

Is Australian public support for aid on the wane?

by Terence Wood

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Photo Credit: [Nathan Fulton/DFAT](#)

Every year the Development Policy Centre commissions a survey question asking a representative sample of Australians whether they think their government gives too much aid, too little, or about the right amount.

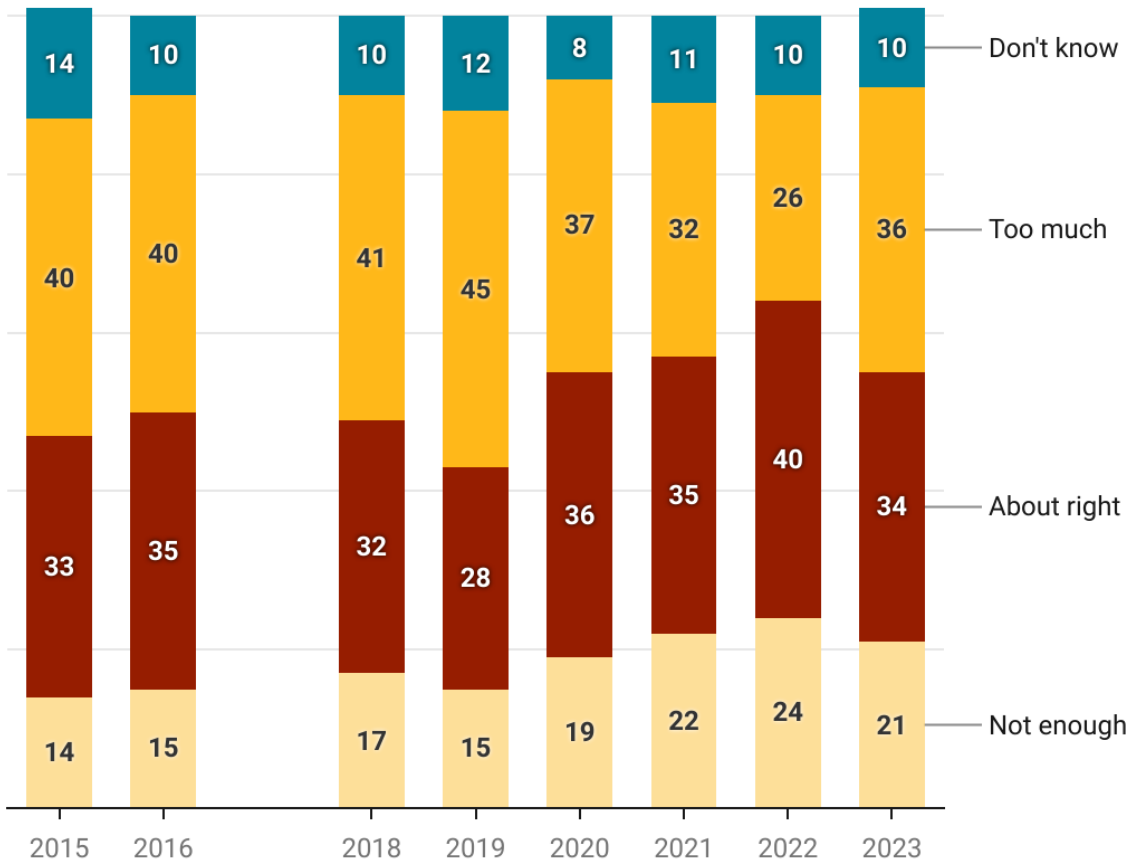
When we ask the question, we also tell participants the share of federal spending that goes to aid (just under 1%). We've asked the question since 2015. Because the wording of survey questions can affect replies, we've kept the question unchanged.

A number of different questions can be asked about aid: you can, for example, simply ask whether Australians support their government giving aid (most do). But we ask whether Australia gives too much or too little, because that's the question most relevant to the decisions that policymakers have to make about aid budgets.

When we started in 2015, about 40% of Australians thought Australia gave too much aid. If anything, this got worse in following years. However, sometime between our 2019 survey and our 2020 survey, attitudes started to change. In subsequent years, Australians became much less likely to think their government gave too much aid, and somewhat more likely to think it didn't give enough. We don't know with certainty why this change occurred. However, [our research](#) points to the COVID-19 pandemic as the most likely cause.

You can see the change in the chart below. Good news if you're a supporter of aid. However, the same chart also shows the findings from our 2023 survey, which we ran in June this year (heart problems, a pacemaker and queue of work have stopped me from analysing the data until now). If you compare 2023 to 2022 you can see Australians appear to have become more hostile to aid again.

Figure 1: Australian attitudes to aid spending over time



Notes: A spreadsheet of data that covers our surveys since 2015, as well as surveys run by other organisations stretching back many years, is available to download. There was no survey in 2017. Two years appear to add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

Chart: Terence Wood, Devpolicy • Source: Development Policy Centre surveys • Created with Datawrapper

The share of Australians who think their country gives too little aid has not dropped much since 2022, but the share who think their country gives too much has increased considerably. The change in those who think Australia gives too much is clearly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); the change in those who think it gives too little is more marginal (the p-value is just under 0.1).

Why do Australians' attitudes about aid budgets seem to be changing for the worse all of a sudden? I can't say for sure, but my guess is that the shift stems from COVID-19 ceasing to be at the forefront of people's minds (even if it's still floating around in their lungs). Quite possibly inflation and talk of "a cost of living crisis" is changing attitudes too.

There's also another, more mundane, potential reason for the change. This year we had to switch survey firms. The firm we were using no longer runs surveys suitable for our annual questions, so we changed firms. The firm we used previously and the one we use now are both excellent, but so-called "house effects" are an issue in surveying. Even with best practice, survey firms end up with samples that differ

somewhat in their attitudes. This means our recorded shift in views about aid this year might not have anything to do with the Australian public at all. It might stem solely from our change in firms. That's possible, and I'm hoping to test the possibility later this year. However, [this year's Lowy Poll](#) also registered a rise in the share of respondents who think aid should fall and Lowy hasn't changed survey firms.

The change in attitudes is probably real, but it still doesn't mean most Australians want aid cut. In 2023, a clear majority of Australians still think their government gives too little aid or about the right amount – only just over a third thinks it gives too much. And attitudes to aid are still more positive than they once were: in 2015, 40% of Australians thought their government gave too much. And who knows what will happen next year: inflation will likely be less, and there are plenty of reasons beyond COVID-19 for Australians to care about the world beyond their borders.

That said, if I were an aid advocate, I would be more anxious than I was a year ago. And I'd be gearing up to persuasively make the case to the public for more Australian aid.

Disclosures:

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