

Public Ignorance or Elitist Jargon?: Reconsidering Americans' Overestimates of Government Waste and Foreign Aid

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Abstract Widespread and profound public misinformation about government presents a serious challenge for democratic accountability. This paper demonstrates that two of the most common examples of public misperception may be systematically overestimated; public misperceptions of government spending are in substantial part the result of differences of elite and popular terminology. “Foreign aid” is widely understood to encompass overseas military spending, and the term “government waste” is popularly used to discuss systemic failures of the democratic process. Failing to take account of what members of the public mean by “waste” and “foreign aid,” existing studies overestimate public ignorance and obscure the substance of public critiques of U.S. policy, particularly among the less educated. The results of this paper suggest the need for a reconsideration of what qualifies as evidence of public misinformation, and what that evidence implies for voters’ capacity to assess their government.

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Introduction

How much do Americans know about what their government does? Scholars assessing public knowledge of the workings of government have, by and large, reported profoundly pessimistic results. A long history of survey research has suggested Americans know little about how the institutions of government function or how those institutions allocate public funds (e.g. Converse, 1964; Bartels, 2005). The level of public ignorance of what government does has profound consequences for the possibility of democratic accountability. Recent research has suggested that, in close elections, voters' decisions are so disconnected from the facts and so swayed by irrelevancies that electoral outcomes are essentially the product of random chance (Achen & Bartels, 2016, c.f. Fowler & Hall, 2017).

But the most pessimistic interpretations of public information and misinformation may overstate the case. In recent years, some of the most common survey tools used to assess political and policy knowledge have been critiqued as "elitist" because they tend to focus on factual information that is not relevant to (or predictive of) voters' policy knowledge or political assessments (Lupia, 2006; Gilens, 2001). Moreover, as this paper demonstrates, 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 profoundly uninformed about public policy, when a substantial portion are simply uninformed about the *terms of art* scholars and policymakers use to describe government functions.

Two common and longstanding examples of American misinformation about government are public estimates of spending on "government waste" and "foreign aid."¹ As one recent study

notes, “On average, Americans think 28 percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, when it is about 1 percent.” (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013) Similarly, U.S. survey respondents tend to overestimate government waste. While expert assessments put federal government waste at a few pennies on the dollar,² survey respondents think about half the federal budget is wasted, on average (Riffkin, 2014). These misperceptions are commonly presented as evidence of profound public ignorance (Hetherington, 2005; Manza, Cook & Page, 2002; Hudson & vanHeerde-Hudson, 2012).

Building on open-ended interviews, a re-examination of the survey data suggests a different interpretation of these overestimates. 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. This relationship is concentrated among less educated people; 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.

These results have two substantive implications. First, scholars should re-examine the substance of popular critiques of government expenditures with the understanding that these critiques are not merely the result of ignorance. Second, social scientists should reconsider how

public policy knowledge is measured, and how measures of public policy knowledge are interpreted. There is substantial risk that assessments of information and misinformation in the public sphere are biased to overestimate misinformation, especially among the less educated, due to gaps between elite and popular definitions of policy terms.

What Do We Know About Public Information and Misinformation?

Though members of the public may be able to use information shortcuts to compensate for a lack of factual information (e.g. Popkin, 1991; but c.f. Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), it is widely agreed that an informed citizenry is a good thing for democracy. “Democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed,” as Delli Carpini and Keeter put it (1996).

Given this normative appeal, there is an immense literature examining what Americans know and do not know about politics. Much of this literature is pessimistic (perhaps most famously, Converse, 1964; for thorough reviews of more recent research, see Lupia & McCubbins, 1998, p. 3 and Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008). A corollary of this research suggests that Americans are not only uninformed, but misinformed; they not only have relatively few facts at their disposal, but the facts they think they have are wrong (e.g. Kuklinski et al., 2000). Rooting out misinformation can be quite difficult (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Thorson, 2016; but c.f. Sides, 2016) in part because people interpret facts to fit their predispositions (Gaines et al., 2007; Taber et al., 2009; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). Imperviousness of opinion to facts should be particularly worrying for small-d democrats, since it implies that voters can be such “biased information processors” (Lodge & Taber, 2005) that efforts to explain policies are “not likely” to increase Americans’ level of information or change their attitudes (Bartels, 2005).

Many scholars have critiqued the characterization of Americans as “know nothings.” One line of research focuses on the methodological limitations (e.g. Achen, 1975; Mondak, 2001;

Sturgis, Allum, & Smith, 2008; Miller & Orr, 2008; Prior & Lupia, 2008; Luskin & Bullock, 2011; Bullock et al., 2013). In recent years, what was once primarily a methodological critique has become a theoretical critique as well. Most prominently, Lupia (2006) notes that assessments of voter competence are undermined by “elitism.”

Most political-knowledge questions are not derived from a replicable or transparent logic about how their answers bear on a voter’s ability to make decisions of a particular quality in the voting booth. Instead the questions test information that academics, journalists, and politicians value.

This paper extends this line of research by examining how elite biases might distort scholarly measurement of policy-specific information. The paper focuses on two common questions about public finance that have become touchstones for academics, journalists and policymakers.

To date, scholars and other observers have often treated public overestimates of waste and foreign aid as evidence of profound ignorance. In his analysis of government trust, Marc Hetherington repeatedly refers to survey data showing high estimates of government waste, which he deems a “misperception” (2005, 10). Derek Bok uses the same survey data to assert a “widespread impression” of government spending for which there is “little evidence” (1997, p. 62). Similarly, Manza, Cook and Page (2002) explain public opposition to foreign aid as a result of “extreme overestimation” of the foreign aid budget. David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson (2012) examine foreign aid estimates and conclude that “Americans, apparently, are particularly ignorant.” Foreign aid and government waste estimates are also widely cited in the popular media, and these articles occasionally veer in explicitly anti-democratic directions. For instance, a 2012 opinion piece in *USA Today* cited the foreign aid estimates to make the case that “not everyone should” vote (Trinko, 2012). Thus these survey results play a role in scholarly and political debates about public misinformation about government, and underwrite doubts about the prospects for democratic accountability.

The paper follows a process of qualitative hypothesis generation followed by quantitative testing in national survey samples. It begins by documenting attitudes about foreign aid and government waste as they were expressed in the course of 49 open-ended phone interviews about taxation and government conducted with Americans in 21 states in the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014.³ The words of these interviewees provide insight into the potential mechanisms and motivations behind their individual survey responses. But no small-n qualitative sample can be deemed representative. The paper therefore turns to large-n national surveys to test how Americans' definitions of "government waste" and "foreign aid" affect their estimates of these expenditures. The paper first examines perceptions of foreign aid, qualitatively and then quantitatively, and then follows the same structure in assessing the public understanding of government waste.

What Americans Mean by Foreign Aid

Foreign aid makes up a very small percentage of the U.S. federal budget (Koshgarian, 2014), but it played a far more substantial role in the minds of interviewees asked about government spending. As the interviewees elaborated on their feelings about foreign aid, their concerns were not primarily about humanitarian spending, however. Instead, they tended to think of foreign aid and foreign military endeavors as a single category of spending of which many disapproved. Erick⁴ is a single white 43-year-old man from Michigan, who was unemployed at the time of our interview. Asked what he disliked about government spending, he said:

Erick: Our money is sent overseas. That bothers me.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Erick: Like money to Israel I don't like. We send money to Egypt. And the wars that are going on over there still.

Erick mentions “money to Israel” and “money to Egypt” – both part of the foreign aid budget – and also “the wars that are going on over there still.” For him, our interventions in the Middle East seem to be one category of spending, money that is “sent overseas.” Interestingly, this interviewee was already familiar with the budget data about foreign aid. Without prompting, he went on to mention that “if you look at a pie chart, foreign aid is, like, a sliver” of the federal budget – a fact that left him confused.

Another interviewee also volunteered her thoughts about the federal budget pie chart, and expressed the same bemusement. Marjorie is a 53-year-old woman, a disabled former teacher from Indiana. She named foreign aid among the programs she opposed, and then continued, “They say that it’s only one percent of the budget or something like that, but like I said, it seems like we’re giving billions of dollars to people in Afghanistan.” Marjorie is correct that Afghanistan receives billions in foreign aid; all told, the country received about \$13 billion in U.S. aid in 2012. But she may also be thinking more generally of the fifteen year American military presence in the region; she does not make a clear distinction.

Is it possible that a substantial portion of the public, like these interviewees, elides between foreign aid and defense spending? The quantitative survey data suggests that the answer is “yes.”

Do 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.⁵ 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?” This question was also open ended, and up to three responses were recorded for each survey participant. Their answers were then sorted into fourteen categories, including “food,” “health care,” “education/schools,” “military/weapons/defense,” and “clean water.”

In all, nearly a fifth of respondents described foreign aid as including military spending. Strikingly, more respondents thought of foreign aid as military spending than disaster relief, education, and economic development combined (Figure 1). Only food aid was as common a response as military spending when it came to respondents’ definitions of foreign aid.⁶

[Figure 1]

If overestimates of foreign aid spending were driven in part by a confusion of aid and military budgets, one would expect those who think of foreign aid in military terms to have substantially higher estimates of the foreign aid budget. This hypothesis can be tested using a beta regression of the relevant demographic and attitudinal variables.⁷

Table 1 reviews the correlates associated with respondents’ estimates of foreign aid. All models include demographic variables commonly associated with differing estimates of foreign aid; as a rule, people of higher socio-economic status pick lower estimates. *Income* is measured on an eight-point scale from “less than \$20,000” to “\$150,000 or more.” *College graduate* is an indicator for receipt of a four-year college degree, *white* is an indicator variable for being white and non-Hispanic, and *male* is also an indicator variable. *Party ID* is measured on a 5-point scale from 1, strong Democrat, to 5, strong Republican. *Ideology* is measured on a 3-point scale from 1, liberal to 3, conservative.⁸ Also included is a measure of respondents’ preferences for

isolationism; those who believe the U.S. should be a world leader tend to pick higher estimates of foreign aid spending.

[Table 1]

Model 2 adds an indicator variable for whether the respondent thought of foreign aid in terms of military spending. Those who think of foreign aid as military spending do indeed pick substantially higher estimates of the foreign aid budget. 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. Moreover, as Model 3 reveals, 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.

Thus the tendency to overestimate foreign aid can be explained in part by the tendency of Americans to think of foreign aid in military terms. Those who pick higher estimates may be defining the term more broadly than policymakers do.

What Americans Mean by Government Waste

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 (cited in Bok, 1997). Asked to estimate government waste, however, American survey respondents put the number at about fifty percent of the budget, on average (Riffkin, 2014).

As we saw with foreign aid, the interviews suggest that popular understandings of waste differ from the experts' definition. Gabriel is a 28-year-old man, a Pacific Islander living in Utah,

and working in the construction industry. He was one of several interviewees who thought of government waste differently from policy experts:

Interviewer: And, then, this is just a personal opinion, but how much of every dollar do you think the government wastes?

Gabriel: 30 cents.

Interviewer: And—go on—

Gabriel: How do you define waste?

Interviewer: That's what I was going to ask you.

Gabriel: Yeah, I guess, to me, waste would be any frivolous spending, even if it is, you know, going back to the military, even if it is going to something tangible, you know, I think that's wasteful. But, even if they were to keep up everything that's going on, I think a certain percentage of that is just falling through the cracks to inefficiency. If I had to define the things I disagree with as waste, then probably 30 percent, I would say.

Interviewer: And, if you were just thinking about inefficiency, would you have a different number?

Gabriel: Yeah, inefficiency, probably around 15 percent.

Gabriel knows that military spending produces “tangible” results, but still sees this spending as wasteful, because he disagrees fundamentally with American military policy. Similarly, Gloria, a 52-year-old woman from Kansas, thinks the government wastes “a lot” of money. Asked what she meant by government waste, she says “Giving money to the arts. Giving money to Planned Parenthood.” The interviewer followed up on her remarks:

Interviewer: Do you think that there's some sort of inefficiency, too?

Gloria: I'm sure there is. I don't know much about it but I'm sure there is. Any big system like we have, it would probably be pretty hard not for there to be some waste. All the lawmakers are trying to help out their own area and states. Some of those things are important, though.

A politically active social conservative, Gloria thinks of government waste in terms of programs

she opposes for moral reasons. But her anger at what she deems waste is simply not matched by her attitudes about inefficiency; she is “sure” there is “some” waste, given the size of the government, but after all, some of that spending is “important.”

For these interviewees, the idea of “government waste” provokes a much more substantial critique of government than annoyance over duplicative services or bureaucratic redundancy. The following section uses survey data to test whether the broader U.S. population thinks about government waste in a comparable way to these interviewees.

Do survey respondents use a broader definition of government waste?

Unlike in the case of foreign aid, no survey was available that offered Americans the opportunity to explain what they meant by government waste. To collect that data, the paper’s author, working with an opt-in panel from the online survey firm Qualtrics, conducted a new survey of 1,000 U.S. adults from November 5-19th, 2014.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Respondents were then asked, “When you were thinking of government waste, what specifically came to mind?” Their open-response text was recorded.¹¹

The respondents’ answers came primarily in one of three forms. First, and most often, 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. Second, respondents described waste by making critiques of 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, a relatively small percentage of respondents described waste as inefficiency or overpayment (such as “duplicate services” and “\$7 screws and \$300 toilet seats”). Figure 2 reports the most common popular definitions of government waste.¹²

[Figure 2]

Inefficiency is a consideration for only 10% of respondents. Public estimates of government waste are not, as Bok (1997) argues, primarily a misperception of “inefficient administration.” Moreover, there is a strong correlation between how one defines waste and the percentage of government spending one sees as wasteful. As with the analysis of the foreign aid survey data, a beta regression is used to model this outcome. Table 2 reports the factors correlated with picking a higher estimate of waste.

Model 1 provides a baseline for the demographic and attitudinal factors that have typically been shown to correlate with waste estimates. *Party ID* and *Ideology* are both measured on a seven-point scale; Republicans and conservatives think government waste is higher. Men and the more educated tend to choose lower estimates. Economic conditions also shape attitudes about waste, to some extent. *Education* is measured on a six-point scale. Household income is measured on a nineteen-point scale, with a maximum of “\$150,000 and above,” and as with education, it correlates with lower estimates of waste. Working people, voters, and homeowners, however, both pick higher estimates of waste, when income level is controlled for. The *Federal Government Feeling Thermometer* measures respondents’ feelings of warmth or favorability to

the federal government; it is measured from 0 (coldest or least favorable) to 100 (warmest or most favorable).

Model 2 includes those same control variables, but adds variables for how the respondent described waste. The first of these notes the respondents who define waste as programs they dislike, the first category in Figure 2. The second notes those respondents whose definitions of waste aligned with the technical definitions used by policymakers (“inefficiency” or “overpayment” in Figure 2).

[Table 2]

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. As Model 3 demonstrates, the impact of a respondent’s definition of waste is attenuated at the highest levels of education. In this model, education is collapsed into a binary variable, to ease the interpretation of the interaction term. 14% of respondents fall in the top category of education, *Post-College Graduate*. The interaction model shows that the impact of thinking of waste as programs one dislikes is limited to those at lower levels of education.¹³

Discussion

To date, American attitudes about waste and foreign aid have commonly been dismissed as an artifact of innumeracy or extreme policy ignorance. Instead, a substantial portion of the overestimates might be better described as a “pigeonhole problem.” Some people file more things under the category of “foreign aid” or “government waste” than other people do, and therefore rate these expenditures as more expensive.

Americans' estimates of waste and government aid are to a substantial degree predicted by the breadth of their definitions. When an American thinks of foreign aid as military spending, their estimate of the foreign aid budget is more than 50% higher. Similarly, when a respondent thought of government waste in terms of programs they dislike, their estimates were 23% higher, while when a respondent thought of government waste in terms most similar to official policymaking, their estimates were 18% lower. These effects are concentrated among less educated people, those likely less familiar with official definitions of policy terms.

Though 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, the findings reported here provide a note of caution for research into public misinformation or assessments of voter capacity to assess policy. In particular, when differing policy definitions correlate with education level (as in this paper), 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 of this kind of elite-popular terminology gap (for another possible example, see Huber and Paris, 2013). There is no *a priori* reason to believe that survey miscommunications are limited to policy questions. Political questions on abstract topics, for instance social class, ideology, or the role of government, may also be prone to diverse interpretation (Hopkins & King, 2010).

The results have implications for research into whether, when and how factual information shapes public opinion. There is a robust debate about whether new facts can outweigh political predispositions (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008) or appealing emotional frames (Graetz & Shapiro, 2005; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011; Sides, 2016). One reason that the findings in this literature conflict may be that differences of

elite and popular terminology in some cases blunt public responses to factual corrections. Similarly, greater attention to popular versus elite terminology may also help arbitrate the ongoing scholarly debate about the interaction between factual information and levels of education and political knowledge (e.g. Gilens, 2001; Sides, 2016).

More generally, these results suggest a limitation to research that asks survey questions and then attempts to extrapolate what the respondents must have meant. Jargon is not always obvious to the experts for whom it is familiar; sometimes, as William Faulkner put it, “the writer himself is at fault” for the reader’s misunderstanding.¹⁴ As McDonnell, Lecomte and Wegimont (2003, p. 228) argue, misinterpretation of survey data can reinforce “long-held views” in academia that amount to “prejudices, perhaps” about the attitudes and capacities of the American public. In the interpretive period post data collection, unvalidated assumptions can shade scholars’ assessments of their survey results. Particularly with the rise of survey experimental work, interviews and open-ended questions have an especially important role to play in validating scholarly interpretations of public opinion results. Interviews let researchers “better understand the meaning people give to particular words” (Bloemraad, 2012, p. 513; see also Conrad & Schober, 2000).

Finally, the results 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.¹⁵ Similarly, political figures frequently describe programs they oppose as wasteful.¹⁶ Such comments obscure the meaningful distinction to be made between humanitarian and national security interests, and between

genuine inefficiencies in public expenditure and ideological disagreements about the appropriate roles of government. These are often strategic rhetorical choices; political actors seek terminology that resonates with, and sometimes misleads, voters (e.g. Hacker and Pierson, 2006; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). 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.” There are substantive critiques of U.S. policy to glean from these survey responses.

Conclusion

A substantial portion of public overestimates of waste and foreign aid can be explained by the fact that members of the public often define these terms more broadly than policymakers do. Respondents thinking of foreign aid in terms of 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 or administration. 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 scholarly assessments of voter competence and shed excessive doubt on the possibility that American citizens can judge the policies put in place in their name.

Endnotes

¹ The earliest example in the Roper Center’s Public Opinion Archives of Americans being asked to estimate the foreign aid budget is a 1963 Gallup Poll. The American National Election Survey has asked respondents to estimate government waste since 1958.

² Government waste is “taxpayers not receiving reasonable value for money... due to an inappropriate act or omission” on the part of government officials, such as “mismanagement” or “inadequate oversight.” (Department of Defense Office of Inspector General).

³ More information about the interviewees, along with details of the interview recruitment and interviewee demographic makeup are available at [citation redacted for author anonymity].

⁴ To protect their privacy, all interviewees are given pseudonyms.

⁵ The survey, “Kaiser Family Foundation Poll: 2012 Survey of Americans on the U.S. Role in Global Health,” was conducted among a nationally representative random digit dial landline and cell phone sample of 1205 adults and weighted to match 2011 Census data on sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, and region. The AAPOR RR3 response rate was 24 percent for the landline sample and 21 percent for the cell phone sample. The data is available via the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (Dataset: USPSRA2012-GHP004).

⁶ Moreover, the survey had already primed respondents to think about the problems in “developing countries such as those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America,” but did not mention the Middle East, which may have discouraged respondents’ thoughts about war.

⁷ Beta regression is recommended for modelling proportion outcomes between 0 and 1. The results are directly interpretable in terms of an odds ratio (Cribari-Neto & Zeileis, 2010; Ferrari and Cribari-Neto, 2004).

⁸ Including a variable for the respondent’s age has no substantive effect on these results.

⁹ The population was balanced to match the U.S. adult population in terms of gender, partisanship and education, and results are weighted to match the broader public in terms of age, employment status, and ethnicity. Pre- and post-weighting demographics compared to the U.S. population as a whole can be found in the technical appendix at [link redacted for anonymity].

¹⁰ Asked about the federal government, “How many cents of each dollar would you say are wasted?” the mean response is 51 cents. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/176102/americans-say-federal-gov-wastes-cents-dollar.aspx>

¹¹ These categories are not mutually exclusive and respondents could offer as many examples of waste as they wanted. Each complaint was counted, and about a quarter of responses were coded in more than one category.

¹² Other categories coded were too infrequent to include in this chart: 42 references to campaigns and elections, e.g. “campaigning” and “political ads,” and 12 references to outright criminal activity (e.g. “fraud” or “embezzlement”).

¹³ The coefficient on the interaction term is also negative if one includes all college graduates, but does not achieve statistical significance.

¹⁴ http://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio12_3

¹⁵ For instance, on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush promised the Iraqi people that “we will deliver the food and medicine you need.” In his speech on the rise of the Islamic State, President Obama described 2014 air strikes in Syria in tandem with the responsibility to provide aid to refugees.

¹⁶ For instance, in reference to a government loan guarantee for a solar company, Donald Trump tweeted in October of 2012, “Obama loves wasting our money.”

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Table 1: Factors Correlated with Foreign Aid Estimates

	1	2	3
(Intercept)	-0.78 ** (0.10)	-0.69 ** (0.15)	-0.83 ** (0.15)
Male	-0.41 ** (0.04)	-0.40 ** (0.07)	-0.39 ** (0.07)
Party ID (more Republican)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
College graduate	-0.44 ** (0.05)	-0.45 ** (0.08)	-0.37 ** (0.08)
Household Income	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Ideology (more conservative)	0.11 ** (0.03)	0.06 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
White	-0.28 ** (0.05)	-0.52 ** (0.07)	-0.55 ** (0.07)
Agrees U.S. should take “the leading role in world affairs.”	0.13 ** (0.02)	0.23 ** (0.04)	0.24 ** (0.04)
Describes foreign aid as military spending		0.44 ** (0.10)	0.80 ** (0.13)
College graduate * foreign aid as military spending			-0.83 ** (0.20)
Pseudo R squared	0.16	0.20	0.21
N	1205	1205	1205

Note: Beta regression of KFF 2012 survey. Dependent variable is the estimate of the fraction of the federal budget spent on foreign aid, from 0 to 1.

Standard errors in parentheses, *p , 0.05, ** p , 0.01, *** p , 0.001

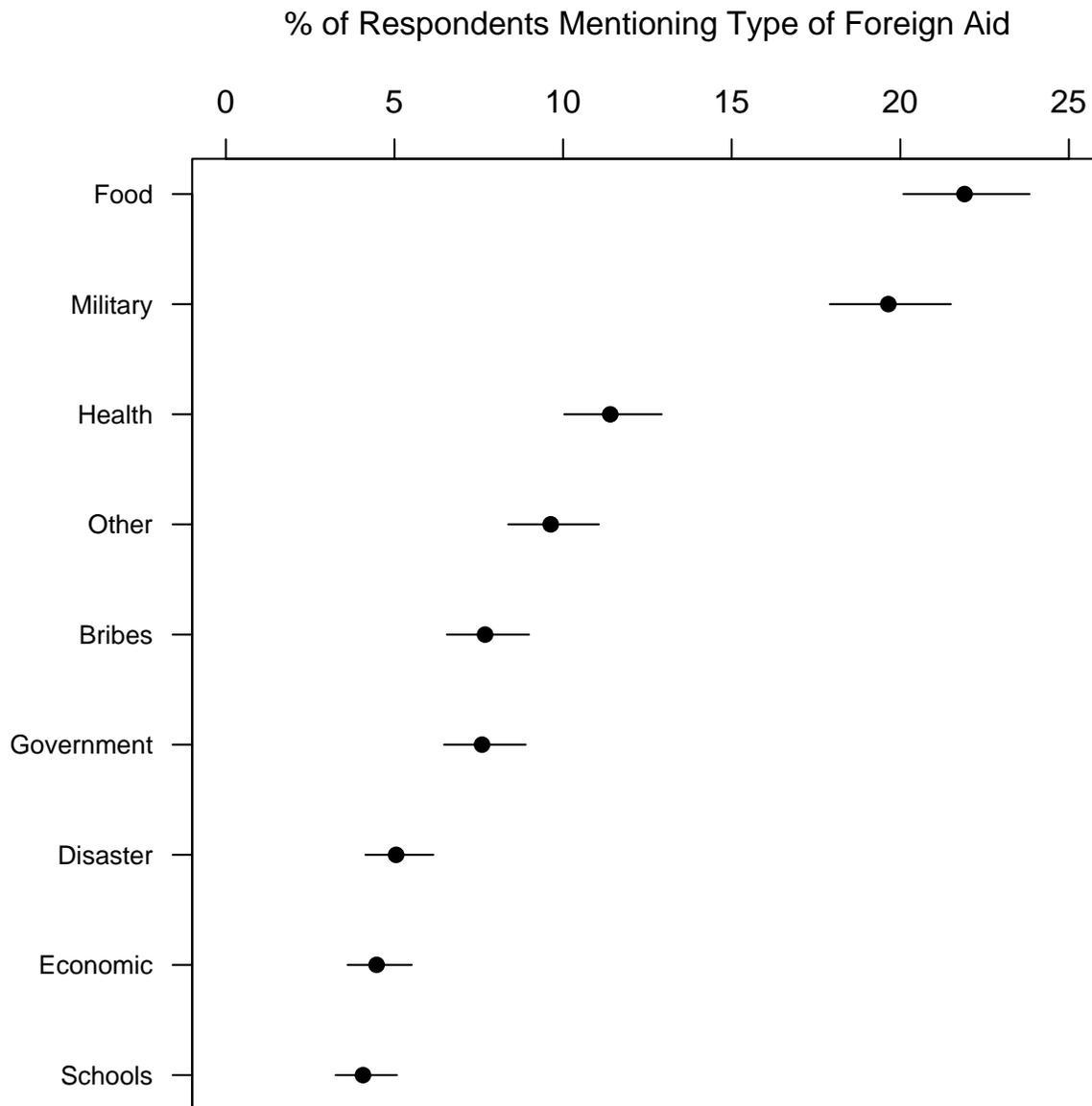
Table 2: Correlates of Respondents' Estimates of Waste

	1	2	3
(Intercept)	0.98 ** (0.29)	0.85 ** (0.29)	0.66 * (0.29)
Male	-0.28 ** (0.07)	-0.29 ** (0.07)	-0.30 ** (0.07)
Party ID (more Republican)	-0.07 ** (0.03)	-0.07 ** (0.03)	-0.08 ** (0.03)
Education	-0.10 ** (0.03)	-0.09 ** (0.03)	
Household Income	-0.02 * (0.01)	-0.02 * (0.01)	-0.03 ** (0.01)
Ideology (More Conservative)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Employed	0.15 * (0.08)	0.17 * (0.08)	0.13 (0.08)
Homeowner	0.25 ** (0.09)	0.27 ** (0.09)	0.27 ** (0.09)
Federal Government Feeling Thermometer	-0.01 ** (0.00)	-0.01 ** (0.00)	-0.01 ** (0.00)
Voted	0.19 * (0.09)	0.20 * (0.09)	0.26 ** (0.09)
Defines waste as programs they dislike		0.21 ** (0.07)	0.31 ** (0.08)
Defines waste as policymakers do		-0.20 * (0.10)	-0.25 ** (0.10)
Post-graduate Degree			0.40 ** (0.14)
Post-graduate Degree * "disliked programs"			-0.60 ** (0.20)
Pseudo R squared	0.15	0.16	0.15
N	1000	1000	1000

Note: Beta regression of Qualtrics 2014 survey. Dependent Variable is the estimate of the fraction of dollars that the government wastes, from 0 to 1.

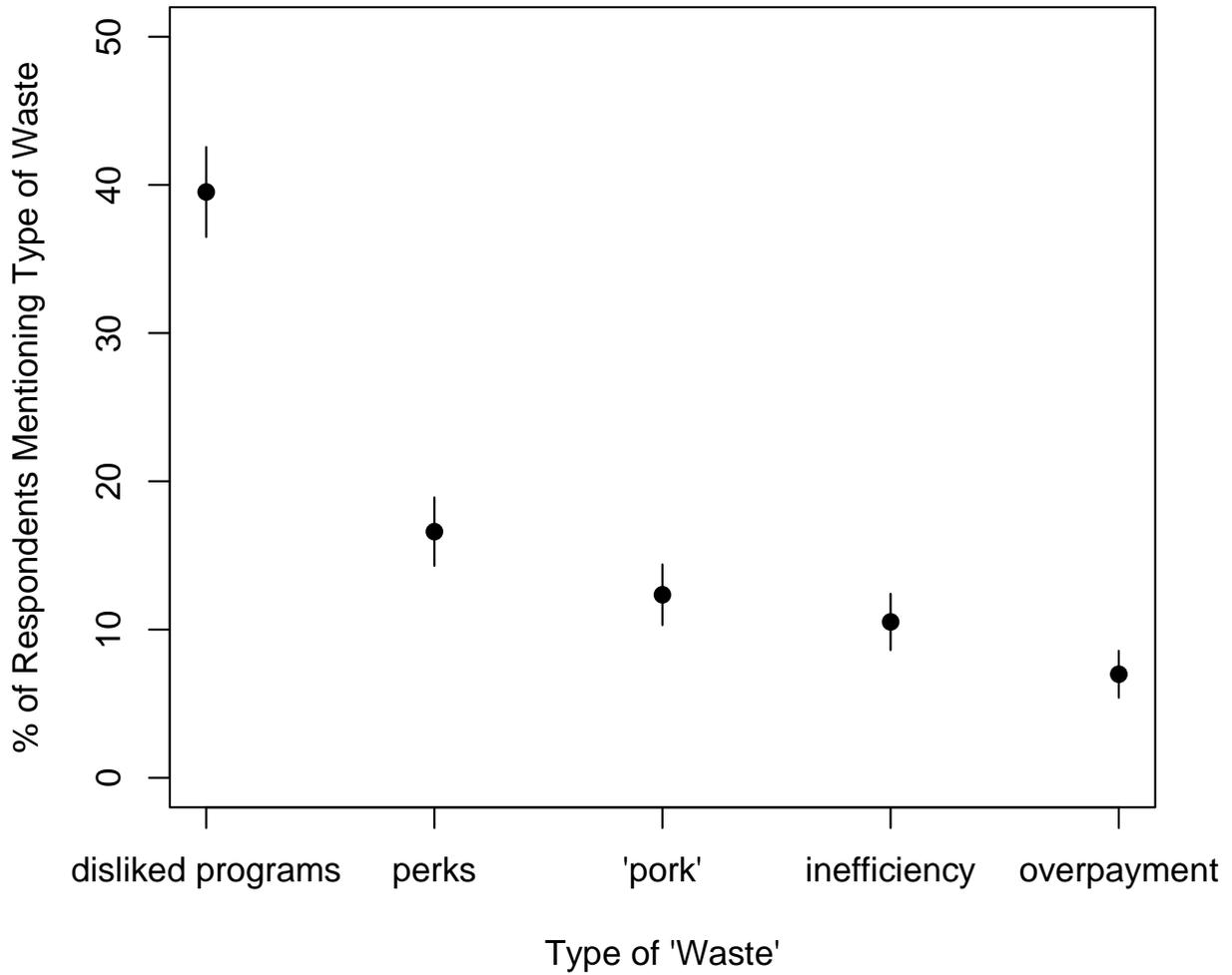
Standard errors in parentheses, *p , 0.05, ** p , 0.01, *** p , 0.001

Figure 1: What Americans Mean by “Foreign Aid”



Note: Based on the open ended question in the Kaiser Family Foundation 2012 Survey of Americans on the U.S. Role in Global Health: “Thinking about U.S. spending on foreign aid, what types of things do you think this money is spent on?” Up to three responses were recorded. Those responses were coded into 14 categories. N=1205.

Figure 2: What Americans Mean by Government Waste



Note: Based on the most common answers reported on an open ended Qualtrics 2014 question: “When you were thinking of government waste, what specifically came to mind?” N=1,000.

Appendix A: Demographics of Interviewees

Table 1: Demographics of Interviewees

	U.S. Adults (%)	Interviewees (n)	Interviewees (%)
Female	52%	27	55%
20s	20%	11	22%
30s	18	11	22
40s	19	11	22
50s	19	12	24
60s	13	4	8
Black	12%	6	12%
White	81	39	80
Asian	5	2	4
Hispanic	13	4	8
Unemployed	7%	5	10%
Full-time employed	43	27	55
Republican	41%	21	43%
Democrat	47	26	53
GED/High school	30%	7	14%
Four year degree	20	18	37
Advanced degree	11	4	8
Total		49	

Appendix B: Survey Demographics, Pre- and Post- Weighting

		Unweighted sample	Weighted sample
Gender	Male	49.5	49.3
	Female	49.6	48.9
Education	High School or less	41.3	42.2
	Some college	27.0	26.0
	4-year college degree	20.8	20.7
	Advanced degree	10.2	9.7
Race and Ethnicity	White	83.2	70.0
	Black	6.8	11.8
	Hispanic	3.2	7.3
	Asian	3.5	8.0
	Other	2.4	4.3
Party Identification	Democratic	35.0	36.3
	Republican	28.0	24.3
	No preference / Other	33.0	33.6
Ideology	Liberal	24.6	27.5
	Moderate	31.6	31.7
	Conservative	36.4	33.4
Income	Under 25k	25.8	20.4
	25-50k	25.6	20.4
	50-100k	32.2	29.6
	Greater than 100k	11.2	23.3
Homeowner		62.3	59.9
Employed		47.4	52.8
Voter		70.2	69.4
Federal Government Feeling Thermometer (mean)		34.0	35.0

Summary Statistics of 2014 Qualtrics Survey

All numbers are percentages. N = 1000.

Appendix C: Survey Demographics, Pre- and Post- Weighting

		Unweighted sample	Weighted sample
Gender	Male	53.1	49.3
	Female	46.9	50.7
Education	Less than HS Grad.	7.3	12.3
	HS Grad.	28.6	33.7
	Some College	24.8	24.4
	College Grad.	38.1	28.5
Race and Ethnicity	White/not Hispanic	72.3	67.0
	Black/not Hispanic	9.4	11.0
	Hispanic	12.0	13.7
	Other/not Hispanic	3.8	5.9
Party Identification	Democrat	31.5	32.0
	Independent	34.9	35.3
	Republican	23.6	22.1
	Other	6.1	5.9
Ideology	Liberal	21.9	21.7
	Moderate	36.7	38.3
	Conservative	35.9	34.0
Preferred Role of U.S. in World Affairs	Leading role	17.5	17.7
	Major role	43.9	44.2
	Minor role	26.2	26.7
	No rule	9.0	11.4

Summary Statistics of 2012 Kaiser Family Foundation Survey

All numbers are percentages. N = 1205.