



The Psychology Of Giving

Exploring donor perspectives on responsibility and motivation to give in the UK and Germany following government aid cuts

January 2026



Executive summary

This report explores how recent government aid cuts are shaping public attitudes and behaviour around charitable giving. Based on a behavioural study of around 2,000 participants in the UK and Germany, conducted in collaboration with Professor Hanna Zagefka, of Royal Holloway, University of London, the research examines how awareness of aid cuts influences perceptions of responsibility, motivation to give and real donation behaviour.

Key findings

1. Aid cuts do not galvanise public support for aid, they often reduce it.

Across both countries, exposure to information about aid cuts was associated with lower perceived importance of aid and weaker moral and emotional engagement. Rather than prompting people to compensate for reduced government funding, reminders of cuts appeared to normalise them. This pattern aligns with a system-justification effect, where people adjust their attitudes to reflect perceived government priorities.

2. Governments are still seen as primarily responsible for aid.

When aid is reduced, responsibility is expected to shift to philanthropists, wealthy individuals and companies, more than to individual donors. This suggests that people look to collective, high-capacity actors to set the direction of travel, reinforcing the role of visible leadership and coordinated action in shaping giving norms.

3. Germany shows higher giving in practice, compared to the UK.

German participants donated more than British participants, despite reporting lower willingness to give. They also showed stronger views and feelings towards social norms, and assigned higher levels of responsibility across all actor groups. This is notable, as it suggests that these variables don't just shape intentions, they also influence real donation behaviour.

The findings challenge the assumption that highlighting aid cuts is an effective engagement or fundraising strategy. Instead, they point to the importance of reinforcing shared norms and visible collective action.

Research survey



GlobalGiving UK partnered with Professor Hanna Zagefka from Royal Holloway, University of London, to better understand how recent government aid cuts are shaping public attitudes towards giving. With aid no longer positioned as a national priority, we wanted to explore a critical question for our work: does this shift prompt individuals to step up because the need feels greater, or does it discourage them from giving altogether?

To answer this, we drew on an online participant pool of 1,001* people in the UK and 1,005* in Germany, enabling us to compare how different national contexts influence donor motivation. The survey collecting data from British participants took place in May 2025, and the survey for German participants took place in June 2025.

The main study was conducted with UK participants, with a smaller parallel study in Germany to provide comparative insight. You can access the [raw data here](#).

UK data:

- Participants were located in the UK and had British nationality
- Sex categorisation: 49% male, 50% female, 1% other
- The mean age was 45 years (ranging from 18 to 83)
- Which of the following categories best describes your household's total income before tax?
 - 11% of sample = Less than £15,000,
 - 27% of sample = £15,000 to £30,000,
 - 28% of sample = £30,000 to £50,000,
 - 21% of sample = £50,000 to £75,000,
 - 14% of sample = More than £75,000

German data:

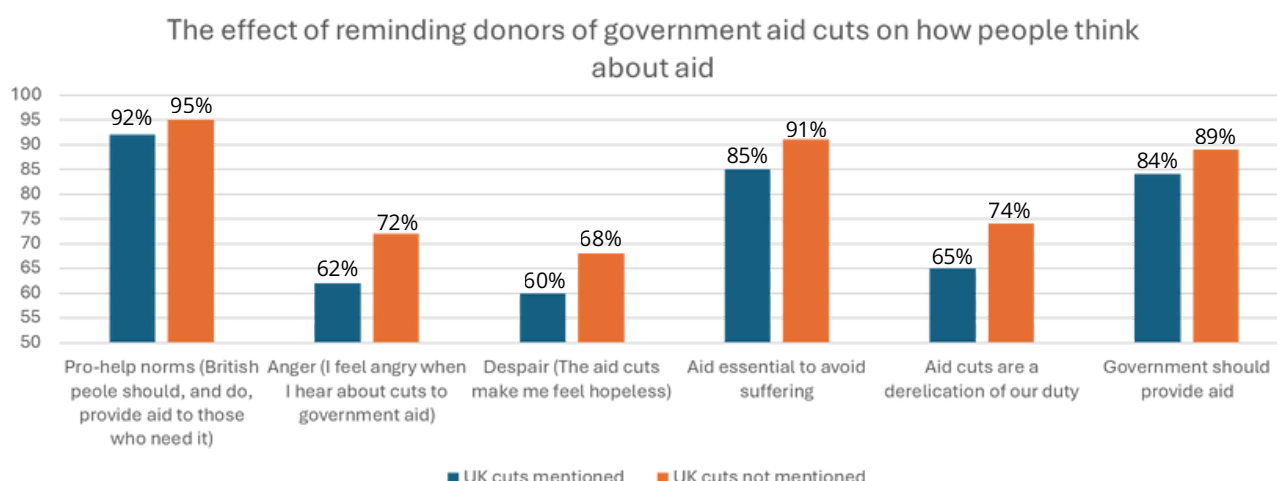
- Participants were all located in Germany and had German nationality
- Sex categorisation: 58% male, 41% female, 1% other
- The mean age was 33 (ranging from 18 to 75)

**the survey closed when it reached 1,000 but people who were simultaneously responding were all allowed to finish.*

UK survey results

Participants were split into two groups: one that viewed information highlighting recent UK aid cuts, and another that did not. We then examined whether this exposure influenced:

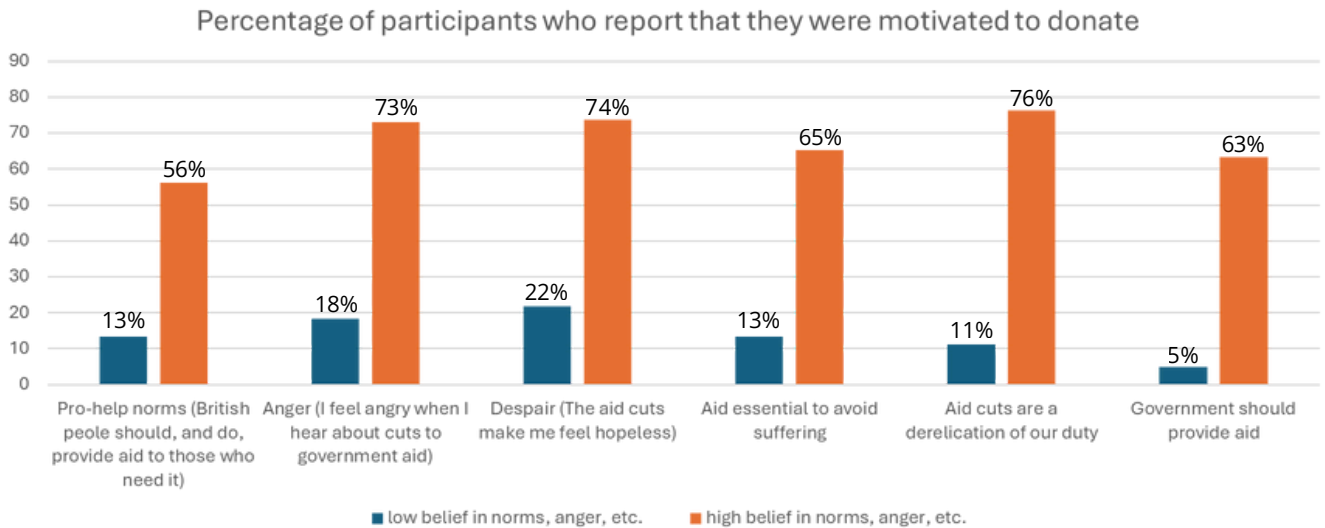
- Beliefs about social norms around helping
- Feelings of anger or despair about the cuts
- How important participants felt aid is (e.g., essential, a moral duty)
- Views on whether the government should provide aid



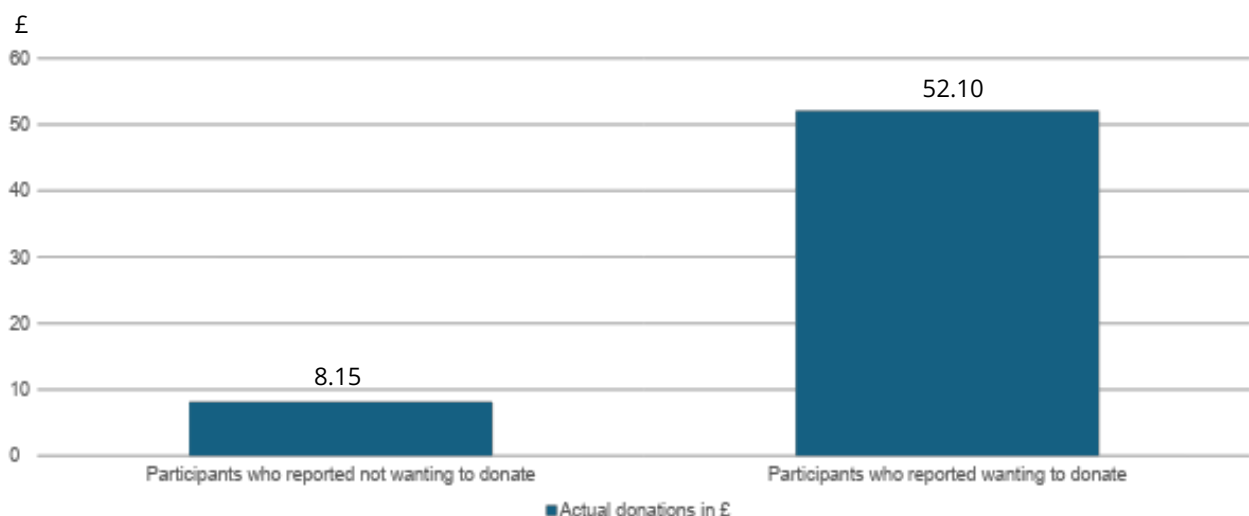
The results point to a consistent pattern: when aid cuts are mentioned their support for aid appears to decrease rather than increase. This could reflect a system-justification effect, where individuals subtly align their views with perceived government decisions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that awareness of the cuts may make people view aid as less important, rather than motivating them to step in, though further research would help clarify the dynamics behind this shift.

Motivations to donate

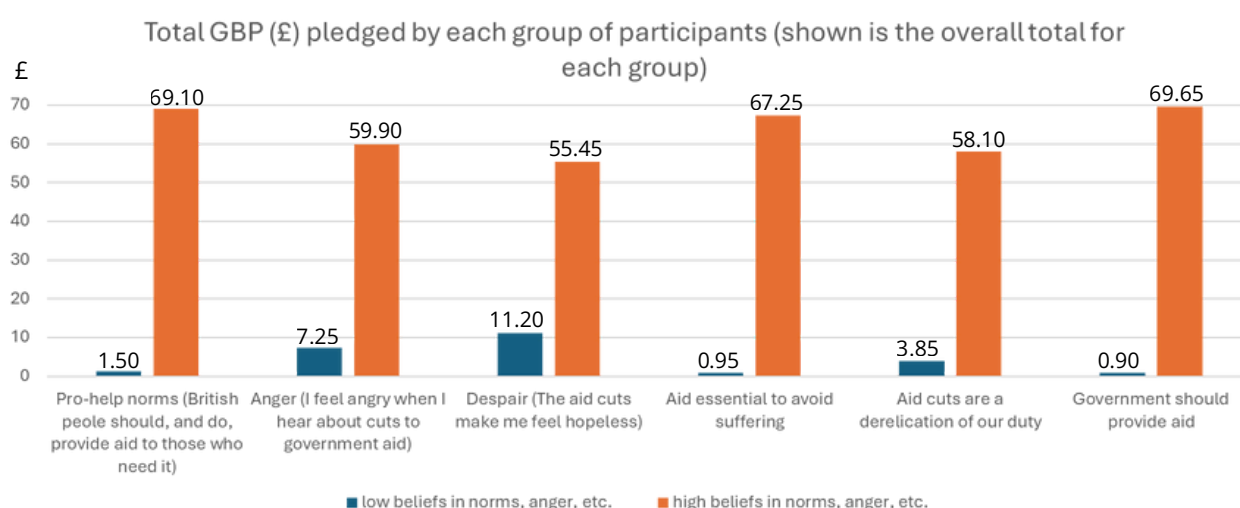


The orange and blue columns represent respondents with high versus low levels of these norms or feelings (orange = high; blue = low). What we see across these groups is a clear pattern: participants who showed higher motivation to donate also felt stronger feelings towards the norms presented in this table. They expressed more anger and despair about the issue, were more likely to view aid as essential to prevent suffering, felt a stronger sense of moral duty, and believed more firmly that the government should provide aid. This suggests that those beliefs about aid might be important drivers for donation decisions.



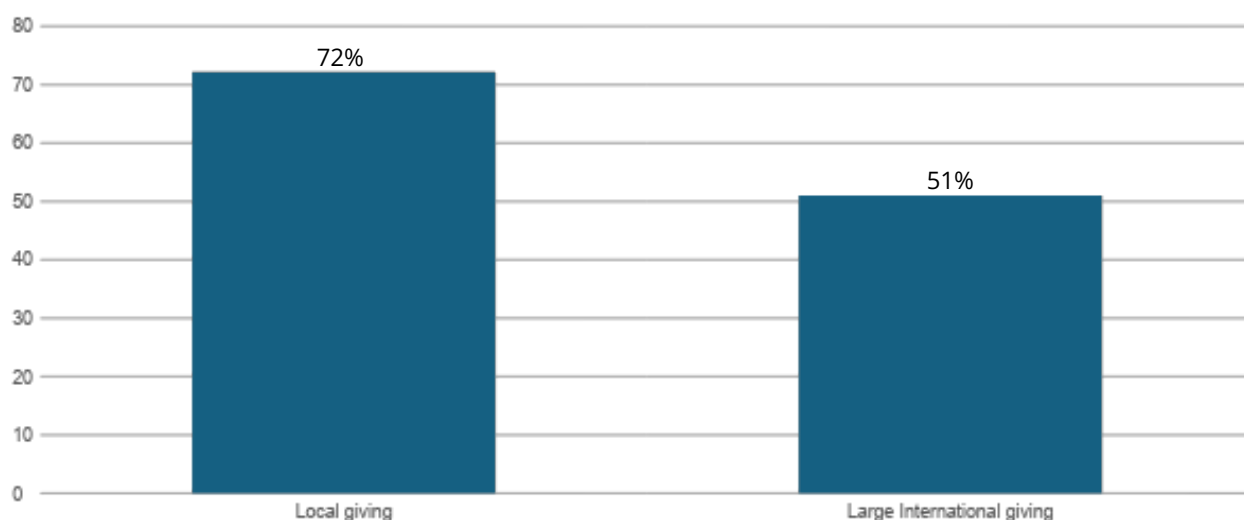
From the bottom graph on page 5, we can see clear differences in how much participants actually donated after reporting whether they did or did not want to donate. It shows that variables meaningfully influence real donation behaviour. Many people who reported wanting to donate actually followed through and donated, and some of those who reported not wanting to donate also donated.

The graph below shows the different feelings and views, such as pro-help norms, anger and other emotional or moral responses, held by those who pledged money. What can be seen here is that beliefs drove actual donation behaviour: perceived pro-help norms, feeling anger and despair, seeing aid as essential and a moral duty, and a belief that government should provide aid all drove an increase in the money pledged.

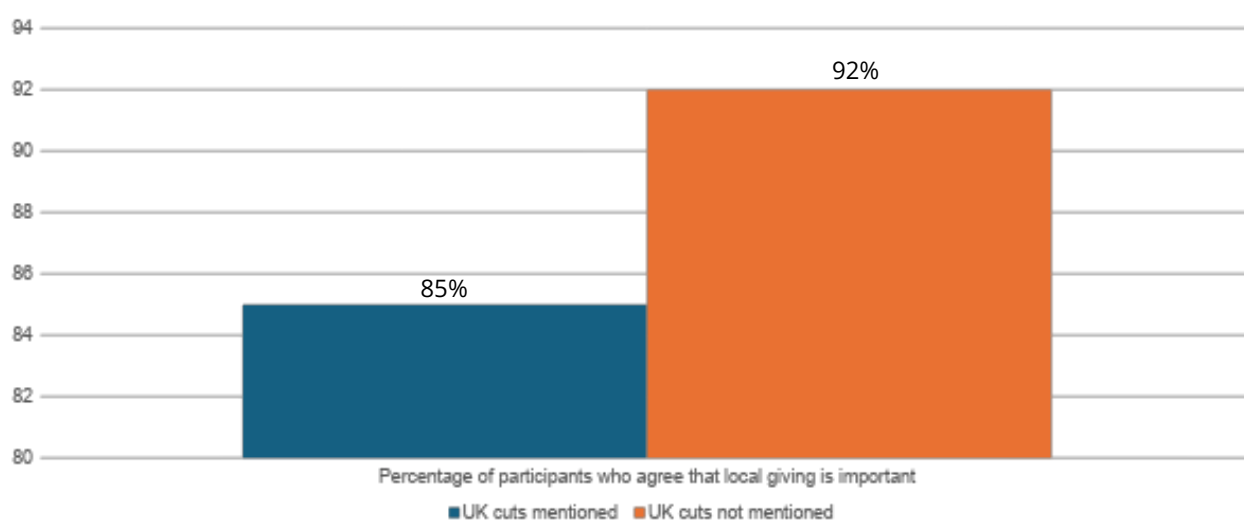


Note: Participants were asked whether they wanted to donate a percentage of their participation fee to measure their willingness to give. However, this percentage was not actually deducted.

Local vs international giving

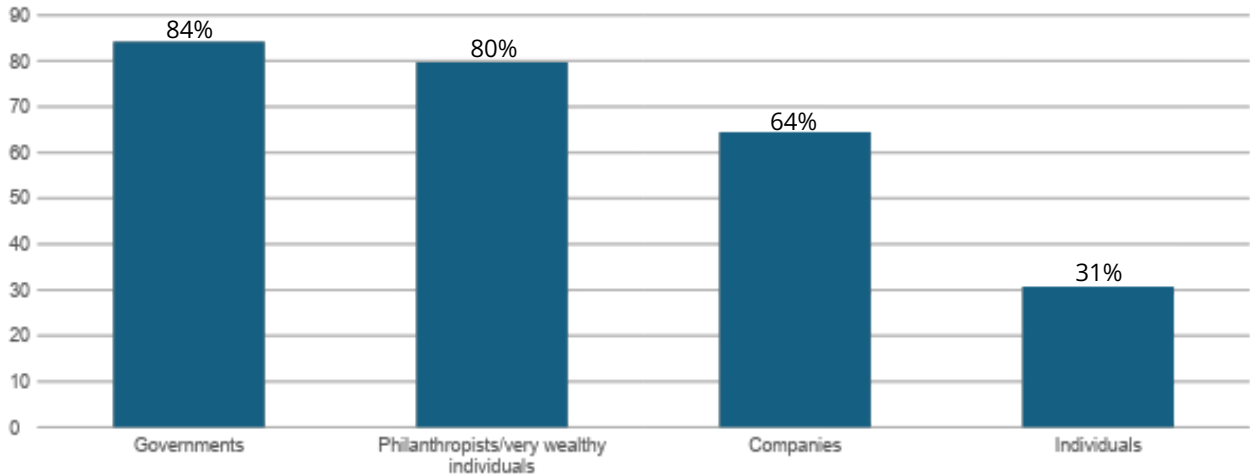


A higher percentage of participants believe it's more important to give through local organisations, compared with those who prioritise giving through large international organisations.



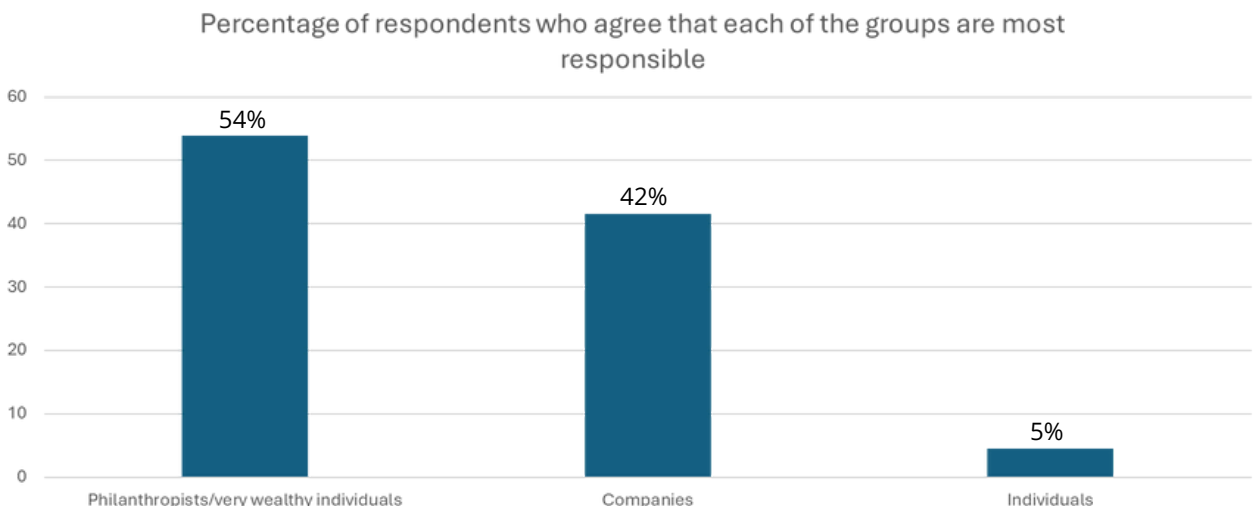
The data in the second chart shows that not mentioning UK aid cuts led to an increase in how much participants were willing to donate to local causes for British participants.

Responsibility to fill the aid gap

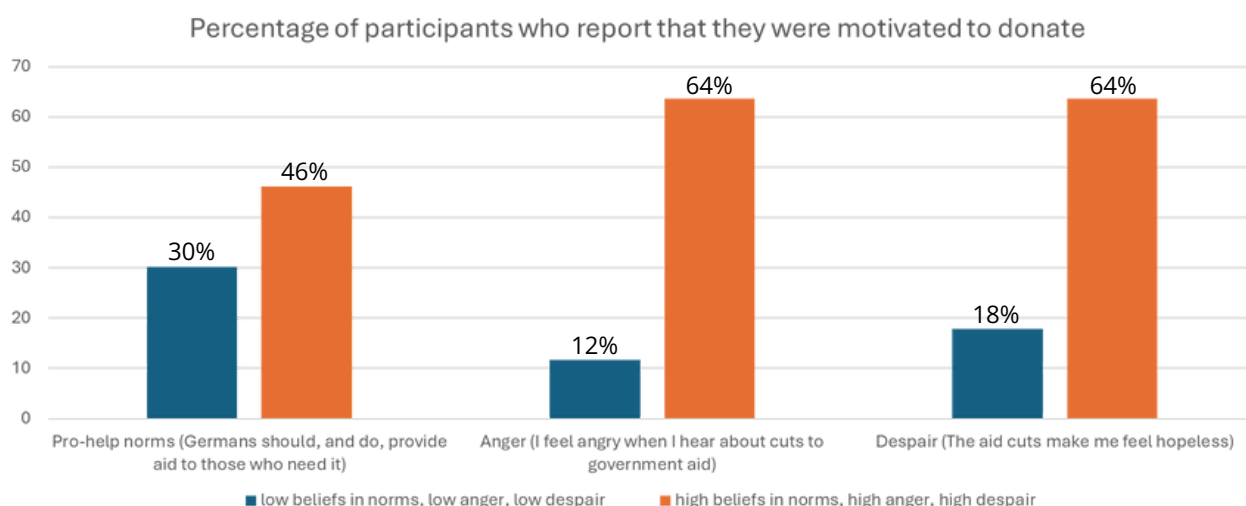


In the top graph, we can see the percentage of respondents who thought that each of the actors shown is responsible for providing aid. The data indicates that respondents see governments as bearing the greatest responsibility for providing aid, followed by philanthropists and wealthy individuals, then companies, and finally individual donors.

After asking respondents about overall perceived responsibility for helping, we then asked them who, in their view, was responsible for making up the gap left by government aid cuts, out of the other potential funding sources. The pattern we see aligns with respondents' expectations: they view philanthropy and wealthy individuals as the next most responsible for filling the gap, followed by companies and then individuals.

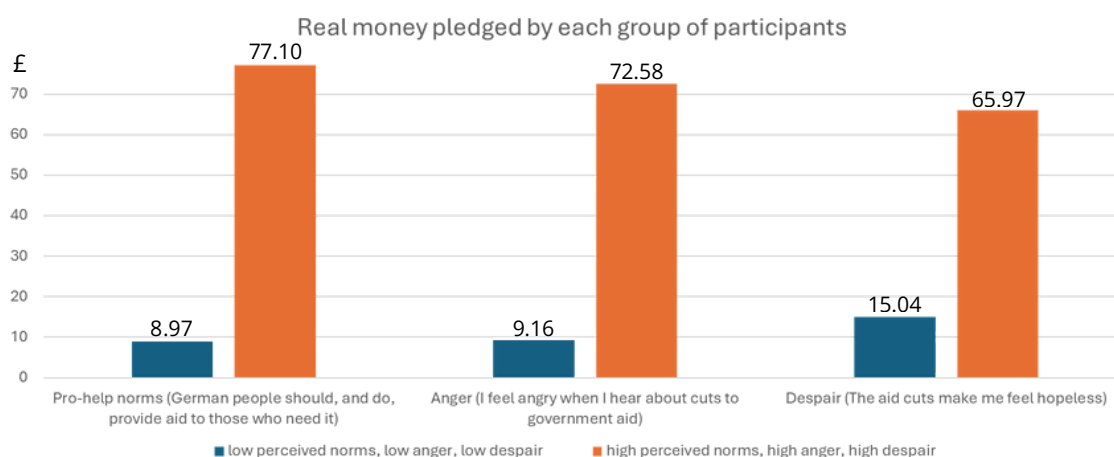


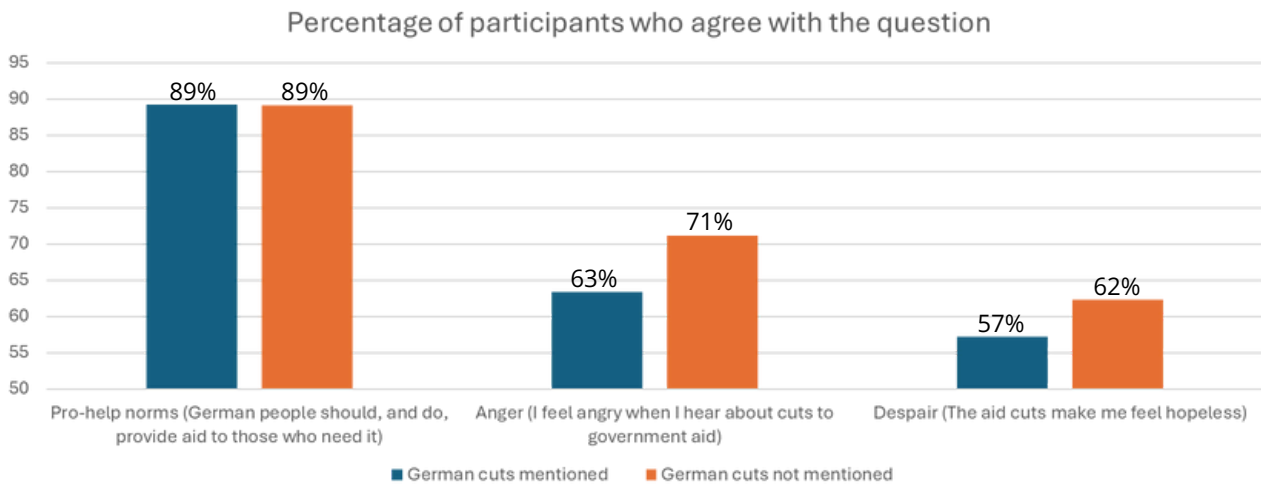
German survey results



German participants were asked some of the same questions as British participants (see pages 4-6), where they were randomly shown either a mention of government aid cuts or no mention at all. They were then asked how willing and motivated they felt to donate, alongside questions about social norms and other beliefs relating to giving. As can be seen here, and mirroring the results from the UK, a perception of pro-help norms, greater anger and greater despair about the aid cuts were associated with greater motivation to donate.

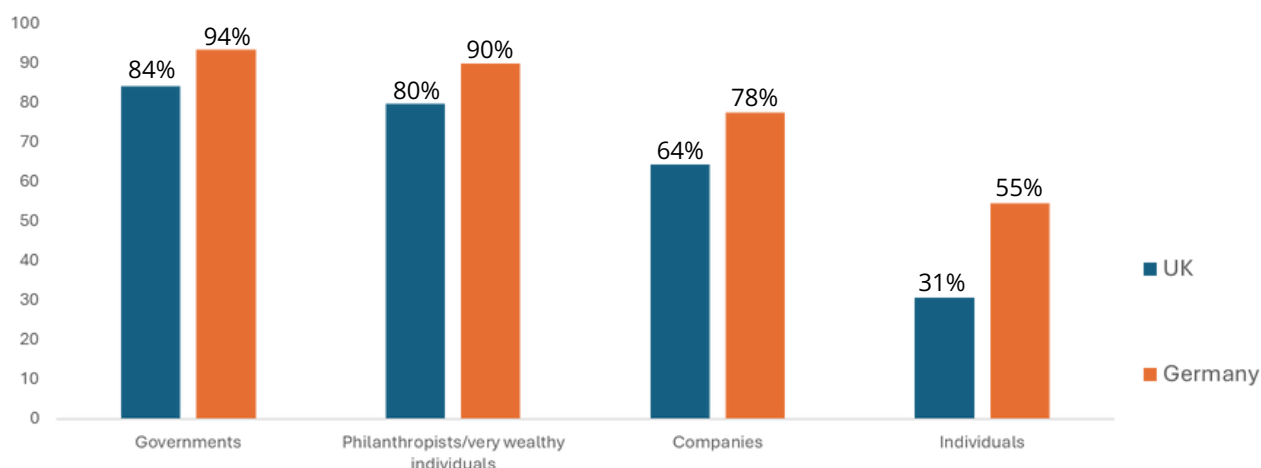
Those who were more motivated to donate, and went on to do so, had stronger leaning towards pro-help norms, and experienced more anger and despair. Mirroring the pattern seen among British participants. This is notable, as it suggests that these variables don't just shape intentions, they also influence real donation behaviour.



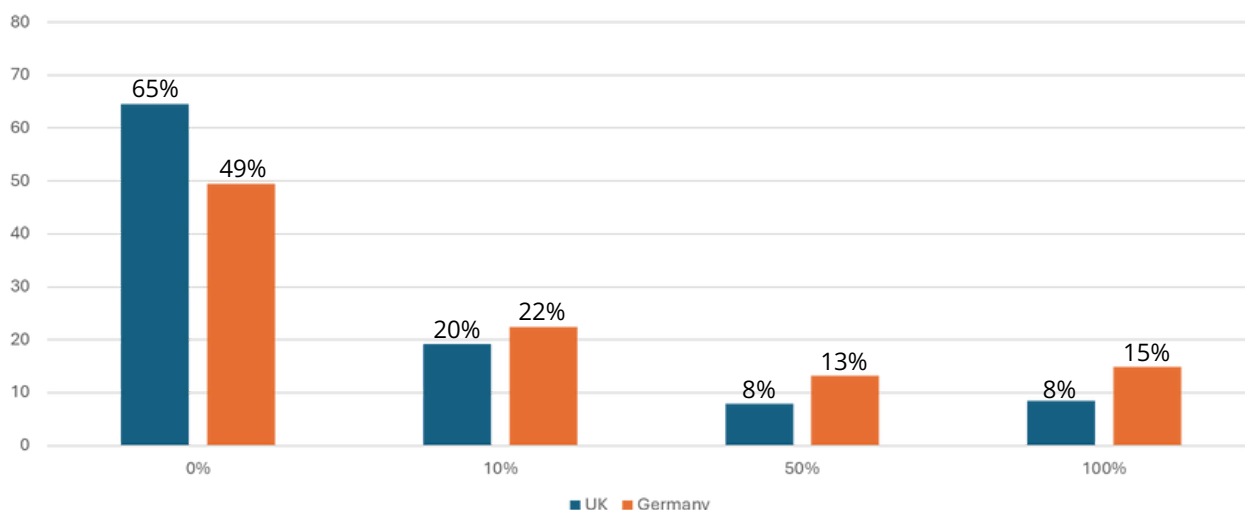


Those who were shown information about the German government's aid cuts tended to report lower levels of anger and despair about the cuts compared with those who were not shown this information. A similar pattern appears in attitudes toward whether German people should provide aid to those in need: participants consistently felt they should, regardless of whether the aid cuts were mentioned or not.

German vs UK survey results

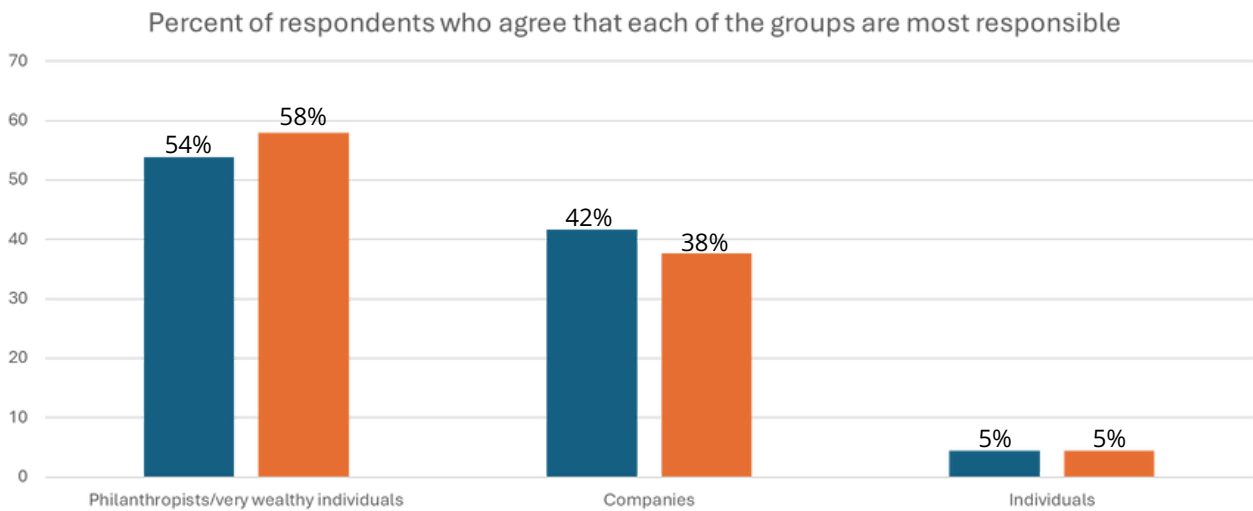


Shown in the graph above are percentages of participants who think that each of the actors shown are responsible, comparing German and British responses. Overall, German participants held all four groups more responsible for providing aid than British participants did.

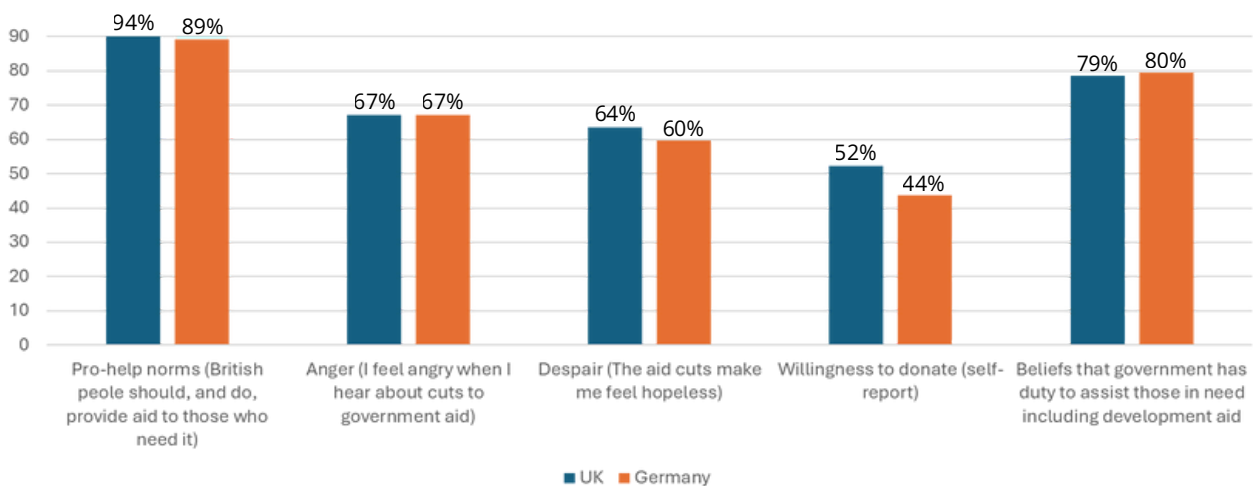


Shown on the second graph is the percentage of respondents in the UK and Germany, respectively, who chose to donate 0%, 5%, 10% or 100% of their participation money. Overall, Germans donated more of their participant payment than British participants.

Note: Total donation amounts shouldn't be compared across countries, as UK participants received higher compensation due to the longer study. A full donation therefore represented a larger sum in the UK than in Germany, so cross-country comparisons of total amounts are not included.



In both Britain and Germany, respondents do not see individual donors as responsible for filling the funding gap left by government cuts. In Germany, there is a slightly stronger tendency to place this responsibility on philanthropists, while in the UK respondents lean a little more towards expecting companies to step in.



Shown above is the percentage of participants in each country who reported that they held greater leaning to pro-help norms, anger, despair, willingness to donate and believed that the government has a duty to assist those in need. Interestingly, self-reported willingness to donate is lower in Germany than in the UK, even though actual donations were higher. It's also notable that belief in the government's duty to support those in need is consistent across both countries.

Appendix

Both the UK and German surveys included additional questions beyond those outlined below. While these are not directly relevant to this report, they may be reported on in other contexts. For a full list of survey questions, including the surveys, please contact Professor Zagefka at: Hanna.Zagefka@rhul.ac.uk

UK survey

At the start of the survey, participants saw an image of the [GlobalGiving Community Aid Fund](#), with the headline: "GlobalGiving is a charity that is working hard to help those in need."

Experimental Conditions

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions:

1. Messages where government cuts or self-interest were mentioned across all three experimental factors
2. Messages where cuts/self-interest were not mentioned

Participants completed a survey using a 5-point agreement scale:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

Survey questions:

1. UK cuts mentioned vs not mentioned (two different results) and then also by whether they were motivated or not to donate, and those who pledged real money
 - British people should and do provide aid to those who need it
 - I feel angry when I hear about cuts to government aid
 - The cuts make me feel hopeless
 - Aid is essential to avoid suffering
 - Aid cuts are a dereliction to our duty
 - The British government should provide aid
2. Who is responsible?
 - Who is responsible for providing aid to those in need out of individuals, governments, philanthropists, companies?
 - Who is most responsible for filling the gap left by government aid? Philanthropy, companies or individuals
3. local vs international aid + a variation on whether UK cuts are mentioned and therefore influence decision
 - Is it more important to you to donate to local or international charities?

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Variables measures in both UK and German surveys:

1. Willingness to donate

These items capture participants' intention and motivation to donate:

- I intend to donate to this cause to support those in need
- I feel motivated to contribute to this fundraising campaign
- I think it is important to donate to this cause

2. Social norms

Descriptive norms (what people typically do):

- People in Britain/Germany provide charitable aid to others when they need it
- British/German people usually provide charitable aid those in need
- Providing charitable aid is valued in British/German society

Injunctive norms (what people believe they should do):

- We British/German people should provide charitable aid to others who require assistance
- It is considered important in Britain to provide charitable aid to those who are in need
- Others would approve of me providing charitable aid

3. Emotional responses (multiple choice)

Anger:

- I feel angry when I hear about cuts to government aid for people in need
- Government reductions in support for those in need make me frustrated and upset
- It makes me angry to know that the government is cutting back on financial assistance for those who rely on it

Despair:

- The reduction in government aid makes me feel hopeless about the future of vulnerable people
- I feel a sense of despair when I think about how government cuts will harm those who depend on aid
- Government reductions in support for those in need make me feel like there is little hope for positive change

4. Beliefs about aid

- Providing development aid is essential for avoiding deaths and suffering
- Not providing development aid is a dereliction of our moral duty

5. Governments should provide aid

- I believe the government should provide financial assistance to people in need
Government aid programs are essential for helping those who are struggling
- I think the government has a responsibility to help people who are less fortunate

6. Socioeconomic Status (SES) - for UK survey:

Household income category (from <£15,000 to >£75,000)

GlobalGiving connects nonprofits, donors, and companies in nearly every country in the world. We help fellow nonprofits access the funding, tools, training, and support they need to serve their communities.

GlobalGiving UK is a registered charity in England and Wales #1122823

Registered address: Office 605 Albert House, 256-260 Old Street, London, EC1V 9DD

For any questions about the [raw data](#), please contact Professor Hanna Zagefka at Hanna.Zagefka@rhul.ac.uk