

Budgetary Illusions: Americans' Misperceptions of Federal Spending on Foreign Aid

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Americans dramatically overestimate how much the federal government spends on foreign aid.**

Across multiple decades of surveys, Americans believe foreign aid is roughly 20% to 25% of the federal budget. In reality, it consistently accounts for 1% or less. Even when asked what the U.S. should spend, respondents propose amounts far greater than the true amount.

- **Misperceptions vary in magnitude but are widely shared across demographic and political groups**

While estimates vary by education, ideology, and other characteristics, all major demographic and political groups substantially overestimate the share of spending devoted to foreign aid.

- **Providing accurate information changes views—but does not eliminate disagreement.**

When respondents are told that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget, many revise their views about whether the U.S. spends too much or too little on foreign aid. Yet these changes are incomplete, and substantial disagreement persists. Even after receiving the information, attitudes often continue to differ, especially across political groups.

INTRODUCTION

Few areas of the federal budget have drawn more attention in recent years than foreign aid. Since the start of the second Trump administration, the issue has become increasingly salient, shaped by debates over the United States' role abroad. These debates may give Americans the impression that foreign aid represents a substantial share of the federal budget.

Public perceptions of foreign aid spending do, in fact, diverge sharply from reality. For decades, Americans have believed that the United States devotes a large portion of its

to foreign aid, even though it has accounted for 1% or less of federal spending.¹ This disconnect raises a fundamental question: how accurately do Americans understand the federal budget, and how do those perceptions shape their policy preferences?

This data brief examines public perceptions of federal spending through the lens of foreign aid spending. The focus on foreign aid reflects both its growing political salience and the availability of decades-long data.

Across our analyses, several patterns emerge. Americans dramatically overestimate the share of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid, and these misperceptions are large, persistent, and widely shared across demographic and political groups. While beliefs about spending are related to spending attitudes, they do not fully explain them, and providing accurate information to Americans does not necessarily change their views.

These findings suggest that public debates over federal spending often unfold in a context where highly inaccurate beliefs about the budget coexist with deeply rooted political and ideological differences. Even with accurate information, broad consensus over spending priorities is likely to remain elusive.

AMERICANS DRAMATICALLY OVERESTIMATE FOREIGN AID SPENDING

Americans dramatically overestimate how much the federal government spends on foreign aid—and they have done so for decades.

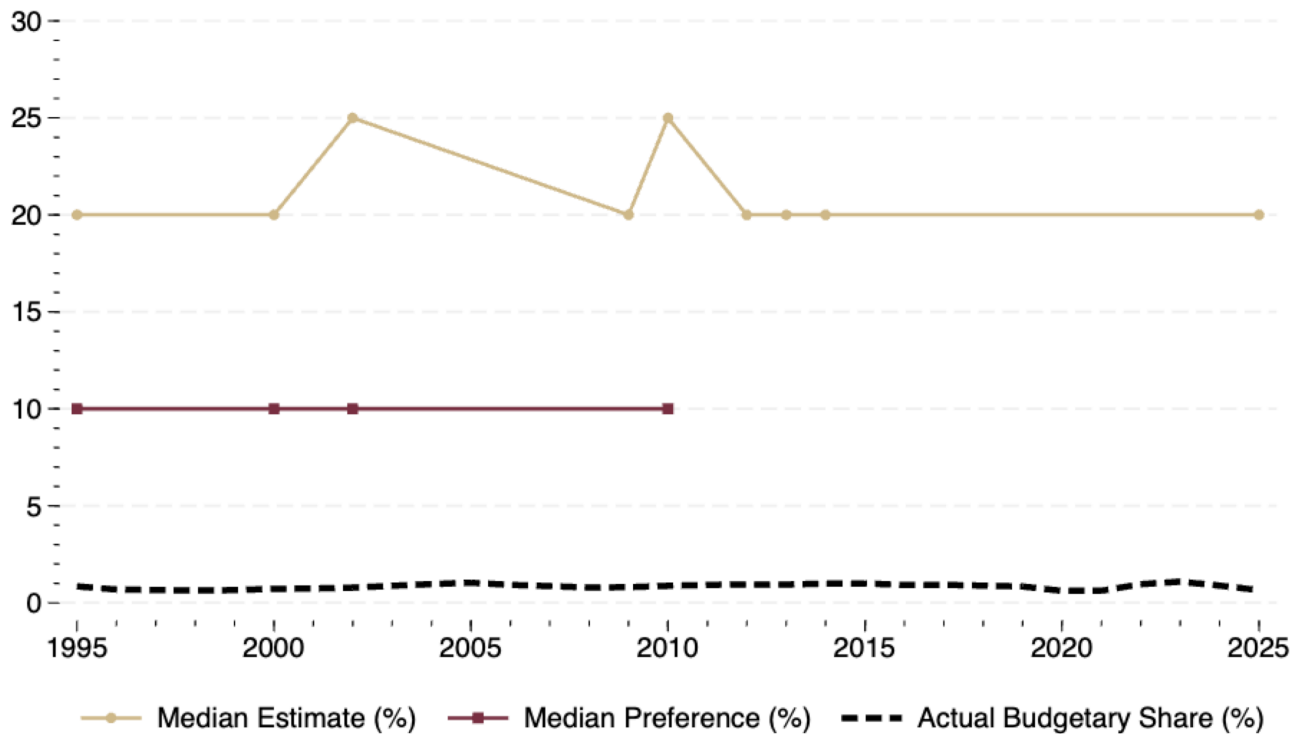
Figure 1 shows the public's typical estimates of foreign aid as a share of the federal budget, along with the share respondents think should be spent on foreign aid (where available), and the actual share of federal spending allocated to it.²

Across surveys that span more than three decades:

- Americans typically estimate that foreign aid accounts for roughly 20% to 25% of the federal budget.
- In reality, foreign aid has consistently accounted for about 1% or less of federal spending.
- Even respondents' preferred level of spending on foreign aid—about 10% of the federal budget—is ten times greater than the actual amount spent.

This pattern does not depend on how surveys measure perceptions. Earlier survey with different different response options show the same basic result. As Appendix Figures A2-A3 show, as far back as 1963, large majorities of Americans—including majorities in both parties—believed that foreign aid accounted for more than 10% of the federal budget, and many placed it above 20%—even as the true value remained near 1%.

Figure 1. Public Estimates, Preferences, and Actual Share of Federal Spending on Foreign Aid

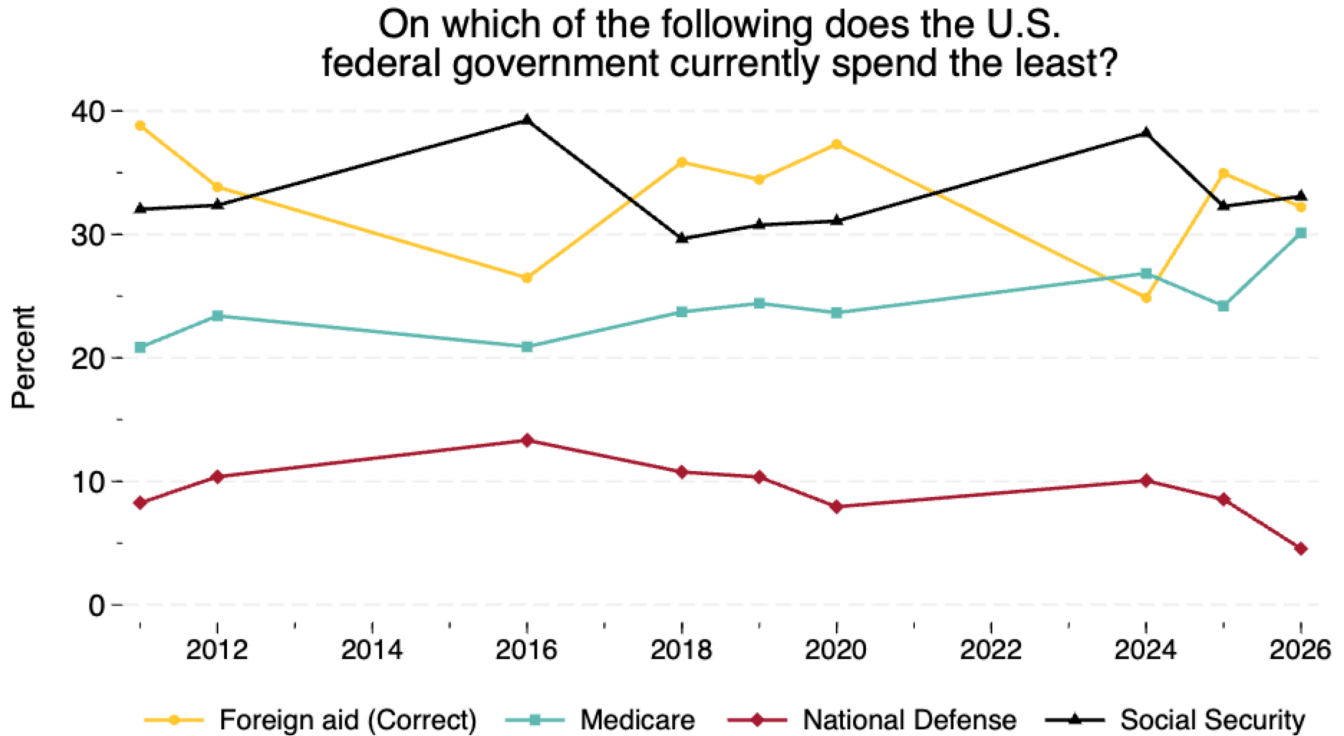


Note: The gold line shows the median value of respondents’ estimated share of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid (“Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?”). The garnet line shows the median preferred share (“What percentage of the federal budget do you think should be spent on foreign aid, if any?”). Preference data are not available after 2010. The dashed black line shows the actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid in each year. Respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

These misperceptions also appear in simpler comparative questions, such as identifying which of several programs receives the least federal spending. As shown in Figure 2, between 2011 and 2026, the share correctly selecting foreign aid as the smallest program listed never exceeds 39%. In most years, respondents are as likely, if not more likely, to select social security (actually 25% of the budget) as the smallest program than foreign aid (actually 1% of the budget).

While perhaps starkest for foreign aid, similar patterns also appear in other areas of federal spending. Analyses reported in Appendix C suggest that Americans tend to overestimate the size of most spending categories, though the magnitude of these errors varies across programs. Together, these findings indicate that Americans’ misperceptions reflect a broader misunderstanding of how the federal budget is structured.

Figure 2. Share of Americans Identifying Each Program as the Smallest Area of Federal Spending (2011-2026)



Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents identifying each program as the area on which the federal government spends the least. “Foreign aid (correct)” indicates the share selecting foreign aid, which is the smallest category among the options listed. Data are drawn from multiple waves of the American National Election Studies (2011-2024) and YouGov surveys (2025-2026).; see Section A of the separate Supplementary Appendix for survey details.

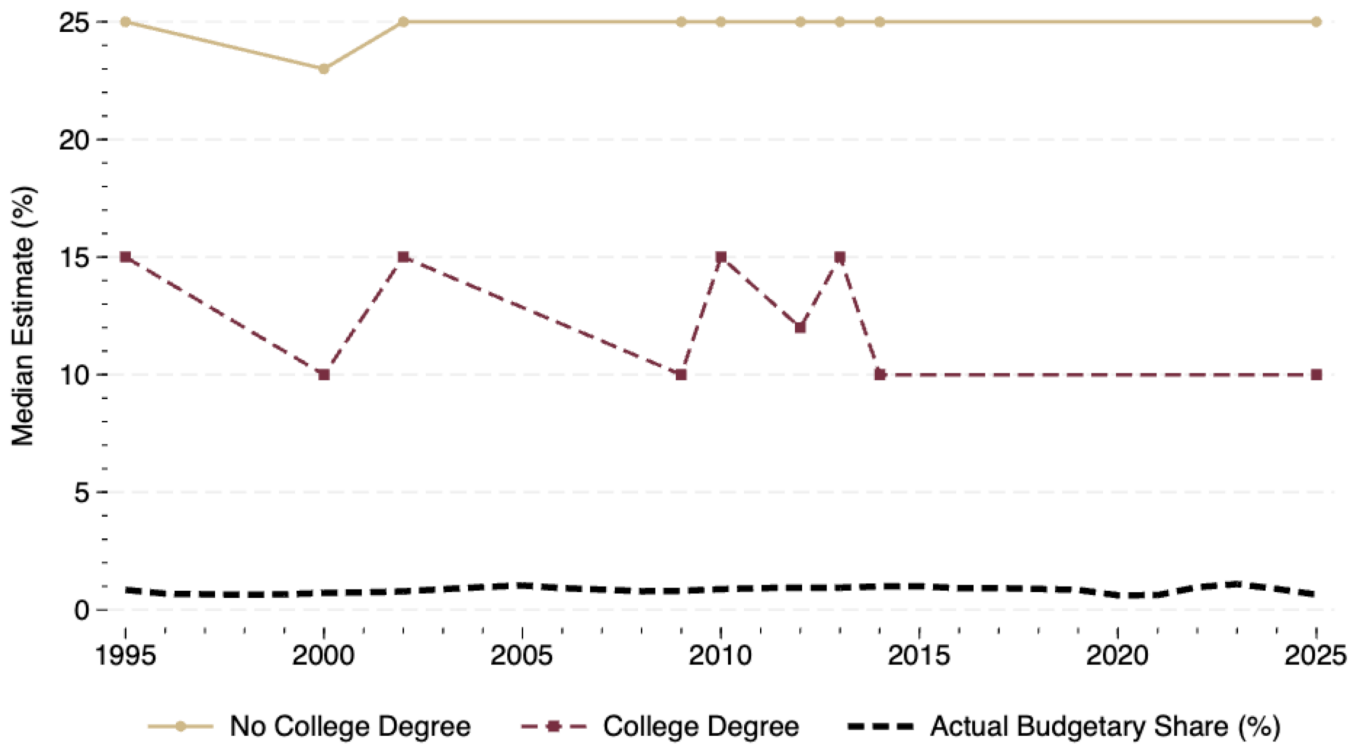
MISPERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN AID ARE BROADLY SHARED BUT VARY ACROSS GROUPS

Misperceptions of foreign aid spending are widespread and not confined to any one group. Figure 3 shows estimates of foreign aid as a share of the federal budget by education level. Respondents with a college degree consistently provide lower estimates than those without one. College-educated respondents typically place foreign aid at around 10% to 15% of the budget, compared with roughly 23% to 25% among those without a college degree. Even so, both groups substantially overestimate the true budgetary share of foreign aid.

Estimates also vary by ideology.³ As shown in Appendix Figure A6, conservatives generally provide higher estimates than liberals and moderates. In recent surveys, liberals typically place foreign aid at around 10% to 15% of the budget, compared with roughly 20% among moderates and 20% to 25% among conservatives. Although these differences

have widened somewhat in recent surveys, all groups continue to substantially overestimate the true budgetary share of foreign aid.

Figure 3. Estimates and Actual Share of Federal Spending on Foreign Aid, by Education



Note: The gold and garnet lines show the median estimated shares of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid (“Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?”) among respondents with and without a college degree, respectively. The dashed black line shows the actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid in each year. Actual budget shares are based on data from the Office of Management and Budget. Respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

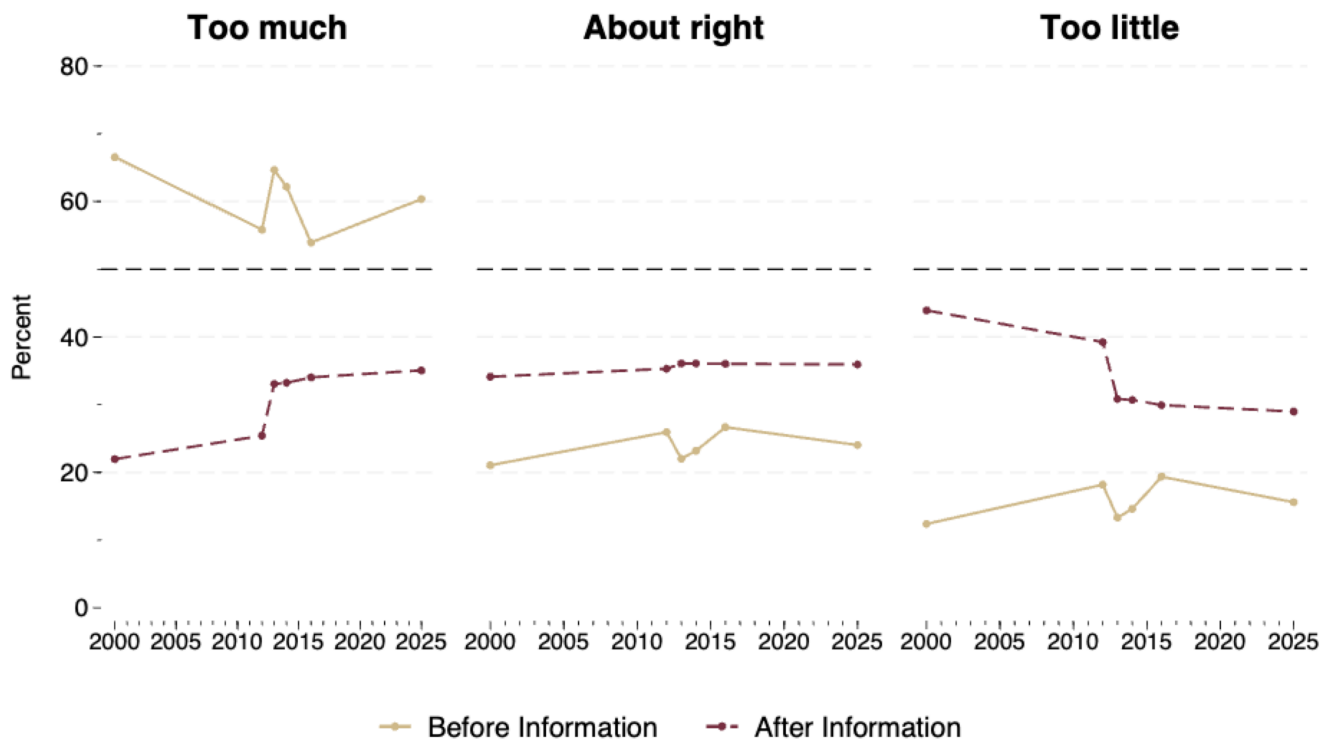
CORRECTING MISPERCEPTIONS CHANGES ATTITUDES—BUT DOES NOT ELIMINATE DISAGREEMENT

Perceptions of foreign aid spending are related to spending attitudes—whether the U.S. is spending too much or too little on foreign aid—but the relationship is limited. Respondents who believe the United States spends too much on foreign aid generally provide higher estimates of foreign aid’s share of the federal budget than those who believe spending is too low. Even so, respondents across all spending attitudes substantially overestimate foreign aid’s true budgetary share. Appendix Figures B1-B3 provide additional detail on these relationships.

One way to see whether these misperceptions matter for public opinion is to examine

have widened somewhat in recent surveys, all groups continue to substantially overestimate the true budgetary share of foreign aid. Whether people change their views when they are given accurate information. Figure 4 shows how attitudes toward foreign aid change after respondents are told that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. Many respondents revise their views after receiving this information, but disagreement remains. Among those who initially say the U.S. spends too much, the share holding that view declines sharply—often by 20 to 40 percentage points. At the same time, the shares saying the U.S. spends too little or about the right amount increase.

Figure 4. Foreign Aid Spending Attitudes Before and After Respondents Receive Accurate Information



Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents selecting each response category (“too much,” “about right,” or “too little”) before (solid gold lines) and after (dashed garnet lines) receiving information that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. The follow-up question asks whether respondents would revise their view after learning that about one percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid. Data are drawn from surveys that include both the initial question and this follow-up question.

Appendix Figure A7 further shows that updating is strongly conditioned by respondents’ initial views. Among those who initially say the U.S. spends too much, a plurality—and in recent years a clear majority—continue to hold that view even after being informed of the true budgetary share, with most of the remaining respondents

shifting to “about right” rather than “too little.”

The extent of updating also increasingly varies by political leaning. Appendix Figures A8–A9 show that, among respondents who initially say the U.S. spends too much on foreign aid, Republicans and conservatives have become increasingly likely to retain that view even after being informed that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. In 2000, roughly similar shares of Democrats and Republicans continued to say spending was too high after receiving this information. By 2025, however, 62% of Republicans continued to hold that view, compared with 34% of Democrats. These results suggest that updating in response to correct information is not only incomplete, but increasingly shaped by political identity.

CONCLUSION

Americans’ views of foreign aid spending rest, in part, on fundamental and long-standing misperceptions about how federal resources are allocated. Many Americans believe the United States devotes a large share of the federal budget to foreign aid when, in reality, it accounts for about 1% or less. This gap has persisted for decades, is widely shared across the public and shapes public attitudes towards the appropriateness of foreign aid spending.

These misperceptions are related to spending preferences, but they are not the whole story. People who believe the United States spends too much on foreign aid do tend to provide higher estimates than those who believe it spends too little. But both groups still greatly overestimate the amounts. Providing accurate information leads some respondents to revise their views, but this updating is incomplete and increasingly shaped by prior beliefs and political identity.

These findings highlight an important challenge: public opinion on spending develops in a context where many Americans hold inaccurate assumptions about how Congress spends federal resources. This makes consensus on spending priorities more difficult to achieve, as attitudes are often shaped by misunderstandings about the federal budget. But while correcting these misperceptions can help, it is unlikely on its own to produce broad agreement on spending priorities, which are increasingly shaped by political identity and broader ideological differences.

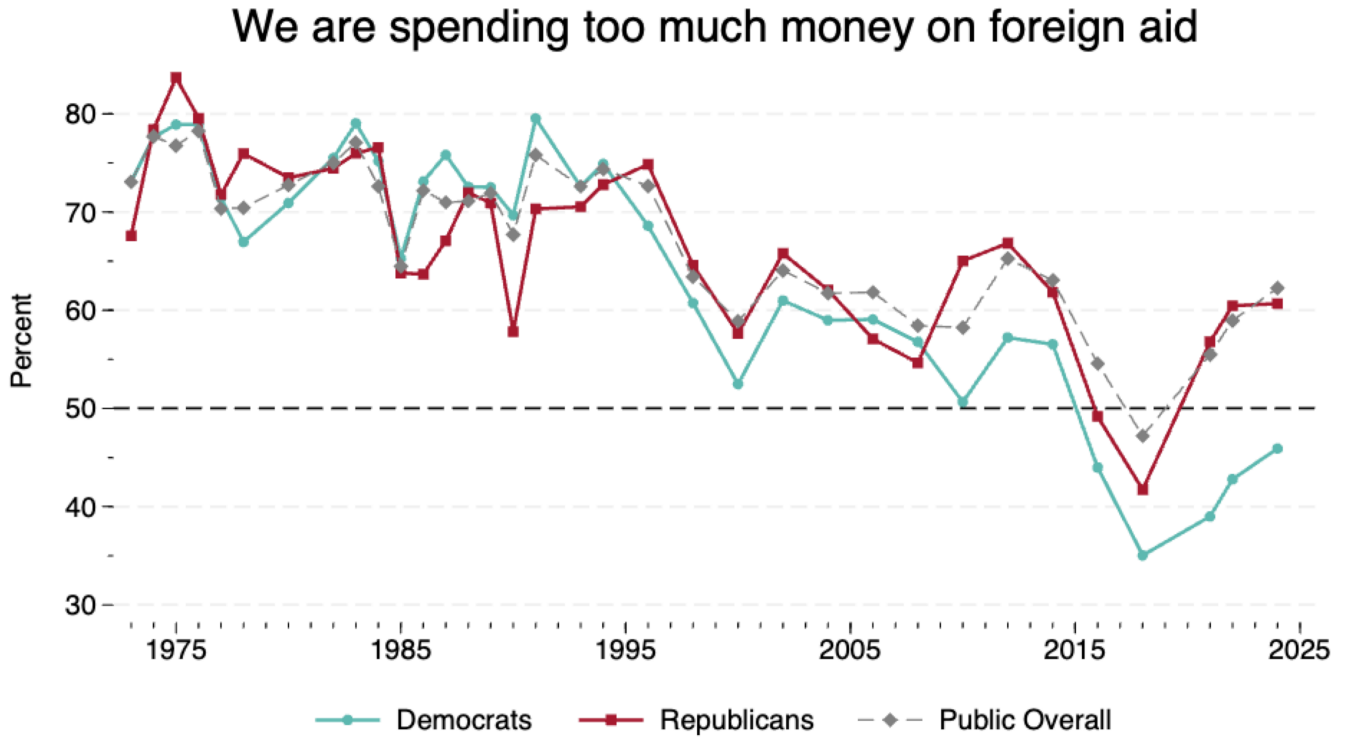
¹ Long-running data from the General Social Survey (GSS) similarly show that large shares of Americans—including majorities in both parties—have consistently believed the United States spends too much on foreign aid. In recent years, however, attitudes have become more polarized, with Republicans significantly more likely than Democrats to hold this view. See Appendix Figure A1.

² See Section A of the separate Supplementary Appendix file for a list of all survey items, their question wording, and the surveys from which they originate. See Section B to download a dataset containing all individual survey items, metadata, and available covariates.

³ For results by party affiliation, see Appendix Figure A5.

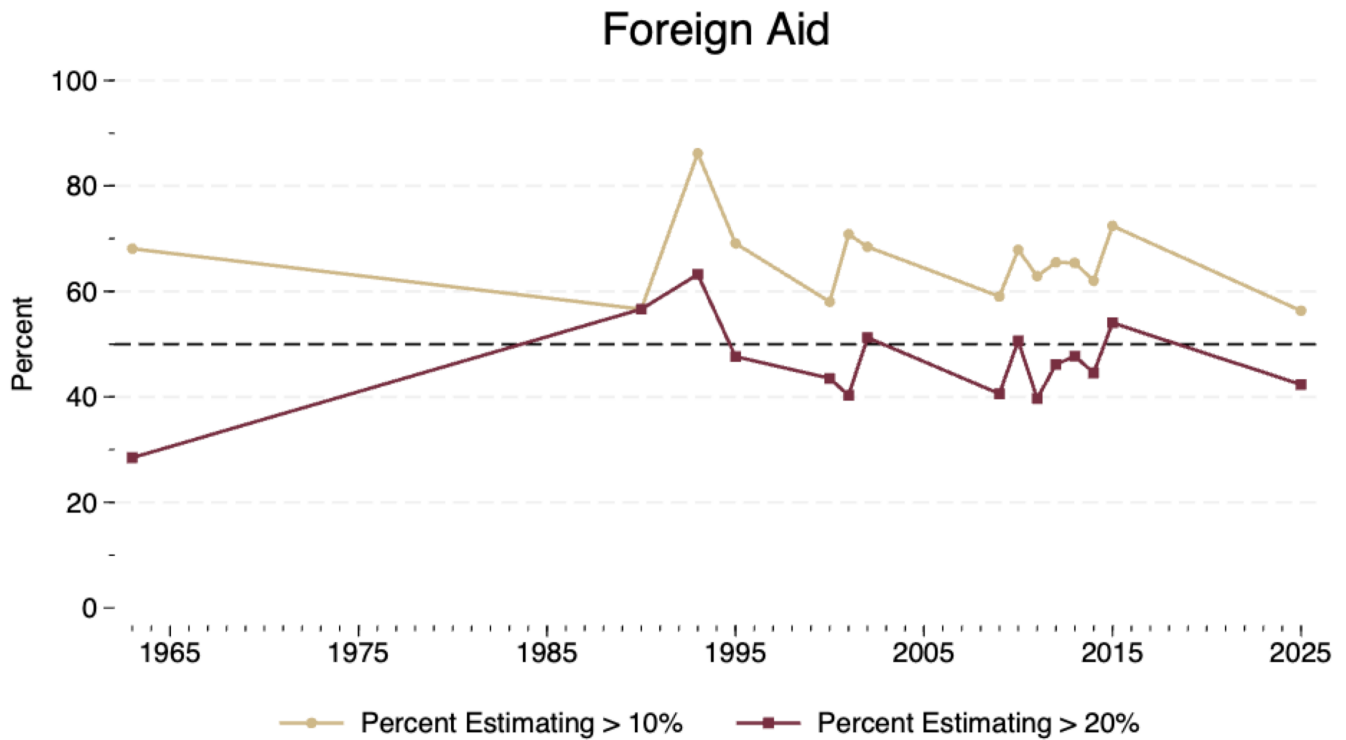
APPENDIX A: SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES

Figure A1. Share of Americans Saying the U.S. Spends Too Much on Foreign Aid (1972-2024), by Party



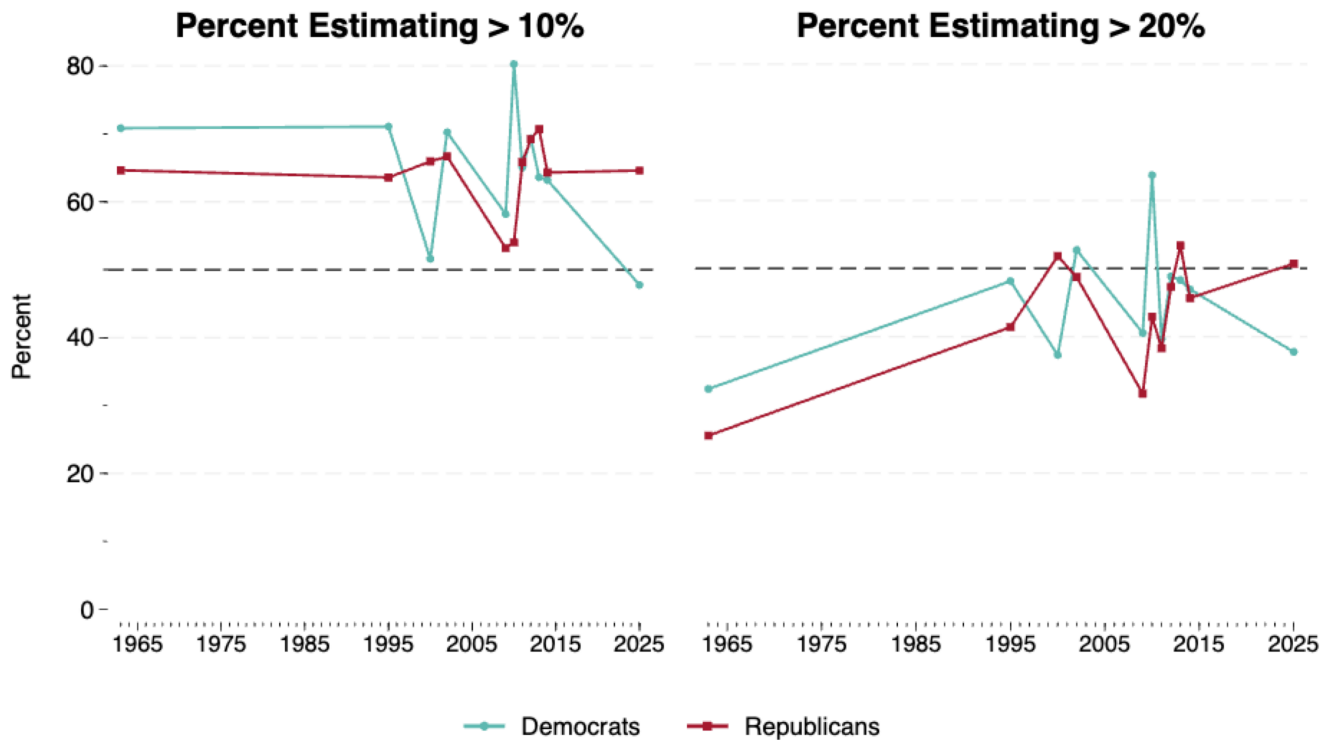
Note: Data are weighted. Lines show the percentage of respondents saying the United States spends “too much” on foreign aid, based on responses to a General Social Survey (GSS) question asking whether the U.S. spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on various policy areas. Results are shown separately for Democrats, Republicans, and the public overall. Party identification is based on respondents’ self-reported affiliation.

Figure A2. Shares of Americans Estimating Foreign Aid as Comprising More than 10% and 20% of the Federal Budget (1963–2025)



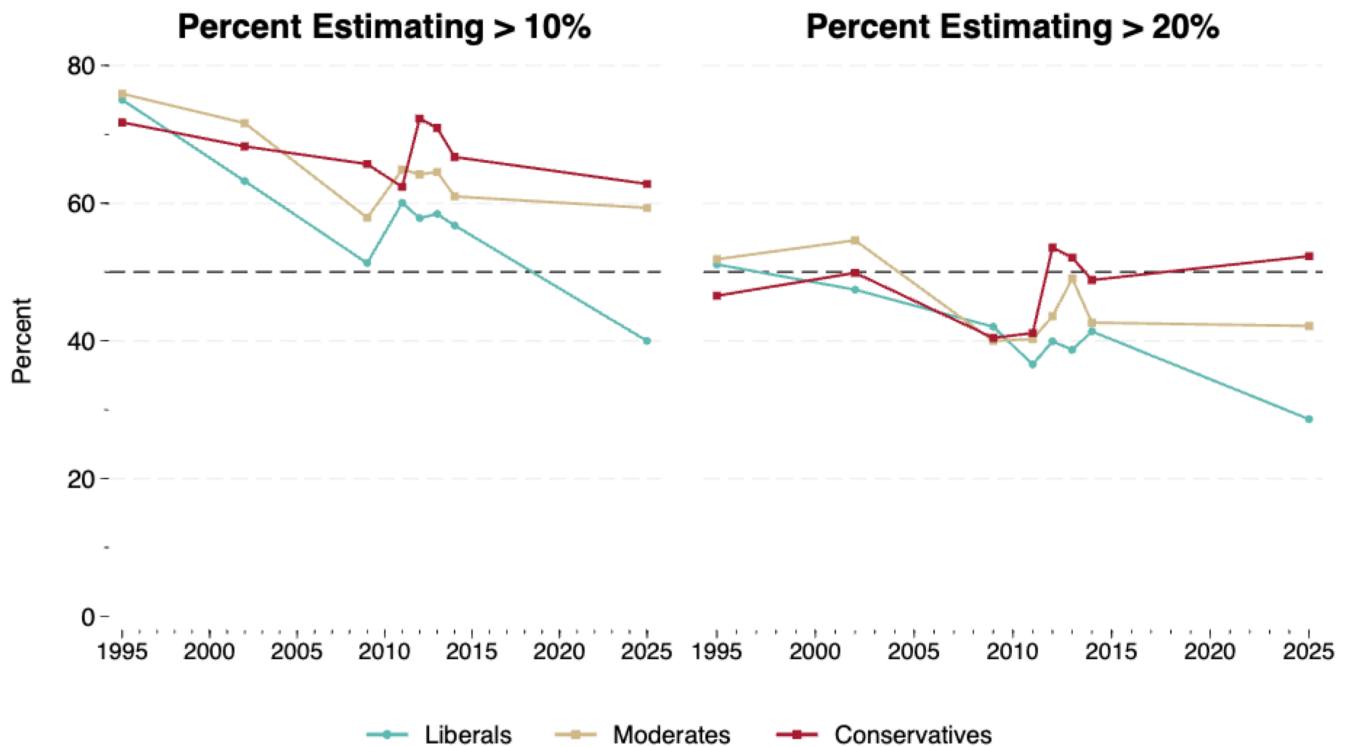
Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents who estimate that foreign aid accounts for more than 10% and more than 20% of the federal budget. Estimates are derived from surveys that use both categorical response options (e.g., “more than 10%”) and open-ended (continuous) questions. For surveys with continuous responses, respondents are assigned to each category based on their reported estimate (e.g., estimates greater than 10% are included in the “>10%” category). The dashed horizontal line marks 50%. The actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid has remained near 1% over this period.

Figure A3. Shares of Americans Estimating Foreign Aid as Comprising More than 10% and 20% of the Federal Budget (1963–2025), by Party Affiliation



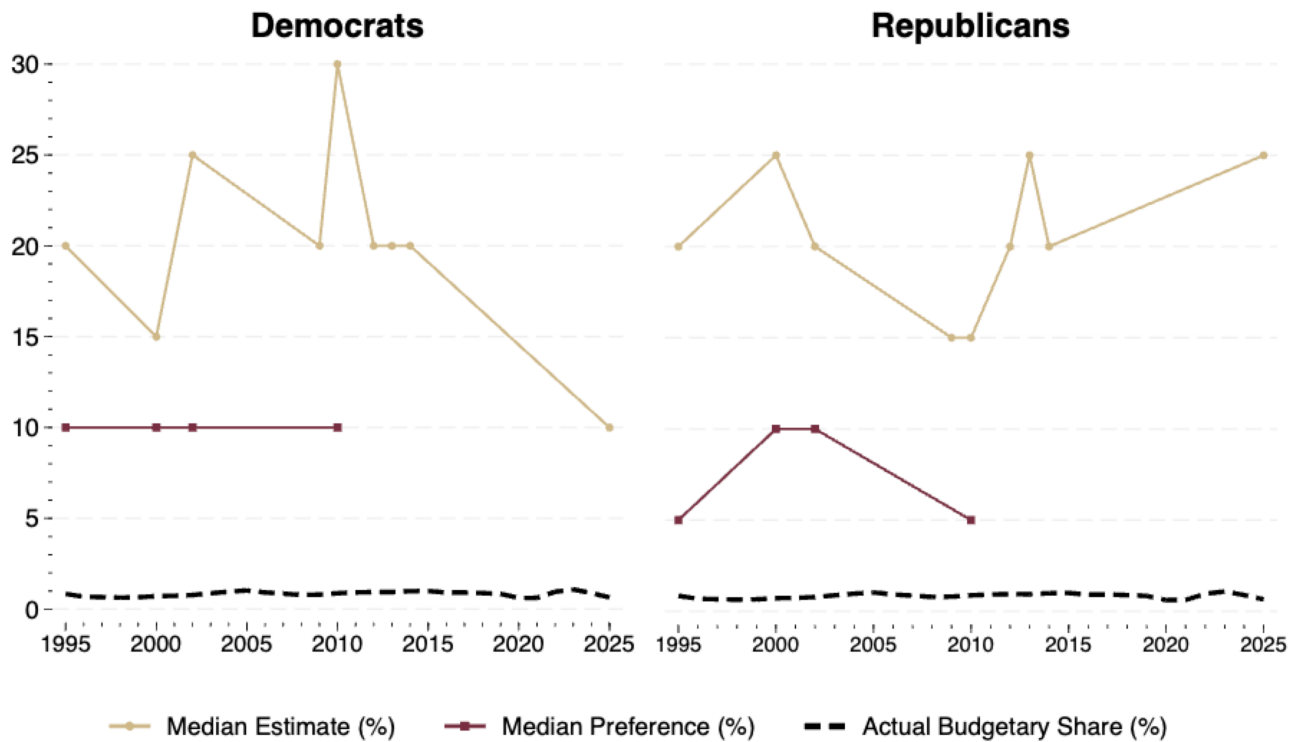
Note: Lines show the percentage of Democratic and Republican respondents who estimate that foreign aid accounts for more than 10% and more than 20% of the federal budget. Estimates are derived from surveys that use both categorical response options (e.g., “more than 10%”) and open-ended (continuous) questions. For surveys with continuous responses, respondents are assigned to each category based on their reported estimate (e.g., estimates greater than 10% are included in the “>10%” category). The dashed horizontal line marks 50%. The actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid has remained near 1% over this period.

Figure A4. Shares of Americans Estimating Foreign Aid as Comprising More than 10% and 20% of the Federal Budget (1995–2025), by Ideology



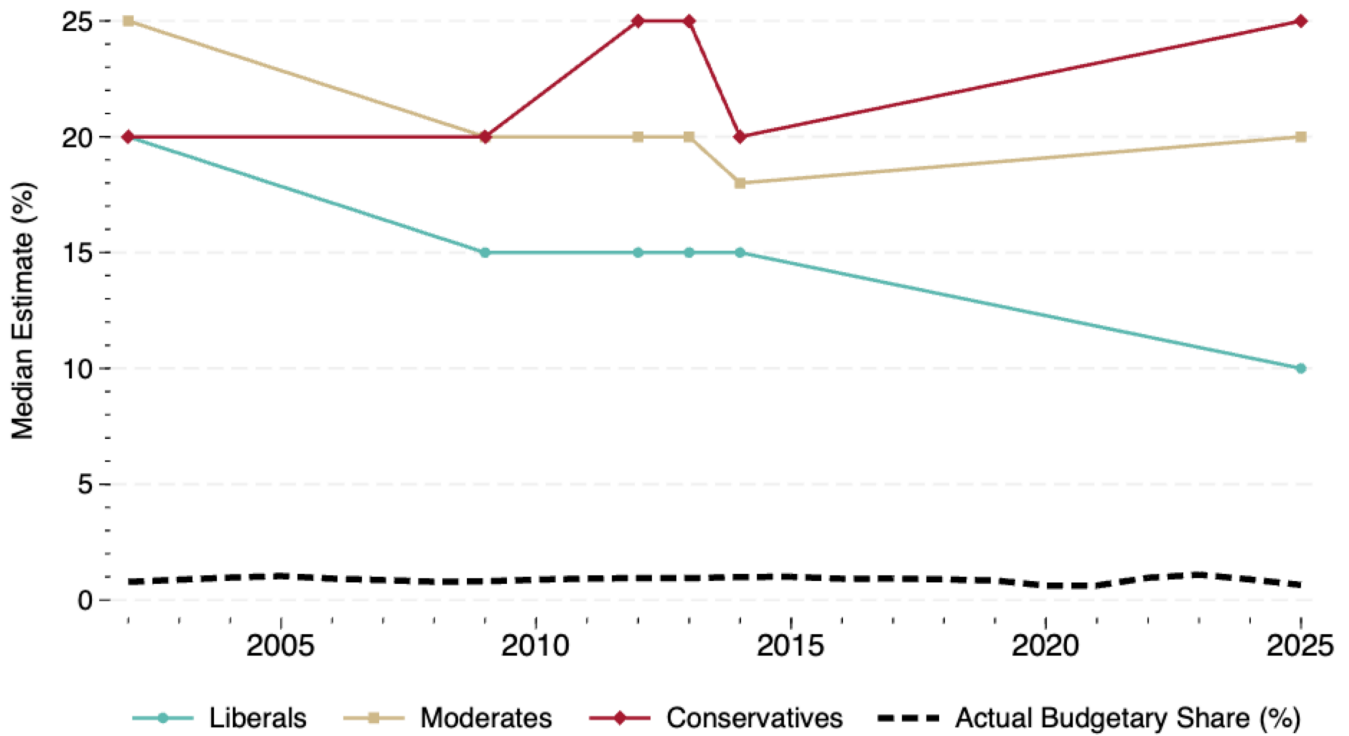
Note: Lines show the percentage of self-identified liberal, moderate, and conservative respondents who estimate that foreign aid accounts for more than 10% and more than 20% of the federal budget. Estimates are derived from surveys that use both categorical response options (e.g., “more than 10%”) and open-ended (continuous) questions. For surveys with continuous responses, respondents are assigned to each category based on their reported estimate (e.g., estimates greater than 10% are included in the “>10%” category). The dashed horizontal line marks 50%. The actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid has remained near 1% over this period.

Figure A5. Estimates and Actual Share of Federal Spending on Foreign Aid, by Party Affiliation



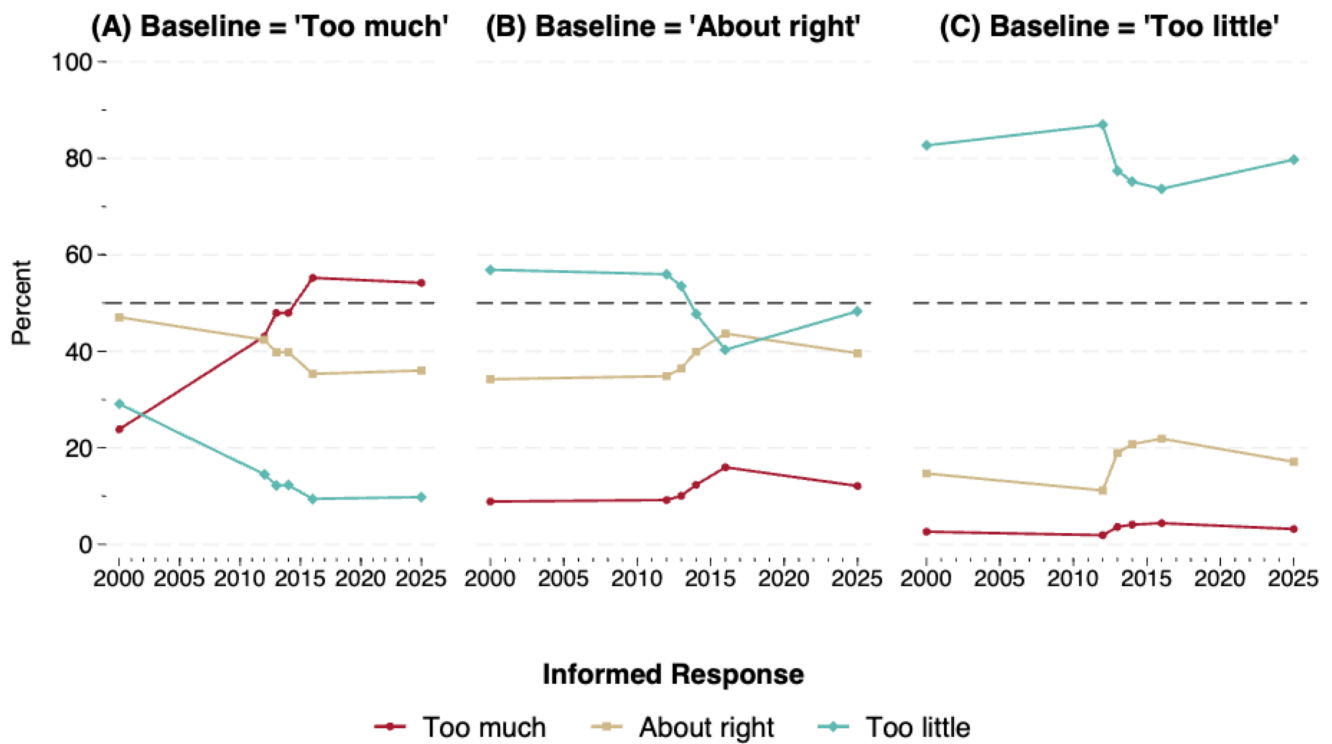
Note: The gold and garnet lines show the median estimated shares of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid (“Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?”) among Democratic (left panel) and Republican (right panel) respondents, respectively. The dashed black line shows the actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid in each year. Actual budget shares are based on data from the Office of Management and Budget. Respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

Figure A6. Estimates and Actual Share of Federal Spending on Foreign Aid, by Ideology



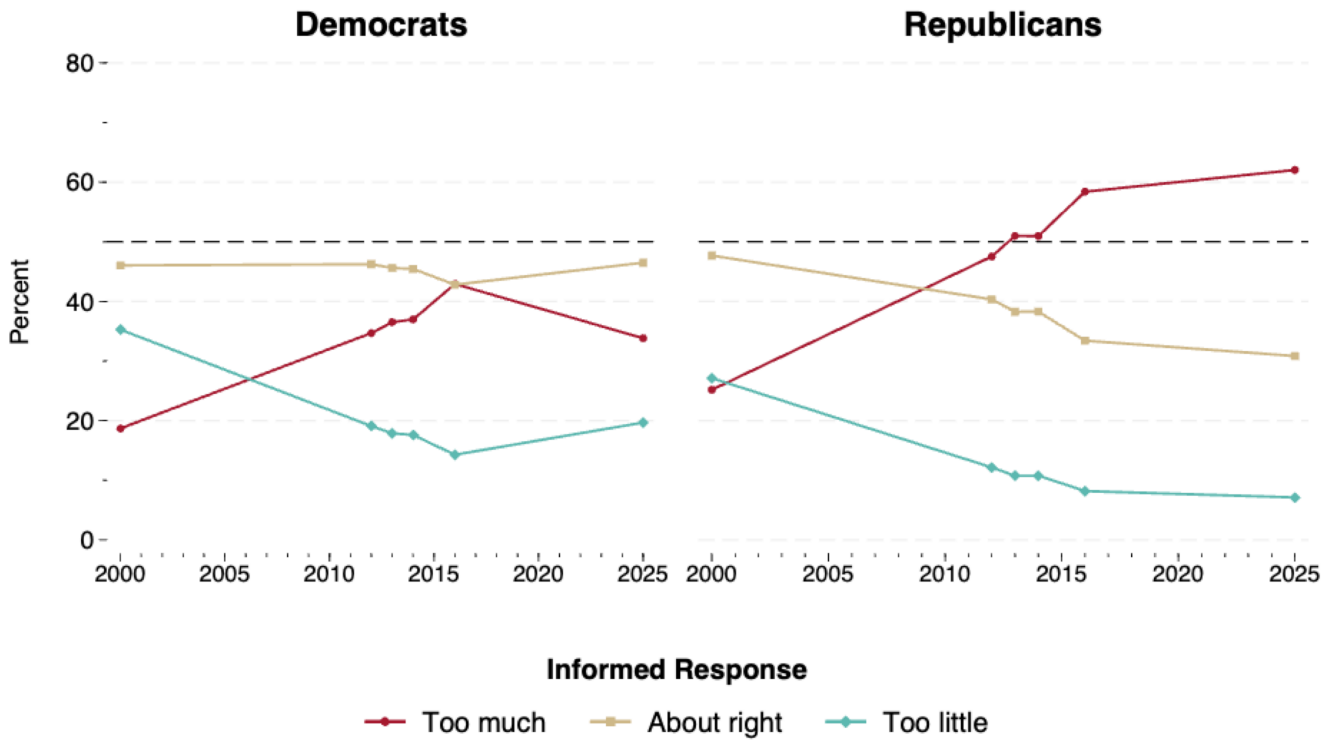
Note: Lines show the median estimated shares of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid (“Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?”) by respondent ideological self-identification. The dashed black line shows the actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid in each year. Actual budget shares are based on data from the Office of Management and Budget. Respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

Figure A7. Informed Attitudes Toward Foreign Aid Spending, by Baseline Attitude



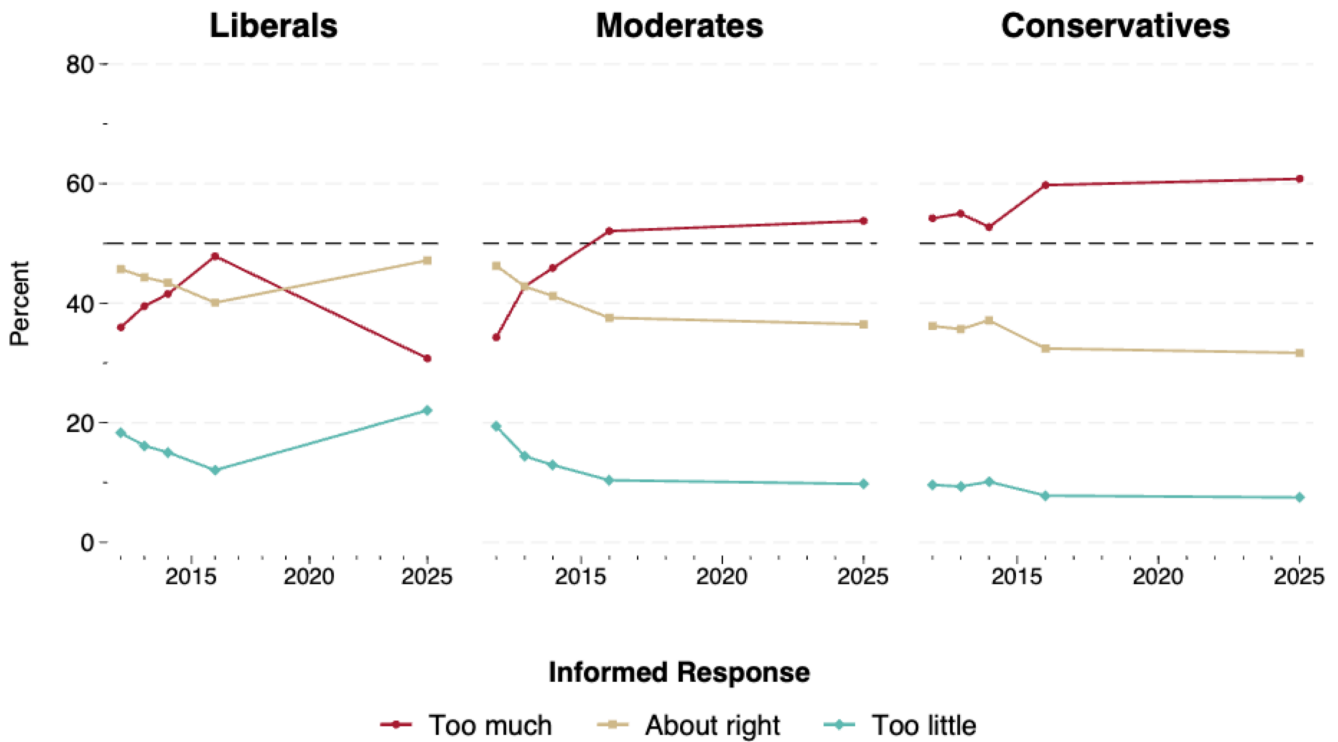
Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents selecting each response category (“too much,” “about right,” or “too little”) after being informed that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. Panels group respondents by their initial (baseline) attitude, as indicated in the panel headers. Data are drawn from surveys that include both the baseline question and a follow-up question asked after providing information about foreign aid’s share of federal spending.

Figure A8. Informed Attitudes Toward Foreign Aid Spending, by Party and Baseline Attitude (“Too Much”)



Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents selecting each response category (“too much,” “about right,” or “too little”) after being informed that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. The sample is restricted to respondents who initially said the United States spends “too much” on foreign aid. Panels display results separately for Democrats and Republicans. Data are drawn from surveys that include both the baseline question and a follow-up question asked after providing information about foreign aid’s share of federal spending.

Figure A9. Informed Attitudes Toward Foreign Aid Spending, by Ideology and Baseline Attitude (“Too Much”)



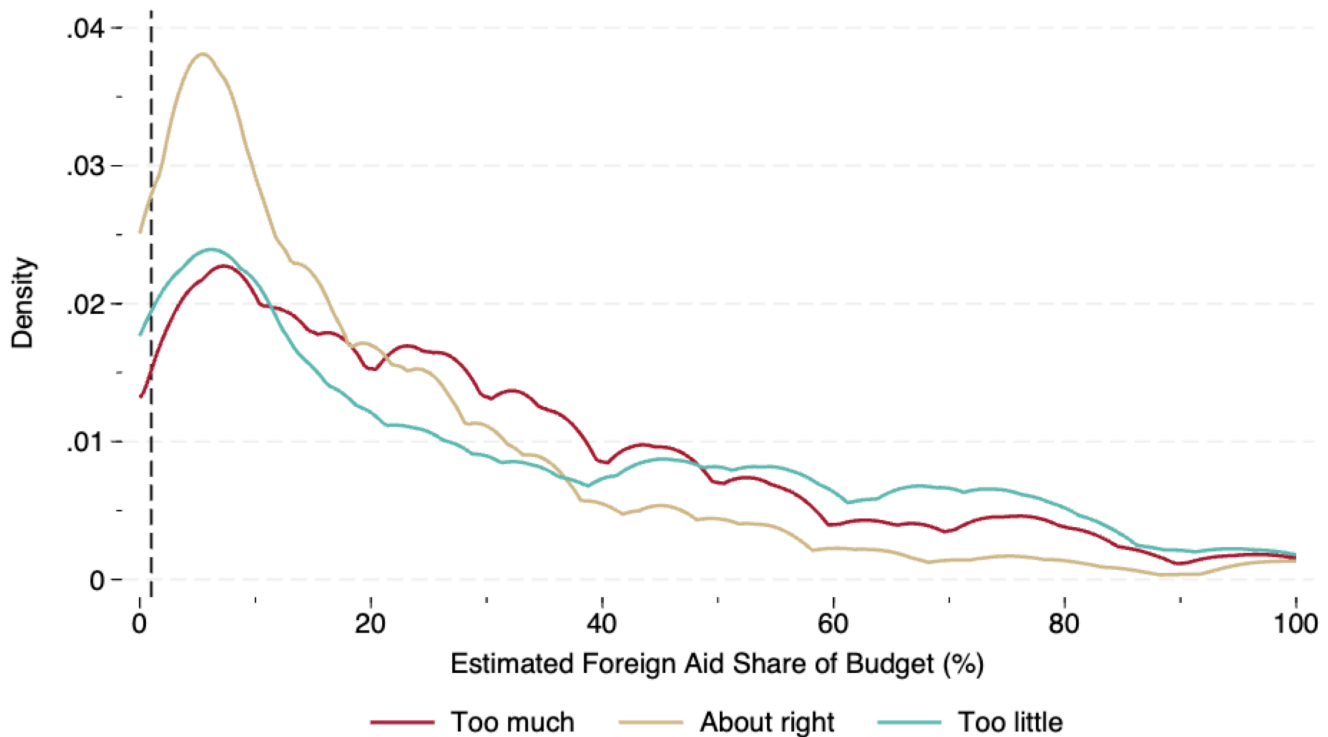
Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents selecting each response category (“too much,” “about right,” or “too little”) after being informed that foreign aid accounts for about 1% of the federal budget. The sample is restricted to respondents who initially said the United States spends “too much” on foreign aid. Panels display results separately for self-identified liberal, moderate, and conservative respondents. Data are drawn from surveys that include both the baseline question and a follow-up question asked after providing information about foreign aid’s share of federal spending.

APPENDIX B: FOREIGN AID ATTITUDES AND INFORMATIONAL UPDATING

The following analyses provide additional detail on the relationship between perceived foreign aid spending, spending attitudes, and informational updating.

Figure B1 shows the distribution of estimated foreign aid spending by respondents' spending attitudes.

Figure B1. Distribution of Estimated Foreign Aid Spending by Policy Preferences

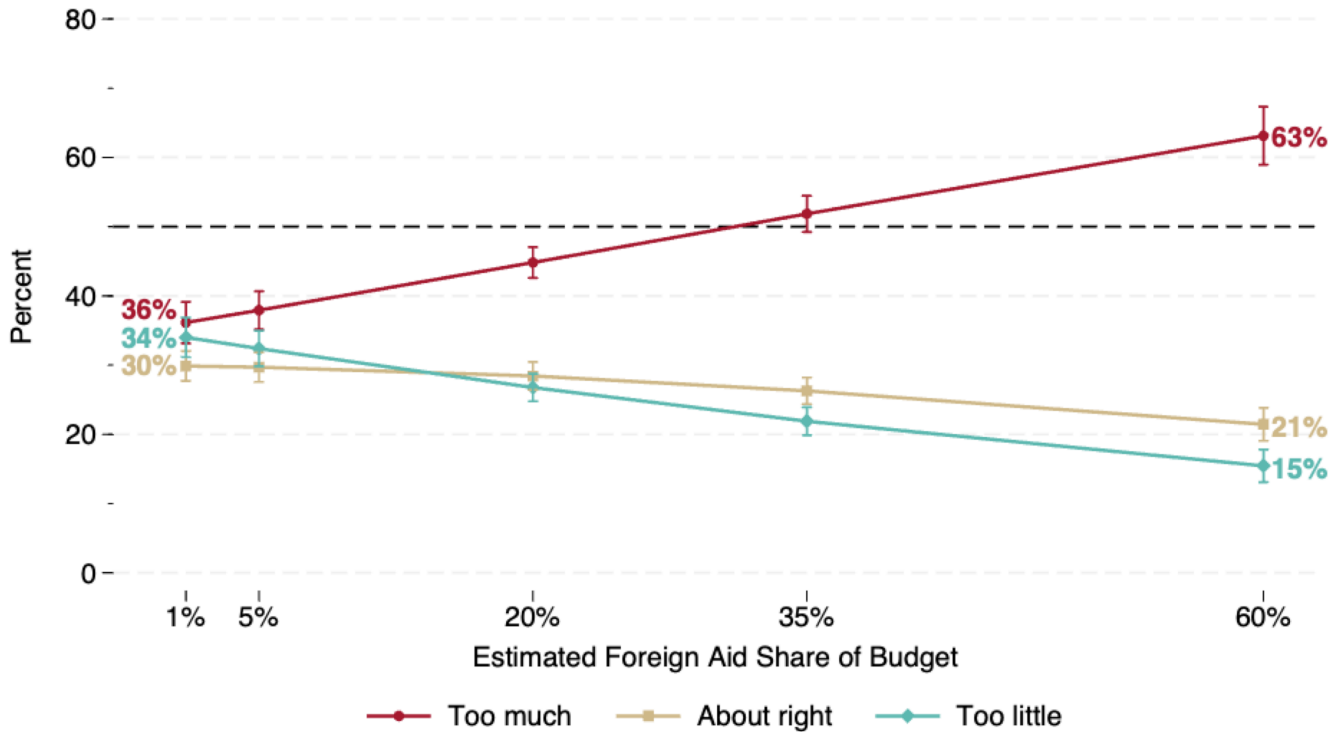


Note: Lines show the distribution (kernel density) of respondents' estimates of the share of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid, by spending attitude ("too much," "about right," or "too little"). The vertical dashed line indicates the actual share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid (approximately 1%). Estimates are based on responses to survey questions asking respondents to provide a percentage estimate of foreign aid spending; respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

Another way to examine this relationship is to consider how spending attitudes vary across different levels of perceived spending. As shown in Figure B2, respondents who estimate foreign aid as a larger share of the federal budget are much more likely to say the United States spends too much, while those who provide lower estimates are more likely to say it spends too little. For example, among respondents who estimate foreign aid at about 60% of the budget, roughly 63% say the U.S. spends too much, compared with about 36% among those who estimate it at 1%. Over the same range, the share saying the U.S. spends too little falls from about 34% to 15%.

Even so, these differences do not resolve the broader pattern of misperception. Respondents across all spending attitudes substantially overestimate foreign aid's true share of the federal budget.

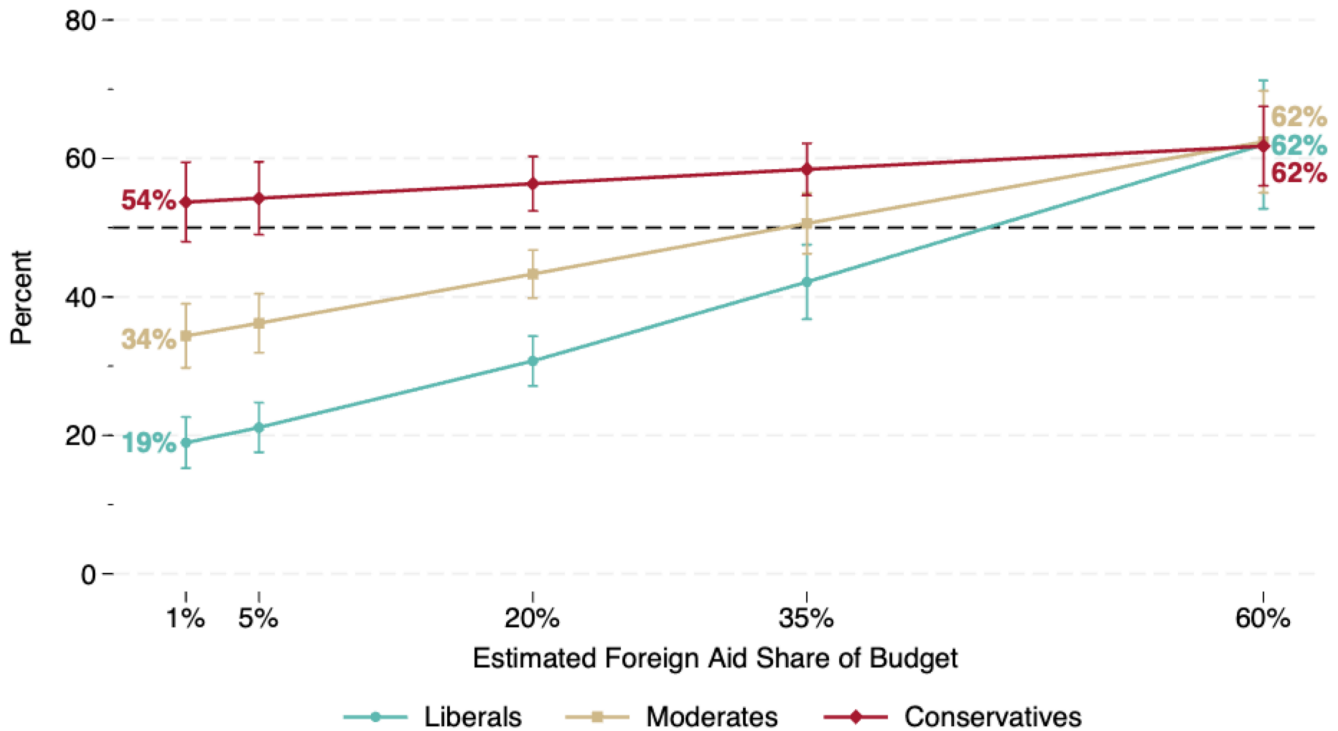
Figure B2. Spending Attitudes by Estimated Share of Foreign Aid in the Federal Budget



Note: Lines show the percentage of respondents selecting each response category (“too much,” “about right,” or “too little”) at different levels of estimated percentage of the budget spent on foreign aid (x-axis). Values are based on predictive margins from an ordered logistic regression of spending attitudes on respondents’ estimated share of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid, controlling for survey year. Points correspond to selected values of estimated spending (1%, 5%, 20%, 35%, and 60%). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B3 further shows that the relationship between perceived spending and policy preferences varies somewhat by ideology. In particular, liberals' spending attitudes appear more responsive to changes in perceived spending levels than those of conservatives, whose views appear less responsive to differences in estimated budget shares.

Figure B3. Probability of Saying the U.S. Spends Too Much on Foreign Aid, by Estimated Spending and Ideology



Note: Lines show the percentage of self-identified liberal, moderate, and conservative respondents selecting a “too much” response at different levels of estimated foreign aid spending. Values are based on predictive margins from an ordered logistic regression of spending attitudes on respondents’ estimated share of the federal budget devoted to foreign aid, controlling for survey year. Points correspond to selected values of estimated spending (1%, 5%, 20%, 35%, and 60%). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

APPENDIX C: MISPERCEPTIONS ACROSS FEDERAL SPENDING CATEGORIES

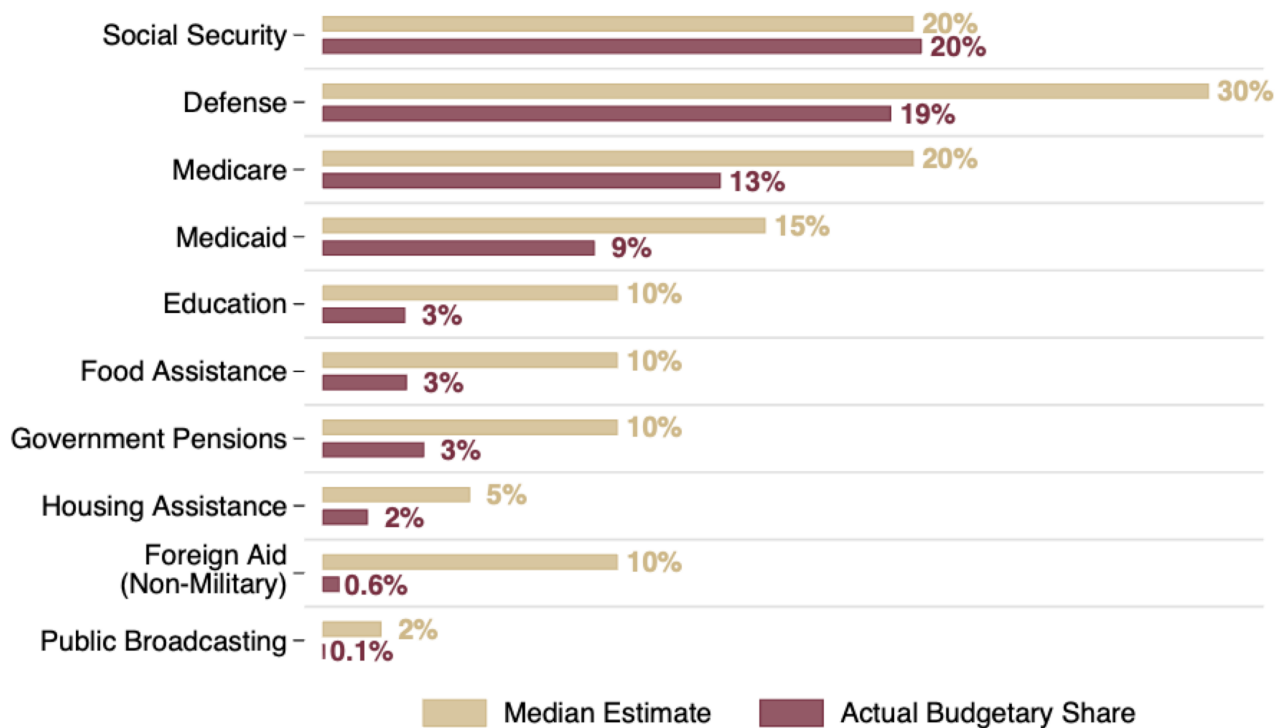
While misperceptions are especially large for foreign aid, Americans also misestimate spending in other areas of the federal budget. Data on perceived spending across multiple budget categories are comparatively limited, but the available surveys suggest that Americans tend to overestimate the size of smaller programs while underestimating larger ones.

Figure C1 shows estimates of spending across a range of major budget categories from

a 2011 survey—one of the few that asked respondents to estimate multiple areas of federal spending. The pattern is clear: Americans overestimate the size of most spending categories, but the magnitude of the error varies widely.

The largest errors occur for the smallest programs, which are inflated by large margins, while estimates of larger programs are generally closer to their true values—though still often overstated. For example, respondents’ estimates of Social Security (20%) closely track its actual share (20%), while estimates of defense (30%), Medicare (20%), and Medicaid (15%) are closer to—but still above—their true values (19%, 13%, and 9%, respectively).

Figure C1. Public Estimates vs. Actual Federal Spending by Program (2011)



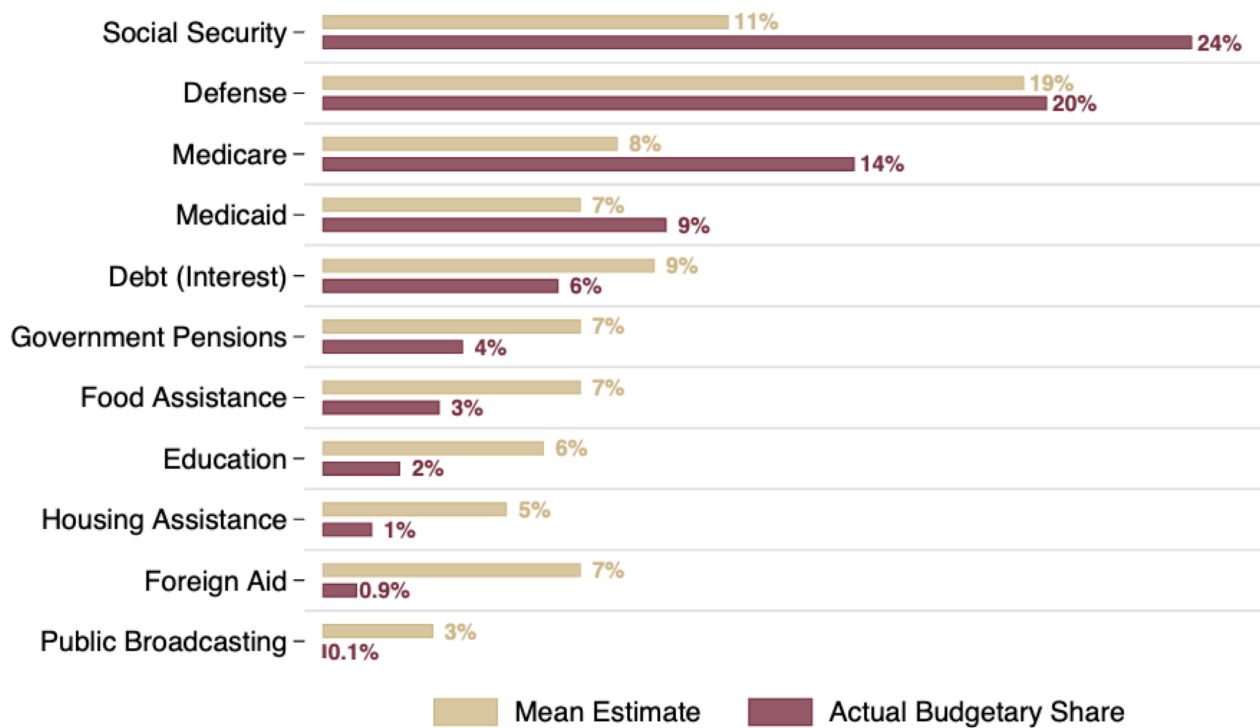
Note: Gold bars show median estimates of the share of the federal budget devoted to each program based on responses to an open-ended question asking respondents to estimate what percentage of federal spending goes to each category. Respondents could provide any value from less than 1% to 100%. “Foreign aid (non-military)” refers to spending on international development and humanitarian assistance. Actual budget shares (garnet bars) are based on 2011 data from the Office of Management and Budget. Respondents who did not provide an estimate are excluded.

One concern with these types of estimates is that respondents are not required to ensure that their answers sum to 100%, which could contribute to overestimation across categories. To address this, Figure C2 presents results from a separate 2013 YouGov

survey that required respondents to allocate the entire federal budget across spending categories.

A similar pattern emerges. Even when constrained to distribute the budget, respondents continue to overestimate the size of smaller programs while underestimating the size of larger ones. Foreign aid, for example, is still assigned a much larger share (7%) than its actual 2013 budgetary share (0.9%). Public broadcasting (3% vs. 0.1%), along with programs such as housing assistance (5% vs. 1%), education (6% vs. 2%), and food assistance (7% vs. 3%), also remain substantially overstated. At the same time, major programs like Social Security (11% vs. 24%) and Medicare (8% vs. 14%) are underestimated, while defense spending is estimated more accurately (19% vs. 20%) than in the 2011 survey.

Figure C2. Public Estimates vs. Actual Federal Spending by Program (2013)



Note: Bars show mean estimates of the share of the federal budget devoted to each program from a survey that asked respondents to allocate the entire federal budget across categories. Because respondents were required to distribute 100% of spending, estimates across categories sum to 100%. Estimates are based on survey crosstabs that report means (medians are not available). The category “Rest of the government” is not shown but can be inferred as the remainder needed for each respondent’s allocations to sum to 100%. Actual budget shares are based on 2013 data from the Office of Management and Budget.

These results suggest that misperceptions of federal spending do not simply reflect a failure to balance totals across categories. Instead, they reflect a broader misunderstanding of how the federal budget is structured.