the face of drastic downturns. To address this

shortcoming, critical policy analysis has become more popular in recent years, although this framework feeds heavily into the creation of narrative, which restarts the loop and pushes for new policy that addresses shortcomings of the previous policy.

The COVID-19 crisis provides a prime example of this loop in action. The widespread introduction of the novel coronavirus into the U.S. in early March of 2020 instantly became the center of discussion and policy debate. This punctuating event saw a tremendous decrease in employment and caused consumption to crater. Competing narratives were constructed from this event in an attempt to persuade policymakers to take a certain course of action. The most successful economic narrative, discussed above, emphasized the burden the coronavirus had taken on lower and middle-class families, as well as the owners of small businesses due to the decrease in consumption. This narrative found success because it fed into the early hopelessness and fear brought on by the coronavirus. The narrative's effectiveness at appealing to emotional distress in the face of a punctuating event allowed this story to grip the nation.

The prevailing narrative not only succeeded in detailing the problem facing the United States but in doing so, also framed what responses to the problem would be considered "rational". Had the economic problems brought on by the coronavirus been framed as a function of the public health crisis itself, stimulus checks would likely not have been seen as a valid policy because policymakers would have recognized that consumption would not return to normal unless the public health problems were resolved. However, at its base, the economic problem was narrativized as a shortage in consumption, which implied that the rational government action would be to stimulate consumption. Stimulus checks were a quick way to do just that. And once the policy had been implemented, the narrative informed the measurements of success used to evaluate the policy. If the policy solely sought to get money into the hands of

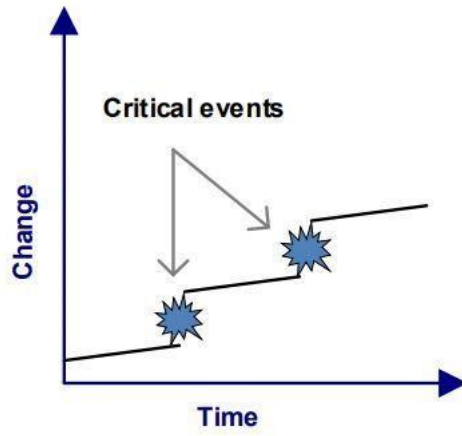
Americans and increase consumption, post-policy measures of disposable income and consumption alone would champion this policy as a success story. Despite the success of this rational policy according to these measurements, it is important to recognize that the narrative that informed the policy provided incomplete information. A more successful policy may deviate from the rational response to the narrative and take a more holistic approach to the problem.

A critical analysis of the effectiveness of the original, rational policy would include an examination of how different groups have been affected by the coronavirus and how the stimulus check policy benefitted them. As mentioned previously, many of the groups hit hardest by the pandemic were not adequately compensated by the stimulus checks (Chetty et. al, 2020). This sort of critical policy analysis has the effect of changing the narrative, which we have in fact seen as the pandemic has continued. The narrative has shifted to now emphasize the disparate impact the coronavirus has had on lower-income individuals and minority communities. This, in turn, has influenced the discussion over what the rational approach to this new problem is. There is now a push for larger stimulus checks to provide better compensation for those who have lost their jobs or businesses, as well as for additional legislation with an emphasis on workers in the service industries. Since critical policy analysis is not widely accepted in the policymaking process yet, this retroactive critical policy analysis will likely continue to point out shortcomings of the next policies passed and therefore will continue to influence the narrative and actual policy discussion.

This feedback loop is not unique to the coronavirus pandemic. A variety of policy theories fit well together and feed into one another in a wide array of policy settings. Punctuated equilibrium theory, narrativization, rationalism, and critical policy analysis are individually applicable to the current crisis and very interactive with one another. The COVID-19 crisis and the policy response, specifically the provision of stimulus checks, provides an excellent example of the individual application of, and interaction between, policy theories.

Appendix

*Figure 1*



**Figure 1: Graphic representation of punctuated equilibrium**

Chart from: Jolicouer (2018)

*Figure 2*

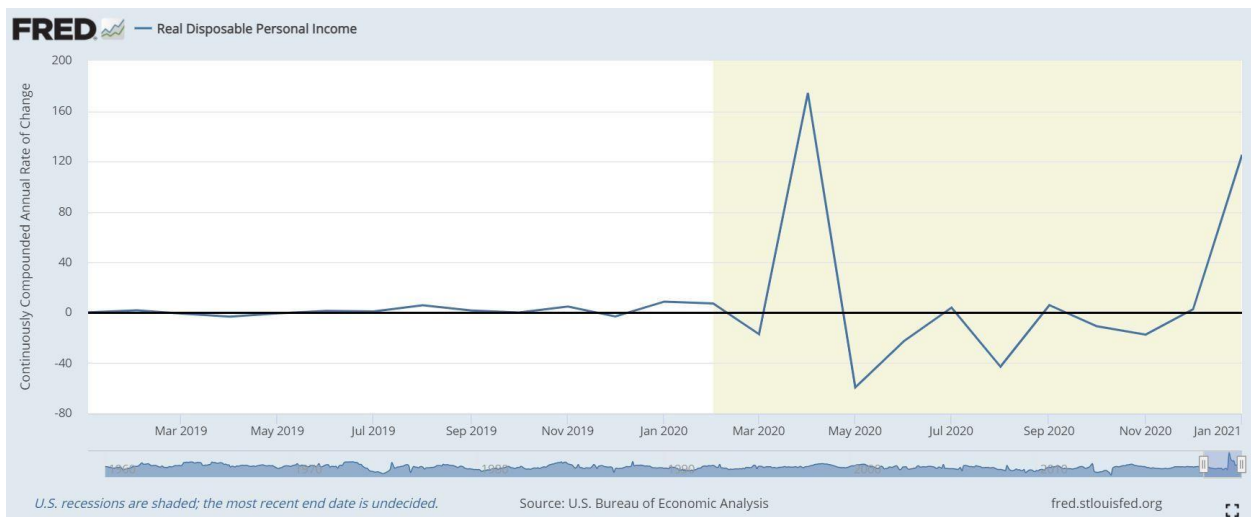


Chart from: FRED Website. Data courtesy of the US Bureau of Economic Analysis.



**Figure 3**

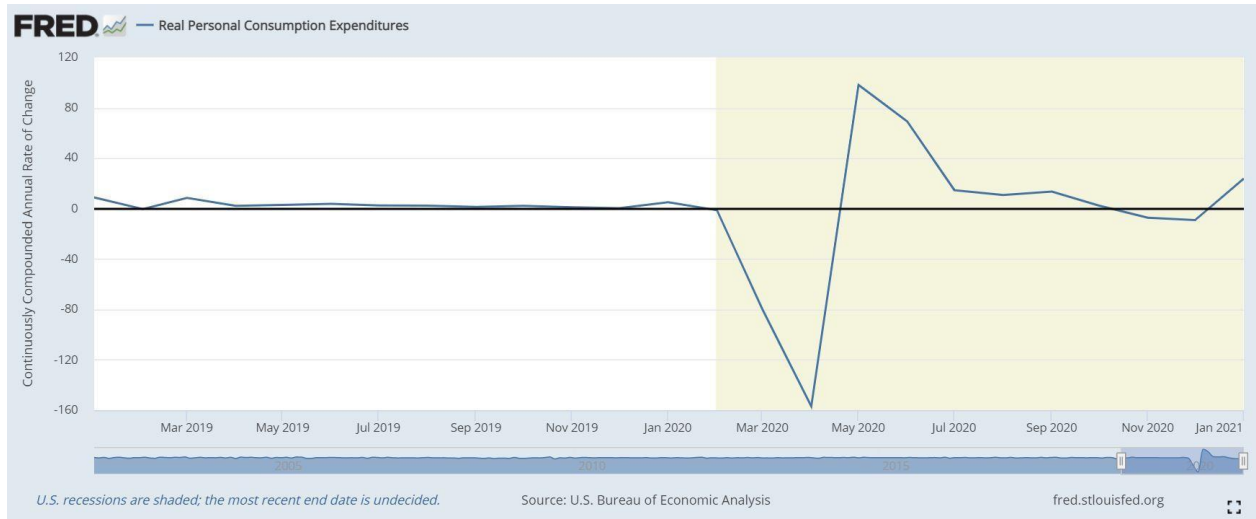


Chart from: FRED Website. Data courtesy of the US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

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