
AMERICANS ON FOREIGN AID

Political disagreements over US foreign aid spending have intensified in recent years. However, the role that the government should play in foreign aid – for both humanitarian relief and economic development – and the amount it should spend, have regularly been debated.

US spending on foreign aid has historically made up about one percent of the federal budget. The public, however, greatly overestimates that foreign aid makes up about 20-25 percent of the budget.

Relative to other developed countries, the US has historically spent more in absolute terms, but less relative to the size of its economy. The public also tends to have misperceptions about this, with most believing the US spends more than others relative to the size of its economy.

Besides the level of spending, there has been debate over how much foreign aid should be administered bilaterally (directly between the US and another country) and multilaterally (through international institutions like the United Nations).

Most recently, the debate over foreign aid has expanded to which agencies should be administering aid. Most foreign aid has been administered through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and some through the State Department. Both agencies work together and coordinate in service of US foreign policy. However, each have distinct missions: USAID is focused mostly on managing on-the-ground aid programs, and the State Department is focused mainly on foreign policy and diplomatic relations. Recently, there have been calls for USAID to be abolished and its programs put under the direct control of the State Department.

Survey Design

Unlike standard polls that rely on respondents' existing impressions and information, PPC took respondents through a process called a 'policymaking simulation' that seeks to put respondents in the shoes of a policymaker. Respondents were:

- given a briefing on policy options under consideration;
- evaluated strongly stated arguments both for and against each option; and only then
- made their final recommendation.

Respondents had the opportunity to evaluate six foreign aid programs: humanitarian relief, global health, economic development, education, the environment, and democracy and human rights. For each, they could recommend, along a seven-point scale, that the government spend more, the same, less or none at all.

For the question about bilateral and multilateral aid, they had the opportunity to keep the balance of aid distribution the same, give more through bilateral channels, or give more through multilateral channels.

For the question about USAID, respondents could choose to keep USAID as an independent agency, or abolish USAID and put its programs under the control of the State Department.

The text of the survey was reviewed by experts to ensure that the briefings were accurate and balanced, and that the arguments presented were the strongest ones being made. Changes were made in response to their feedback. The Flesch-Kincaid readability test was used to verify that the survey material would be comprehensible to a person with a high school education.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Estimates of What the US Spends, and Should Spend on Foreign Aid

The majority of respondents estimated that twenty percent of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, or about twenty times the actual amount. A bipartisan majority of over six-in-ten incorrectly answered that the US spends less than most other developed countries, relative to the size of its economy.

A majority of respondents recommended that the US spend at least ten percent of its budget on foreign aid, with a bipartisan majority recommending at least five percent.

Humanitarian Relief

A majority of 56% want spending on humanitarian relief to be kept the same or increased, including seven-in-ten Democrats and six-in-ten independents. While a majority of Republicans prefer spending less, this includes 16% who want to spend just a little less, and only one-in-ten want to eliminate the aid program.

Global Health

A majority of 64% want spending on foreign aid for global health to be kept the same or increased, including eight-in-ten Democrats and half of Republicans. Among the half of Republicans who want to reduce spending, 15% want to spend just a little less, and only one-in-ten want to eliminate the aid program.

Economic Development

A majority of 56% want spending on foreign aid for economic development to be kept the same or increased, including seven-in-ten Democrats and over half of independents. While a majority of Republicans prefer spending be reduced, this includes 19% who want to spend a little less, with just over one-in-ten wanting to eliminate the aid program.

Education

A bipartisan majority of 67% want spending on foreign aid for education to be kept the same or increased, including 54% of Republicans and eight-in-ten Democrats.

The Environment

A majority of 65% support keeping spending the same (32%) or increasing it (33%), including 82% of Democrats and 65% of independents. A bare majority of Republicans (51%) prefer spending be reduced, but this includes 14% who want to spend "a little less", and 37% who want to spend "somewhat less" (20%) or "none at all" (17%).

Democracy and Human Rights

A majority of 60% support keeping spending the same (34%) or increasing it (26%), including 76% of Democrats and 55% of independents. A small majority of Republicans (53%) prefer spending be

reduced, but this includes 14% who want to spend "a little less", and 39% want to spend "somewhat less" (19%) or "none at all" (20%).

U.S. Agency for International Development

A majority of nearly six-in-ten (58%) oppose the proposal to abolish USAID and put its programs under the control of the State Department, including three-quarters of Democrats and six-in-ten independents. But a majority of Republicans support the proposal (60%).

Bilateral vs Multilateral Aid

Four-in-ten prefer keeping the current balance of aid distribution – about two-thirds through bilateral channels and one-third through multilateral channels. A third wants to shift more aid to bilateral channels, and a quarter prefer shifting more through multilateral channels. There is no majority support among Republicans or Democrats for any option.

Foreign Aid	
Humanitarian Relief	\$15.6 billion
Health	\$16.1 Billion
Economic Development	\$19.4 Billion
Education	\$1.1 Billion
Environment	\$1.4 Billion
Democracy and Human Rights	\$2.3 Billion

Response to Arguments For and Against Foreign Aid in General

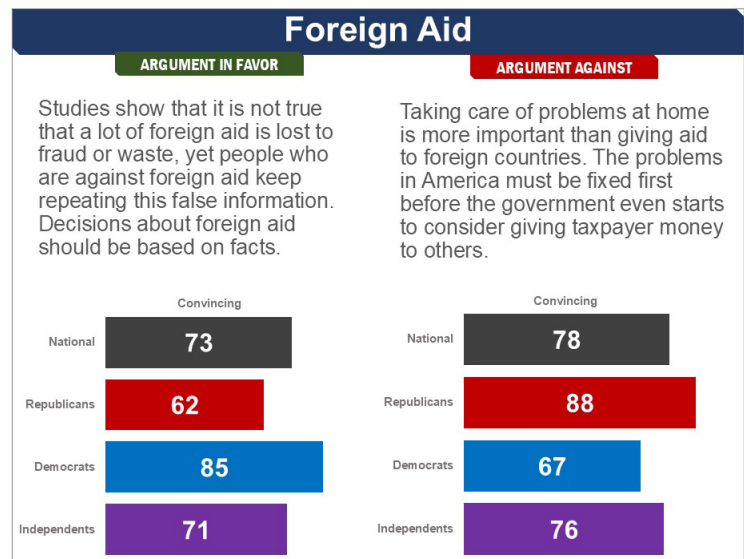
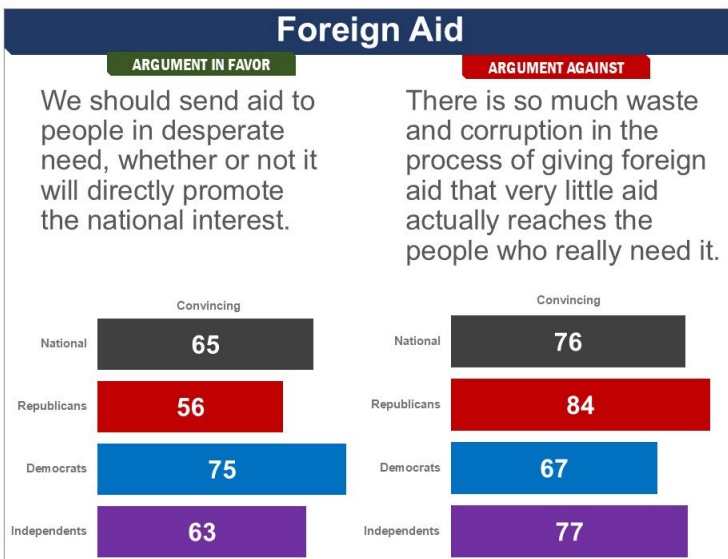
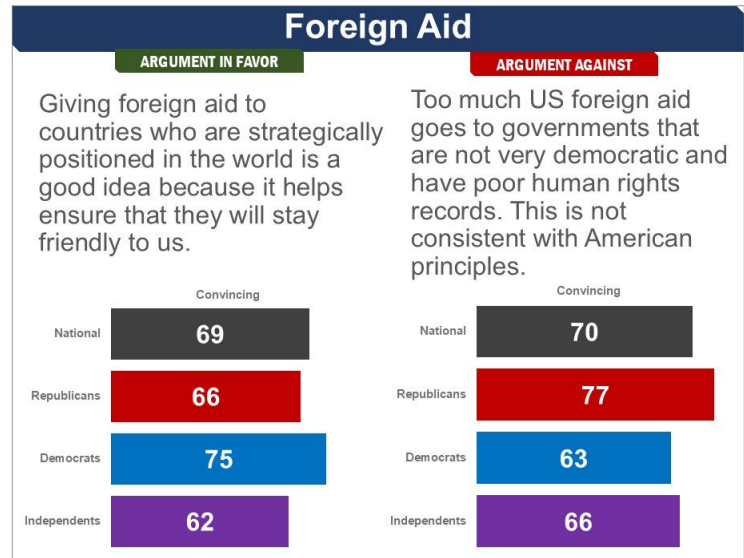
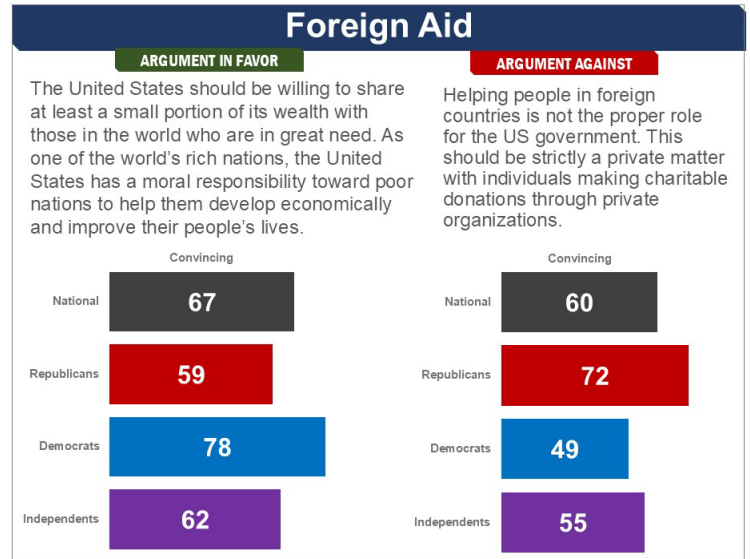
Respondents evaluated four pairs of arguments for and against US foreign aid in general. Each was found convincing by a majority, and most by a bipartisan majority.

The first argument, that the US has a “moral responsibility” to help poor countries was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of two thirds. The argument against stated that foreign aid is “not the proper role for the US government” and was found convincing by six in ten, but just half of Democrats.

The second argument in favor, that giving foreign aid helps to ensure other countries will stay friendly to us, was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of seven in ten. The argument against stated that foreign aid too often goes to undemocratic countries with poor human rights records, and was found convincing by a bipartisan seven-in-ten.

The third argument in favor countered that the US should send aid to those in need, “whether or not it will directly promote the national interest,” was found convincing by a bipartisan two thirds. The third argument against exclaimed that there is too much waste and corruption, and so “very little aid actually reaches the people who need it most. A bipartisan majority of three in four found this convincing.

The fourth argument in favor countered that studies have proved that talking point about waste to be false, and that foreign aid decisions “should be based on facts.” A bipartisan majority of over seven in ten found this



convincing. The last argument against focused on the idea that “taking care of problems at home is more important than giving aid” was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of nearly eight-in-ten.

Estimates of What the US Spends, and Should Spend on Foreign Aid

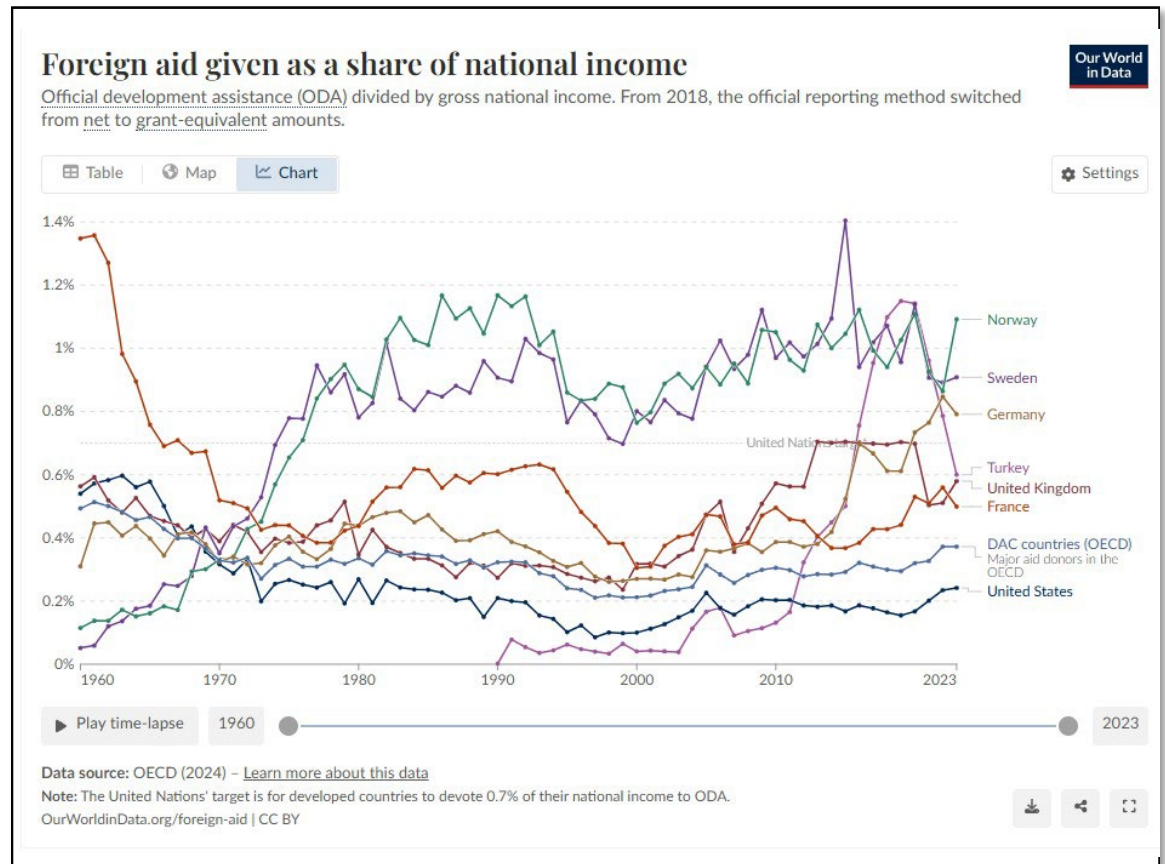
The majority of respondents estimated that twenty percent of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, or about twenty times the actual amount. Less than one in five correctly answered that the US spends less than most other developed countries, relative to the size of its economy.

A majority of respondents recommended that the US spend at least ten percent of its budget on foreign aid, with a bipartisan majority recommending at least five percent.

Public opinion research has consistently found that the majority of Americans greatly overestimate the percentage of the federal budget that goes to aid, which is currently, and historically, about one percent. In surveys on foreign aid by PPC (formerly PIPA) in [1999](#) and [2000](#), respondents were asked to estimate the percent of the federal budget that goes to foreign aid. The median respondent estimated 15 and 20 percent, respectively. A Kaiser Family Foundation poll in [2014](#) asked the same question and found an average estimate of 26%.

In this survey, respondents were asked the same question, before evaluating any specific foreign aid programs. The median estimate was that 20 percent of the budget goes to foreign aid.

Then, asked what percentage of the federal budget should go to foreign aid, the median respondent said it should be at least 10%. Among Republicans it was 5%, and among Democrats 10%.



A separate analysis of those responses found that an overwhelming majority of 89% of Americans said the US should spend at least one percent of the federal budget on foreign aid. The differences between Republicans and Democrats were not substantial – 84% and 94%, respectively.

Similar misperceptions have been found regarding the amount the US spends compared to other developed countries, relative to the size of each country's economy. While the US spends more in absolute terms, relative to the size of its economy it is 25th out of 31 developed countries, and spends less than the average.

Respondents were asked whether the US spends more, about the same, or less on foreign aid than other developed countries, relative to the size of each country's economy. Overall, an overwhelming and bipartisan majority of 83% got the answer incorrect. A bipartisan majority of 64% said the US spends more than others, including 70% of Republicans and 59% of Democrats. Another 19% said it spends the same amount.

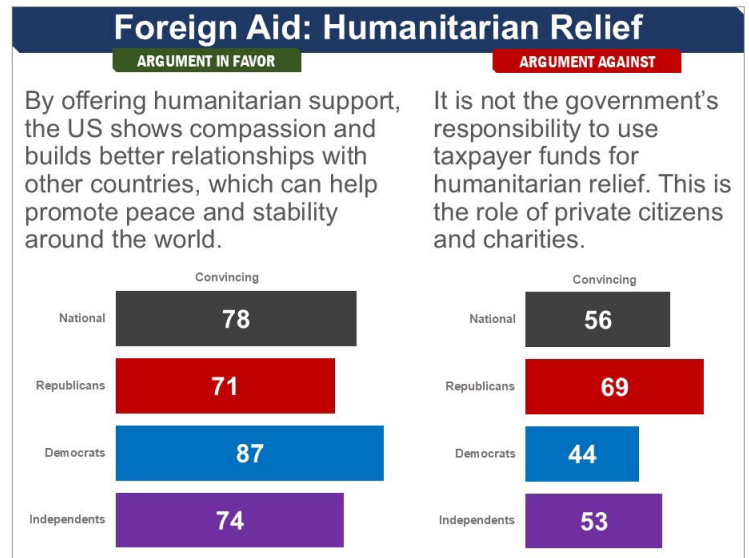
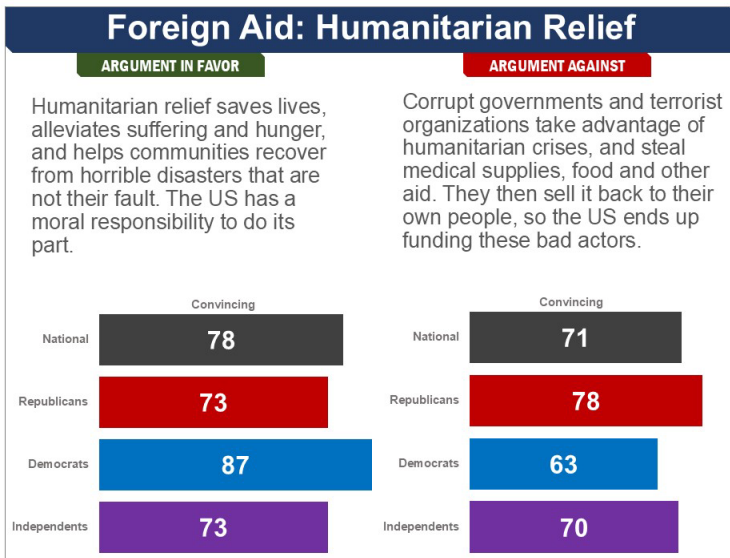
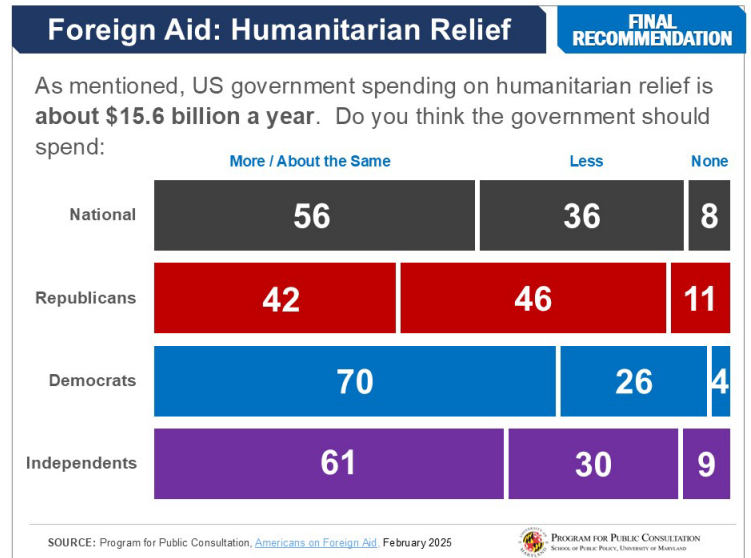
Humanitarian Relief

A majority of 56% want spending on humanitarian relief to be kept the same or increased, including seven in ten Democrats and six in ten independents. While a majority of Republicans prefer spending less, this includes 16% who want to spend just a little less, and only one in ten want to eliminate the aid program.

Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$15.6 billion a year on aid for, "caring for people who urgently need food, medical care, or shelter because they are victims of a disaster like famine, a flood, or a war."

All of the arguments were found convincing by a bipartisan majority, but the pro arguments did better overall. The argument that humanitarian relief saves lives and alleviates suffering and hunger was found convincing by a large bipartisan majority of nearly eight in ten. The argument against, that corrupt governments and terrorists take the aid and sell it back to their own people, was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of seven in ten.

The second argument in favor, that humanitarian relief helps the US build better relationships and promotes peace and stability, was found convincing by a large bipartisan majority of nearly eight in ten. The second argument against state that humanitarian relief is the role of private citizens and charities, not the government. A much smaller majority of 56% found convincing, with less than half of Democrats convinced.

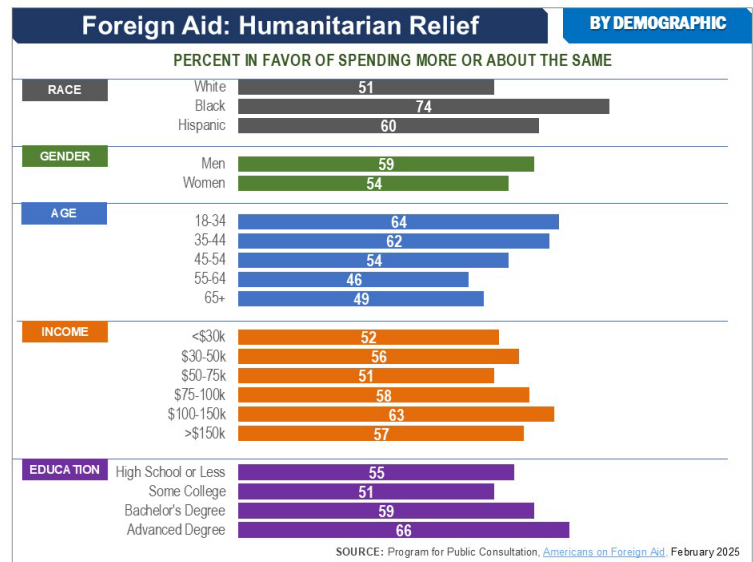


Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A majority of 56% supported keeping spending the same (28%) or

increasing it (28%), including 70% of Democrats and 61% of independents. A majority of Republicans (57%) preferred spending be reduced, but this included 16% who want to spend "a little less", and 36% who wanted to spend "somewhat less" (24%) or "none at all" (12%).

Young people were significantly more supportive of foreign aid for humanitarian relief, with 64% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, but just under half of those aged 55 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with 74% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by Hispanic people (60%). Just half of white people took this stance (51%).

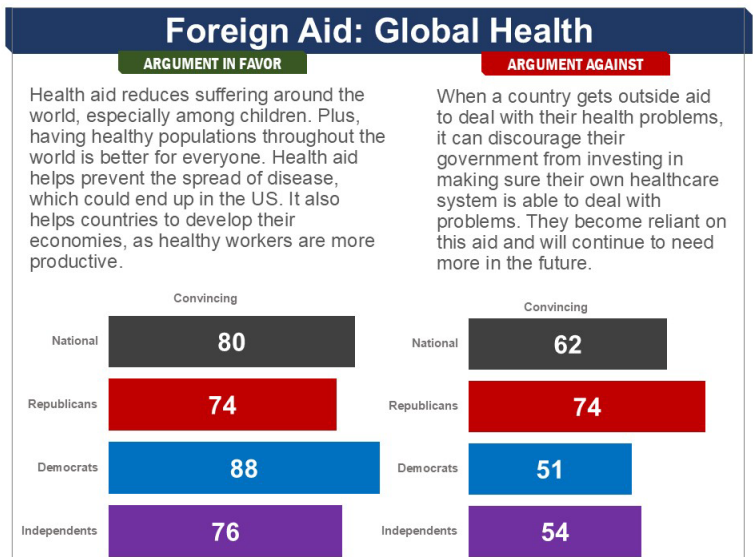
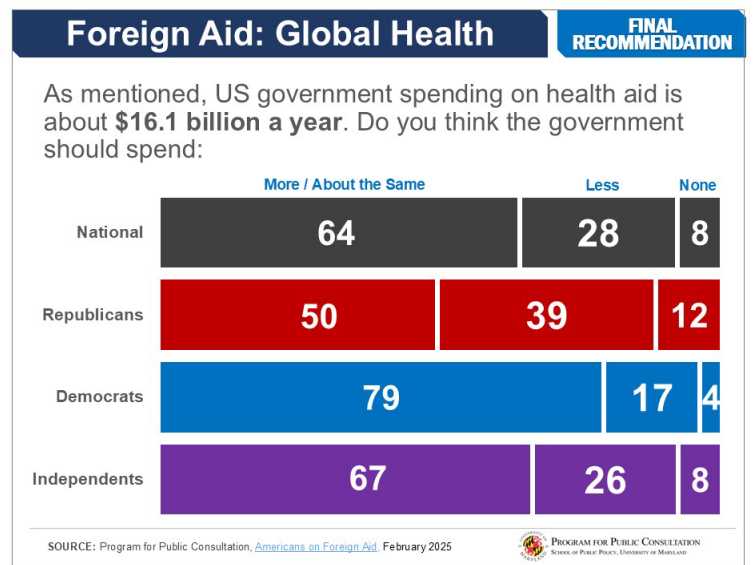


Global Health

A majority of 64% chose to keep spending the same or increase it, including eight in ten Democrats and half of Republicans. Among the half of Republicans who want to reduce spending, 15% want to spend just a little less, and only one in ten want to eliminate the aid program.

Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$16.1 billion a year to, “treat diseases (including HIV and malaria); prevent the spread of diseases; improve health outcomes (especially for mothers and children); train doctors and nurses; ensure access to clean water.”

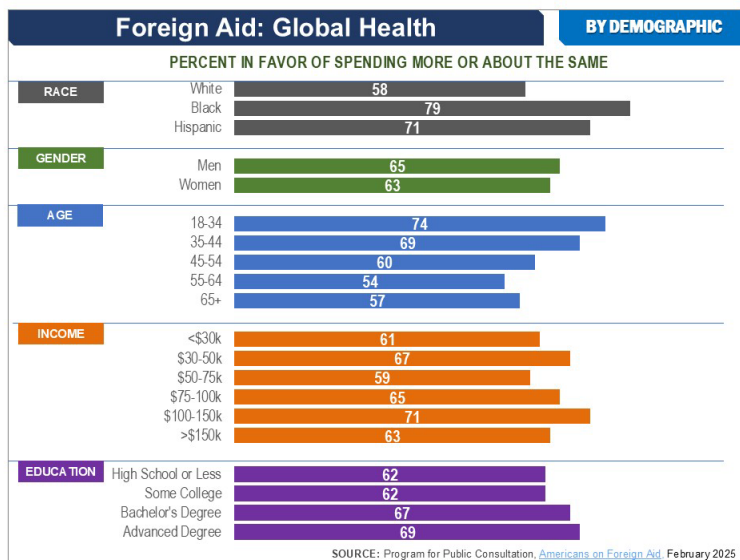
The argument in favor focused on how effective health aid is at reducing suffering, stopping the spread of diseases around the world, including to the US, and improves economies. A large bipartisan majority of eight in ten found this convincing. The argument against, that health aid can countries from building a self-sufficient healthcare system, and makes them reliant on aid, was found convincing by just over six in ten, but just half of Democrats.



Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A majority of 64% chose to keep spending the same (32%) or increase it (32%), including 79% of Democrats and 67% of independents, and half of Republicans. Among the half of Republicans who wanted to spend less, 15% wanted to spend "a little less", and just 41% wanted to spend "somewhat less" (30%) or "none at all" (11%).

Young people were much more supportive of foreign aid for global health, with 74% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, compared to 57% of those aged 65 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with 79% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by Hispanic people (71%), and then white people (58%).

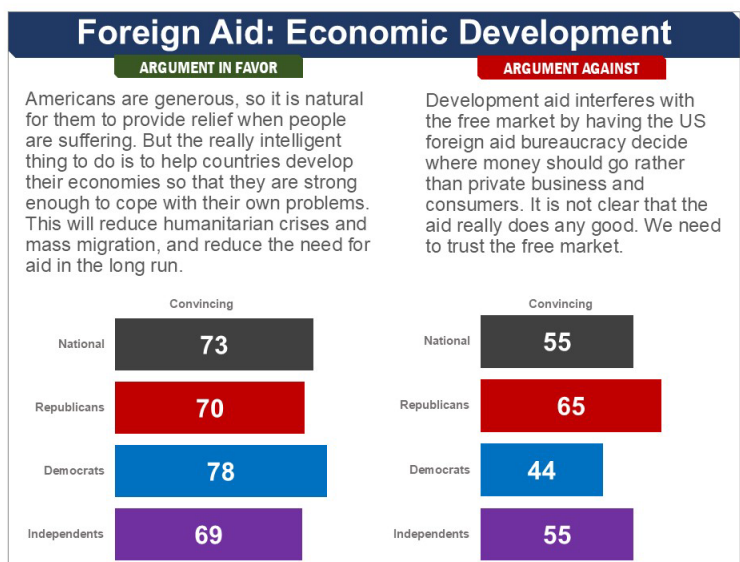
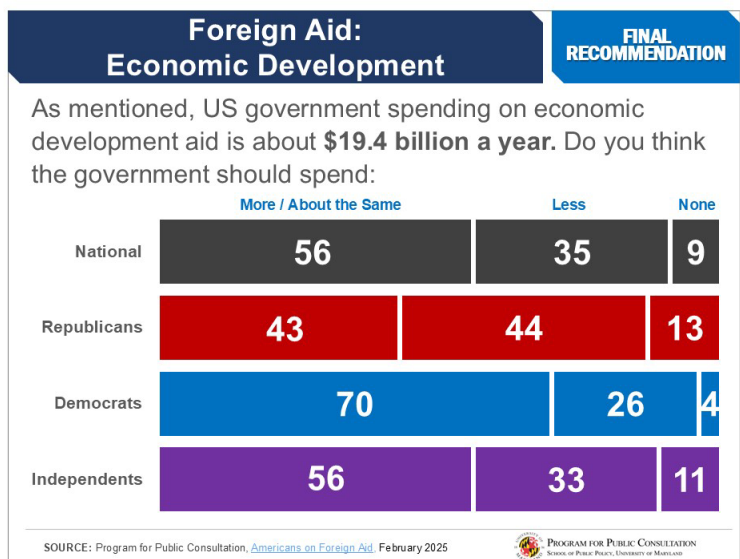


Economic Development

A majority of 56% want spending on foreign aid for economic development to be kept the same or increased, including seven in ten Democrats and over half of independents. While a majority of Republicans prefer spending be reduced, this includes 19% who want to spend a little less, with just over one in ten wanting to eliminate the aid program.

Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$16.1 billion a year to, “help less developed countries improve their food production, develop their infrastructure, and build their private enterprises and financial systems.”

The first argument in favor, that the “intelligent thing to do is to help countries develop their economies” so they can “cope with their own problems,” was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of over seven in ten. The argument against, that “development aid interferes with the free market” did much worse overall (55%) and among both Republicans and Democrats.



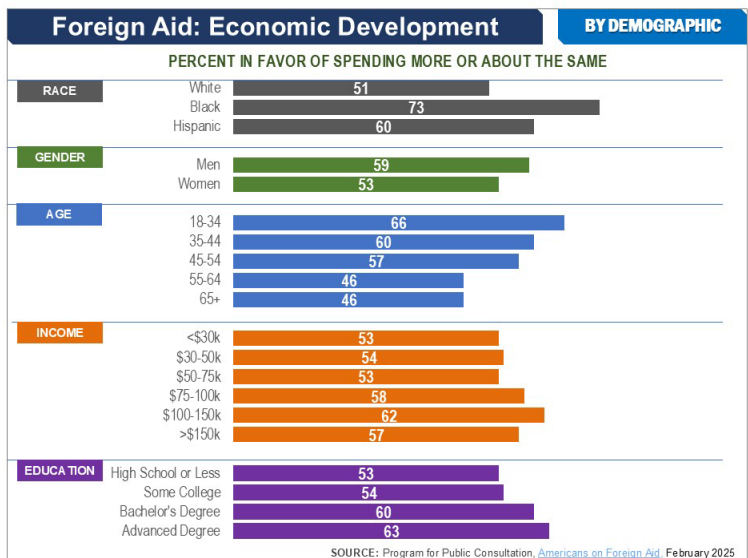
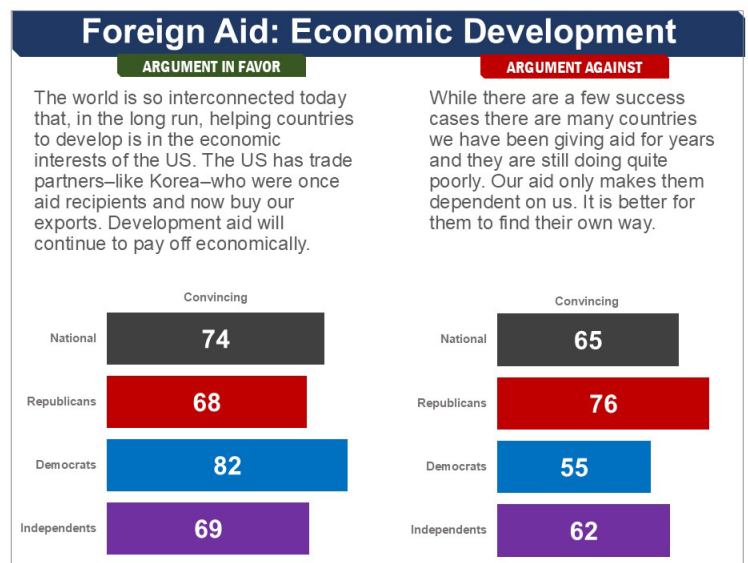
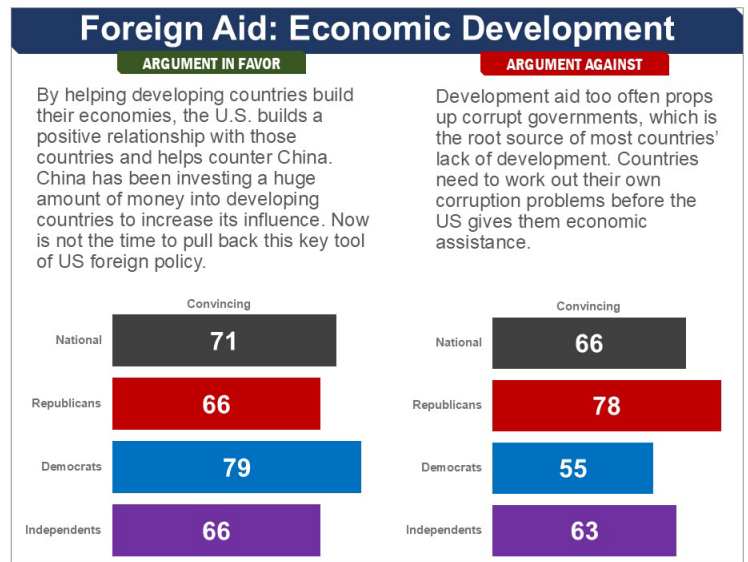
The second argument in favor focused on how developing other countries economies benefits the US by creating new trade partners, and was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of nearly three in four. The argument against stated that, “while there are a few success cases,” many countries have been receiving US aid for years and are not developed. A bipartisan majority of two thirds found this convincing.

The third argument in favor focused on how economic aid is a “key tool of US foreign policy” necessary to counter China’s influence-buying investments in developing countries. A bipartisan majority of seven in ten found this convincing. The argument against, that “aid too often props up corrupt governments,” which is the main source of countries’ lack of development, was found convincing by a bipartisan two in three.

Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A majority of 56% chose to keep spending the same (30%) or increase it (26%), including 70% of Democrats and 56% of independents. A majority of Republicans (57%) preferred spending be reduced, but this includes 19% who wanted to spend “a little less”, and 38% who wanted to spend “somewhat less” (25%) or “none at all” (13%).

Young people were significantly more supportive of foreign aid for economic development, with 66% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, but less than half (46%) of those aged 55 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with 73% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by Hispanic people (60%). Just half of white people took this stance (51%).



Education Aid

A bipartisan majority of 67% want spending on foreign aid for education to be kept the same or increased, including 54% of Republicans and eight in ten Democrats.

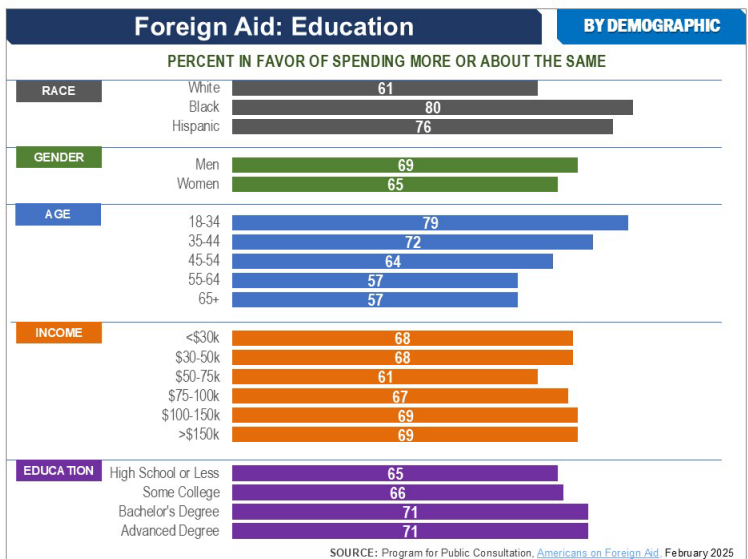
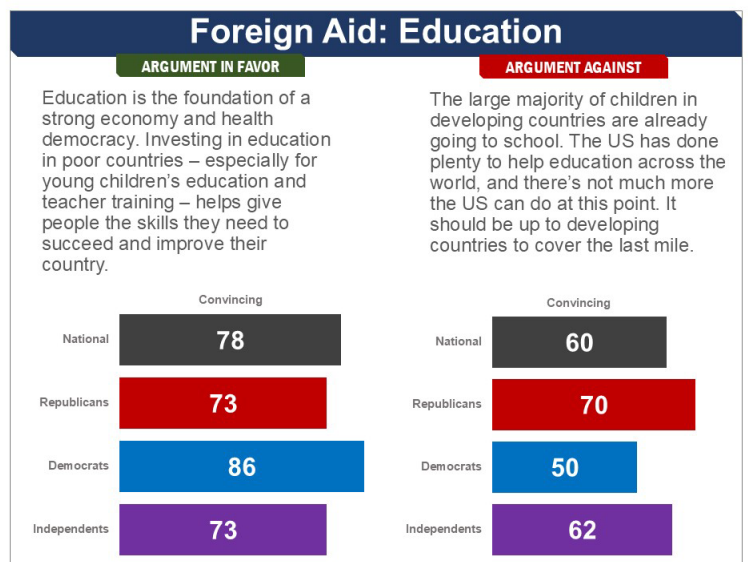
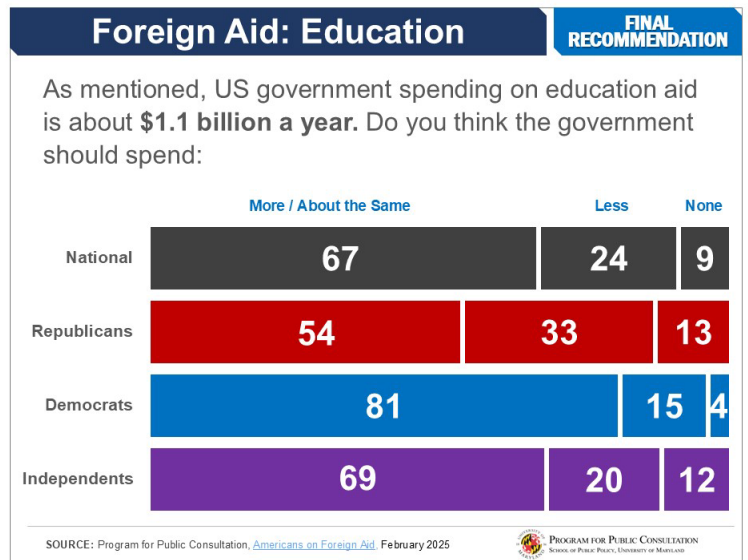
Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$1.1 billion a year to help, “less developed countries to train teachers, encourage school attendance (especially for girls) such as by offering school lunches, and improve literacy.”

The argument in favor stated that investing in education is necessary to “give people the skills they need to succeed and improve their country,” and was found convincing by a large bipartisan majority of nearly eight in ten. The argument against, that the US has already done enough since “the large majority of children in developing countries are already going to school,” was found convincing by a smaller majority of six in ten, including seven in ten Republicans, but just half of Democrats.

Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A bipartisan majority of 67% chose to keep spending the same (30%) or increase it (26%), including 54% of Republicans, 81% of Democrats and 71% of independents.

Young people were significantly more supportive of foreign aid for education, with 79% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, compared to 57% of those aged 55 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with an overwhelming majority of 80% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by a very large majority of Hispanic people (75%), and then white people (61%).



Environmental Aid

A majority of 65% want spending on foreign aid for the environment to be kept the same or increased, including over eight in ten Democrats and two thirds of independents. While a bare majority of Republicans (51%) prefer spending be reduced, this includes 14% who want to spend "a little less", with just 17% wanting to eliminate the aid program.

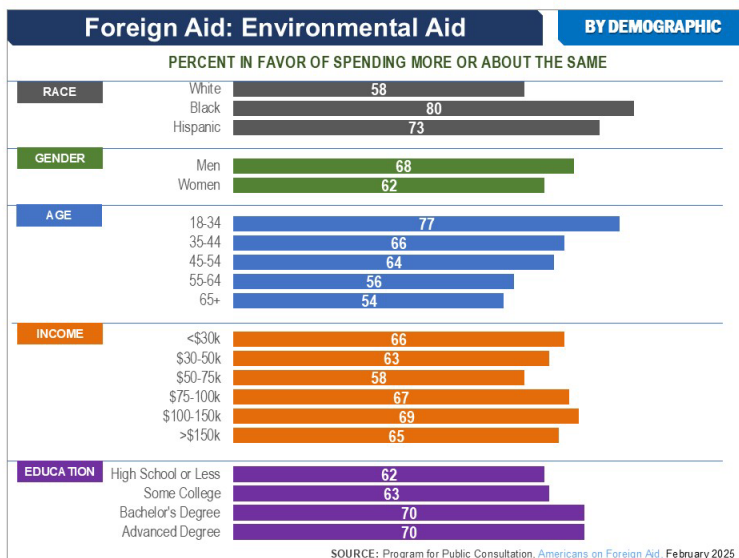
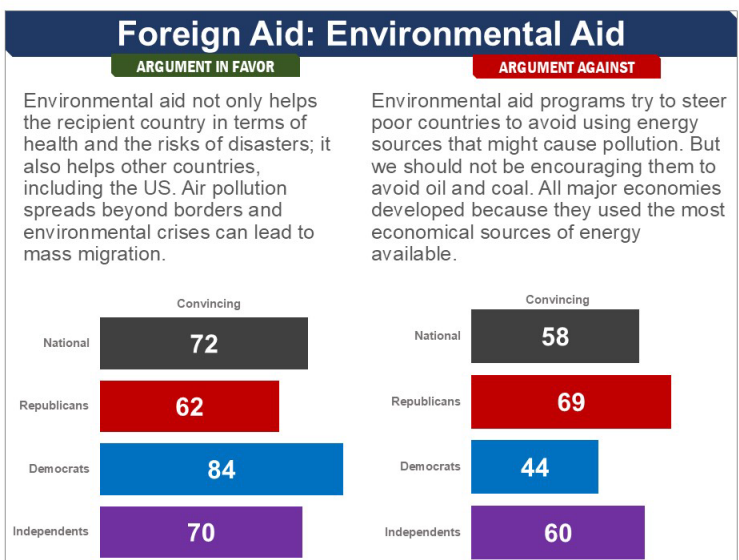
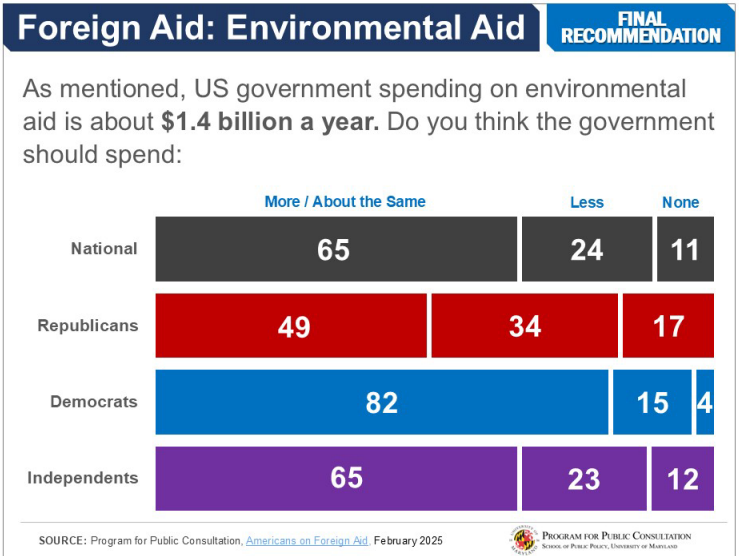
Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$1.4 billion a year, "to help countries preserve their environment, reduce pollution, transition to energy sources that produce less or no pollution, and prepare better for natural disasters."

The argument in favor focused on how environmental aid helps all countries, since "air pollution spreads beyond borders and environmental crises can lead to mass migration." A bipartisan majority of over seven in ten found this convincing. The argument against stated that this aid can steer poor countries away from using fossil fuels, which all major economies relied on to develop. A much smaller majority of under six in ten found this convincing, including seven in ten Republicans, but less than half of Democrats.

Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A majority of 65% support keeping spending the same (32%) or increasing it (33%), including 82% of Democrats and 65% of independents. A bare majority of Republicans (51%) prefer spending be reduced, but this includes 14% who want to spend "a little less", and 37% who want to spend "somewhat less" (20%) or "none at all" (17%).

Young people were significantly more supportive of environmental foreign aid programs, with 77% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, but just 54% of those aged 65 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with an overwhelming majority of 80% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by Hispanic people (73%), and then white people (58%).



Aid for Democracy and Human Rights

A majority of 60% want spending on foreign aid for democracy and human rights to be kept the same or increased, including three quarters of Democrats and over half of independents. While a small majority of Republicans (53%) prefer spending be reduced, this includes 14% who want to spend a little less, with just two in ten wanting to eliminate the aid program.

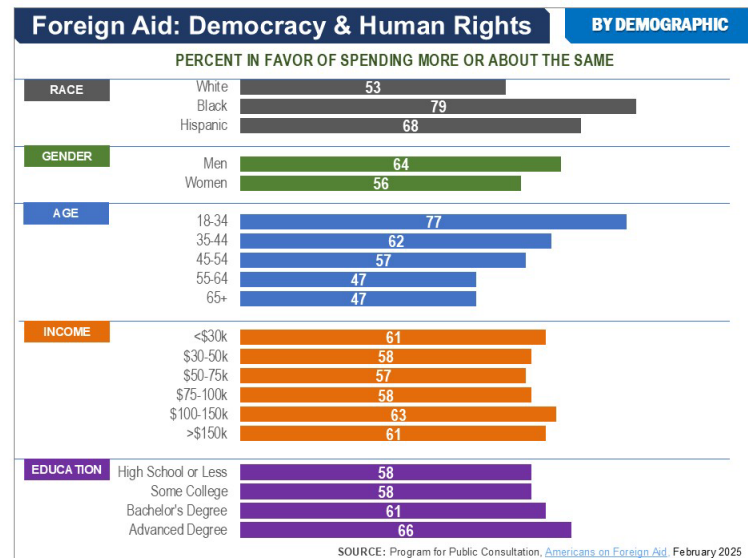
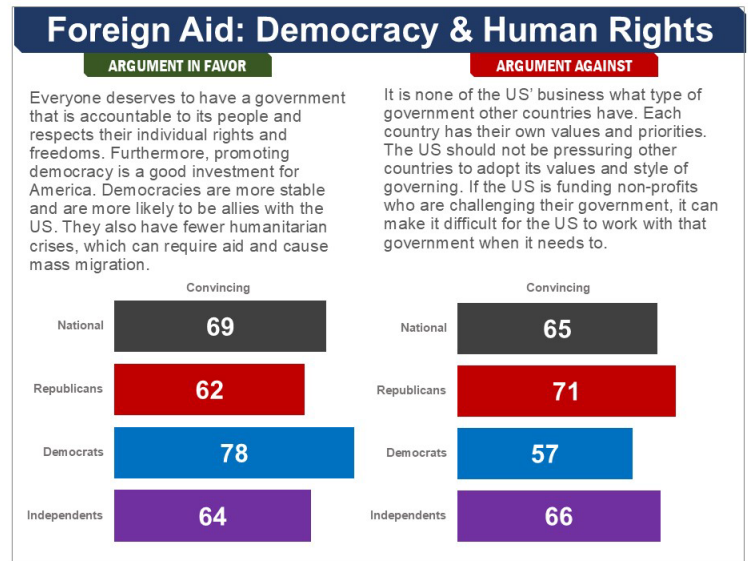
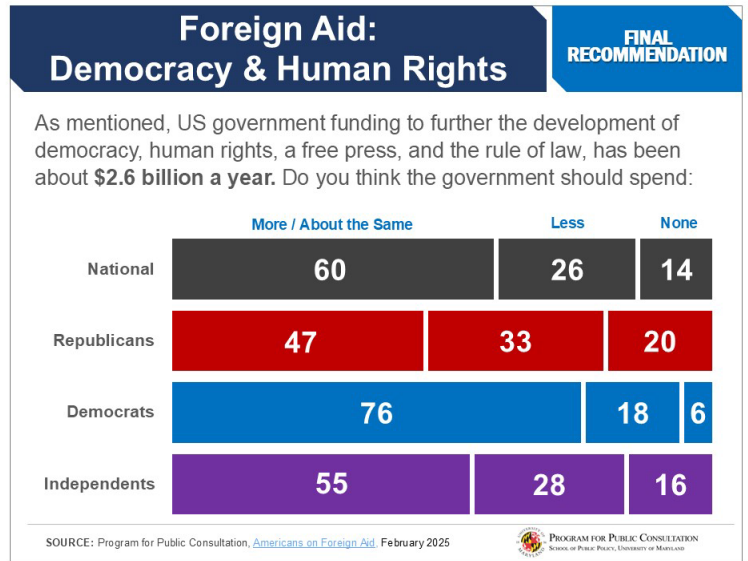
Respondents were informed that the US has been spending about \$2.3 billion a year “to further the development of democracy, human rights, a free press, and the rule of law,” and that, “nearly all of this goes to non-profits and international organizations with specialized skills, rather than directly to foreign governments.”

The argument in favor, that everyone deserves to live in a democracy and that countries with democracy are often more stable and likely to be allies to the US, was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of seven in ten. The argument against, that “it is none of the US’ business what type of government other countries have,” was found convincing by a bipartisan majority of two thirds.

Finally, they were asked whether they think the US should increase spending, keep it the same, decrease it, or eliminate it, along a seven-point scale. A majority of 60% support keeping spending the same (34%) or increasing it (26%), including 76% of Democrats and 55% of independents. A small majority of Republicans (53%) prefer spending be reduced, but this includes 14% who want to spend “a little less”, and 39% want to spend “somewhat less” (19%) or “none at all” (20%).

Young people were significantly more supportive of foreign aid for democracy and human rights, with 77% of those 18-34 preferring to keep spending the same or increase it, but less than half (47%) of those aged 55 and older.

By race, black people were the most supportive, with a very large majority of 79% preferring to keep spending the same or increase, followed by a large majority of Hispanic people (68%). Among white people, just over half (53%) took this stance.



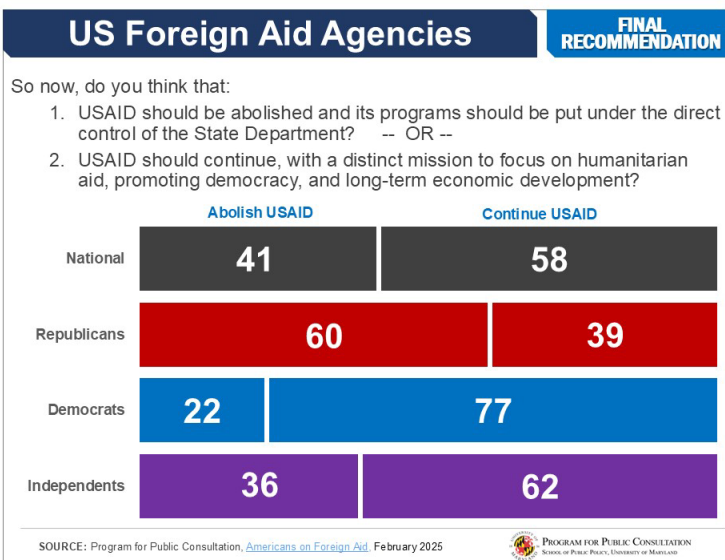
The U.S. Agency for International Development

A majority of nearly six in ten (58%) oppose the proposal to abolish USAID and put its programs under the control of the State Department, including three quarters of Democrats and six in ten independents. But a majority of Republicans support the proposal (60%).

Respondents evaluated a proposal for, “abolishing U.S. Agency for International Development and putting its programs under the direct control of the State Department.” They were first provided a briefing on the two main agencies that manage foreign aid – USAID and the State Department – including a description of how their missions are distinct:

Some foreign aid goes through the US State Department, but most foreign aid goes through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). This agency was established in 1961 by then-President John F. Kennedy with a mission to focus specifically on humanitarian aid, promoting democracy, and long-term economic development efforts.

USAID answers to the President and works closely with the State Department. But it was established as an independent agency to keep its mission distinct from the State Department: While the State Department focuses on managing US foreign policy and diplomatic relations, USAID focuses on managing aid programs by employing specialized experts in disaster relief, health, education, environment, and democracy.



The argument in favor of abolishing USAID and putting its programs under the control of the State Department, stated that it is necessary that all foreign aid money contributes directly to US interests, and how “USAID has often gotten too preoccupied with helping other countries as an end in itself.” A bipartisan majority of two thirds found this convincing, including three quarters of Republicans and six in ten Democrats.

The argument against stated that it is necessary to have an agency, “with the central mission of reducing suffering and poverty in the world,” and how if USAID is absorbed by the State Department “humanitarian goals will be increasingly sidelined.” A bipartisan majority of six in ten found this convincing, including six in ten Republicans and nearly three quarters of Democrats.

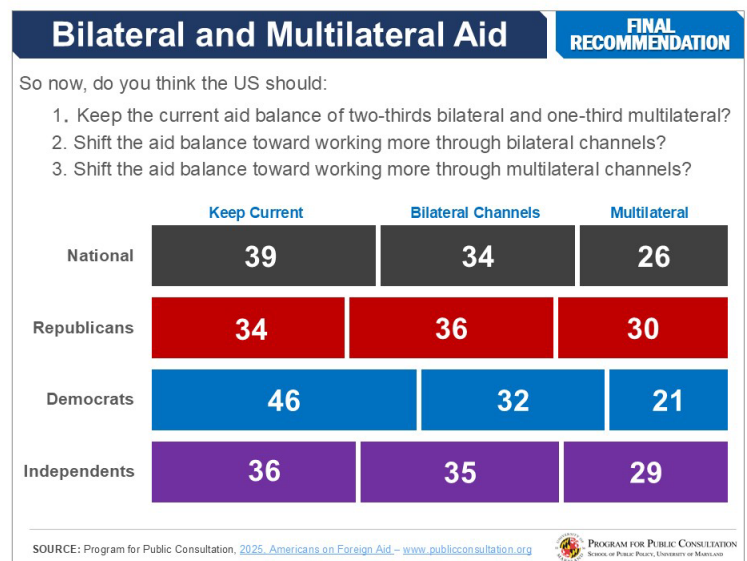
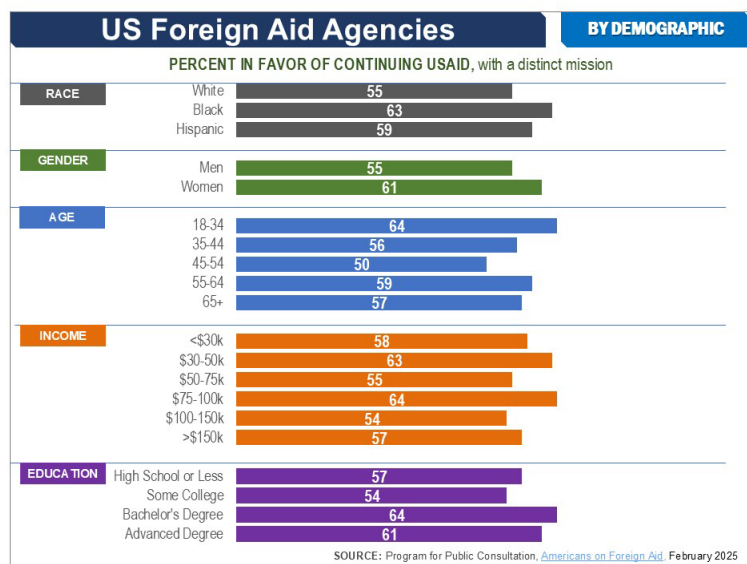
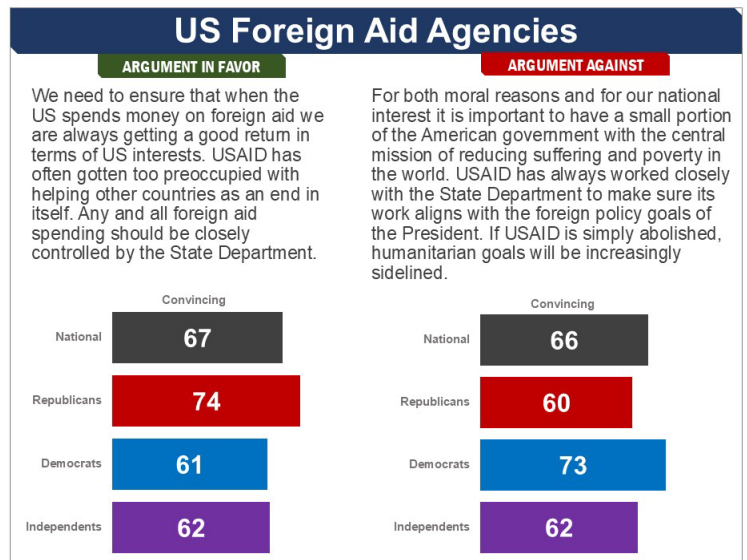
Asked for their final recommendation, a majority of 58% opposed abolishing USAID, instead preferring that it be kept as an independent agency. This included 77% of Democrats and 62% of independents. But a majority of Republicans support the proposal (60%).

Interestingly, there were no meaningful differences between demographics, unlike there were with the questions about spending on foreign aid programs.

Bilateral vs Multilateral Aid

Four-in-ten prefer keeping the current balance of aid distribution – about two thirds through bilateral channels and one third through multilateral channels. A third wants to shift more aid to bilateral channels, and a quarter prefer shifting more through multilateral channels. There is no majority support among Republicans or Democrats for any option.

Respondents evaluated whether foreign aid should be distributed more through bilateral channels to specific countries, or more through multilateral institutions like the UN, or if the balance should be kept the same.



They were provided descriptions for both types of aid:

Bilateral aid: The US provides aid directly to a specific country, primarily through US government contractors or non-profit organizations working in those countries, and in some cases directly to the government.

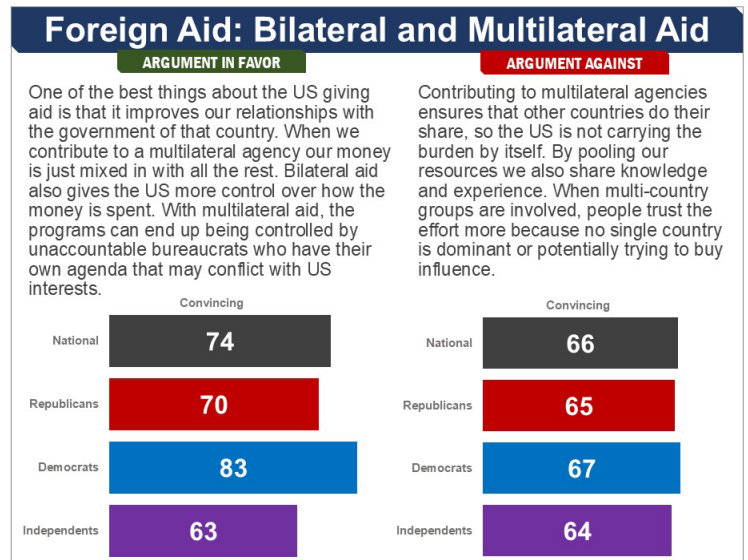
Multilateral aid: The US provides funds to international organizations that work globally, such as:

- United Nations agencies that provide services like disaster relief, food aid and healthcare
- Development banks, such as the World Bank, which make loans and provide consulting to developing countries to help them develop their economy

They were informed that, historically, about two-thirds of foreign aid is bilateral, and about one-third is multilateral

The argument in favor of shifting the balance towards bilateral aid focused on how it “gives the US more control over how the money is spent,” unlike multilateral aid for which the US’ contributions are mixed in with the rest. A large bipartisan majority of three quarters found this convincing.

The argument in favor of shifting the balance towards multilateral aid focused on how it “ensures that other countries do their share,” and how recipients trust that aid more because no single country is possibly “trying to buy influence.” A bipartisan majority of two thirds found this convincing.



Finally, they were asked to choose between the following options:

1. Keep the current aid balance of two thirds bilateral and one third multilateral
2. Shift the aid balance toward working more through bilateral channels
3. Shift the aid balance toward working more through multilateral channels

None of the options had majority, or even large plurality support. Keeping the current balance was the most popular option, with 39% (Republicans 34%, Democrats 46%). Shifting the balance to bilateral aid was preferred by a third (34%, Republicans 36%, Democrats 32%), and shifting it to multilateral aid was preferred by 26%.