

# AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON FOREIGN AID

*Measuring Americans' perceptions toward U.S. foreign aid, one year since USAID's dismantlement*

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ECHELON  
INSIGHTS



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# Executive Summary

One year after the U.S. government dismantled USAID and made sweeping foreign aid cuts, a clear majority of Americans back foreign aid—and that support reaches across party lines. We asked over 2,000 Americans about their views; respondents started out supportive of foreign aid by a decisive 19-point margin, 54 to 35 percent. That support runs deeper than the label suggests: when foreign aid is described not as an umbrella term but as the specific programs it funds—disaster relief, global health, disease prevention, peacekeeping—Americans favor every major program area, often overwhelmingly so. And rather than wanting it all torn down, 8-in-10 say the path forward is to reform and strengthen what works, not eliminate it.

Initial support for foreign aid is broad but uneven. Republicans and MAGA Republicans are initially skeptical, with net unfavorable views toward U.S. foreign aid; Democrats are among the strongest proponents of foreign aid. Many Americans also start out with real misconceptions—most of all about cost, vastly overestimating how much the U.S. actually spends. After learning that just one percent of the budget was spent on foreign aid prior to cuts, over three-quarters (78%) of Americans favor maintaining or even increasing those spending levels. And when Americans learn what aid dollars have actually accomplished, support for foreign aid grows to 70%—including 58% among Republicans and 50% among MAGA Republicans, or double-digit shifts in support among those most skeptical toward foreign aid at the start.

# What we found

## Trend #1: Americans show broad support for foreign aid.

A year after foreign aid cuts, a majority of Americans overall are still favorable toward U.S. foreign aid—54% reported being very or somewhat favorable, with a net rating of +19 points. This baseline reflects Americans’ broader sentiments about the country’s role in the world. 7-in-10 say the U.S. should be at least selectively, if not actively, engaged at a global level, whether through aid or partnerships, and 79% agree that foreign aid can be a good and effective part of U.S. foreign policy.

However, support for foreign aid significantly increases when it’s given more concrete labels, rather than treated as an umbrella term. From disaster relief to global health, and peacekeeping to democracy building, Americans are favorable toward every tested program area in the foreign aid family [Figure 1]. This is true even for areas Americans struggled to define as “foreign aid,” such as trainings for civil society organizations or investing in local businesses. Notably, Americans across parties support each tested program area but vary considerably in intensity. Democrats are much more supportive than Republicans of program areas such as democracy promotion and economic development.

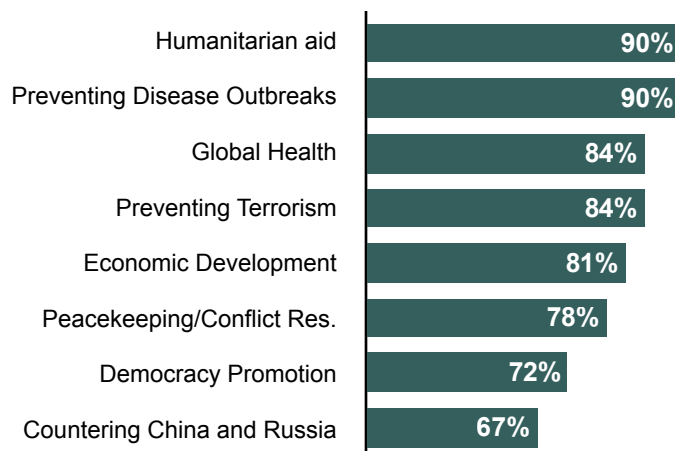


Figure 1: % of Americans who “strongly support” or “somewhat support” each type of aid.

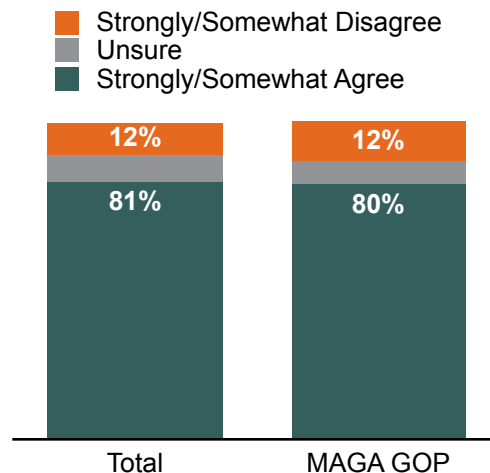


Figure 2: Americans’ views on reforming, rather than eliminating, foreign aid.

Republicans are slightly less supportive on average across program areas, but are more likely than Democrats to support programs countering the influence of China and Russia. Americans also think their neighbors are more likely than not to support foreign aid, too—47% believe their neighbors strongly or somewhat support foreign aid, while just 23% believe the opposite.

Americans are even more supportive of U.S. foreign aid when they think it’s accountable to them. We prompted respondents with an acknowledgement that not all aid programs were up to par, highlighting some of the most common critiques on priorities and accountability. When given that context, 8-in-10 agree that the path forward should be reforming and strengthening foreign aid with better safeguards, not cutting it all. Even those most skeptical toward foreign aid agree. MAGA supporters—defined in this survey as those who support or lean towards Republicans but say they primarily support Trump over the Party—start out unfavorable toward foreign aid, at net -17, but still prefer reforming aid programs over cutting them by a 68-point margin [Figure 2].

## Trend #2: Americans overestimate past foreign aid spending and would support the same or higher spending

Within the grand scheme of annual spending for the U.S. government, foreign aid historically made up just a small fraction of the budget, at around 1%.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, the average American vastly overestimates how much the U.S. spent on foreign aid each year before the 2025 cuts. Just 31% of respondents guessed it's under 5%. Slightly more—35%—thought U.S. foreign aid spending was at least 20% of the annual budget, roughly the same size as all of Social Security in the federal budget. 8% of Americans thought it was over half the budget—on par with yearly spending for Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and defense, combined.

After asking them to guess a specific number, we then asked respondents whether they would support setting foreign aid spending at 2%. With still only their best guesses to go off of, 7-in-10 of Americans strongly or somewhat support a proposal for spending 2% of the annual federal budget on foreign aid—which would double foreign aid's past annual budget. That support even extends to MAGA supporters—half (49%) support the move, while just 36% oppose it [Figure 3].

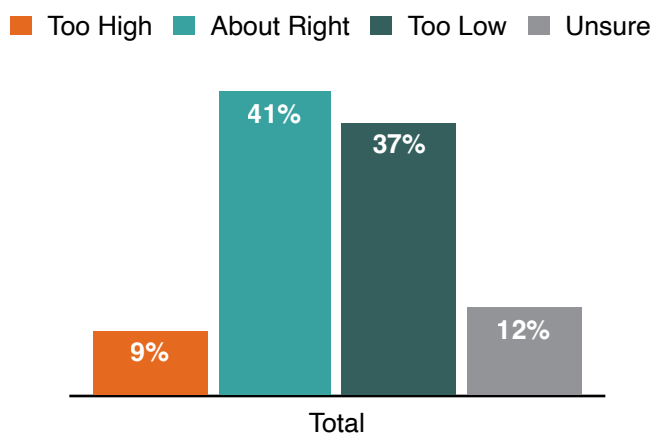


Figure 3: Americans' views on spending 1% of the U.S. government's total budget on foreign aid.

<sup>1</sup> In Fiscal Year 2024, the percentage was 1.04%. Disbursements totaled \$72 billion, and the total U.S. budget was \$6.93 trillion. Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, "ForeignAssistance.gov," <https://foreignassistance.gov/>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "America's Finance Guide: Federal Spending," <https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/federal-spending/>.

What about the existing budget? When we finally revealed the actual cost of U.S. foreign aid—1% of the annual budget before 2025—78% of Americans said that was either "about right" (41%) or "too low" (37%). Americans reached consensus on this across societal lines—71% of Republicans, 80% of Independents, and 86% of Democrats feel the same, as did 64% of MAGA supporters.

Impact matters most here. Americans want to see what their taxpayer dollars accomplished, and they associate those stories of impact with greater funding. Nearly 8-in-10 support keeping funding for programs that demonstrate early or long-term impacts. Just 12% say foreign aid should be cut across the board regardless of impact.

But impact also does not necessarily mean demonstrating benefits to the U.S. While respondents are not completely unreceptive to the idea of conditional aid, humanitarianism leads over transactional relationships in support. We asked Americans whether aid should be conditional on direct trade benefits to the U.S.; just 18% say it should always be conditional, while over 3-in-4 say that should never or only sometimes be the case. When given examples of impact to consider, humanitarianism reliably resonated. For example, 70% say they would support restoring aid funding when reading estimates from experts that foreign aid cuts could lead to over 9 million deaths by 2030.

The bottom line—when it comes to cost versus impact, selling foreign aid does not have to be just about helping ourselves; foreign aid advocates can lead with humanitarian objectives.

## Trend #3: Overseas impacts matter, but so do overseas threats: the case with Ebola

In the post-Covid era, global health is the most popular program area within the wider foreign aid community. Preventing disease outbreaks and global health more broadly polled at or near the top of the list of program areas at the start of the survey, at 90% and 84% support, respectively. Americans across party lines also see security as a key priority, with 72% overall agreeing that foreign aid helps to keep the U.S. safer from threats overseas. That existing support is reflected in their views on the threat of Ebola.

Americans are generally fearful of the spread of Ebola—a majority are very or somewhat concerned about its potential spread to the U.S. When given facts about the current outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including that experts identified U.S. foreign aid funding cuts as a key factor in its rapid spread, 3-in-4 support restoring funding to fight the outbreak. Even further, nearly the same number (72%) say the Ebola outbreak has led them to support restoring some or all global health funding around the world.

Notably, Republicans are especially moved by the data provided. While results on being very or somewhat concerned about the potential spread of

Ebola into the U.S. are partisan—69% among Democrats, versus 40% among Republicans—after learning about the outbreak in the Congo, Republicans overwhelmingly support restoring aid to fight this specific outbreak by a 38-point margin (62-24), and nearly 6-in-10 support restoring some or all global health funding across the board. MAGA supporters likewise agree with both proposals, by 52-34 and 46-37 point margins, despite being less concerned with the threat of Ebola to the U.S.

The data shows facts matter. We wanted to measure how much information about types of aid, the overall cost, and its humanitarian impact moved the needle, and the results were striking. After survey-provided context on the cost and impact of U.S. foreign aid spending—but before any message testing—Americans' favorability toward foreign aid shifted by +9 points. When asked how favorable they are toward foreign aid after learning more, nearly 2-in-3 (63%) say they're very or somewhat favorable, with 26% very or somewhat unfavorable. That shift was across the board, too. Even for MAGA supporters, among the most skeptical groups at the start of the survey, favorability had moved into the net positive, 45-43 (+2).

## Trend #4: Stories of impact drive support. So does foreign aid's connection to national security

A recurring industry challenge in the run-up to USAID's dismantlement was how to sell foreign aid to the American public. What we already knew—and what the above data shows—was that Americans had gaps in their knowledge of what foreign aid is, what it does, and what it costs. In a short span, op-eds, substacks, and white papers proliferated on topics ranging from national security to economic benefits, as well as an appeal to America's moral compass—

“aiding those less fortunate is simply the right thing to do.”

One year later, our findings show all these arguments ultimately are successful—from the internationalists to the MAGA movement, every argument we tested is convincing both overall and among key demographics. But it turns out the most successful case for foreign aid is simply telling Americans what it accomplished.

We tested stories of impact—narratives that typically only lived in Monitoring & Evaluation reports sent to USAID or the State Department—in two ways, including a general message and four specific cases. All were very or somewhat convincing arguments for three quarters of Americans [Figure 4]. Whether they were learning for the first time about foreign aid programs supporting girls’ education in the former Boko Haram-held regions of Nigeria; helping farmers to plant food crops instead of coca in Peru; combating the spread of tuberculosis in Bangladesh; or fighting poverty through infrastructure and economic development in West Africa, Americans found each a convincing case in favor of restoring foreign aid.

Stories of impact were not the only winning narratives, however. Americans were just as receptive to national security messaging. More than 3-in-4 were convinced by the argument that the U.S. is safer and more secure when it stops threats at their source, by giving foreign aid to promote stability and

development in areas vulnerable to cartels or terror groups, bolstering democracy, and fighting pandemics before they have a chance to spread globally. Republicans were particularly convinced by security messaging—2-in-3 (67%) said it was convincing for them, more than any other general message. Going into the details was just as effective—69% were convinced by the story of impact from Peru, which mentioned curtailing the Peruvian drug trade by cutting off cocaine production at the source.

Other tested narratives, from the morals argument to tangible benefits to Americans at home, were all also convincing. Even the lowest performing messages, that foreign aid saves the U.S. money in the long run and that it helps us compete with Russia and China, were convincing for 68% of respondents. When asked how they feel after messaging, favorability for foreign aid among Americans rose by a further +7 points, to 70%.

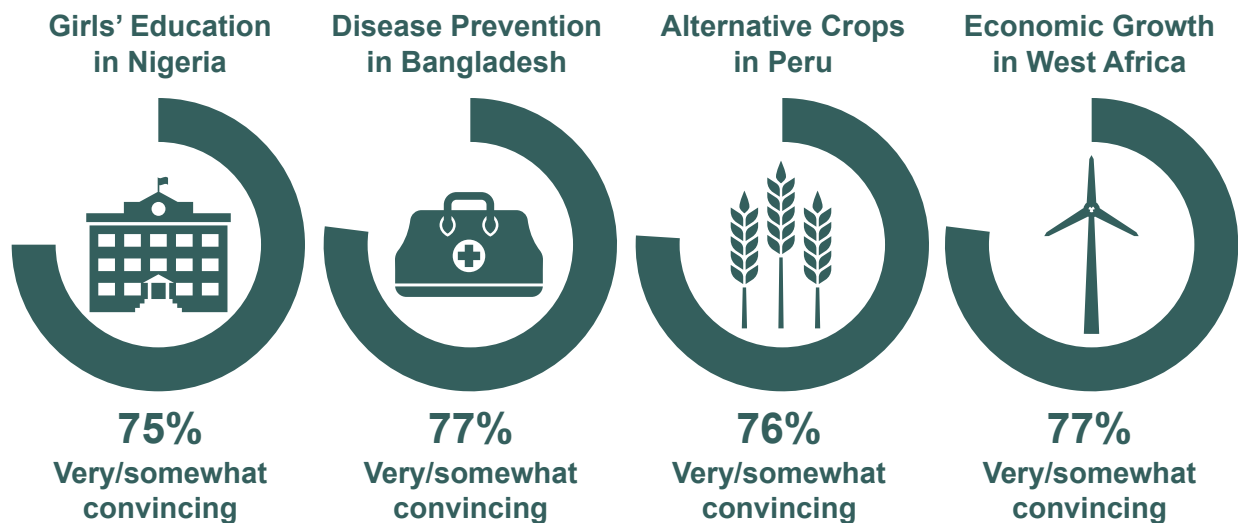


Figure 4: % of Americans who found each story of impact “very convincing” or “somewhat convincing”.

# Conclusion: Where foreign aid can go from here

Data does not exist in isolation, and the findings are clear: Americans support engagement in the world and see foreign aid as an important part of U.S. cooperation. 71% want the U.S. selectively or actively engaged in world affairs, especially when it relates to national interest. 79% see foreign aid as a good and effective part of that engagement, and when prompted on impact, 41% say the world is worse off today than it was a year ago due to U.S. foreign aid cuts—compared to just 20% who said it is better off.

Without information, foreign aid is favorable among more than half the country. With greater information, that number goes up by +16 points, from 54% to 70% [Figure 5]. The path there does not run through one winning message. Facts about cost, impact, and accountability all matter in the conversation. So does simply telling Americans what foreign aid actually is. This is consistent across demographics and in every part of the country. From as far west as California to as far east as Maine, and from Texas to the Dakotas, Americans in every region ended the survey more favorable. Even for the most skeptical, the foreign aid debate is not a settled one. With access to the same information, net favorability toward foreign aid among MAGA supporters goes from -17 to +10.

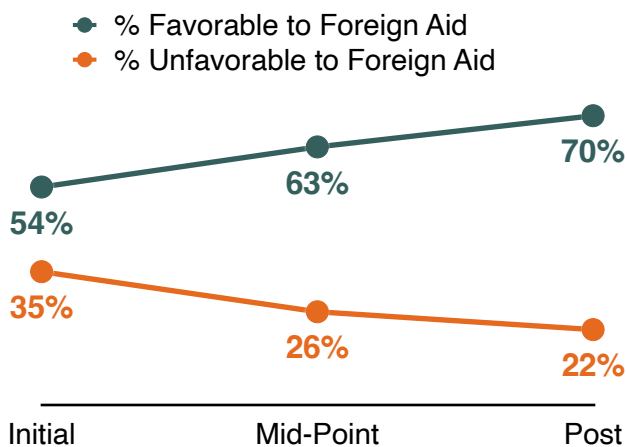


Figure 5: Change in favorability to foreign aid over the course of the survey.

What concerned Americans want is accountability. When asked what would change their mind, Americans who answered “unfavorable” or “unsure” toward foreign aid at the end of the survey said they would be more likely to support it if they saw greater accountability measures in place. Those include independent audits of programs (49%), evidence of impact on threats to the U.S. (47%), and clear end dates for programs (41%)—just 16% said none of the proposed ideas would change their mind. This is reflective of the strong support for rebuilding foreign aid with greater safeguards in place. It also outlines things the foreign aid industry already did, but where there is an opportunity to highlight these existing measures more in the future—such as receiving U.S. foreign aid grants meant publishing evidence, undergoing independent audits, and establishing program close-out procedures.

One year on, Americans—regardless of demographics or party lines—are looking for reforms to U.S. foreign aid, not termination. They want—and can be persuaded even further by—information access, from the realities of costs to stories of impact, and the accountability measures that were already in place before 2025. The path forward is therefore not ending all aid or reinventing the wheel, but simply reforming what was already there and finding better ways to communicate to the American public what the work is, what its impact is, and how it is safeguarded. The future of foreign aid lies not in a sweeping overhaul, but in tweaks to the status quo presented as a new direction. It’s about using the chisel, not the axe.

# Methodology

Echelon Insights conducted a survey on behalf of The Rockefeller Foundation to better understand voters' attitudes on foreign aid. The survey was fielded online from June 12-16, 2026 in English among a sample of 2,022 voters in the likely electorate nationwide using non-probability sampling, with a base sample of N=1,512 Registered Voters in the Likely Electorate Nationwide and an oversample of N=510 Republican Voters, achieving a total of 1,080 Republican voters in the sample. This oversample was included in order to be able to more closely examine opinions within this cohort of respondents. The sample was drawn from the Lucid sample exchange based on demographic quota targets for registered voters in the likely electorate nationwide, and matched to the L2 voter file to verify respondents' voter registration status.

Measures taken to ensure data quality included measures to prevent duplicate responses, questions designed to disqualify inattentive respondents, and the removal of respondents from the data file who answered more than one-third of the questions they were asked in less than one-third of the median response time per question.

The sample was weighted to reflect modeled turnout and demographic characteristics of the population of voters in the 2026 likely electorate nationwide based on a probabilistic model that incorporates data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement, as well as L2 voter file data. Weighting dimensions included gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, region, and turnout probability, as well as gender by age, education by gender, race by age, race by education, and age by education. The sample was also weighted on party affiliation to reflect an even balance between Republican/Republican-leaning and Democratic/Democratic-leaning voters.

Calculated the way it would be for a random sample and adjusted to incorporate the effect of weighting, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.5$  percentage points.