



RECONSIDERING AMERICANS' OVERESTIMATES OF GOVERNMENT WASTE AND FOREIGN AID

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March 30, 2018

Widespread and profound public misinformation about government presents a serious challenge to democratic accountability. This paper demonstrates that two of the most common examples of public misperception may be systematically overestimated; public misperceptions of “foreign aid” spending and “government waste” are in substantial part explained by differences of elite and popular terminology. Failure to take into account what members of the public mean by waste and foreign aid has led researchers, journalists and public officials to misunderstand meaningful public critiques of U.S. policy.

How much do Americans know about what their government does? Very little, at least according to most scholars. A long history of survey research finds large gaps in Americans’ knowledge of government functions and public budgets. But the most pessimistic interpretations of public misinformation may overstate the case.

As I demonstrate in a recent paper,¹ the interpretation of survey results can be biased by gaps between popular and elite definitions of policy terms. The result is that those less familiar with elite terminology appear more profoundly uninformed about public policy, when a substantial portion are simply uninformed about the *jargon* scholars and policymakers use to describe government functions.

I examine two commonly cited examples of American misinformation: public estimates of “government waste” and “foreign aid.” In these estimates, Americans are typically off by a factor of ten or more. One recent poll found that, on average, “Americans think 28 percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, when it is about 1 percent.”²

¹ Vanessa Williamson. 2018. “Public Ignorance or Elitist Jargon? Americans’ Overestimates of Government Waste and Foreign Aid.” *American Politics Research*. February.

² Kaiser Family Foundation. 2013. “2013 Survey of Americans on the U.S. Role in Global Health,” November 7. <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/poll-finding/2013-survey-of-americans-on-the-u-s-role-in-global-health/>

Similarly, while expert assessments put federal government waste at a few pennies on the dollar, survey respondents think about half the federal budget is wasted, on average.³ Journalists and academics usually present these misperceptions as evidence of profound public ignorance.

A re-examination of the survey data suggests a more nuanced interpretation. Many Americans, especially those of lower education levels, conceive of “foreign aid” as overseas military spending. When an American thinks of foreign aid as military spending, their estimate of the foreign aid budget is more than 50% higher, all else being equal. Non-college graduates who think of foreign aid as military spending estimate the foreign aid budget to be twice as high as their peers who do not think of foreign aid in this way.

Similarly, what Americans mean by “waste” includes more than just inefficiency, and those wider definitions correlate with substantially larger estimates of waste. All else equal, when a respondent thought of government waste in terms of programs they dislike, their estimates of waste were 23% higher. When a respondent thought of government waste in terms most similar to official policymaking, their estimates were 18% lower, all else equal. Again, the impact is concentrated among those at the lowest levels of education.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS SEE “FOREIGN AID” AS OVERSEAS MILITARY SPENDING

Though many surveys ask Americans to estimate foreign aid, hardly any have asked Americans what they mean by the term. One exception is a February 2012 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. In this survey, respondents were asked an open-ended question: “Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?” Half the survey respondents were later asked, “Thinking about U.S. spending on foreign aid, what types of things do you think this money is spent on?” The second most common answer, provided by about one-fifth of respondents, was military aid. More respondents thought of foreign aid as military spending than disaster relief, education, and economic development combined. Only food aid was as common a response as military spending when it came to respondents’ definitions of foreign aid.

Not surprisingly, people with different definitions of foreign aid had different estimates of the programs’ costs. All else being equal, a person who thought of foreign aid as military spending picked an estimate of foreign aid 55% higher than someone who thought of other uses for foreign aid. The effect is concentrated among those with lower levels of education – those least likely to be familiar with the definition of foreign aid employed by policy experts.

WHAT AMERICANS MEAN BY GOVERNMENT WASTE

To offer Americans the opportunity to explain what they meant by government waste, I conducted a survey of 1,000 U.S. adults between November 5-19th, 2014. Respondents were first asked to estimate government waste: “How many cents out of every tax dollar do you think the government wastes?” The mean answer was 52 cents, a result comparable to those in nationally representative samples. Respondents were then asked, “When you were thinking of government waste, what specifically came to mind?” Their open-response text was recorded.

The respondents’ answers came primarily in one of three forms. Most commonly, about 40% of respondents talked about programs they disapproved of as “waste.” For instance, a 68-year-old independent from Illinois lists “Afghanistan, Iraq, the UN, Medicaid,” as examples of government waste. Another respondent, from New York, sees “gay rights” and “abortion support” as wasteful. Less than a fifth of respondents described waste by making critiques of

³ The National Performance Review led by Vice President Al Gore in 1993 produced detailed recommendations to reduce waste across the federal government, but estimated these savings at only two percent of the budget. Bok, D. (1997). Measuring the performance of government. In Joseph S. Nye, Phillip D. Zelikow, & David C. King (Eds.), *Why people don't trust government* (pp. 55-76). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Riffkin, R. (2014). Americans Say Federal Gov't Wastes 51 Cents on the Dollar. Gallup. September 17.

elitism in the political process, either in the form of “perks” accruing to elected officials (e.g. “big fancy dinners for politicians”) or “pork” spending that benefited special interests rather than the public as a whole (e.g. “ridiculously special interest driven spending”). Finally, about ten percent of the participants described waste as inefficiency or overpayment (such as “duplicate services” and “\$7 screws and \$300 toilet seats”).

There is a strong correlation between how one defines waste and the percentage of government spending one sees as wasteful. All else being equal, a person who thinks of waste in terms of programs they dislike picks a 23% higher estimate of waste. Those thinking of waste in terms of overpayment pick estimates about 18% lower.

DISCUSSION

These results should not be taken to mean that Americans are fully informed, or even well informed, on the subject of government efficiency or foreign policy. For instance, a higher level of education still predicts lower estimates, even in models accounting for differing definitions of terms. But the findings reported here provide a note of caution for research into public misinformation or assessments of voter capacity. In particular, when differing policy definitions correlate with education level, research will tend to misidentify the perceptions and the attitudes of the less educated more than the perceptions and attitudes of the more educated. More research is needed to determine the prevalence and research implications of this kind of elite-popular terminology gap.

Moreover, it is an open question whether the popular definitions are “good” definitions. On the one hand, political leaders tend to emphasize the humanitarian aspects of foreign military engagements, so it may be reasonable for the public to see prolonged military engagements as a kind of “foreign aid.” Similarly, it is within reason to describe a wrong-headed project as “wasteful.” On the other hand, there is a meaningful distinction to be made between humanitarian and national security interests, and there is undoubted value in separating genuine inefficiencies in public expenditure from ideological disagreements about the appropriate roles of government. But we cannot begin to judge whether these distinctions exist in the popular understanding without first being clear on how members of the public understand the relevant policy terms.

The results also have implications for how political figures speak to the public about fiscal policy. In the case of both foreign aid and government waste, government leaders themselves sometimes use blurry definitions, which likely reinforces popular definitions and overestimates. It is common, for instance, for political leaders to emphasize the humanitarian aspects of foreign military engagements they are promoting. Similarly, political figures frequently describe programs they oppose as wasteful. These are often strategic rhetorical choices; political actors seek terminology that resonates with, and sometimes misleads, voters.⁴ Those speaking in a public arena and wishing to avoid these pitfalls might seek new terminology to speak more clearly to the public – perhaps such as “humanitarian aid” or “government inefficiency.”

In the meantime, however, it is important to recognize what members of the public are attempting to convey when they talk about “government waste” and “foreign aid.” In treating foreign aid and government waste estimates as innumeracy, we lose sight of what many respondents are attempting to convey in their critiques of these expenditures.

CONCLUSION

A re-examination of popular overestimations of government waste and foreign aid reveals that members of the public often define these terms more broadly than policymakers do. Respondents thinking of foreign aid in terms of

⁴ Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. *Off center: The Republican revolution and the erosion of American democracy*. Yale University Press, 2006. Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. *Politicians don't pander: Political manipulation and the loss of democratic responsiveness*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

military spending pick substantially higher estimates of foreign aid. Those thinking of government waste in terms of programs they dislike think waste is higher than those thinking in terms of government efficiency. The impact of these broader definitions is concentrated among those with lower levels of education, the people least likely to be familiar with elite definitions of waste and foreign aid. The result is a biased assessment of the public's policy knowledge, especially when it comes to less educated people; this bias may distort scholars' and policymakers' assessments of voter competence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Arnold Foundation and the Washington Center for Equitable Growth. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, the Urban Institute, the Brookings Institution, their trustees, or their funders.

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