

American Public Vastly Overestimates Amount of U.S. Foreign Aid

[Questionnaire with Findings, Methodology \(PDF\)](#)



As debates about how to deal with the budget deficit have heated up in recent weeks, a new WorldPublicOpinion.org/Knowledge Networks poll finds that Americans continue to vastly overestimate the amount of the federal budget that is devoted to foreign aid.

(Image: US Navy)

Asked to estimate how much of the federal budget goes to foreign aid the median estimate is 25 percent. Asked how much they thought would be an "appropriate" percentage the median response is 10 percent.

In fact just 1 percent of the federal budget goes to foreign aid. Even if one only includes the discretionary part of the federal budget, foreign aid represents only 2.6 percent.

This set of questions has been asked repeatedly since the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) first asked them in 1995, and it was subsequently asked by other organizations as well. Over the years the most common median estimate was that foreign aid represented 20 percent of the budget, most recently in a 2004 poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Thus the most recent number represents an increase of 5 points in the median estimate. Steven Kull, director of PIPA comments, "This increase may be due to Americans hearing more about aid efforts occurring in Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti over the last few years. There have been some increases in foreign aid under both Presidents Bush and Obama, but, of course, nowhere near to the perceived level."

The median amount proposed as appropriate has consistently been 10 percent in other polls including the 2004 Chicago Council poll.

In the current poll estimates of foreign aid vary by education, growing more accurate with higher levels of education. Among those with less than a high school education the median estimate was that foreign aid represented an extraordinary 45 percent of the budget, those with only a high school diploma 25 percent, those with some college at 20 percent. However, even those with a college degree or higher still overestimate by a wide margin, with a median estimate of 15 percent of the budget.

Steven Kull comments, "It is quite extraordinary that this extreme overestimation has persisted for so many years, even among those with higher education."

Overall, the percentage of respondents who estimated anywhere near the correct amount was quite small. Only 19 percent estimate that foreign aid is 5 percent or less of the budget.

On the question of how much of the budget should go to foreign aid only 42 percent say that the amount it should be is 5 percent of the budget or less and only 20 percent say that it should be 1 percent or less. The percentage saying that foreign aid should be eliminated is quite small--just 10 percent of respondents.

Those who identify themselves as Republican are somewhat lower in their estimates than Democrats. But Republicans still overestimate the amount with a median estimate of 20 percent, while Democrats have a median estimate of 25 percent and Independents 25 percent.

Attitudes about what percentage of the budget should go to foreign aid tend to track the amount estimated. The median preferred level is 5 percent for Republicans, and 10 percent for Democrats and Republicans.

The poll of 848 Americans was fielded from November 6 to 15, 2010. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.4 percent.

It was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel[®], a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers



and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel[®]. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides at no cost a laptop and ISP connection. Panelists receive unique log-in information for accessing surveys online and are contacted by an email inviting them to participate in a study. More technical information is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>.

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