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WEBINAR

WHAT AMERICANS THINK ABOUT FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

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UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

WELCOME:

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PANEL DISCUSSION and Q&A:

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MCARTHUR: Good morning, everyone. I'm John McArthur, director and senior fellow of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings. We're living in a time of disruption in terms of how policymakers approach long-held policy norms, both within and between many countries. In the United States, the new administration took rapid steps to freeze foreign assistance funding, issue a stop work order that brought most activities to a halt, and quickly shut down USAID without seeking congressional approval. Is this consistent with what the American public wants? Is this a partisan issue? How do Americans actually feel about foreign assistance across political divides? Today we'll be discussing the results of a new public survey taken earlier this month, led by arguably the foremost pollster on how Americans view foreign assistance, Steven Kull. This will be followed by a fantastic expert panel that will be moderated by my CSD colleague, George Ingram. Viewers online watching can submit questions by emailing events, events@brooking.edu, or by using the #USForeignAid on either X, Twitter, or Bluesky. But let's start with Steven Kull's latest survey results. Steven, just by way of introduction, is a political psychologist and director of the Program for Public Consultation in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. For two decades, he's conducted in-depth studies of public opinion on policy issues in the United States and around the world. He's worked extensively with officials in U.S. Congress, the State Department, and international organizations to develop surveys that help policymakers gain greater insight into the public values and beliefs on policy issues. He's here today to share the results of a new survey that he conducted just a couple of weeks ago on an issue that's of foremost importance to a lot of public debates today. We're delighted to have him here today. So, Steven, over to you.

KULL: Thanks very much. Thanks for having me. Obviously, the subject of foreign aid is very big in the news today. There are a lot of assertions that the American public just doesn't like foreign aid. They don't care about foreign aid, that there's some kind of isolationist tendencies. We've been studying this assumption now for three decades, going back to 1995, and it has consistently proven to not be the case. In fact, the number of people who say that foreign aid should be cut or that it's too much has actually been, over the decades, been going downward just in standard polls. So we wanted to go deeper and see, well, what's going on in terms of the perceptions that we have found in the past and the attitudes, because we have found in the past, going back to 1995, that Americans greatly overestimate the amount of spending on foreign aid. And we'll be sharing that now, too. Ok, I'm going to try to get this going. This is always the scariest part of my presentations, and I'm going to get this up. And OK, that wasn't too bad. All right, so the survey that we conducted just a few weeks ago was with 1,160 adults nationally, an opt-in sample. You can get the details elsewhere. So moving in on that question of the perceptions, because this seems to be we have found this is

a real driver of attitudes. And we said, just based on what you know, please tell me, you know, what's your hunch about what percentage of the federal budget goes to foreign aid? And the median estimate was 20 percent. Fifty six percent actually gave that estimate. Republicans are particularly strong, Democrats not quite as strong. You may see the number around from others of 25 percent. That's usually the average. But we think the median is the right number because that's what the majority are more assume. Now, others have also tried different ways of asking this question. And, you know, one that you got recently is which of the federal federal programs do you think the government spends the least amount on and puts it up against Social Security, Medicare and national defense? And only 26 percent were aware that foreign aid was less than Social Security, Medicare and national defense, when in fact it's dramatically less. But here's really the most important question. What do you think would be an appropriate percentage of the federal budget to go to foreign aid, if any? And the median response is 10 percent among overall Republicans, five Democrats, 10. So this is a really remarkable finding that all around. Now, how many people say it should be something more than at least one percent or more? Well, eighty nine percent, which is, of course, as you know, the the actual amount that the US spends on on on foreign aid. So eighty nine percent basically confirm the the level of current spending, including 84 percent of Republicans and 94 percent of Democrats. Now, we also have to that went through the pros and cons, which I will try to come back to. Now, the next thing that we did was we say, Ok, it is about one percent. We're letting you know that. And we're going to look at the different areas of spending and how much goes to each. And so we presented them and they went heard pros and cons for each and so on. And they got in terms of humanitarian relief. We told them how much it was. Do you think the government should should spend more about the same little less, somewhat less and so on? And overall, 56 percent say when they're given this, it should be more or about the same. Now, Republicans, you have it gets a majority, says less, but it's 16 percent of them say a little less. Only less than half, well less than half say that it should be somewhat less or none. So that it's a very can you all see this or are these? That's probably better. You can see that the numbers who want to simply zero it out are very small, including among Republicans. And only 41 percent of Republicans want to say somewhat less or none. So there is not support for for deep cuts in this area. Trouble here. There we go. The Ok. And then in terms of global health, the numbers, 64 percent say it should be more or about the same. Very small numbers, somewhat less or none. Republicans in this case have say it should be more or about the same in terms of economic development aid. 56 percent more are about the same. You know, 17 percent, a little less. Again, the same. Do you see the same pattern with Republicans? At the most, the majority says a little less. And education aid, 67 percent, more about the same. Republicans, this case, a majority of 54 percent. Environmental aid, 65 percent more or about the same. And Republicans about half with another 14 percent saying a little less.

Democracy, human rights and so on. Sixty percent Republicans, 47 percent and another 14 percent less. So now turning down to the question of USAID versus the State Department, we gave them the arguments on both sides of this, told them a little bit about the history. And so do you think the USAID should be abolished and its programs should be put under the direct control of the State Department? And the argument given was that, you know, then they can have more direct control, can serve US interests more directly or so and so on, versus the idea it should have a distinct mission that's very much oriented toward the humanitarian goals and so on. And overall, 58 percent favor continuing USAID and 41 percent to fold it into the State Department. It was not said that there would be some kind of mass firing or something like that, just that it would be folded into the State Department. But a majority of Republicans do support the idea of folding it into the State Department. In terms of bilateral and multilateral aid, we told them that about two thirds is bilateral and one third multilateral. Explain what that all meant and ask, well, what do you think? And basically 39 percent say, well, keep it as it is. A third say, yeah, do more bilateral and a quarter more multilateral. There was basically no clear sentiment to move it one way or the other. There's basically what this says is basically comfort with the current distribution. I'm just going to take a few minutes to go over some of the arguments that people respond to that we presented in terms of arguments in favor. The humanitarian, the moral arguments do extremely well. Humanitarian relief saves lives, alleviate suffering and hunger and helps communities recover from horrible disasters that are not their fault. The U.S. has a moral responsibility to do what Spartans 78 percent find that convincing, including Republicans. And I should always emphasize in advance. It's normal for people to find arguments on both sides, at least somewhat convincing. So and this is very particularly true when it comes to foreign aid, that there's this kind of dialectical state that people have, you know, responding to both the pros and the cons. Strategic arguments given foreign aid to countries are strategically positioned. It's a good idea because it helps ensure that they will stay friendly to us. That does quite well as well. But we should send aid to people in desperate need, whether or not it will directly promote the national interest is found convincing overall. So this this argument that is sometimes put forward, but it should be strictly divided, guided by national interest is not is not the dominant view. Now, arguments against that. This is very important. You can taking care of problems at home is more important than giving aid to foreign countries. The problem in America must be fixed first before the government even starts to consider giving taxpayer money to others. Well, 78 percent find that convincing. This is very important that if you create the frame in terms of problems at home and problems abroad, people always push the button that says problems at home are more important. Right. So as we say, problems at home are important. They they they they push that button. So the question is, well, what we ask them, well, of all the but if you change this to a distribution framework and you say, well, I'd like you to think about the US government spending to help

poor people at home and poor people abroad. What percentage do you think should go to poor people abroad? And how much for the poor people at home? Well, 10 percent, they say about 10 percent should go to people abroad. And the other 92 percent to people at home and Republicans say 8 percent. So it's it and this is actually substantially more than go than the ratio is actually more in favor of people at home than than than this substantially. The arguments about corruption and theft and so on. These are very big people. We do have a very strong sense that that there's there's this waste and fraud and so on. We once asked him, you know, how much actually gets to the people who need it and it's less than half. But this is something that's true of government in general, even more so when it comes to foreign aid because there are other foreign actors in the in the picture. But also when you push back and say, well, study shows that it's not true that a lot of foreign aid is lost or fraud or waste. And this is false information. Decisions about foreign aid should be based on facts. This does extremely well as well. So people are do not hold to this belief of waste and fraud intensely, but it's it's very much there. But I think we'll stop there and open it up for some for our discussion. OK, how do we go? How do we go from there?

INGRAM: Steven, thank you very much for that timely presentation. With all of the information and misinformation that's going on about foreign aid, it's really could not be more timely. I'm going to ask my other colleagues on the panel to join us now. Steven is going to stay on the panel and we are joined by Vanessa Williamson, who's a senior scholar at both the Brookings Governance Studies program and the Urban Institute for Tax Policy. She's written on issues in a number of areas, particularly tax, but also on foreign assistance and is the author of a forthcoming book, "The Price of Democracy." Our other panelist is Charlie Dent. He is a former seven term Republican member of Congress from Pennsylvania from 2005 to 2018. He was a senior member of the House Committee on Appropriations, from which perch he became deeply immersed in foreign aid program. His current roles include a senior advisor to DLA Piper, executive director and vice president of the Aspen Institute Congressional Program and commentator on CNN. Charlie, I'd like to start with you. Thank you for joining us today. To say the least, there is much going on in Washington that is affecting foreign assistance. How would you interpret the findings of this survey to inform messages to U .S. policy makers, both Congress and the administration and especially for Republicans?

DENT: Well, a couple of things. I would say to inform these members. There is one poll question up there about folding USAID into the State Department. I really don't think people have a strong opinion on that one way or the other. I mean, that's kind of an inside Washington thing. Is it better to have it independent? Is it better to fold it into the State? So I think, and I looked at that question, I thought, you know, not one that a

member is going to lose his or her election over. It's just not going to rise to that level. But in terms of the messaging on foreign assistance, I'd say this. I have for years, when I would get questions all the time in my town hall meetings, “well, you know, foreign aid, we spend so much on it, you know, we're not going to be able to fund Social Security.” You know, you hear those arguments all the time. And then you just put, when you, I always found it was easy to just talk about the facts. Less than one percent of funding is going to foreign assistance. And I would often then talk about it, reframe the whole question. I said the United States has a national security posture. We have a national security program, and I always say it's and it's three-headed diplomacy, defense, and development. And we spend, you know, in this case, about eight hundred billion dollars a year on defense. And maybe we spend about 50 billion on diplomacy and then and on development. Maybe you're going to spend maybe we'll spend close to what let's say 40 billion in that range. And but I would say it's the smallest, the least funded of the things that we need to do and that this soft power by making sure that certain places remain stable. And we talk about the PEPFAR program, for example, by having a healthier subcontinent in Africa, you provide for greater social and political stability. And then and then why this is in our interests so that we don't need military engagements. And you can make those arguments and then Republicans will respond to that. I found that they will respond to that national security parts, part of a national security strategy. And this is the least funded, but it's an important piece. If we don't do this, it will require additional it'll require additional support for the armed forces at some point if we're not careful. And I think people respond to that. So and I think many members of Congress don't wreck. You know, I think many of them will also and I think I would say with Republican audiences, too, that, you know, much of the aid, a significant portion of the aid, I should say, is distributed through international NGOs that have religious affiliations, whether they be Catholic Relief Agency. And there are also ones that are evangelical Christian and many of these churches. And these people know they go to their church on Sunday and they see people sitting in, you know, in the hallways there with their their hands out saying, hey, we need help to support our efforts and pick your pick your favorite country in the developing world. And and so they understand it's part of their faith mission, many of them to engage in this very humanitarian assistance. And I also think that I was interested in your survey in that, well, I thought the national security argument might be more persuasive for some skeptics. But the humanitarian role is also quite strong. I mean, when you say to people that 25 million lives have been saved because of our investments to PEPFAR and HIV AIDS, you know, that's not nothing. I mean, that's a lot of people saved. And that's an enormous impact and that fewer and fewer people are dying of that and we're doing better. It's still always an issue. But and I think people will respond. And you say, look, people in sub -Saharan Africa, many of the governments have had a very favorable view of the United States and no small part because of how we intervene there.

And you contrast that with what the Chinese do, who are all about resource recovery. You know, they're out there trying to build a road out to a mine. They bring in Chinese workers. That's how they help. You know, we try to do things in a you know, we're trying to actually build actual health capacity, agricultural capacity, education capacity in these countries to help them improve themselves. It's not a bad it's not I think it's I think it helps our country's image in so many ways. So overall, I think those survey results just kind of reflect that most people don't understand how much we spend on foreign aid. They think we're spending more than we are actually are. And and so I think there's a I think there's a good chance that, you know, you can make you can make the arguments. I don't think people want to cut it off they don't.

INGRAM: Great. Thank you very much, Charlie. That was very helpful. Vanessa, you've done dug deep into how the American people respond to opinion surveys, specifically writing an article on how they perceive foreign aid and government waste and how much they actually know about public policy issues. You note the public often overestimates both in the context of this most recent survey. Give us your thoughts of what Americans know and think about foreign aid.

WILLIAMSON: That's a great question. So I would start by saying that of their own accord, Americans think about foreign aid very rarely. This is not an issue that's top of mind. So you can both so you can ask people about the question and find out what they think about it. But you can also ask them what parts of government do they think about? And foreign aid is very, very low salience, as political scientists would say. That is to say, not many people are thinking about the issue, but those who are tend to think about it in negative terms. Which means that it's an area that has traditionally been one that has sort of a political valence to it and sort of concern that American money is going overseas. But those are really weakly held views. And as you saw, a whole set of factual corrections, a whole set of moral interventions rapidly change people's opinion because it's simply not something they've thought very much about. And I think that it's really interesting and useful to see that both people with a sort of practical experience of lawmaking and speaking to constituents find that that's true. That you can adjust people's perceptions pretty quickly by giving them information. And we find the same thing in surveys. On the specific question of overestimation of foreign aid, this is a substantial amount of overestimation, as we've seen. And that's a very consistent policy over time. Again, factual corrections improve those overestimates, but there is also a broader tendency of the American people to overestimate small percentages and under estimate large ones. So sort of across the board, if you ask Americans to estimate something that is 1 percent, 2 percent, 3 percent of the public. So, for example, you can ask them about how many people in America are Muslim or Jewish, how many people are Hispanic

or Black. Questions that are comparatively small, are asking for a comparatively small percentage, will get overestimated. And if you ask people about things that most people have done, they tend to get underestimated. So when we're thinking about assessing the foreign aid survey here, which I think is absolutely in keeping with my own research on the subject and I think a wonderful intervention at this time. I think it's important to both recognize that there's a broader tendency for Americans to not quite get the numbers right. And also to recognize the power of new information to correct underlying assumptions that are weakly held and are misinformation.

INGRAM: Great. Thank you, Vanessa. So, Steven, as John noted, you've been undertaking surveys of public opinion on foreign aid for some 30 years. How have you seen public and elite attitudes towards aid change over that period of time? And I was particularly interested. I've always assumed that the humanitarian argument would outrank all the other arguments with the American people. But that doesn't, with your survey, this survey doesn't show that. Has that changed?

KULL: Oh, they're all right up there on the front. And I think humanitarian does do better than self -interest based ones. But going back historically in the 90s, there was a much stronger sense in in the elite that the public really didn't like foreign aid and that everything needs to be interest based and that kind of thing. And that actually, you know, and there was this big struggle. Then that actually changed, particularly under George W. Bush, who really emphasized the Christian aspect of the commitment to the to to care for others. And again, that's that's a very, very strong argument. And the whole thing kind of settled down. The the the information that that it is much less than people assume got out there more and was used effectively. I've seen in town halls people get when when people raise their hand and say, well, let's pay for that by cutting foreign aid. And then the member says, well, you know, it's just one percent. And then that kind of calms them down. And I think this this theme that people what it's it's what comes to people's mind whenever they want to pay for something that that's and they were asked where are we going to get the money that foreign aid comes into their mind. And so there that that leads members to assume that there's it's just this this thing that people don't care about. And that's really that's really not true. Now, why do people have this this view? I think it's there is a kind of assumption that America has this generosity that goes back to the two intervening in World War Two and the Marshall Plan and all that. And there's just this assumption that it is kept on going. The Marshall Plan is still going and that that and actually people feel pretty good about that. They don't feel bad about it, but they think of it as something they can draw on at any time. Like when we need something, let's just draw that down a little because it's so big. Right. But when they're actually given the and so you can

kind of politically play on it if you're if you're trying to to energize people and say, I'm going to take care of you. We're going to take care of problems here at home. And then people go, yeah, people, they nod as we can see. But when you actually ask them, do you want to eliminate it? Do you want a gut foreign aid? Do you want to? No, no, no, no, we didn't say that. Let's just make it, you know, five, 10 percent. And and certainly one percent is fine. So it becomes a kind of political football. And and and after George W., it got it's the people stopped using it as much and it's stopping a partisan issue the way it was in the 90s. And now there's this kind of idea of bringing it back up and suddenly now it is a more of a partisan issue again.

INGRAM: So that that really begins to address what I call the pothole question, which you got into in your presentation of, you know, would you rather spend money on foreign aid or on fixing the potholes or on education? In America, you showed that Americans, you know, want to fix the potholes, but they're still willing to spend a little bit of money on foreign aid. In fact, spending more than we actually do spend. Any more you want to say on that before I talk to turn to Charlie and Vanessa on that?

KULL: Yeah. If you make it a priority question, people always say spend more at home. This is a higher priority, even in using very strong language like we should spend any money abroad. But if you give them a distributional framework and we've done it where we say, OK, here's the whole budget and you can increase or decrease as you see fit. And then we and at the most they might trim foreign aid items just a little bit, you know, like a billion dollars here or there, that kind of thing. So when they see it in the in the in the framework in a distributional framework, they they really leave it pretty much the as it is. They just think there's some part we should be some for others. We have some percentage. And then when they're told the actual percentage, that looks about right. So it's it's it's. But again, you can you can play on that that assumption of the overestimation and use that as something to leverage, to to to emphasize that, you know, I as a political leader, I'm going to take care of you more effectively.

INGRAM: So, Charlie, you talked about town halls, which you had to deal with on a on a weekly or basis for seven years. How often would foreign aid come up and how would you deal with this pothole question of domestic versus international spending?

DENT: You know, doing nearly 14 years in Congress, I used to get that question every so often, not not as often as you think. And I think because of what Steven said that after I came into Congress in, I was elected in '04. And, you know, with PEPFAR just beginning and it was I thought foreign assistance became much

less of a partisan issue at that time. I agree with that. That was my observation. It didn't come up often, but when it did, it usually was brought up in a very negative way that because of all the money we're spending on foreign assistance, we're not able to meet the needs and demands of our of our own population. And that's where we always pivoted back to this whole idea of a national security strategy that was three headed defense, development, and diplomacy. And and I would talk about it in those contacts, talk about the successes we've had. I would even say, you know, there are countries like, well, let's look at the look at the Marshall Plan. That was that was foreign aid. And look what's happened. Europe is peaceful, prosperous and free for our biggest trading partner. We have, you know, we're much better off. We don't kill each other anymore over there, which is a great thing until obviously with what's happening with Putin, Russia and Ukraine, but has been largely peaceful, prosperous and stable, which is I always said that's not the historical norm. It's the exception. And we can take a lot of credit for that for our leadership. And people don't always connect that dot that because what we did, we helped stabilize this place where so many millions of people have been killed, especially in the last century. So I would make that argument. You talk about country success stories, you say, well, look at places like Taiwan and South Korea that were very poor places. And now they're wealthy, but they are recipients of support from American foreign assistance. And you talk about the successes and I think you get you get to a much better place in the conversation with your your constituents. But remember one thing, though, foreign assistance is a very easy target, though, for policymakers. And I remember explaining to some heads of foundations back during Trump one, in the first administration when the first budget came out and they proposed cutting the State Department back and related agencies by about 30 percent. And and and they were kind of having a hard time understanding this. I won't mention any names, but they couldn't understand what the thinking was. I said, well, it's actually quite simple. At the time, President Bush, he had President Bush, President Trump had campaigned on the idea of, you know, he said he wasn't going to he's going to increase defense spending. He wasn't going to touch Medicare or Social Security. And and so his budget director was Mick Mulvaney. And so he had to present a budget. So where was he going to find some money? So he looks at the non -defense discretionary piece of the budget and sees foreign assistance and just decides a lot that off. It's easy. And some of them were thinking, well, what were the metrics that were used? There were no metrics. There were none. They just said, that's it. That looks easy. Nobody's going to care if we cut that off. That was their thinking. Of course, those changes, those cuts never happened because we in Congress stopped it from happening. We said it wasn't going to happen. But that's why foreign assistance is vulnerable because it just looks easy. And that's why you have to be that's why everybody has to be concerned now. Again, it looks it looks like an easy place

to cut, even though it's only one percent and people overestimate how much we spend there. It's still vulnerable. And so that's why you have to take the current threat very seriously.

INGRAM: Good. Thank you, Vanessa. Before I turn to you, I want to remind people that you can submit questions by emailing to events@Brookings.edu or by using the hashtag #USForeignAid either on X or on Bluesky. Now, Vanessa, you find in your 2019 article that opinion surveys have implications for how political figures speak to the public about policy. And in the case of foreign aid and government waste, sometimes they use blurry definitions, which likely reinforce popular definitions and overestimate. Can you explain that a little bit and your thoughts on how public officials might use the results of this recent survey?

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, that's a great question. So I think this follows very much on what my fellow panelists were saying. Because leaders, when they are engaging in foreign interventions, tend to talk about those things in humanitarian terms. President Bush certainly did in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Obama made the same sort of rhetorical choices that they tend to talk about military interventions in humanitarian terms. This reinforces the feeling for Americans that much of what is foreign when they're thinking about foreign aid, they're confusing it with our military spending, which is in fact vast. Right. So on the one hand, of course, it makes perfect sense for politicians to talk about their military interventions in humanitarian terms. That is the thing that appeals to Americans always has. And at the same time, it makes sense that this would reinforce a really widespread misperception. Right. So we need to take that into account that that the kind of interventions we do in surveys where we tell people this is what foreign aid is over here and this is military spending over here. And they're different and they're completely different orders of magnitude in terms of spending. That's not a rhetoric that's getting reinforced very often by political figures. So that's one of the sources of this misperception. But I think it also has, as I think both of my fellow panelists pointed out, because people like President Bush spoke about military interventions in humanitarian terms, it to some degree depoliticized foreign aid. Right. Because it was something that both Republicans and Democrats were hearing about as part of the United States mission abroad. So I think that that's, you know, that it's sort of a two-edged sword when we're thinking about what that kind of rhetoric can do. I mean, I think looking forward, one thing that's important to remember is that what we're seeing happen right now is not occurring. Right. Cuts to foreign aid are being proposed or implemented, in fact, outside of the legislative process and are therefore not encountering the portion of government over which constituents can really speak up. Right. Calls to Congress do matter. But what's happening to foreign aid is not occurring through legislation. So when we think about the role of public opinion right now, we should be asking ourselves, is it appropriate that

substantial decisions about foreign aid and about a bunch of other kinds of governments, many, are occurring through an agency that has no accountability mechanisms whatsoever. And I think that, you know, my fellow panelists talking about how Congress responded to the first Trump administration, right, is an indication of what elected officials would choose to do about foreign aid compared to unelected actors that are operating today.

INGRAM: Thank you. So let's turn to the politics of foreign aid. And obviously, Charlie, I'm going to start with you on this. Foreign aid has never been a priority issue in any national election that I can recall. Some people probably consider it to be a niche issue. How do you think about the relationship between public opinion and policymaking? Which constituencies matter? And how much of the issue is about financial transactions versus how much is about values?

DENT: You know, that's a tough question in many ways. I think you need to talk about this issue differently to different constituencies. You know, you think about it. Look, look where some of the pushback is coming right now over what's happening at USAID. It's coming from Kansas for good reason. You know, I've been to it. I've been to refugee camps in sub-Saharan Africa, but the up near the Sudanese border in Kenya and Kakuma. And, you know, I've seen the wheat bags from Kansas, you know, that are from USAID. And I was there with a member from Kansas who prominently took a picture of himself next to those bags. Constituents know that, you know, our product, our commodity wheat is here. And I'm proud of that fact, you know. And so what I'm finding is that you can talk about this issue in different ways to different people. Like I said, when you talk to the farmers, they have skin in the game. I mean, this is they're they're they're sending food and it's important part of their own business model. So it's important for them. I would often talk about it in my own constituency in Pennsylvania, in south central Pennsylvania. I would I represented Hershey, Pennsylvania. And I would say, yeah, you know, we look at Ghana. We do a lot of work over in Ghana as a as a nation. It's a stable place. Well, you know, they produce a lot of cocoa. And last I checked, we don't grow cocoa in North America. And we need cocoa by the shipload so that we can make chocolate to keep all these people working here in south central Pennsylvania, who are making 70 million Hershey kisses a day. You know, so which is a lot of loving. And and I said, that's a but we need we need a stable supply. And so to the extent that we're all working together and even at that time, the Hershey Corporation and their school, which is well funded and endowed, is educating the children of the cocoa growers. I said, so I try to connect it back home, always try to connect why this foreign assistance matters directly to your own local economy. You can do that in Kansas with sorghum and wheat. You can do it in Hershey, Pennsylvania, because they

need cocoa. And I'm sure there are numerous examples all around the country where you can make that connection. And then, of course, you can speak to the, you know, to the I'll say to the more religious or evangelical community a little differently, many of whom will believe it's part of their faith mission. And you can talk about saving lives. Twenty-five million from HIV. I think that does resonate. And so I'm saying is all these arguments have resonance. They all do. And there are there are other issues, too. But in the whole country right now, the one thing, the few things that Republicans and Democrats agree on is that China is increasingly threatening, taking increasingly threatening positions relative to the United States. And so to the extent that you say, look, if we step out of the game, if we walk away, the choice isn't between us and China. The only choice is China. We've vacated the whole field to the Chinese. And I think that gets the attention of a lot of Americans who don't want China to have as much influence and are concerned about a rising China. So there's so many ways you can talk about this issue. And I think in ways that then people stop, they stop even talking about eliminating it because they realize there are bigger issues at play. But they have to hear the they have to understand potential consequences to to growers out in Kansas, to to confectioners in Hershey, Pennsylvania, or wherever they may be. They need to hear that their potential consequences if we're not in the game. And of course, an ascendant, more dominant China. I hear people complain about China being in Latin America all the time. Well, Ok, let's just walk away. What's that going to do? And in fact, you know, and I'm just going to pick on this. You know, the president floated this idea, which I didn't think was serious. Frankly, it's preposterous about, you know, the US occupying Gaza. Well, Ok, let's say this is just let's just pretend for a second that it's a serious proposal, which it's not. Let's pretend it's serious. Well, why would you shut down USAID the week before? I mean, you're going to need a whole battalion of USAID workers there in addition to the US army to deal with the deal with the security issues and the insurgency. I mean, I just there's like a lack of coherence to some of these arguments that you hear from the other side. But the good news is, you know, you have very powerful arguments to make that resonate with members in both parties all across the country.

INGRAM: I like that good news point, Charlie. Thank you for that. Vanessa, how do you how do you look at this?

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. I mean, one of the concerns that I have looking forward is that it's that turning off government functions so that Americans can learn what they did is not the strategy I would prefer to see us adopting to educate people about what these programs do. Right. And I think that, you know, if the kinds of policies we're seeing, we're going through Congress, then I think there would be an

opportunity to have some of that education process occur without the tremendous upheaval and harm that is being done through these sort of unaccountable actions. But I think that's exactly right that, you know, one of the challenges I think we face as a country is recognizing the level of distance between what happens when you do really high-quality survey work like this work that we're talking about today. Right. And you see what Americans actually want and you see the enormous distance between what Americans want and what's actually happening. Right. The disconnect between public opinion and public policy has always been wide, but it has grown wider. And I think that that is, you know, maybe the most fundamental governance question we're facing today.

INGRAM: So, Steven, how do you how do you think about the relationship between public opinion and policymaking? And in the case of foreign aid, as I said earlier, is it more issue of the finances, the budget issue, or is it more issue of values?

KULL: Oh, it's fundamentally a value issue. And there's always this struggle between how much should we emphasize the self and how much we emphasize the collective. And any that there is no solution on one side or the other. And it's not that the public divides between those who are self -oriented and those who are collective oriented, though you sometimes get get stories that presented that way. Every American has within themselves both collectivist and moral and humanitarian feelings and self -interest for themselves and for the nation. And every individual is in some way or another trying to find a kind of balance, a kind of equilibrium. And they're looking to leaders to not present an either or set of options, but say, where's the right balance and where and where can they be complementary and things like that? So that is that is and politicians don't always, you know, they they find often very attractive to hit one tone or the other. And they get a response. Remember that is not heads will nod to the most extreme statements on on both sides. But ultimately, where the stability lies is in some kind of balance and some kind of integration and the signaling does. And yes, but public opinion plays some role, not so much in terms of very specific choice points, but in the kind of equal equilibrium of values.

INGRAM: So let's turn to questions from the viewers and the question that multiple ones have sent in. The last one from James Fremming is what actions might advocates for US foreign aid or just those in favor of getting to the truth take to count on the substantial flow of disinformation about fraud and waste and foreign assistance? And, you know, Steven, you deal with that in the way you frame your surveys because you give alternative answers. Charlie, you've dealt with that and how you deal with town halls where you address it

directly. But how do you do that at a national level? And I've been impressed that the mainstream press in the last 10 days has really presented a lot of facts about foreign aid. Which I think would make a difference to people who are reading. But let me start with you, Charlie. How do you think we get the real information out there across the country?

DENT: Well, I think you do it by highlighting the successes as best you can. And historically, current day, you know, again, PEPFAR is the one we talk about most. But there are other very significant successes in food security in particular that I think we can we can brag about. And we should when we don't do that enough. And also, you know, we have inspectors general in this country and in the government and and they write reports. And, you know, as a member of Congress, I used to sit I used to look at those reports. We used to look at those reports before we brought these departments and agencies before our committees and subcommittees. And we use those reports to identify waste, fraud and abuse. And I would I don't walk away from the issue. Look, I would I would acknowledge there is waste, fraud and abuse across the whole federal enterprise. It's everywhere. The question is, how much of it is there and what are you doing about it? As long as you think that you're trying to address waste, fraud and abuse, I think that goes a long way. And that's why with the USAID being shuttered, I thought, you know, there's a lot of waste, fraud and abuse and an 800 billion dollar Pentagon budget. But nobody suggests dismaying the Pentagon because they bought some bad screwdrivers or some hammers that were too expensive, whatever. They're not going to do that. I mean, it's and so we have to acknowledge the very real issue that money does get misspent. And actually, in the most recent debate, my my good friend who was just fired as an inspector general for USAID, Paul Martin, I've known for 45 years. We were we were fraternity brothers at Penn State, lived together for two and a half years. And but I'm just saying, but but in that case, you know, he I with he released a report the other day that probably got him fired. And it basically said that by dismantling USAID and, you know, we were going to risk spoilage and death of a lot of food that's sitting in ports and in warehouses that can't be moved one way or the other. It probably costs close to a half a billion dollars. And so, OK, there's a there's a story. And and I guess what I'd say to you, too, that we do talk about that fraud and abuse issue more specifically. I think a lot of people think we just send this foreign aid right to the government of your favorite country in Sub -Saharan Africa or elsewhere. And they think we're just giving it to the politicians who are then going to take it and skim it and do whatever they do with it. And then very few gets to the beneficiaries. But you have to kind of explain them. A lot of this money goes to USAID to contractors. These are NGOs are working on the ground with people. They work with the governments, but the money really isn't going to the government. It's going to the people. And so I think you have to address it head on. But don't don't be afraid to acknowledge that there are

some failures here or there and that you and you just deal with it. And we are doing much better now. And you talk about things like the Millennial Challenge Corporation, which was created in large part to help countries develop better governance. And that's so I think there are certain things you can do here to to minimize that waste, fraud and abuse argument.

KULL: And I jump in there. The public's response isn't. Yes, there is a huge perception that in in a that there's a lot that's lost to waste, fraud and abuse and that there's skimming and all this kind of stuff. And the way we've asked them how much actually help helps the people who need it. And it's like a quarter or something like that. I mean, so worse than the standard government. But the answer the people have to it is not. Therefore, let's shut the whole thing down. It's clean it up. Clean it up. What are the how can how can we do better than that? So it's that it's not a killer argument that leads people to simply want to not do aid, just do it better.

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, if I can jump in on that as well, I think that, you know, one of the most important things we could be doing in terms of thinking about how to talk to the American people about waste is that under spending is incredibly wasteful. Right. And this example of food spoiling is such a good example of that phenomenon. But we're cutting a budget at a certain point is in fact quite inefficient because they don't have enough money to spend the money well. And so this is to me an area that has been a sort of politicians haven't talked much about. It's not a way of thinking about spending that has a lot of traction with sort of elite rhetoric. So it means that Americans haven't thought about it very often. But I think the the basic idea there that suddenly turning off programs just invariably leads to waste. You know, just in the same way that suddenly firing, you know, air traffic controllers causes these huge problems. Right. That's something that people can and do understand in their daily lives that sudden shocks to budgets are not the most efficient way to to run operations. So I think that there's there's enormous room for political figures and people in the media to explain the immense costs of under spending. Relatedly, I'd add, you know, coming back to the point of what foreign aid means to Wichita or what foreign aid means to Hershey, Pennsylvania. You know, we talk a lot about the way that sort of policymakers and decision makers and media leaders should be talking about these issues. But there's also so much room for amplifying the stories of people locally across the United States, because I think there's very little that's more convincing to other Americans than the stories, firsthand stories of not of political leaders, but of farmers in Kansas. Those are the kinds of stories that resonate with people and that are sticky. That is to say they will have it in their mind later the next time they're asked this question, much more likely than they'll have data in their minds, statistics or percentages in

mind. They'll recall that, you know, well, when I when I heard about foreign assistance last time, I remember a story about a farmer. You know, that's the kind of thing that sticks in people's minds. And that's part of the public opinion story. Right. It's not just about what people remember over the course of one survey is what they remember over time. And so I think there's there's real room for greater application of stories of just everyday Americans and what foreign aid and assistance means.

DENT: Yeah, just one quick comment on that, too. One one anecdote that I've used. I've been to various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and you hear of presidents who will tell you that in their little village in the middle of in the middle of nowhere. There they are. And there's some Peace Corps volunteer who helped that young child or boy in many cases learn to read and realize there was a world beyond their little village. And these people become presidents of their country. And that's their impression. The United States, that Peace Corps volunteer who actually made a difference in the guy's life. He's now running the country. I mean, that's those stories are are and then not just presidents, but people who have other leadership positions in their own countries. All of a sudden, they felt like this is something that America gave to them.

INGRAM: You know, Vanessa and Charlie, you both talked about what I would call human interest stories to grab people's attention. And my my initial career was in working in the Congress, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. And I eventually learned that the way to get the attention of a policymaker was not with the facts, but to get to their heart, get to something that related to what they cared about, and then they would listen to the facts. Now we're getting a number of questions coming in. We've got about another five minutes about the politics surrounding this. And what's what's the political arena going to do with foreign assistance in the first administration? The Congress pushed back strongly on Trump's 30 percent cut for foreign aid. We've got a different Congress today. Charlie, I'm not going to ask you to predict what the Congress is going to do, but you're a strong believer in foreign aid. And what would you be telling your colleagues today if you were you were still in the Congress? And then, Vanessa, I'd like to get your take on that.

DENT: Well, I know Congress well enough to know when you have a very slim majority in both the House and the Senate. And you need in this case, even though there's one party that has majority Republicans in the House and the Senate, you'll need 60 votes in the Senate. That means you'll need at least seven Democratic votes for a spending bill. And you're going to need a whole bunch of Democrats in the House because there are plenty of Republicans who aren't going to vote for an omnibus bill in March. And so that empowers Democrats. And so at the end of the day, you know, I think that foreign assistance is going to be

funded come March 14th. The question, I think, that is in the minds of many of these members is, OK, if we vote to fund this, will the administration actually spend the money as Congress directs? Now, that's a question I don't know the answer to. I don't know anybody does because this is sort of unprecedented because I'm an old style appropriator saying, hey, you know, when we pass spending laws in this country, appropriations bills, those aren't suggestions. Those are those are laws. They are commands. You the executive shall spend the money as we direct. And if you don't spend it, there better be a damn good reason. And you can't move around other things without our approval. So that's kind of where I am. I'm kind of a hard hardnosed guy on that sort of thing. So I still think at the end of the day, you're going to get it funded. The question is, what will the executive branch do if it chooses not to spend this Congress directs?

INGRAM: And you're saying that there's got to be a bipartisan accord on the funds.

DENT: And there will be, there has to be, because there simply aren't enough Republicans to pass these things on their own in the House and the Senate.

INGRAM: Vanessa?

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I think it's exactly right. The real question is whether Congress will continue to have the spending power. And that is a constitutional question. It marks a, I think frankly, quite shocking shift in power in this country. I am a political scientist, and so we would talk about this globally in a comparative context in terms of executive aggrandizement. That is to say, the abrogation of new powers to the executive that were previously not held, were held by the elected legislature. And, you know, this has been a very clear -cut policy for a very long time that Congress says shall. And that means that it's a law. And that's what the executive does. You know, there's a reason Congress is Article 1 in the Constitution. It was intended to be the most powerful branch. So we really are outside of experience, broadly speaking, in terms of the way that power is being asserted by the current executive. So I think that is really the ballgame fundamentally. I think that, you know, I'm not going to tell Congressman Dent or Congressman Dent how Congress works. I absolutely agree. And he did it himself. But we really are in new times in terms of thinking about whether Congress will continue to assert the authority that was vested in it by the Constitution.

INGRAM: Yes, if we had another three hours, we could get into the constitutional questions. Steven, it was your survey that informed this conversation. And you get the last word to wrap this up.

KULL: All right. I come back to the, you know, basic theme that...

INGRAM: And I say that of everything in your survey, what do you want to leave the audience with thinking about from what you found out in your survey?

KULL: Right. I come back to the theme that there is this kind of inner struggle between how much to emphasize the self and how much to emphasize the collective. And we're always looking for a kind of equilibrium. And it turns out that when people get information about what we are doing, they are pretty much comfortable with what we're doing. That what we are doing is pretty much reflective of a kind of balance that Americans want. And that there's a lot of misinformation that's rooted in this positive image of America that they admire, that they feel good about, but they don't necessarily want to fulfill completely. So they're looking for that, you know, where is the right balance? And they tend to think maybe we're overdoing it because of that misinformation. But when they get correct information, they become comfortable with it. And any idea that you're going to just eliminate one side of that equation, we will have just equilibrium. If we have some idea that we're going to eliminate aid, it is part of who we are as a people to have that as a function. And the only question, the only debate is what's the right balance and how should it be distributed and so on. And there I think there will become more of a debate of how important is expertise. That's, I think, a really important question around AID that hasn't yet been fully discussed. And I think it will be. Is it really important that people who have been there for decades are in there or is that somehow a problem? I think that will become a discussion. And I think ultimately people do think some kind of expertise is critical to it. So I don't think we're going to end up, if the American people have a say, all that far from where we are now.

INGRAM: All right. That's a nice note to conclude on. Steven, Vanessa, Charlie, thank you very much for taking the time for being with us today and lending your thoughts and ideas. And everybody have a good rest of your day. Goodbye. Thank you.