
Charity or Government? Americans' Views on Helping People in Need

Zach Goldberg, Lynn Woodworth, & Ryan Owens
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Do private charity and government assistance serve complementary roles? Or does charitable activity substitute for public support? Since 2009, few if any national surveys have asked Americans their views on these questions, including whether they think charitable organizations or government programs do a better job helping people in need. These questions are central to debates about the appropriate balance between government programs and private charitable efforts in addressing social needs.¹ In a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults conducted between December 10 and 18, 2025, Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) provides the first data on these questions in nearly sixteen years. Key findings include:

- **Most Americans say charities are at least as effective as government programs at helping people in need**

Seventy-three percent of Americans say charitable and community organizations are either more effective than government programs (36%) or about equally effective (37%).

- **Public confidence in charities has remained stable for decades**

Earlier national surveys conducted between 2000 and 2009 show similar results, suggesting that public confidence in charities has remained relatively stable over time.

- **Americans are divided over whether charities would expand their activities if government assistance declined**

Forty-four percent of respondents stated charities would fill the void; 44% doubt charities would.

- **Political ideology strongly shapes beliefs about charities and government, with religiosity playing a smaller role**

Conservatives are much more likely than liberals to say charitable organizations are as or more effective than government programs and are also far more likely to believe charities would expand their activities if government assistance declined. Religiosity shows a similar but more modest pattern: Americans who say religion plays an important role in their lives are also somewhat more likely to view charitable organizations as effective and to expect charitable expansion if government assistance declined.

INTRODUCTION

Charitable and community organizations play a significant role in helping Americans in need. So too do government programs at the federal, state, and local levels. Policymakers and scholars have long debated how these two sources of support—civil society and the state—should interact in addressing social needs.

Two related questions often arise in these debates. First, are charitable organizations or government programs more effective at helping people in need? Second, if government assistance declines, would charitable organizations expand to fill the gap? Advocates of government programs argue that public assistance operates at a level of reliability that private organizations cannot match. Others contend that charitable and community organizations provide more flexible, locally responsive support.

To understand better how Americans think about these two questions, the Institute for Governance and Civics surveyed 1,533 American adults in its December 2025 nationally representative survey—the first national update on these issues since a 2009 Pew Research Center survey.

The findings show that while many Americans view charitable organizations as effective providers of assistance, they are divided about whether charities would expand their activities if government support declined—and these expectations differ sharply across

political groups. These differences suggest that disagreements about the role of government in helping people in need may reflect not only differing appraisals of government effectiveness, but also expectations about whether charitable organizations would expand their activities if public assistance declined.

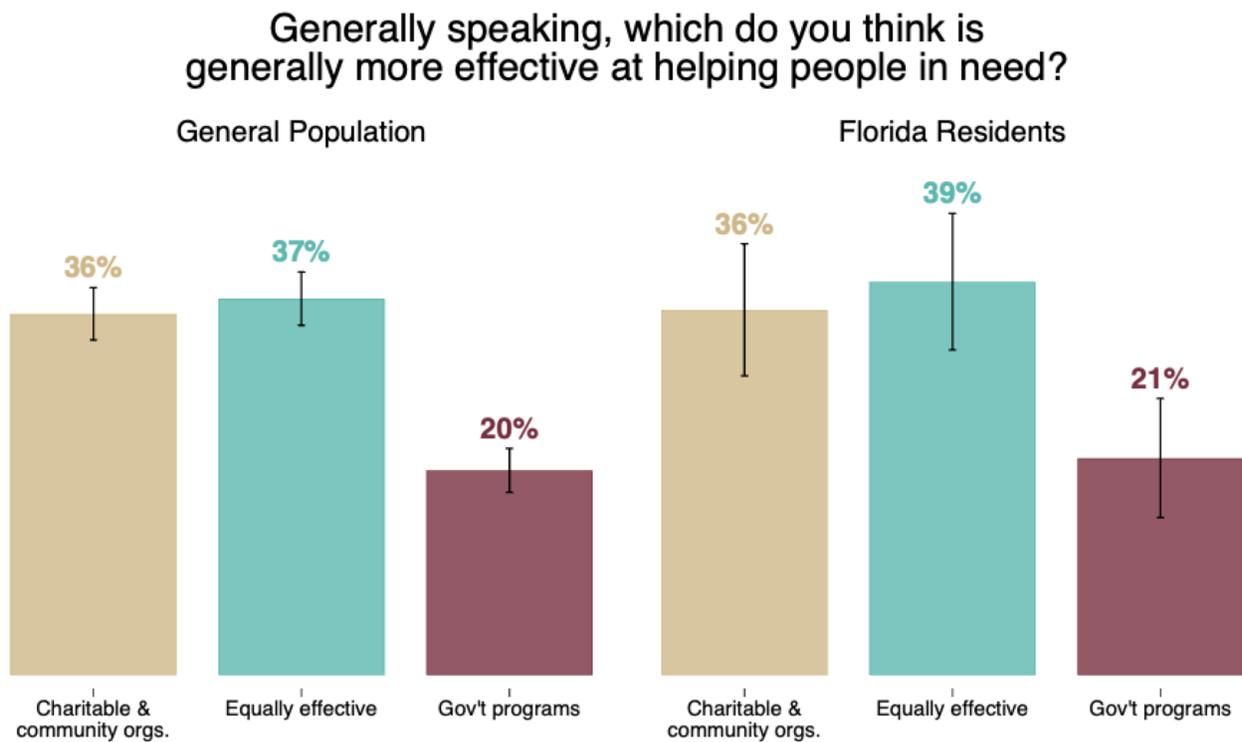
MOST AMERICANS SAY CHARITIES ARE AS EFFECTIVE OR MORE THAN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

We asked respondents which they believe is generally more effective at helping people in need: charitable and community organizations or government programs.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses. Thirty-six percent of Americans say charitable and community organizations are generally more effective at helping people in need, while 37% say the two are about equally effective. Only 20% say government programs are generally more effective. Seven percent say they are not sure.

Florida residents show a similar pattern. Forty percent say charitable and community organizations are generally more effective, while 34% say the two are about equally effective. Just 18% say government programs are more effective. Simply put, many Americans view private charitable efforts as an equally—or more—effective way of helping people in need.

Figure 1. Americans' Views on the Effectiveness of Private Charitable Organizations vs. Government Programs



Note: Estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population nationally (n = 1,533) and of adult residents of Florida (n = 263). "Not sure" responses are included in the analysis but are not shown in the chart.

IDEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT SHAPE BELIEFS ABOUT EFFECTIVENESS

Political ideology and the importance respondents place on religion in their daily lives strongly relate to views about whether charities or government programs are more effective.

The left panel of Figure 2 shows how responses to our questions vary across ideological groups. The share of Americans who say charitable and community organizations are more effective than government rises steadily as respondents become more conservative. Twenty-one percent of very

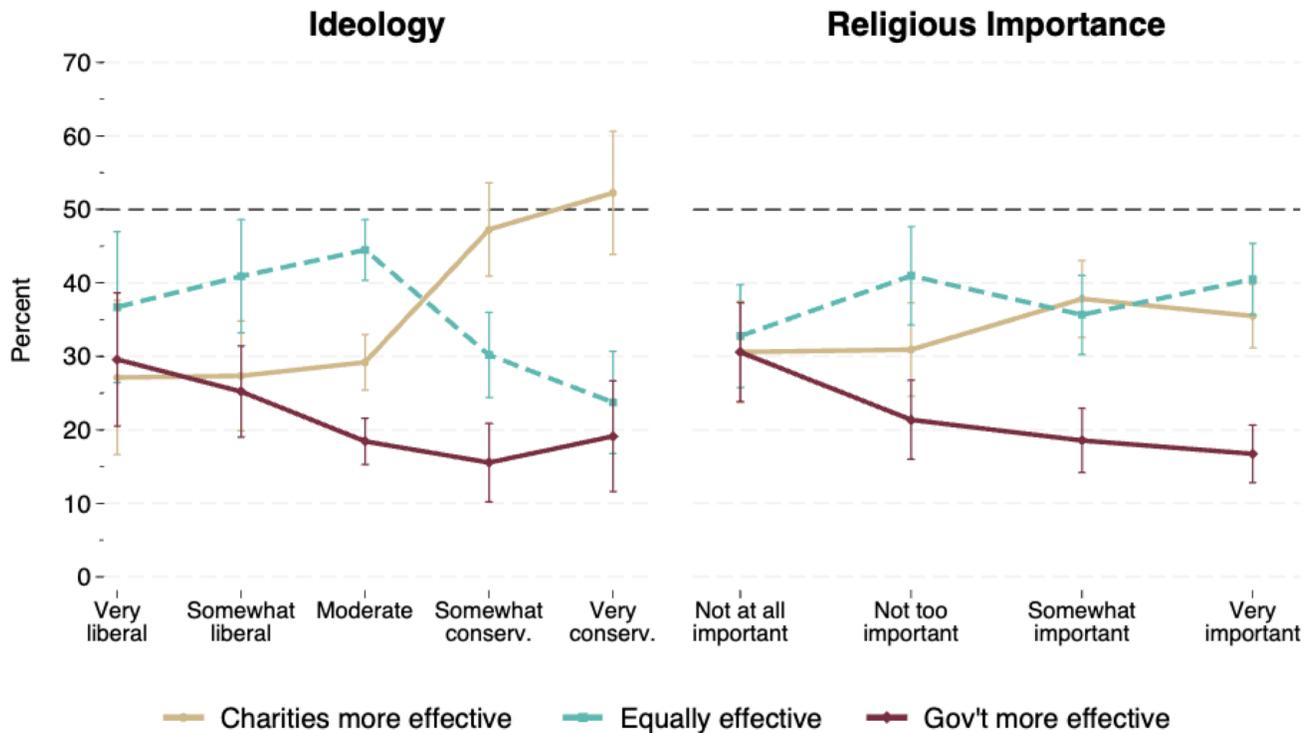
liberal respondents say charities are more effective, compared with 23% of somewhat liberal respondents and 28% of moderates. This figure continues to rise among somewhat conservative respondents (54%), and peaks at 59% for very conservative respondents.

Even after adjusting for religiosity and other characteristics, conservatives overall remain substantially more likely than liberals to say charitable organizations are more effective

Conversely, 38% of very liberal respondents say government programs are more effective, compared with 34% of somewhat liberal respondents, 18% of moderates, 12% of somewhat

conservative respondents, and 13% of very conservative respondents. Moderates (45%) are more likely to say the two are about equally effective.

Figure 2. Americans' Views on the Effectiveness of Charitable Organizations vs. Government Programs, by Ideology (left) and Religious Importance (right)



Note: Estimates (n = 1,524 in the ideology model; n = 1,533 in the religious importance model) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. "Not sure" responses are included in the analysis but are not shown in the chart. Respondents who refused to self-identify ideologically (n = 9) are excluded. Religious importance data are missing for 16% of respondents (n = 250); these respondents were assigned to a "Missing" category and are included in the analysis.

Religiosity also influences these views. As shown in the right panel of Figure 2, respondents who say religion plays an important role in their daily lives are significantly less likely to say government programs are more effective. Among respondents who say religion is not important at all, 38% say government

programs are more effective, 31% say the two are equally effective, and 25% say charities are more effective. By contrast, those who say religion is very important are split between charities being more effective (41%) and charities and government programs being equal (38%). Just 15% of this group say government

programs are more effective.

Because political ideology and religiosity often overlap—with religiosity increasing with conservatism—we also estimated models that account for both factors simultaneously (along with a range of demographic characteristics). In the end, both variables independently relate to how Americans evaluate charities and government programs. Even after adjusting for religiosity and other characteristics, conservatives overall (49%) remain substantially more likely than liberals (28%) to say charitable organizations are more effective than government programs.² And inversely, conservatives remain less likely than liberals to say government programs are more effective (17% vs. 27%), though this difference is smaller than the ideological gap in views that charities are more effective.

Religiosity shows a somewhat different and more modest pattern when accounting for ideology and other factors. Respondents who place greater importance on religion remain less likely to say government programs are more effective (18% vs. 26%). They are also somewhat more likely to say charities are more effective (37% vs. 31%).

Overall, these patterns indicate that ideology and religiosity shape how Americans evaluate institutions that provide assistance. As respondents become more conservative and more religious, they become more likely to say charitable organizations are the more

effective method to provide aid.

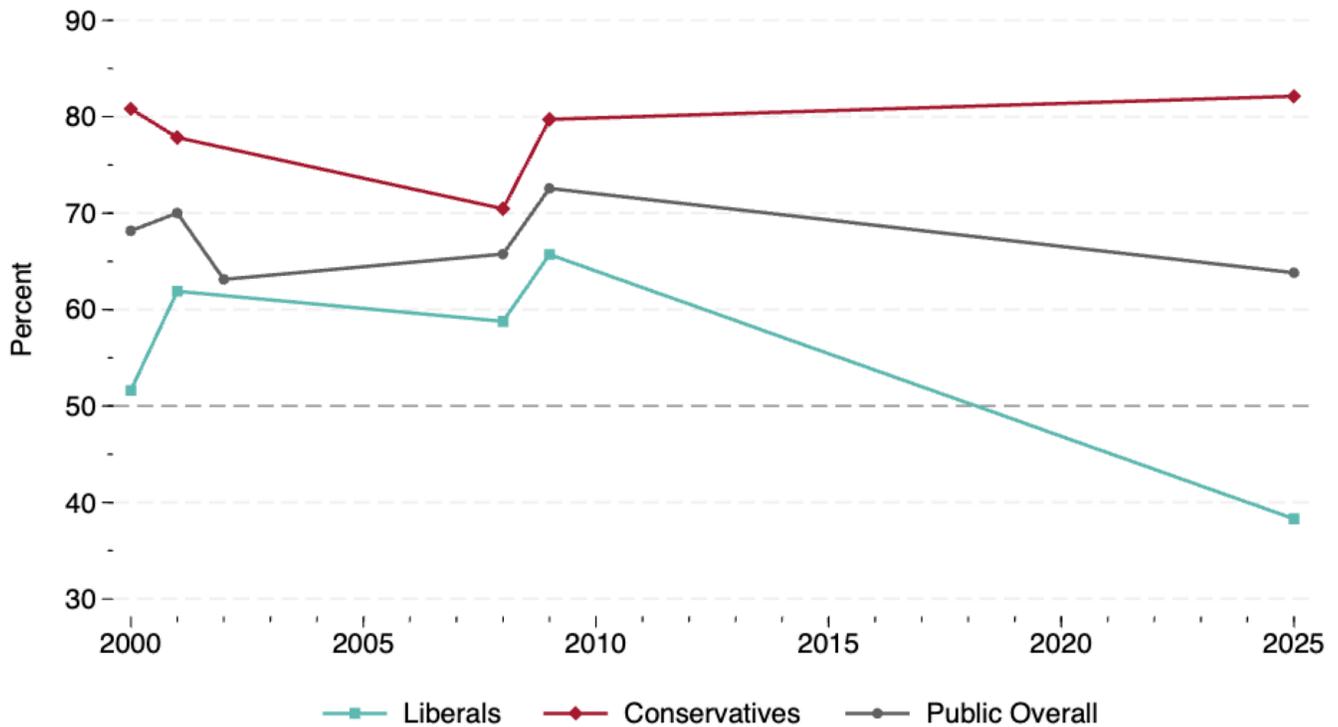
PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN CHARITIES HAS REMAINED HIGH FOR DECADES

To place these results in historical context, we compare them with similar earlier national surveys. The most recent of these surveys was conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2009, while the earliest was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2000. The Institute for Governance and Civics' December 2025 survey thus provides the first national update on this question in more than fifteen years.

Because these surveys used different response options, we harmonize them by focusing on respondents who expressed a directional view—we drop the respondents from our survey who say “both are equally effective.” Figure 3 shows the share of liberals, conservatives, and the overall public who say charitable organizations are more effective than government programs.

Overall public opinion—and the views of conservatives—have remained fairly stable over the past two decades. Liberals, however, express much less confidence in charitable organizations today than they did in 2000.

Figure 3. Share of Americans Saying Charitable Organizations Do a Better Job Than Government Programs Helping People in Need, 2000–2025



Note: Estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Data combine national surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2000, 2002), Pew Research Center (2001, 2008, 2009), and the Institute for Governance and Civics (2025). Because survey response options varied across studies, estimates are harmonized by focusing on respondents who expressed a directional preference between charitable organizations and government programs. See Appendix B for the full question wording by survey and year.

The results show that overall public opinion and the opinion of conservatives have remained fairly stable over the past two decades. Liberals, however, express much less confidence in charitable organizations today than they did in 2000.

In 2000, 68% of the public overall who expressed a directional view said charitable or community organizations are more effective at helping people in need. This share dipped to 63% in 2002. In 2009, 73% of the public overall believed charities were more effective

than government. In our 2025 survey, when examining only those respondents who rate charities or government programs as more effective, 64% say charitable organizations do the better job.

By ideology, however, substantial shifts appear over this same period—particularly among liberals. In 2000, liberals were evenly split: 52% said charitable or community organizations were more effective at helping people in need, and 48% said government programs were more effective. By 2025,

only 38% of liberals said charitable organizations do the better job. With the exception of a dip in 2008, conservatives remained consistent over the 25-year period in their view that charities were more effective at providing aid.

AMERICANS ARE DIVIDED OVER WHETHER CHARITIES WOULD STEP IN IF GOVERNMENT AID DECLINED

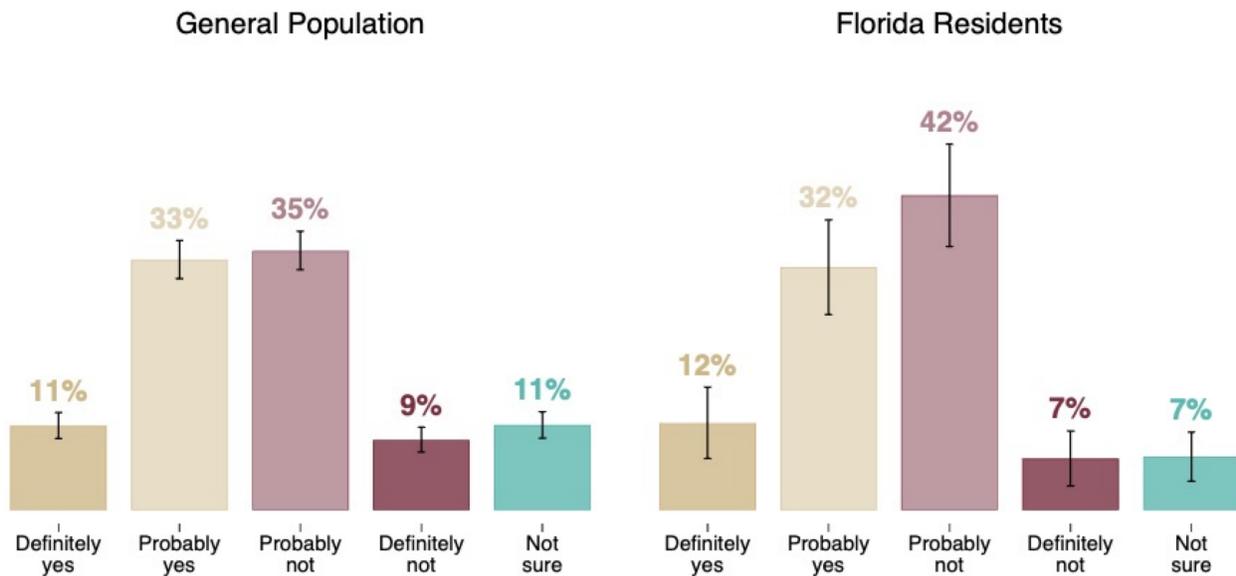
We also asked respondents whether they believed charities would expand their activities if government programs are reduced. Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses. As the left

shows, 11% of Americans say charitable organizations would *definitely* increase their activities if government assistance declined, and 33% say charities would *probably* increase activities. In total, 44% say they expect charitable organizations to expand their activities in response to government cuts.

But an equal share of respondents (44%) expresses skepticism. Thirty-five percent say charitable organizations would *probably not* increase their activities, and 9% say charities would *definitely not* increase their activities. The remaining 11% say they are not sure.

Figure 4. Public Expectations About Whether Charities Would Expand if Government Assistance Declined

The United States has a long tradition of churches, fraternal organizations, and other community groups providing charitable help to people in need. If the government provided less public assistance, do you think these groups would increase their charitable activities?



Note: Estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population nationally (n = 1,533) and of adult residents of Florida (n = 263).

Florida residents (right panel) show a slightly more skeptical pattern, with 49% saying either that charities would probably not (42%) or definitely not (7%) increase their activities if government assistance lessened.

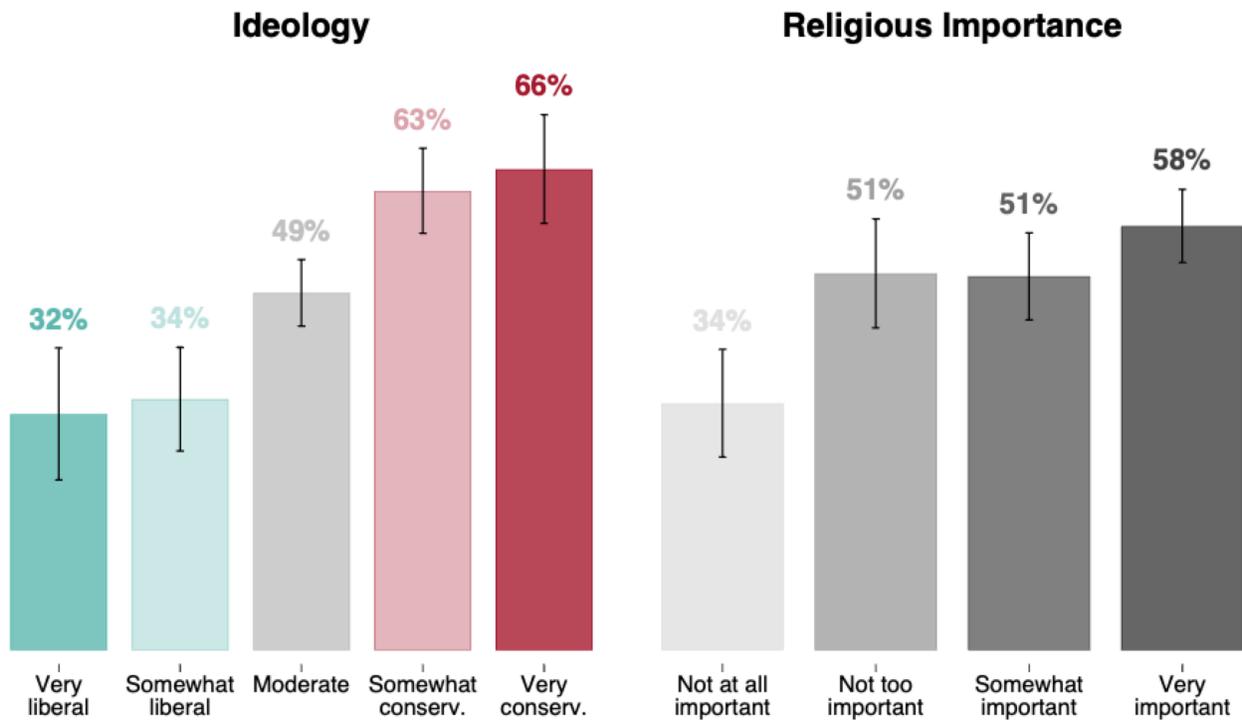
IDEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT SHAPE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT CHARITABLE RESPONSE

As with views about the effectiveness of charities, expectations about whether charities would step in if government

assistance declined vary substantially across political and social groups. Once again, political ideology and the importance respondents place on religion in their daily lives are associated with these views.

The left panel of Figure 5 shows that the share of Americans who say charitable organizations would probably or definitely increase their activities rises steadily as respondents become more conservative.

Figure 5. Expectations That Charitable Organizations Would Expand Their Activities if Government Assistance Declined, by Ideology (left) and Religious Importance



Note: Estimates (n = 1,366 in the ideology model; n = 1,371 in the religious importance model) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Bars represent the predicted probability (percent) that a respondent says charitable organizations would “probably” or “definitely” increase their activities if government assistance declined. “Not sure” responses (n = 162) are excluded from the analysis. Respondents who refused to self-identify ideologically (n = 9) are excluded. Religious importance data are missing for 16% of respondents (n = 250); these respondents were assigned to a “Missing” category and are included in the analysis.

Among very liberal respondents 32% say charities would expand their activities if government assistance declined, compared with 34% of somewhat liberal respondents, 49% of moderates, 63% of somewhat conservatives, and 66% among very conservative respondents. These results change little when adjusting for religiosity and other demographic and political characteristics.

While Americans often view charities as effective providers of assistance, they are less certain about whether private organizations would scale their activities in response to changes in government policy

Turning to the right panel, religious commitment shows weaker and less consistent pattern. Among respondents who say religion is not at all important in their daily lives, 34% believe charitable organizations would increase their activities if government assistance declined. This share rises to 51% among those who say religion is not too important. The same percentage (51%) of those who say religion is somewhat important in their lives believe charities would expand their activities. Among respondents who say religion is very important, 58% think charities would do so. When we combine ideology, religious

importance, and other factors into a single statistical model, the only difference that remains statistically significant is the difference between the least religious respondents (39%) and other respondents (51–55%).

All told, these results indicate that political ideology plays a larger role than religiosity in shaping expectations about whether charities would step in if government assistance declined. Additional analyses—including those examining how beliefs about institutional effectiveness relate to expectations about charitable response across ideological groups—are reported in Appendix A.

CONCLUSION

Americans believe in the role of charitable and community organizations to help people in need. Most respondents say charitable organizations are at least as effective as government programs at providing assistance. Looking across available national surveys conducted between 2000 and 2009 and comparing them with the Institute for Governance and Civics' 2025 survey, the share of Americans who believe charities do the better job of helping people in need has remained within a narrow range.

Americans are divided, however, over whether charitable organizations would

expand their activities if government assistance declined. Roughly equal shares of the public believe charities would expand their activities as doubt they would do so. This division suggests that while Americans often view charities as effective providers of assistance, they are less certain about whether private organizations would scale their activities in response to changes in government policy. These differing expectations may help explain why Americans often reach different conclusions about how much responsibility government should assume in helping people in need.

Poll Information

This study was conducted online between December 8–18, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,533 respondents age 18 or older, including an oversample of 263 Florida residents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-2.7% at the 95% confidence level. Weighted demographic characteristics of the survey group are presented in Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

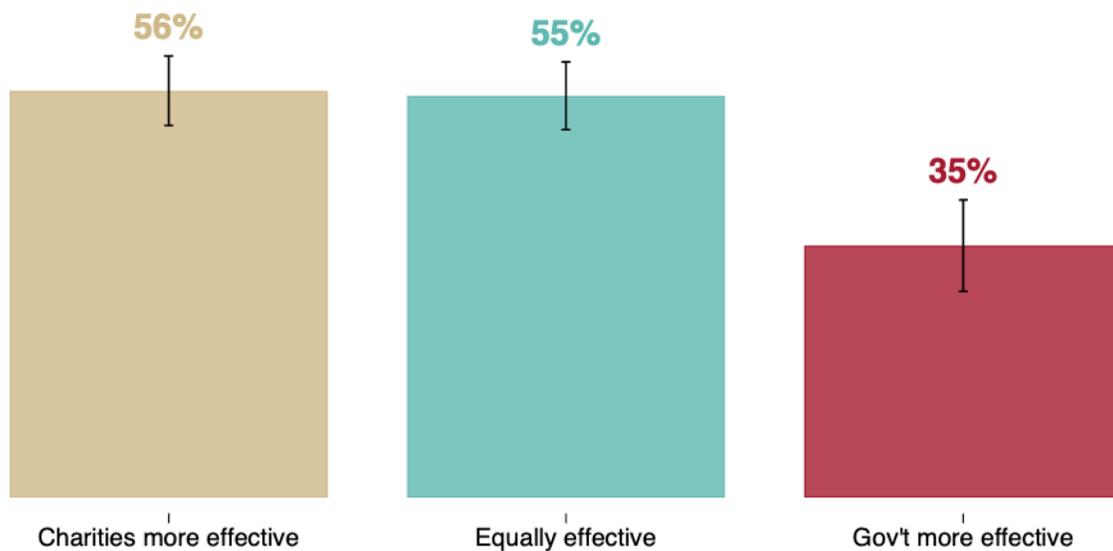
Category	General Population	Florida Sample
Sex		
Male	49%	49%
Female	51%	51%
Age		
18 to 29	20%	18%
30 to 49	34%	30%
50 to 64	23%	23%
65 or older	23%	28%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	60%	53%
Black	12%	15%
Hispanic	17%	25%
Asian	7%	3%
Other	4%	3%
Household Income		
Less than \$50,000	43%	40%
\$50,000-\$74,999	16%	19%
\$75,000-\$99,999	13%	16%
\$100,000 and over	29%	24%
Education		
Less than HS	9%	8%
HS Graduate	28%	29%
Some college	26%	27%
BA Degree	21%	23%
Postgrad / Prof. Degree	15%	12%
Parent Status		
Parent	26%	23%
Not a Parent	74%	77%
Stated Party		
Democrat	29%	26%
Republican	29%	32%
Independent/ Something Else	42%	42%
Political Ideology		
Liberal	23%	18%
Moderate	44%	46%
Conservative	33%	36%

APPENDIX A: BELIEFS ABOUT CHARITIES' EFFECTIVENESS SHAPE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THEIR RESPONSE—ESPECIALLY AMONG CONSERVATIVES

Expectations about whether charitable organizations would expand their activities if government assistance declined are closely related to respondents' broader views about the effectiveness of charities and government programs.

Figure A1 shows the probability—adjusted for ideological, religious importance, and other characteristics—that respondents say charitable organizations would probably or definitely increase their activities if government assistance declined, grouped by their responses to the earlier question about which sector does a better job helping people in need. Those who believe charitable and community organizations are more effective (56%)—or about equally effective as government programs (55%)—are significantly more likely to expect charities to step in than respondents who say government programs are more effective (35%).

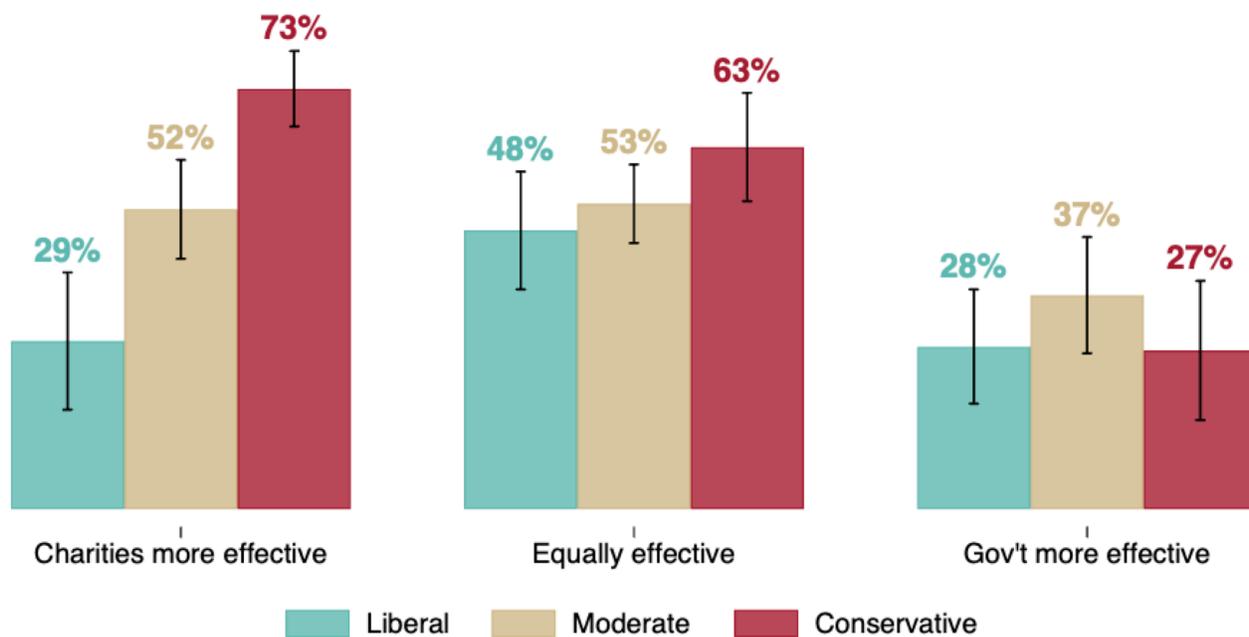
Figure A1. Expectations That Charities Would Expand If Government Assistance Declined, by Beliefs About Which Sector Is More Effective



Note: Estimates (n = 1,270) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Bars represent the predicted probability (percent) that a respondent says charitable organizations would “probably” or “definitely” increase their activities if government assistance declined, grouped by respondents' views about which sector is more effective at helping people in need. Respondents who gave “Not sure” responses to either question (n = 263) are excluded from the analysis; including these respondents does not materially affect the results. Estimates adjust for age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, household income, marital status, number of children (0–17) in the household, number of adults (18+) in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership status, metro status, religious importance, ideology, and party affiliation.

As Figure A2 shows, however, these relationships are much stronger among conservatives than liberals.

Figure A2. Expectations That Charities Would Expand If Government Assistance Declined, by Beliefs About Sector Effectiveness and Ideology



Note: Estimates (n = 1,270) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Bars represent the predicted probability (percent) that a respondent says charitable organizations would “probably” or “definitely” increase their activities if government assistance declined, grouped by respondents’ ideological self-identification and their views about which sector is more effective at helping people in need. Respondents who gave “Not sure” responses to either question (n = 263) are excluded from the analysis; including these respondents does not materially affect the results. Estimates adjust for age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, household income, marital status, number of children (0–17) in the household, number of adults (18+) in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership status, metro status, religious importance, and party affiliation.

Among conservatives, those who say charities are more effective are more likely to believe charities would step up their activities if government assistance declined. The probability rises from 27% among conservatives who say government programs are more effective to 73% among those who say charities are more effective—a 46-percentage-point difference. Conservatives who say the two are equally effective also report higher expectations of charitable response (63%).

Among liberals, in contrast, the relationship between views about effectiveness and expectations of charitable response is noticeably weaker. Moving from a “government

more effective” to a “charities more effective” response corresponds to only a one-percentage-point increase in the probability of expecting charities to expand their activities (28% to 29%). Liberals who instead say charities and government programs are about equally effective are more likely to expect charitable expansion, with the probability rising from 28% to 48%—though still falling short of a majority.

APPENDIX B: TIME SERIES SURVEY ITEMS

Table B1. Pre-2025 Survey Questions on Whether Charitable Organizations or Government Programs Do the Better Job Helping People in Need

Survey Question	Response Options	Survey Sponsor(s)	Field Date(s)
Some people believe that religious, charitable and community organizations can do the best job of providing services to people in need. Others believe that the government can do the best job of providing services to people in need. Which is closer to your view?	(1) Religious/charitable/community organizations can do the best job (2) The government can do the best job (3) Both (4) Neither (8) Don't know (9) Refused	Kaiser Family Foundation; NPR; Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government	6/2000, 9/2000
	(1) Religious/charitable/community organizations can do the best job (2) The government can do the best job (8) Don't know (9) Refused	Kaiser Family Foundation; Pew Research Center	5/2002
In general, who do you think can do the best job of providing services to people in need?	(1) Religious organizations (2) Non-religious, community-based (3) Federal and state government agencies (4) None of the above (9) Don't know/Refused	Pew Research Center	3/2001, 8/2008
	(1) Religious organizations (2) Non-religious, community-based (3) Federal and state government agencies (4) Family/friends/other (VOL) (5) None of the above (VOL) (9) Don't know/Refused (VOL)		9/2009

¹ Pew Research Center. (2024, June 24). Americans' views of government aid to poor, role in health care and Social Security. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/americans-views-of-government-aid-to-poor-role-in-health-care-and-social-security/>

² Specifically, in the ideology model, we control for age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, household income, marital status, number of children (0–17) in the household, number of adults (18+) in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership status, metro status, religious importance, and party affiliation. In the religious importance