Trust in Government and American Public Opinion Toward Foreign Aid

Abstract

Since the end of World War II, the United States government has spent nearly $4 trillion on humanitarian, economic, and military assistance to other countries. Despite the benefits that foreign aid programs can yield to both donor and recipient countries, mass support for foreign aid spending has long been lacking. Here, I argue that trust in the national government, which is similarly lacking among the U.S. public, plays an important, and heretofore, underappreciated role in shaping public opinion toward foreign aid. Despite having little connection to domestic national politics and the mixed evidence, at best, from extant research regarding the potential for political trust to shape mass opinion on this issue, I find, using cross-sectional and panel survey data from the United States, a robust, positive, and substantively significant relationship between political trust and support for government spending on foreign aid. Overall, these findings help use to better understand the drivers of mass support for U.S. foreign aid spending and, more broadly touches on a debate regarding whether the United States should continue its long-standing role of global leadership or turn inwards. These findings also underscore the political consequences of citizen trust in government.

Since the end of World War II, the United States government has, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, spent nearly $4 trillion on foreign aid, broadly referring to money that seeks to provide humanitarian relief, economic development, and/or military arms to other countries.

Despite the numerous benefits that foreign aid programs can yield (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Wood 2014; Ingram 2019; Savun and Tirone 2011; but see e.g., Wright 2009), including economic development (e.g., Dalgaard, Hansen, and Tarp 2004; Economides, Kalyvitis, and Philippopoulos 2008; Karras 2006) and the promotion of democracy (e.g., Ariotti, Dietrich, and Wright 2022; Dietrich and Wright 2015; Heinrich and Loftis 2019), a long-standing elite consensus in support of such programs, and their importance for U.S. global leadership (Lieberman and Kyl 2015; Obama 2007), American public support for such spending is quite low, particularly when compared to other types of government spending (Oldendick and Hendren 2018). This holds true even when foreign affairs moves atop the political agenda.[1] And while the American mass public stands out as especially averse to foreign aid spending (e.g., Diven and Constantelos 2009), this pattern, i.e., of a lack widespread support for large public expenditure on foreign aid programs, particularly compared to other types of government spending, also appears to manifest among mass publics in other Western democracies (Henson and Lindstrom 2013; Wood 2018).

One common explanation for such spending attitudes, focusing on the United States, relates to uncertainty about what "foreign aid" actually entails and ignorance, specifically gross overestimates about foreign aid's share of the federal budget (e.g., Hurst, Tidwell, and Hawkins 2017; Scotto et al. 2017). However, data from a module on the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) shows that even among the approximately 4 in 10 Americans who know that foreign aid comprises a small proportion of the federal budget (less than Medicare, Social Security, and national defense), there is more support for cutting foreign aid (38%)

[1]Indeed, data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and from The Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that in every year since the early 1970s, the percentage of people who say we should spend less on foreign aid/assistance to other countries outnumbers the percentage who say we should spend more.

than for increasing it (12%). Data from the 2008-2018 General Social Survey (GSS) shows that even among the approximately 1 in 5 Americans who say they are "very interested" in international issues, far fewer people agree that we are spending "too little" on foreign aid/assistance to other countries (13%) than believe we are spending "too much" (60%). Collectively, this suggests that even if ordinary people paid more attention to international affairs and/or possessed more factually correct information about the nature of government spending, there would likely still be a dearth of public support for government allocating large sums toward foreign aid programs and assistance to other countries.

In seeking to explain American public support (or lack thereof) for foreign aid, extant scholarship tends to focus on framing and exposure to different types of information. These include exposure to information such as the extent of global wealth inequality (Nair 2018), and characteristics about potential recipient countries, such as whether it is a democracy (e.g., Doherty et al. 2020), is in a developing and/or negatively stereotyped region of the world (e.g., Baker 2015; Blackman 2018), engages in rights abuses (e.g., Heinrich and Kobayashi 2020), or conversely, whether such aid would benefit the donor country on the international stage (e.g., Chung, Pechenkina, and Skinner 2023; Strange 2023; Wood and Hoy 2022). This focus on framing experiments means that we know a good deal about how exposure to different kinds of information shape attitudes toward foreign aid, but know less and lack consensus about the demographic and attitudinal factors that shape public opinion toward foreign aid, particularly relative to, for example, what is known regarding attitudes toward economic redistribution (e.g., Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Piston 2018) and immigration (e.g., Citrin, Levy, and Wright 2023; Valentino et al. 2019).[2]

In short, extant research, both observational and experimental, has yielded important

[2]This is, of course, not to say that foreign aid is an ignored topic. Indeed a voluminous literature has examined this phenomenon, with a particular focus on the consequences of foreign aid and the behavior of donor countries. However, my focus here is on public opinion (in the U.S. case) toward foreign aid and how domestic political trust may shape such attitudes. For relevant and illustrative (but, of course, not exhaustive) overviews of various topics regarding foreign aid, e.g., the determinants of aid spending and its consequences, see the following review articles (Findley 2018; Qian 2015; Wright and Winters 2010).

insights regarding public opinion toward foreign aid spending. What is lacking, however, is clear and comprehensive evidence regarding how and why attitudes toward government, the actor most responsible for crafting, funding, and distributing foreign aid, may matter, and specifically whether trust in one's national government, which I refer to here as *political trust*, matters. While existing scholarship has paid some attention to how trust matters for foreign aid support, these studies either focus on trust in other people (Bayram 2017), trust in international organizations (Bayram and Graham 2022), or trust in other countries (Brewer et al. 2004), rather than trust in one's domestic national government.

To the extent that existing work has focused on this latter phenomenon, the empirical results, are mixed, with some studies (Bauhr, Charron, and Nasiritousi 2013; Bodenstein and Faust 2017; Chong and Gradstein 2008), but not all (Paxton and Knack 2012) finding evidence of a statistically significant relationship between domestic political trust and public support for foreign aid expenditure. These aforementioned studies also include a measure of domestic political trust as a control variable in cross-sectional multivariate regression models, rather than as a theorized explanatory variable of interest. As such, it remains unclear as to *why* such variables (political trust and foreign aid attitudes) may be linked.

Furthermore, these studies measure the concept of domestic political trust in different ways, often with single survey items, rather than with multiple questions comprising a validated multi-item scale. This empirical approach, i.e., employing single-item survey measures that only partially capture aspects of a well-validated measure of political trust (Hetherington 2005) can, by increasing the likelihood of possible measurement error. This can lead to researchers failing to find, or potentially underestimating, by a non-trivial degree, statistical relationships between concepts of interest (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008).

One study that goes beyond including a single-item measure of domestic political trust as a control variable is Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson (2021). Using a variety of data, including surveys from the United States (MTurk in 2018) and the United Kingdom (Dynata in 2019), these authors examine the relationship between populism and mass support for

foreign aid. As part of their broader exploration of how populism shapes foreign aid attitudes, the main focus of their paper, they find evidence of a statistically significant relationship between "anti-elitism," one component part of populism, which they define as perceiving elites to be "corrupt, dishonest, and self-serving," and thus not representing a clearly defined public will, and support for foreign aid spending. This is related to the concept of domestic political trust, which reflects general attitudes toward government and the political system but is also empirically distinct from it (Geurkink et al. 2020). Indeed, it is possible for one to think that government is ineffective and inefficient, without believing that a small elite are nefariously defying a clear and apparent public will. Furthermore, several of the questions that Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson (2021, 1050) employ to measure "anti-elitism" are very similar to those that are used to measure external political efficacy (Geurkink et al. 2020, 254). In short, Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson's work, while informative and valuable, provides stronger evidence to suggest that populism and foreign aid attitudes are linked, but yields more suggestive, rather than definitive, evidence regarding the relationship between domestic political trust and attitudes toward foreign aid spending.

Here, I build upon these existing studies, including Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson's (2021) finding of a statistically significant relationship between "anti-elitism" and foreign aid attitudes, but also diverge from past work in several ways. One is by focusing specifically on political trust, rather than populism writ large, as my main explanatory variable of interest. A second is by using an explicit measure of political trust (in my primary analyses) that has been widely employed in existing studies, the 4-item ANES scale. A third is by employing a theoretical framework that focuses more on cost-benefit trade-offs in the public mind, one that is consistent with existing scholarship on the mass-level policy consequences of political trust (e.g., Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Macdonald 2021). Finally, I also use nationally representative survey data (from the ANES and GSS) and employ both cross-sectional and panel survey designs to test this relationship. Overall, existing work provides some evidence to tentatively suggest that domestic political trust may shape public opinion toward foreign

aid spending. Here, I seek to test this more comprehensively and definitively.

In addition to providing a more comprehensive and definitive series of tests regarding how domestic political trust shapes attitudes toward foreign aid spending, which is the main objective of this paper, I also seek, by examining a wide range of individual-level explanatory factors, e.g., demographics, political identities, values, social group sentiments, along with political trust, to further advance our understanding of the individual-level factors that systematically shape of public opinion toward foreign aid. This reflects an additional contribution to the literature given that there is less consensus regarding the individual-level factors that systematically and meaningfully shape attitudes toward foreign aid spending, relative to, for example, other policies in the domain of foreign affairs such as international trade (e.g., Mutz 2021), and the use of military force (e.g., Berinsky 2009).

I use a combination of cross-sectional and panel survey data from the United States to (1) thoroughly test how political trust matters, and (2) to advance a more comprehensive model of public opinion toward foreign aid spending. Overall, I find that political trust is associated, to a substantively significant degree, with support for foreign aid spending. This relationship is robust to a variety of model specifications and is present during both peacetime and wartime. I attribute this to the perceived imbalance of costs and benefits that foreign aid entails, i.e., that it imposes a financial burden on the domestic population while conferring financial benefits upon foreigners. Additionally, I find that race, ideology, core political values, general isolationist sentiment, evaluations of the national economy, and feelings toward poor people also meaningfully shape public attitudes toward foreign aid.

Overall, these findings advance collective knowledge regarding American public opinion toward foreign aid, a widely employed strategy in international diplomacy and statecraft (e.g., Lancaster 2008; Schraeder, Hook, and Taylor 1998; Van der Veen 2011). These findings also underscore the political relevance of political trust (Zmerli and Van der Meer 2017) and suggest that consistently low levels of political trust may help to explain consistently low levels of support for foreign aid among the American mass public.

Why Political Trust Matters for Foreign Aid Support

At first glance, it might seem unlikely that trust in the national government, referred to here as *political trust*, would matter in shaping public opinion toward foreign aid spending. Indeed, this would jibe with majority of work on this subject, the policy consequences of political trust, focusing on domestic issues (Devine 2024). Notable exceptions to this approach include studies focusing on [U.S.] public opinion toward military force during the 9/11-era War on Terror and the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars (Hetherington and Husser 2012), immigration (Macdonald 2021), and free trade (Macdonald 2024), although all of these policies arguably have roots in domestic affairs as well, particularly the latter two issues of immigration and trade.[3] In short, the vast majority of existing scholarship (but see, e.g., Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson 2021) has (1) focused exclusively on domestic issues, or (2) focused on how political trust matters for issues that arguably straddle both domestic and international politics.[4]

While foreign aid is doled out for a variety of reasons, both self-interested and altruistic other-regarding in nature (Bearce and Tirone 2010; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2009; Chiba and Heinrich 2019; Heinrich 2013), and can ultimately serve the ends of both donor and recipient countries (e.g., Bermeo and Leblang 2015; Blair, Marty, and Roessler 2022; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; McLean 2015; Wang 2016), I argue that ordinary mass publics are unlikely to view it that way. Indeed, while the benefits of U.S. foreign aid may be clear and tangible to economic, military, and/or political elites, they are unlikely to be

[3]For example, free trade has (in the public mind) implications for domestic manufacturing, while immigration has implications for domestic issues involving a country's culture, economy, and welfare state generosity. Moreover, U.S. military force overseas also has clear ties to domestic politics because it directly involves U.S. citizens, their families, and/or their communities. In contrast, foreign aid spending is, I argue, a more distant non-domestic issue, one for which political trust may simply be less likely to matter.

[4]It is not clear whether political trust "matters more" for issues involving social welfare vs. globalization, for example. A recent meta-analysis by Devine (2024, see Figure 3) suggests that it appears to matter to a roughly equal degree, for government spending and immigration. However, this is something that merits additional work and analysis.

similarly apparent to the masses, the large majority of whom are only moderately political informed, at best (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997), particularly regarding international politics and global affairs.[5] In contrast, government spending in areas dealing with, for example, environmental protection and infrastructure may entail higher taxes and/or ultimately prove to be ineffective wastes of money, but can also yield clear, tangible benefits such as, for example, reduced pollution and fewer potholes, to the domestic [U.S.] population.

In contrast, there is no such clear tangible benefit regarding foreign aid programs. Such spending, by definition, disproportionately benefits foreigners. As noted by then-budget director Mick Mulvaney in 2017, during the Trump administration's ultimately unsuccessful push to drastically cut U.S. foreign aid, "the overriding message is fairly straightforward: less money overseas means more money spent here" (Shepardson 2017). More than two decades earlier in 1992, another right-wing populist candidate, Pat Buchanan, stated that "we simply do not want to fight other people's wars or use the tax dollars of our citizens to pay other nations' debts" (Lauter 1992). More recently in 2023, left-wing (on certain issues) populist candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. contrasted the "$113 billion committed to Ukraine" with the "57% of Americans who can't put their hand on $1,000 if they have an emergency," (DeArment 2023), implying that U.S. tax dollars would be better served if they were spent domestically rather than abroad.

Although foreign aid can help donor countries to advance their various policy objectives, government spending on this program is fundamentally centered around U.S. tax dollars are being spent to benefit a non-U.S. population. In other words, the costs of foreign aid are borne by the domestic U.S. population, while the benefits of such government largess are, I argue, in the minds of ordinary citizens, conferred upon a non-domestic population. This is not to say that such aid never flows to a U.S. ally or a group toward whom most people would view sympathetically, but foreign aid is inherently different from domestic

[5]See the following link for a variety of quotes from various economic, military, and political elites espousing the merits of foreign aid (`https://www.usglc.org/our-issue/quotes/`).

spending programs, e.g., on infrastructure, health, childcare, education, the environment, etc., in that the perceived cost-benefit balance is fundamentally tilted away from the domestic population. In other words, foreign aid spending entails costs and risks for the mass public, e.g., potentially wasteful and ineffective spending that comes without any clear, tangible benefits to offset them.

Regardless of the merits of U.S. foreign aid and assistance to other countries, these messages echo a potentially powerful argument against it, that foreign aid imposes costs upon *us* and confers benefits upon *them* (Kinder and Kam 2009). Furthermore, foreign aid could be ineffective in achieving its goals, end up entrenching dictators rather than promoting democracy, and/or be taken advantage of by corrupt actors rather than flowing the intended target group (e.g., Bermeo 2016; DiLorenzo 2018; Kono and Montinola 2013). While every government policy has a non-zero chance of being ineffective and/or detrimental, foreign aid stands out in that it does not, I argue, in most ordinary people's minds, counterbalance this with potential benefits to the domestic population.

This is not to say that the American mass public, nor mass publics anywhere, are universally opposed to foreign aid. Indeed, myriad survey data shows that they are not. Rather, I am arguing that the nature of this policy entails, for ordinary people, a cost-benefit imbalance that can "activate" political trust (Hetherington 2005). By this, I mean make it "matter" for people's decision calculus when they are considering their support for said policy. This dynamic has been demonstrated widely, including for affirmative action (Hetherington and Globetti 2002), gun control (Hansen and Seppälä 2023; Ryan et al. 2022), economic redistribution (Macdonald 2020; Rudolph and Evans 2005), and health insurance reforms that entail "more government" (Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Political trust has also been shown to shape U.S. public opinion toward immigration (Macdonald 2021), free trade (Macdonald 2024), and the use of military force (Hetherington and Husser 2012). Here, I seek to extend this to foreign aid, something that has not been clearly demonstrated by extant research. What all of these aforementioned policies have in common, unlike for

example, receiving cash benefits from the government, such as the stimulus checks that most Americans received during the Covid-19 pandemic, or universal old-age pension programs such as Social Security and Medicare, is that they entail risks and costs, i.e., they may have detrimental societal impacts, without conferring clear and tangible benefits to wide swaths of the population. As such, it is natural for people to exhibit some degree of skepticism about supporting such policies. One thing that can help them to overcome such skepticism is whether they trust government, the actor responsible for enacting and implementing said policies. In other words, people's support for policies like foreign aid should be determined, in part, by how much they trust and confidence they have in government.[6]

In sum, my argument is that foreign aid is a policy that should "activate" political trust. When policies entail costs and risks but confer few clear, tangible benefits, people are likely to be skeptical about giving government the flexibility and leeway, via public support, to enact and implement said policies. However, when people are more trusting of government, they will be more likely to give government the "benefit of the doubt" and support an increased role for government, even when the policy seems unlikely, on its face, to clearly and directly benefit themselves, their social groups, and/or their country. I articulate my formal hypothesis is as follows and discuss my associated research design below.

Hypothesis: Political trust is positively associated with support for foreign aid spending.

[6]Such "benefits" can be material (e.g., Hetherington and Globetti 2002), ideological (e.g., Rudolph and Evans 2005), or partisan (e.g., Hansen and Seppälä 2023). In other words, people may be less skeptical about supporting a policy because it confers economic benefits upon them, their families, and/or their social groups, or because it comports with their ideological and/or partisan identities, e.g., Republican (Democratic) partisans supporting a policy that is advocated for by their co-partisan elites, or conservatives (liberals) supporting a policy because it jibes with their general political outlooks. The broader point is that political trust, i.e., people's general views toward government, are relevant when policies entail such cost-benefit dynamics, in contrast to those that impose minimal costs and confer benefits widely, meaning, for example, that they are universal in nature and/or that they lack a clear partisan/ideological slant. I argue that the policy of U.S. foreign aid spending *does not* meet these criteria.

Data and Methods

My main data source is the Cumulative American National Election Studies (ANES), a nationally representative survey of the American mass public that has long been recognized as a "gold standard." The ANES also has valid measures of support for foreign aid spending and of political trust, as well as a rich battery of theoretically appropriate control variables. Unfortunately, the ANES does not ask about foreign aid spending in every year and has not done so for several election years. As such, I use data from the 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 ANES. I chose these years for several reasons. One is because, at the time of this writing, 2008 was the last year that the ANES asked about foreign aid spending. The second is because these election years include periods of peace (1996 and 2000) and war (2004 and 2008), and span both two-term Democratic (Bill Clinton) and Republican administrations (George W. Bush). Pooling data from these four election years also yield a sufficient sample size to validly test my hypotheses.

I supplement these pooled cross-sectional analyses of the 1996-2008 ANES with panel data from 1994-1996 and 2002-2004 ANES to demonstrate that political trust appears to drive attitudes toward foreign aid, rather than the reverse, and panel data from three GSS panel studies spanning 2006-2014 to show that the results hold even with an extremely strict test that accounts for individual fixed effects (dummy variables for each survey respondent) as a means of better accounting for unobserved pre-adult socialization factors. In the following sections, I discuss the data for main (1996-2008 ANES) analyses in detail. I discuss the data for my supplemental analyses (panel data from the 1994-1996/2002-2004 ANES and the combined 2006-2014 GSS) in latter sections.[7]

[7]See Supplemental Appendix A for descriptive statistics and detail on variable coding and creation.

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable (for my 1996-2008 ANES analyses) is support for foreign aid spending. This question is asked of ANES respondents as follows: *should federal spending on foreign aid be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?*. I code responses as follows (1 = decrease; 2 = same; 3 = increased; mean = 1.61). Given that my dependent variable is ordinal in nature, I employ an ordered probit regression model for my main analyses.

Main Independent Variable

My main independent variable (for my 1996-2008 ANES analyses) is trust in the national government, which I refer to as *political trust*. This has commonly been measured in the ANES with four questions, all of which are intended to capture people's general attitudes toward government rather than views toward any one political figure or specific branch of government. The four questions are as follows (1) *how much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington do do what is right?*, (2) *would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking our for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?*, (3) *do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?*, and (4) *do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?*. Consistent with past scholarship, I sum responses to these four questions into an additive index ($\alpha = 0.637$; mean = 0.350) and re-scale it to range between 0 and 1, with lower (higher) values indicating lower (higher) levels of trust in the national government.[8]

[8]Owing to data availability, I use different questions to measure this concept in the other surveys that I analyze. For example, the available GSS questions ask about "confidence" in the executive and legislative branches. This aside, the concept is intended to be the same, i.e., people's general attitudes toward the national government as a whole.

Control Variables

For my main (1996-2008 ANES) analyses, I account for a theoretically appropriate battery of control variables, i.e., individual-level demographic and attitudinal factors that may correlate with both political trust and attitudes toward foreign aid spending. To identify such variables, I draw on past studies (employing observational research designs) that have identified various correlates of public opinion toward foreign aid spending (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2018; Bauhr, Charron, and Nasiritousi 2013; Bayram 2017; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson 2021; Kim 2013; Paxton and Knack 2012; Kam and Kinder 2007; Prather 2024; Van Heerde and Hudson 2010). I also draw upon additional [observational] studies that focus on the determinants of mass attitudes toward foreign policy issues more broadly (e.g., Brewer et al. 2004; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Hetherington and Husser 2012; Rathbun et al. 2016). Collectively, these illustrative (but not exhaustive) studies, along with the variables available in the ANES, lead me to control for a combination of demographic and attitudinal factors.

To account for people's socialization and life experiences, I control for the following demographics: age (in years), gender (female vs. male), race (White, non-Hispanic vs. not), whether both of a respondents' parents were born in the United States (yes vs. no), and Census region of residence (Northeast vs. Midwest vs. South vs. West). To help account for socio-economic status, I control for formal education (4-college degree or higher vs. not), home ownership (yes vs. no), marital status (married vs. not), and household income (upper tercile vs. not). To help account for exposure to news about national and/or international affairs, I also control for whether people report reading a newspaper ever day (yes vs. no).

In terms of attitudinal variables that may correlate with both political trust and foreign aid support, I control for partisanship (7pt; strong Democrat $\rightarrow$ strong Republican) and ideology (7pt; extremely liberal $\rightarrow$ extremely conservative) to help account for ordinary Americans' general left-right identities and long-standing orientations to politics. Beyond these, I also control for the core political values of traditionalism (4-item index; $\alpha = 0.619$)

and egalitarianism (6-item index; $\alpha = 0.696$). Traditionalism is coded so that higher values reflect a stronger desire for conformity, aversion to new ideas and cultures, and the need to guard against external threats. Egalitarianism is coded so that higher values reflect a stronger desire for cooperation, less rigid group hierarchies, and the need to ameliorate social and economic inequities. In addition to these core values, I also control for the general foreign policy orientation of isolationism (a binary measure), and social trust (can't be too careful vs. most people can be trusted). This helps to ensure that my measure of political trust is not simply capturing a willingness to trust other countries and/or other people. I also account for feelings toward poor people (cold $\rightarrow$ warm), as this may reflect a salient group, in ordinary Americans' minds who are the likely intended target group of foreign aid spending. In other words, people who feel more favorably toward the poor should be more likely to support policies intended to benefit such individuals (Piston 2018).

Additionally, I account for people's perceptions of the national economy in the past year (5pt; much worse $\rightarrow$ much better) and of their personal financial situations in the past year (5pt; much worse $\rightarrow$ much better), as people may be more politically trustful, favor "more government," and exhibit less antipathy toward foreigners during economic "good times" (e.g., Hetherington and Rudolph 2008; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Bryant 2016; Hopkins, Margalit, and Solodoch 2024; Rueda 2018; Wlezien and Soroka 2021). Finally, I account for year fixed effects (dummy variables for 1996 vs. 2000 vs. 2004 vs. 2008). These help to account for factors such as real-world economic conditions, partisan control of the federal government, and whether the United States was at war. I re-scale these variables (except for age and the fixed effects) to either be dichotomous (0 vs. 1), or continuous (ranging 0-1).[9]

[9]In a secondary ordered probit regression model (see column 2 of Table 1), I also control for preferred immigration levels (decrease $\rightarrow$ maintain $\rightarrow$ increase; ranges 0-1). I do so because political trust and immigration attitudes are associated (e.g., Macdonald 2021) and to assuage concerns that my various controls do not sufficiently account for factors such as general anti-foreigner sentiment.

Main Results

I present my main results in Table 1. These are pooled cross-sectional analyses, using an ordered probit regression model, of the 1996-2008 ANES. Overall, the results show that political trust (in the U.S. national government) is positively associated, to a large and statistically significant degree, with support for federal spending on foreign aid. This is consistent with my hypothesized expectations. Indeed, the only independent variable with a larger z-statistic (coefficient ÷ standard error) than political trust is isolationism (z = 8.20 for political trust vs. z = -9.60 for isolationism). Beyond these two largest (in terms of magnitude) variables, I also find that race, ideology, core political values, feelings toward poor people, and evaluations of the national economy in the past year are meaningfully and significantly associated with support for foreign aid spending.These findings are theoretically sensible and suggest that this regression model is appropriately specified.

Given that these are ordered probit coefficients, the results in Table 1 are not directly interpretable. As such, I graphically illustrate, in Figure 2, my main relationship of interest (between domestic political trust and U.S. public opinion toward foreign aid spending). I do so by plotting the predicted probabilities of each ordinal outcome (1 = decrease; 2 = same; 3 = increase) from Table 1 across the observed range (0-1) of political trust, holding all of the control variables constant at their observed values (Hamner and Kalkan 2013).

The results in Figure 2 show that a shift from the minimum to maximum level of trust in the national government ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with an approximately 0.32 decrease in the probability of supporting decreased federal spending on foreign aid, from 0.63 to 0.31. This is both statistically and substantively significant, i.e., these results show not only that the coefficients are different from zero, but also that domestic political trust does indeed appear to be a powerful driver of mass opinion toward foreign aid spending.[10]

[10]A smaller and more realistic shift from roughly one standard deviation below the mean level of political trust to roughly one standard deviation above the mean (from 0.25 to 0.50) is associated with a 0.08 decline in the probability of supporting decreased federal spending on foreign aid, from 0.55 to 0.47.

The results in Figure 1 also show that lower support for cutting spending on foreign aid (the modal outcome in the ANES sample) comes along with greater support for both maintaining spending levels (the second most common value) and increasing federal spending on foreign aid (the least common choice of survey respondents). On average, holding the other control variables constant at their observed values, a shift in political trust from its minimum to its maximum ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with a 0.16 increase in the probability of keeping foreign aid spending "about the same," from 0.33 to 0.49, and a 0.15 increase in the probability of favoring increased foreign aid spending, from 0.05 to 0.20. These results are also both statistically and substantively significant.[11]

In the Supplemental Appendix (see Tables B1-B4), I run additional models to show that the main results are similar if I restrict the sample to non-Hispanic Whites and control for ethnocentrism (Kam and Kinder 2007), that the results hold if I include a measure of authoritarianism (Hetherington and Suhay 2011), that the results hold when controlling for feelings toward Muslims (Sides and Gross 2013), and when I use an alternative measure of political trust, a feeling thermometer rating (cold $\rightarrow$ warm) of the federal government.[12]

[11]Smaller and more realistic shifts from roughly one standard deviation below the mean level of political trust to roughly one standard deviation above the mean (from 0.25 to 0.50) is associated with a 0.08 decrease in the probability of supporting decreased federal spending on foreign aid (from 0.55 to 0.47), a 0.05 increase in the probability of keeping spending about the same (from 0.38 to 0.43), and a 0.04 increase in the probability of supporting increased spending (from 0.07 to 0.11).

[12]Owing to ANES question availability, some models do not examine the same survey years (1996-2008). For instance, the models that control for ethnocentrism (among Whites) do not include data from 1996 (Table B1), the models that control for authoritarianism similarly omit data from 1996 (Table B2), and the models that control for feelings toward Muslims only include data from 2004 and 2008 (Table B3). The federal government feeling thermometer model (Table B4) includes data from all ANES years (1996-2008).

Table 1: Political Trust and Support for Spending on Foreign Aid, 1996-2008

	DV = Foreign Aid Spending Support			
	coef	(std err)	coef	(std err)
Political Trust	0.884	(0.108)***	0.873	(0.109)***
Age	-0.000	(0.001)	-0.000	(0.001)
Female	0.054	(0.040)	0.061	(0.041)
White	-0.269	(0.050)***	-0.234	(0.051)***
Both Parents Born in USA	-0.066	(0.059)	-0.028	(0.060)
College Degree	0.047	(0.046)	0.003	(0.047)
Home Ownership	-0.094	(0.048)*	-0.092	(0.048)*
Married	-0.057	(0.042)	-0.059	(0.042)
High Family Income	-0.084	(0.049)*	-0.112	(0.049)**
Daily Newspaper Reader	0.031	(0.047)	0.024	(0.048)
Partisanship	-0.047	(0.071)	-0.062	(0.072)
Ideology	-0.288	(0.119)**	-0.310	(0.121)**
Egalitarian Values	0.271	(0.117)**	0.223	(0.119)*
Traditionalist Values	-0.526	(0.112)***	-0.401	(0.114)***
Isolationism	-0.474	(0.049)***	-0.446	(0.050)***
Social Trust	-0.005	(0.043)	-0.040	(0.043)
Feeling Thermometer: Poor People	0.387	(0.110)***	0.344	(0.112)***
Evaluations: National Economy	0.183	(0.090)**	0.202	(0.091)**
Evaluations: Personal Finances	0.034	(0.075)	0.013	(0.077)
Preferred Immigration Levels			0.544	(0.066)***
Constant cut1	0.174	(0.176)	0.347	(0.179)*
Constant cut2	1.611	(0.177)***	1.813	(0.181)***
Region Fixed Effects	✓		✓	
Year Fixed Effects	✓		✓	
Observations	3,756		3,713	
Pseudo R^2	0.073		0.085	

Note: Dependent variable is support for federal spending on foreign aid (1 = decreased; 2 = same; 3 = increased). All independent variables either range between 0 and 1 or are dichotomous (0 vs. 1), except for age. Ordered probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, two-tailed test. Source is the 1996-2008 ANES.

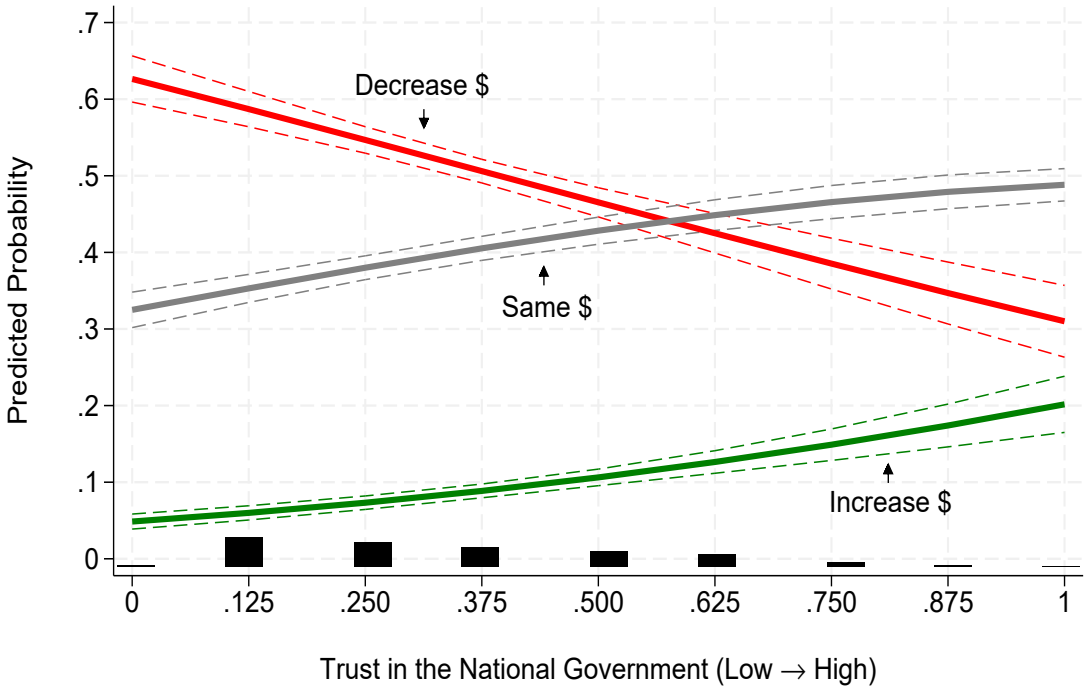

Figure 1: Political Trust and Attitudes Toward Spending on Foreign Aid, 1996-2008

Note: Shows the predicted probability of supporting decreased vs. kept about the same vs. increased federal spending (1-3) on foreign aid across the observed range of political trust. Based on the ordered probit regression model in the first column of Table 1. All control variables are held constant at their observed values. The small black bars represent a histogram showing the distribution of political trust. The thick lines represent the predicted probabilities for each ordinal outcome. The thin dashed lines represent the 95% confidence intervals (robust standard errors, two-tailed test).

Heterogeneity in the Relationship

My theoretical argument, which draws on the logic of Hetherington and Globetti (2002), and various subsequent related work on how political trust shapes mass opinion across a range of policies (see Devine 2024 for a review), is that foreign aid spending is the type of policy that should, as a result of an imbalance, in the public mind, between who receives the benefits/largess and who bears the costs/risks of foreign aid spending, serve to "activate" political trust. By this, I mean make attitudes toward government, the actor who I argue is, in ordinary people's minds, most responsible for crafting and implementing foreign aid programs, relevant when ordinary people are considering their attitudes toward said policy.

However, this line of work also notes that political trust should not matter equally for everyone. For example, political trust matters little for the attitudes of people who receive the benefits of a public policy; they will be likely to support it even if they are generally distrustful of government. However, for people who bear the costs of said policy and/or do not receive the benefits, they need additional reasons to overcome their skepticism and support said policy; one such factor is being trustful of government. The logic is similar for liberals (conservatives) being asked to support conservative (liberal) policies, or Democrats (Republicans) being asked to support a policy supported by Republican (Democratic) Party elites, i.e., political trust matters more (less) for policy support when people are (not) asked to make material, ideological, and/or partisan "sacrifices" by supporting a policy that does not yield clear (broadly defined) benefits.

Building on this idea, it seems reasonable to assume that people who hold isolationist views toward foreign policy, meaning that they are less inclined to support the U.S. taking an active role in world affairs (e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), will have fewer reasons to support foreign aid spending that their non-isolationist counterparts, who presumably would derive some benefits, i.e., the policy would comport with their general political orientations. In other words, people who simply believe that the U.S. would generally be better off it we turned inwards (a non-trivial minority of the mass public), may need to be especially trustful of government in order to support foreign aid spending. For people who eschew isolationism, it seems plausible that political trust would matter *less* in terms of their support for government spending on foreign aid.

I test this in Table 2 by regressing support for foreign aid spending (1-3) on an interaction between political trust (ranges 0-1) and isolationist sentiment (0 vs. 1), along with the same control variables as in Table 1. If political trust matters (in terms of shaping attitudes toward foreign aid spending) more for those who exhibit isolationist sentiment than for those who do not, then we would observe a positive and statistically significant interaction term. Overall, the results in Table 2 show that political trust matters for *both* isolationist

and non-isolationist Americans, but also that its "effect" is stronger for the former group. This is demonstrated by the positive and significant coefficient for political trust (when "isolationist" is at a value of "0"), as well as by the positive and statistically significant interaction term. In short, political trust appears to matter broadly in terms of shaping public opinion toward foreign aid spending.[13]

Table 2: Political Trust, Isolationism, and Support for Spending on Foreign Aid, 1996-2008

	DV = Foreign Aid $	
	coef	(std err)
Political Trust	0.723	(0.120)***
Isolationist	-0.716	(0.100)***
Political Trust × Isolationist	0.713	(0.252)***
Additional Controls	✓	
Region Fixed Effects	✓	
Year Fixed Effects	✓	
Pseudo R^2	0.075	
Observations	3,756	

Note: Dependent variable is support for federal spending on foreign aid (1 = decreased; 2 = same; 3 = increased). Political trust ranges 0-1; isolationist sentiment is dichotomous (0 vs. 1). Includes the same control variables as in column 1 of Table 1. Ordered probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, two-tailed test. Source is the 1996-2008 ANES.

[13]I also consider potential interactions between political trust and (1) egalitarianism and (2) traditionalism, two important core political values in American political discourse and history. I present the results of these interactions in the Supplemental Appendix (see Tables B5 and B6). Overall, I find, using the same control variables as Table 2, I find (1) that political trust matters somewhat less at higher levels of egalitarianism, but not significantly so (coef for interaction term = -0.666; p-value for interaction term = 0.211). I also find (2) that political trust matters somewhat more for people who score higher in the core political value of traditionalism (coef for interaction term = 0.680; p-value for interaction term = 0.179). While this evidence appears mixed, it also further suggests that political trust matters broadly, i.e., not just among a small subset of the general population, in terms of its ability to shape public opinion toward foreign aid spending.

Assessing Directionality

Thus far I have shown evidence of a positive and substantively significant relationship between political trust and public support for federal spending on foreign aid (Table 1). I have also shown that this relationship is present among both the minority of Americans who hold isolationist foreign policy orientations and among the majority who eschew isolationism, although political trust is more meaningful, i.e., it is larger in magnitude among the former group of Americans (Table 2). These results come from pooled cross-sectional regressions, in which my variables of interest are all measured contemporaneously. As such, it is difficult to establish the direction of "causality," i.e., whether, as I have argued, political trust drives attitudes toward foreign aid spending, or whether people adjust their level of trust in the national government to justify their support (or lack thereof) for foreign aid.

While existing work has shown, via the use of panel data, that the "causal arrow" appears to run from political trust to policy preferences, rather than the reverse (Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Hetherington and Husser 2012; Macdonald 2021; Macdonald 2024), it is still prudent to test this empirically where possible. I do so in Table 3 with panel data (the same respondents interviewed at multiple points in time) from the 1994-1996 and 2002-2004 ANES. Employing the same measures of political trust and foreign aid spending opinion as in my main results (Table 1), I use a series of cross-lagged OLS regression models to test whether past values of political trust significantly predict future values of foreign aid spending support, holding past values of foreign aid spending support constant, or whether the reverse is more likely to hold true.

Overall, the results in Table 3 show that political trust significantly predicts support for foreign aid spending, even when controlling for past values of foreign aid spending attitudes. This is evidenced (in columns 2 & 4) by the statistically significant and substantively large coefficients for political trust. In contrast, there is little evidence to suggest that the reverse hold true, i.e., that people meaningfully adjust their degree of trust in the national

government to bring them in line with their attitudes toward foreign aid spending. This is evidenced (in columns 1 & 3) by the substantively small and marginally significant (at best) coefficients for attitudes toward foreign aid. In short, the results in Table 3 show that political trust drives mass opinion toward foreign aid spending, rather than the reverse.

Table 3: The Cross-Lagged Relationship Between Political Trust and Support for Spending on Foreign Aid, 1994-1996 & 2002-2004

	ANES, 1994 → 1996		ANES, 2002 → 2004	
	Political Trust$_{(t2)}$	Foreign Aid$_{(t2)}$	Political Trust$_{(t2)}$	Foreign Aid$_{(t2)}$
Political Trust$_{(t1)}$	0.555***	0.346***	0.638***	0.205***
	(0.030)	(0.049)	(0.028)	(0.053)
Foreign Aid$_{(t1)}$	0.029*	0.231***	0.027	0.382***
	(0.015)	(0.027)	(0.017)	(0.038)
Observations	1,051	1,200	706	739
R^2	0.303	0.281	0.434	0.173

Note: Shows the cross-lagged relationship (t1 = 1994/2002; t2 = 1996/2004) between political trust (as a dependent variable in 1996/2004; as an independent variable in 1994/2002) and support for foreign aid spending (as a dependent variable in 1996/2004; as an independent variable in 1994/2002). Political trust ranges 0-1 (low → high), support for foreign aid spending ranges 0-1 (decreased → same → increased). OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, two-tailed test. Sources are the 1994-1996 and 2002-2004 ANES panels.

Accounting for Unobserved Factors

Thus far I have shown that political trust is associated, to a positive and substantively significant degree, with support for government spending on foreign aid. I have also taken pains to ensure that this relationship is robust. By controlling for a battery of theoretically appropriate variables that may correlate with both political trust and attitudes toward foreign aid spending, and by employing panel data to address "reverse causality," I can also assuage some concerns about endogeneity and reduce the likelihood that my findings are simply a "false positive." However, my research design is observational in nature and thus cannot account for certain unobserved variables such as pre-adult socialization processes, underlying the relationship between political trust and policy preferences (e.g., Peyton 2020).

To better address such concerns, I employ three-wave panel data from the General Social Survey (GSS). By using three waves (people interviewed at three different points in time), I am able to control for individual-level fixed effects, i.e., a dummy variable for each survey respondent. This is an exceptionally powerful research design (Allison 2009) because it is able to account for stable, unobserved factors such as people's pre-adult socialization experiences, that may correlate with both political trust and attitudes toward foreign aid spending. While not a panacea, it is, by examining only within-person variation, a much stronger test than a cross-sectional analysis (e.g., Lee and Mutz 2019).

I conduct such a test in Table 4. I do so by combining data from the three GSS panel studies (2006-2008-2010, 2008-2010-2012, and 2010-2012-2014).[14] Pooling across these GSS panels and restricting my sample to respondents who answered questions about foreign aid spending and political trust in all three waves, results in a valid sample size of 6,984 (2,328 respondents $\times$ 3 interviews). This permits me to examine within-person variation (t1 $\rightarrow$ t2 $\rightarrow$ t3) and to include fixed effects (dummy variables) for each of these 2,328 individuals. While this cannot account for *every* possible factor that may correlate with both political trust and foreign aid opinion, it does provide an exceptionally strong test of this relationship.

The GSS uses two questions measure attitudes about foreign aid, my dependent variable of interest. The first is posed to respondents as follows *are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on foreign aid?*. The second is posed to respondents as follows *are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance to other countries?*. I combine responses to these questions into a single measure of foreign aid opinion and re-code responses to be dichotomous (0 = too much/right amount; 1 = too little).[15] Given this coding scheme, where higher values indicate support for cutting

[14]See Supplemental Appendix A for additional detail on these GSS panels and the associated survey questions to measure the variables of interest.

[15]Depending on the version of the survey, some GSS respondents were asked the first question (nataid) about foreign aid and some were asked the second question (nataidy) about assistance to other countries. I combine responses here in order to maximize the valid sample size.

foreign aid, the coefficient for "political trust" should be negative, meaning that as trust in government increases (decreases), people should be less (more) likely to agree that we are spending "too much" on foreign aid/assistance to other countries.[16]

Unfortunately, the GSS lacks the same questions as the ANES to measure political trust, but it does have an appropriate substitute that asks about confidence in different institutions, and one that has been used by past work to measure the concept of political trust (e.g., Catterberg and Moreno 2006). To measure political trust in the GSS, which is conceptualized as general attitudes toward government as a whole, I combine two questions into an index. These questions are posed to respondents as follows (the text in brackets varies), as part of a broader battery about confidence in different institutions *As far as the people running these institutions [Executive branch of the federal government; Congress] are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?*. The valid responses to both of these questions range from 1-3 (1= hardly any; 2 = only some; 3 = a great deal) and thus the additive index ranges from 2-6; I re-scale this variable to range between 0 and 1, with lower (higher) values indicating lower (higher) levels of domestic political trust.

My "control" variables in this model are individual-level fixed effects, meaning a dummy variable to represent each of the 2,328 GSS respondents in this dataset. As previously discussed, this is an exceptionally powerful control variable and thus a strict test of the relationship between political trust and attitudes toward foreign aid. I also cluster my standard errors by respondent to account for repeated observations (each person was surveyed three times) among units of analysis (Cameron and Miller 2015).

[16]An ordered probit (1-3) and a binary probit (0 vs. 1) model yields similar results (substantively and statistically significant coefficients for my GSS measure of political trust) but are far more computationally intensive. As such, I present simpler OLS coefficients from a linear probability model in Table 4.

Overall, the results in Table 4 show that, on average, if a person's level political trust shifted from the minimum observed value to the maximum (from 0 to 1), they would be approximately 15.3 percentage points *less likely* to agree that we are spending "too much" on foreign aid/assistance to other countries, with a decrease from 0.73 to 0.58.[17]

In short, the results in Table 4 are robust to an exceptionally strict statistical test. They also manifest even when employing what I view as a less ideal measure of political trust (compared to the 4-item ANES scale). Overall, this further demonstrate the robustness and validity of my main findings, yielding additional evidence of a substantively significant relationship between political trust and public opinion toward foreign aid spending.

Table 4: Individual Fixed Effects Model of Political Trust and Support for Spending on Foreign Aid/Assistance to Other Countries, 2006-2014

	DV = Cut Foreign Aid/Assistance
Political Trust	-0.153***
	(0.031)
Fixed Effects for Individual Respondents	✓
Respondents	2,328
Observations	6,984
R^2	0.631

Note: Shows the relationship between political trust (ranges 0-1) and support for cutting spending on foreign aid/assistance to other countries (0 = no; 1 = yes). Model also controls for individual fixed effects (a dummy variable for each survey respondent). These variables and the constant term are not displayed here. OLS coefficients from a linear probability model with robust standard errors clustered by individual in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, two-tailed test. Sources are three GSS panel studies spanning 2006-2014 (06-08-10; 08-10-12; 10-12-14).

[17] A smaller and more realistic within-person shift in political trust, from 0.25 to 0.50 (on a 0-1 scale), is associated with an approximately 0.04 decrease in the probability agreeing that we are spending "too much" on foreign aid/assistance to other countries, from 0.69 to 0.65.

Conclusion and Political Implications

Political trust and its dynamics have long been of interest to the study of political systems (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Easton 1975). It has also been shown to matter for mass politics in numerous ways (Zmerli and Van Der Meer 2017). Here, I have shown that it also has important consequences for public opinion toward foreign aid spending. These findings not only underscore the importance of political trust in shaping mass opinion (Devine 2024; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), but also suggest that public attitudes toward foreign aid are not simply reflections of elite rhetoric (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). If they were, then we would observe much higher support for foreign aid spending, consistent with a long-standing post-World War II elite consensus, albeit certainly not a unanimous one, in favor of foreign aid. Accordingly, low political trust can help to explain why mass support has long remained low, relative to other types of spending, among the American mass public. While public opinion on foreign aid spending is clearly shaped by stereotypes of potential recipient states (e.g., Baker 2015; Heinrich and Kobayashi 2020), and the predispositions that underlie ordinary people's general willingness to favor (or disfavor) people different from oneself (e.g., Kam and Kinder 2007; Prather 2024), I have shown that is it also meaningfully shaped by the degree to which people exhibit confidence and trust in their national government.

The real-world relevance of these findings can be illustrated with data from the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES), which fortuitously asked questions about both political trust (in the national government) and public attitudes toward extending foreign aid to Ukraine. These data show that among the majority of Americans (just over 6 in 10) who report having "none at all" or "not very much" trust in the federal government when it comes to handling the nation's problems, 45.1% favor sending food, medicine, and other aid to affected countries [by Russia's invasion of Ukraine] and just 32.1% favor providing arms to Ukraine. The analogous numbers among the minority of Americans (just under 4 in 10) who reporting having "a fair amount" or "a great deal" of trust in the federal government

when it comes to handling the nation's problems were 58.7% (aid to affected countries) and 51.0% (arms to Ukraine). While public opinion may not decisively determine whether major world powers such as the United States provide additional aid to Ukraine, a country facing, at the time of this writing, a daunting Russian military invasion, higher public support, signaling a friendlier "pro-aid" domestic environment, would almost certainly make it easier to achieve this legislatively (Milner and Tingley 2016). Moreover, a lack of strong public support for aiding Ukraine economically and/or militarily, which, I argue, is driven partially by low levels of political trust, could provide ammunition to politicians who oppose the continuation and/or expansion of such aid.

Alternatively, the successful provision of foreign aid and/or positive media framing of such spending can potentially improve politicians' standing among the voting public (e.g., Heinrich and Peterson 2020; Tobin, Schneider, and Leblang 2022). Rather than low and declining levels of political trust fueling greater public opposition to foreign aid spending, successful (be it real or perceived) aid provision could potentially bolster political trust (Hetherington 1998; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008), which, as demonstrated here, can increase mass support for spending on foreign aid, and afford national governments greater leeway and flexibility to use the economic, humanitarian, and/or military aid as a means of achieving their various foreign policy objectives.

In terms of future work, it would be worthwhile to examine whether political trust matters less for policy support when spending is discussed in specific rather than general terms (e.g., Jacoby 2000), given that people tend to be more supportive of foreign aid spending when it is portrayed in way that emphasizes specific goals such as disaster relief, food and medical assistance, and aid for women's education in needy countries rather than presented as "foreign" aid in the abstract (Wojtowicz and Hanania 2017).

It would be beneficial for future work to extend this analysis to other donor states beyond the United States, including both Western-aligned multi-party democracies such as Germany, France, Japan, and Australia, as well as authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, the

difficulties of measuring public opinion in such contexts notwithstanding (e.g., Chia 2014). Future work would also do well to consider *when* political trust is a stronger driver of attitudes toward foreign aid spending. For example, it would be valuable to test whether political trust matters more, in terms of shaping political attitudes, during economic downturns or when a country is experiencing an influx of refugees. In such instances, the idea of sending tax dollars overseas rather than spending them "at home" may seem "riskier" and less appealing and thus potentially more likely to "activate" political trust among the mass public. This latter phenomenon is especially relevant in Europe, where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has drastically upended the politics of migration, security, and alliances (Bergmann, Toygür, and Svendsen 2023). Such questions could benefit from a future cross-national study, e.g., variation in potential conditioning factors, both over time and across countries.

This study has focused on the American case, which is important to do given the uniquely powerful role that the United States plays in global politics. It is also important to note that the data I examine here (ANES & GSS) spans 1994-2014. This predates the 2016 election of Donald Trump, a far less pro-democracy internationalist figure than other early twenty-first century U.S. presidents (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden). Given increased right-wing isolationist sentiment during the Trump era, a notable departure from recent decades, it is important to test, in future work, whether the relationship between domestic political trust and foreign aid spending now has a strong partisan component.

The U.S.-led post-World War II global order, of which foreign aid is an important component, depends, in part, on domestic political forces (e.g., Dietrich, Milner, and Spalin 2020; Greene and Licht 2018; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Milner and Tingley 2010). One such force is public opinion. As such, the findings in this paper suggest that we should also pay greater attention to the factors that underlie mass opinion regarding foreign aid spending. Here I have demonstrated, via analyses of cross-sectional and panel survey data in the United States, that one such important factor is the extent to which ordinary people exhibit confidence and trust in their national government.

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