

WHEN SELLING BECOMES VIRAL:  
DISRUPTIONS IN DEBT MARKETS IN THE COVID-19  
CRISIS AND THE FED'S RESPONSE

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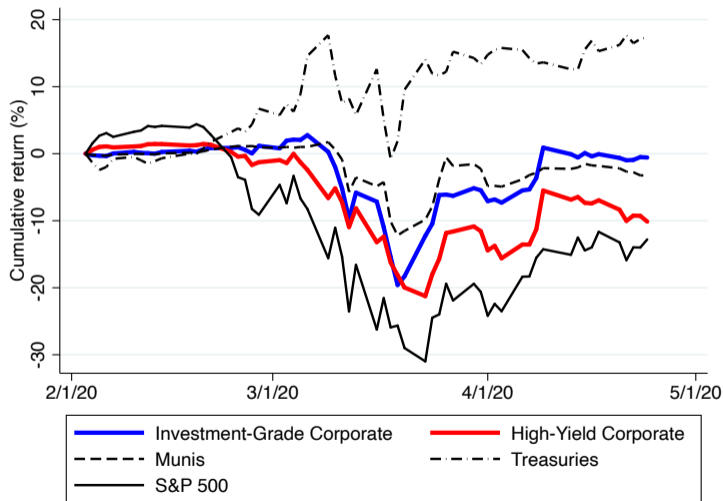
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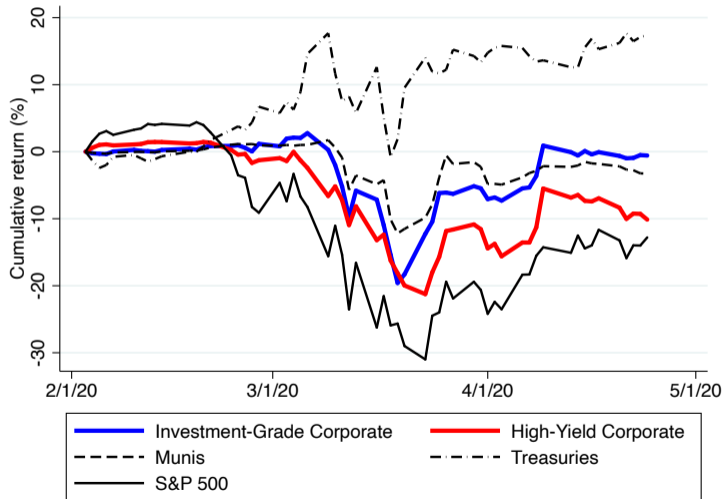
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# CUMULATIVE RETURNS DURING COVID-19



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■ Pre-crisis beta implies a drop for investment-grade corporate of  $5\% \ll 20\%$

## THIS PAPER

### Use the cross-section of debt markets to discipline interpretation of this episode

- Document pervasive dislocations in debt prices, **in particular investment-grade debt**
  - ▶ Discount on *cash-intensive trades*: bonds cheap relative to CDS
  - ▶ Discount on *safer and more liquid* trades: ETFs cheap relative to bonds
- Trace recovery back to Fed announcements of bond purchases

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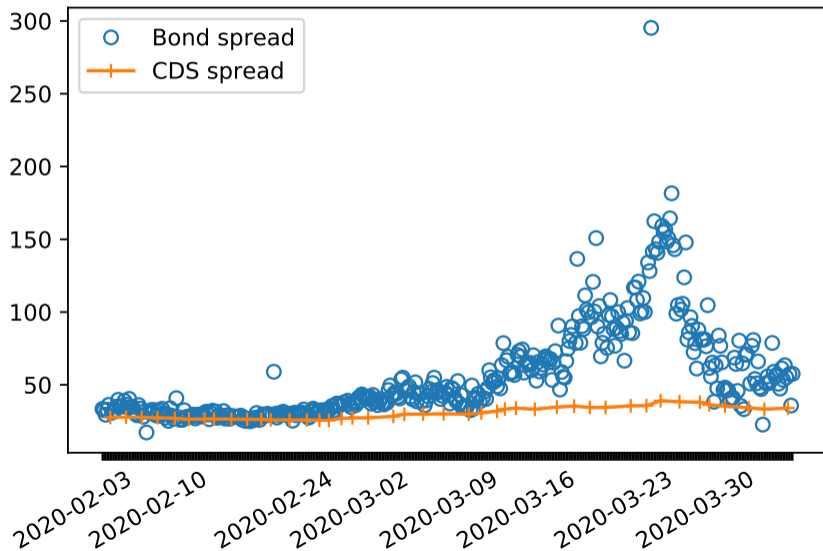
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→ Challenges frictionless explanations (cash-flow expectations or risk compensations)

→ Challenges dealer-centric view

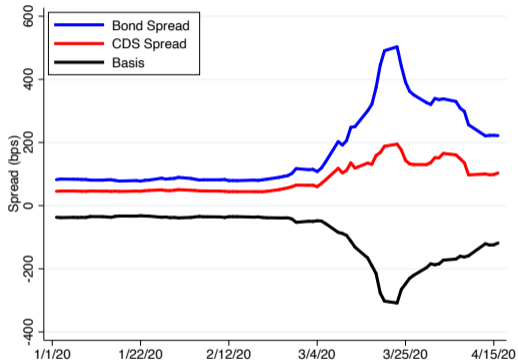
→ Most consistent with widespread persistent selling pressure to obtain cash ... but still a lot unanswered

## AN EXAMPLE: 6-YEAR GOOGLE BOND

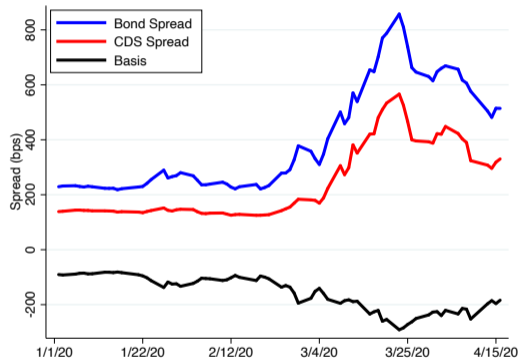


# CDS-BOND BASIS

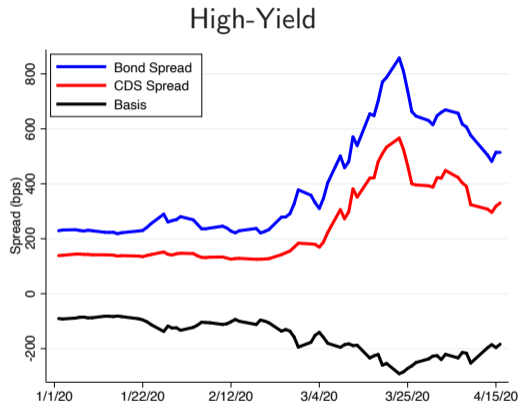
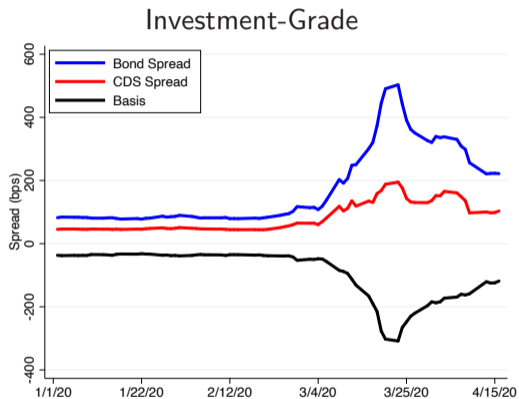
## Investment-Grade



## High-Yield



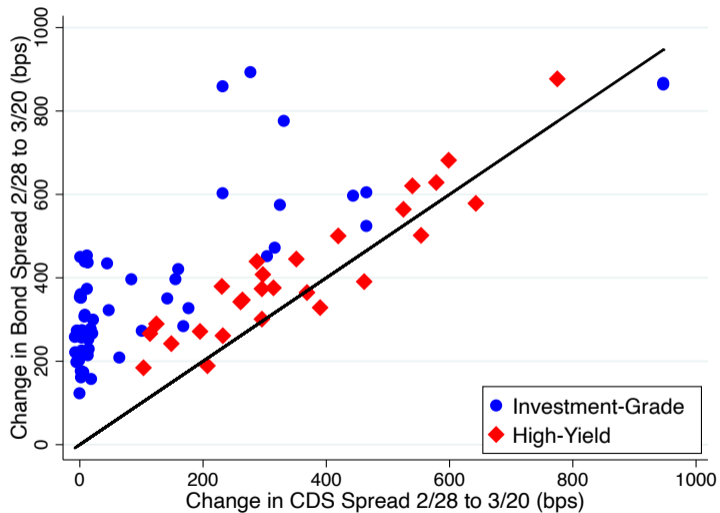
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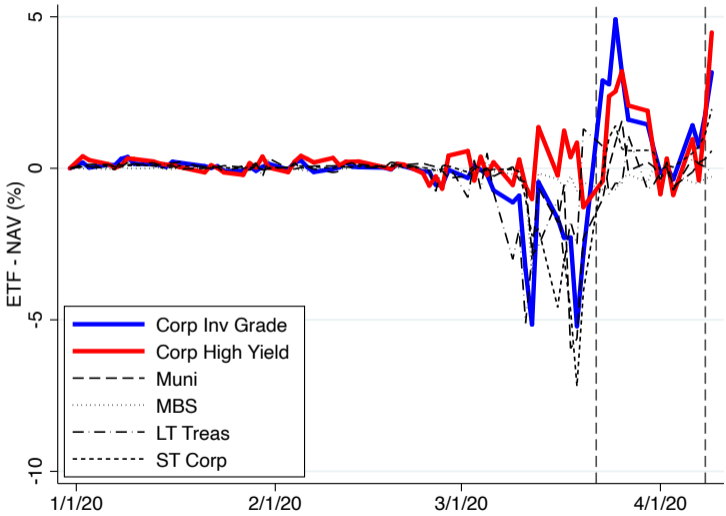
- Synthetic investment-grade (Treasury – CDS) drops by 5%  $\ll$  20% for actual bonds



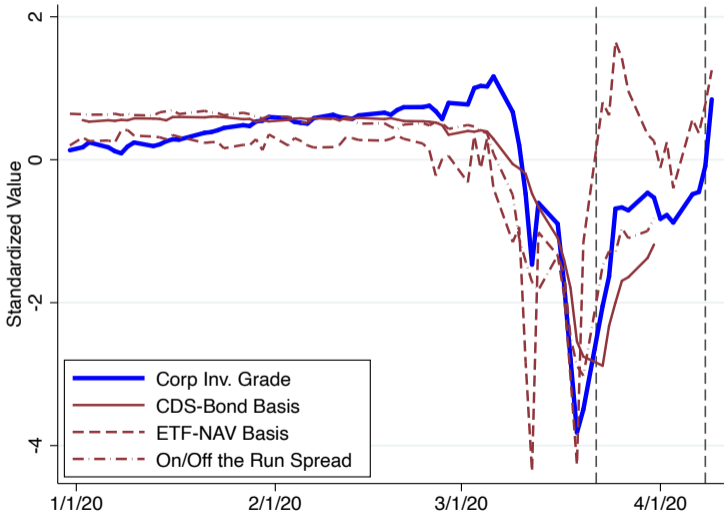
# CROSS-SECTION OF CDS-BOND BASIS



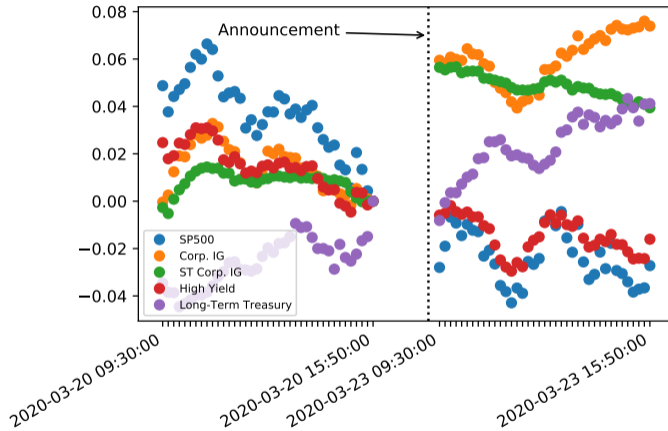
# ETF-NAV BASIS



# SYNCHRONIZATION OF PRICE MOVEMENTS AND DISLOCATIONS

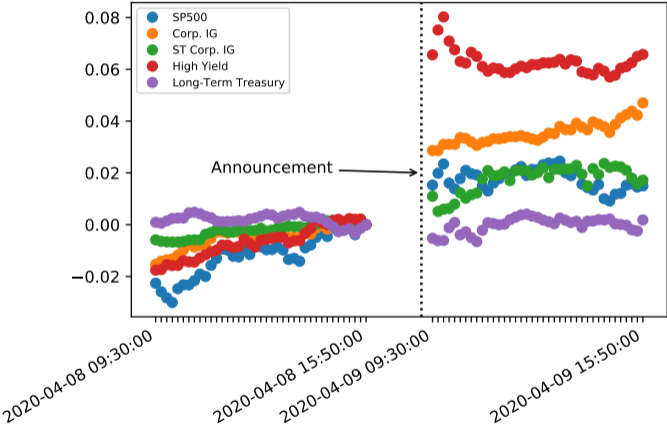


# MARCH 23: ANNOUNCE CORPORATE BOND PURCHASES



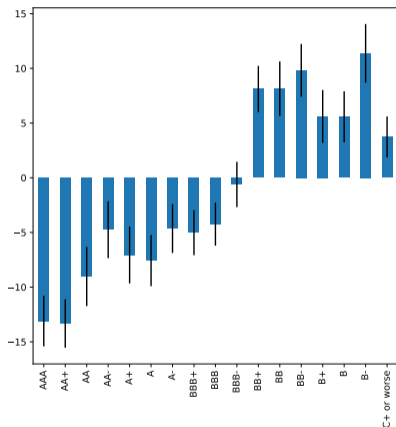
- Strong response in investment grade:  $6\%$  (return)  $\times$   $\$6\text{T}$  (market size) =  $\$360\text{bn} \approx$  facility size ( $\$300\text{bn}$ )

# APRIL 9: EXPAND SCALE AND SCOPE OF PURCHASES

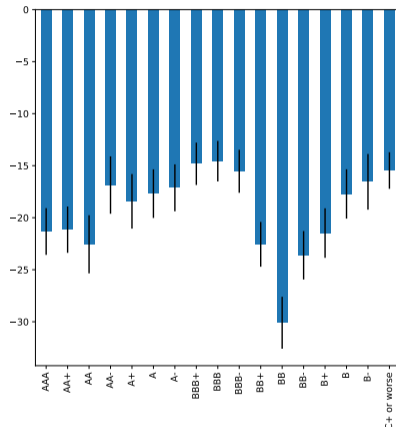


# INDIVIDUAL BONDS ACROSS RATINGS

$\Delta \log(\text{spread})$ : March 23



$\Delta \log(\text{spread})$ : April 9



■ In the paper: maturity, belonging to an ETF, ...

# DID THE FED CLOSE THE DISLOCATIONS?

	$\Delta$ spread on March 23			$\Delta$ spread on April 9		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant	49.51*** (9.15)			-64.81*** (6.30)		
$\Delta$ basis <sub>2/28</sub> →day before ann.	-0.14*** (0.04)			0.13*** (0.04)		
IG		31.33** (12.57)	13.75 (14.50)		-60.93*** (7.12)	-16.81* (9.65)
IG × $\Delta$ basis <sub>2/28</sub> →day before ann.		-0.15*** (0.05)	-0.11** (0.05)		0.23*** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.07)
IG × $\Delta$ cds <sub>2/28</sub> →day before ann.			0.07** (0.03)			-0.26*** (0.04)
HY		68.75*** (11.35)	49.08*** (18.74)		-68.71*** (10.86)	-33.51** (13.22)
HY × $\Delta$ basis <sub>2/28</sub> →day before ann.		0.11* (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)		-0.33*** (0.09)	-0.26*** (0.09)
HY × $\Delta$ cds <sub>2/28</sub> →day before ann.			0.06 (0.04)			-0.19*** (0.05)
<i>N</i>	310	310	310	308	308	308
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.20	0.21	0.03	0.14	0.27

# INTERPRETING THE DATA



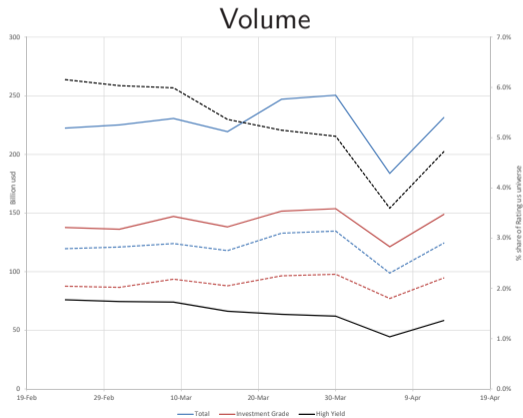
# FUNDAMENTALS

- *Cash flows*: intuitive given large drop in GDP
  - *Risk compensations*: more uncertainty, low GDP triggers habit, long-run risk ...
- Difficult to explain similar losses on investment-grade and high-yield, and close to stocks
- Difficult to reconcile with the fact that dislocations represent bulk of price drop

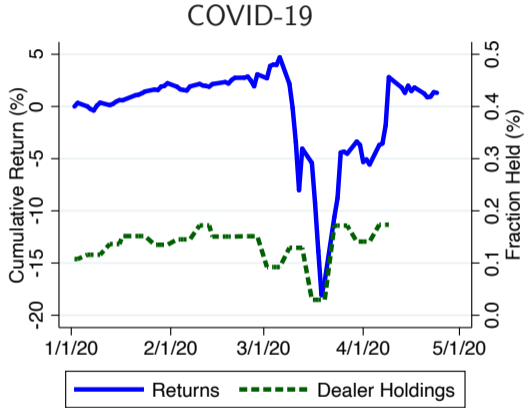
# TRADING FREEZE

■ Market breakdown?

→ No meaningful change in volume



# PLUMBING: DEALERS



- Disintermediation due to post-crisis regulation, increased cost of balance sheet space

## PLUMBING: DEALERS

Three challenges:

- Strong price and quantity response when the Fed *announces* future bond purchases (March 23, April 9)
- No price response to PDCF (March 17) and relaxation of leverage regulation for Treasuries (April 1)
- Intermediation costs tend to be larger or equal for high-yield than for investment-grade

## WIDESPREAD SELLING PRESSURE

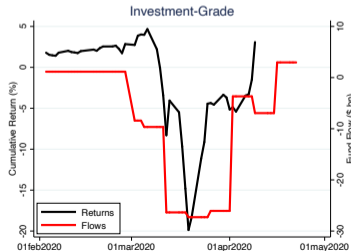
- Widespread and persistent selling pressure, but not due to asset fundamentals

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- Price dislocations suggest need for liquidity or cash
  - ▶ Selling usually more liquid investment-grade bonds (Ma Xiao Zeng 2020)
  - ▶ Selling bonds rather than insuring them with CDS
  - ▶ Selling more liquid ETFs first

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- Who is selling?
  - ▶ *Mutual funds*: \$100bn outflow in investment-grade funds (see Falato et al 2020)



## FUTURE SELLING

- Immediate selling might be tip of the iceberg: *anticipation of future* selling creates large price drops
  - ▶ *Mutual funds*: fragility of funding structure (Goldstein et al. 2017, Falato et al 2020)
  - ▶ *Life insurers*: typically slow-moving, but predictable future sales plausible (Chodorow-Reich, Ghent, Haddad 2020)
  - ▶ *Issuers*: borrow more due to revenue shock
- Anticipation of future buying works: Fed effect even though buying has not started



# CONCLUSION

- **COVID-19 crisis created large tremors on debt markets**
  - ▶ -20% return on investment-grade bonds
  - ▶ Large price dislocations: ETF-NAV, CDS-Bond
  - ▶ Reversion because of Fed intervention
- Overall strongly suggest widespread and persistent selling pressure
  - ▶ rather than frictionless fundamentals
  - ▶ rather than purely dealer-centric issues
  - ▶ consistent with many institutions needing liquidity

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  - ▶ consistent with many institutions needing liquidity
- Lots of great work on debt markets and COVID-19: Augustin et al., Brunnermeier and Krishnamurthy, D'Amico et al., Duffie, Fleming et al., He et al., Kargar et al., Ma et al., O'Hara and Zhou, Schrimpf et al., Vissing-Jorgensen, ...