

A dollar here where it's needed, a dollar there where it isn't

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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So congressional negotiations have followed up on December's budget agreement with [a specific deal on spending that would take the government through the fiscal year](#). Ed O'Keefe has a helpful list of [winners and losers in the deal](#).

I'm happiest to see early-childhood funding restored. I'm unhappiest to see new dollars for border security.

Sure, I would say that. I'm a bleeding-heart liberal, and I'm soft on crime! But that partisan lens isn't the only way to look at federal spending choices. What if we all agreed that secure borders are important, and that so are poor kids' chances of growing up healthy, decently educated, and no longer poor? Then we could talk less about conservative vs. liberal goals and more about how we're doing on these *shared* goals, and how to do better. Instead of [debating the role of government as an abstraction](#), we could talk about the effectiveness of specific (public or private) approaches.

Early-childhood programs are [a highly effective way to improve outcomes for low-income kids](#). Low-income kids in this country [need better outcomes](#). So [the early-childhood funding in the spending bill](#)—more money for Head Start, the child care block grant, and grants to states for preschool programs—is very good news.

Meanwhile, Homeland Security [got a big increase for border security](#). But unlike child poverty and upward mobility, border security is an area where it's hard to imagine much more improvement. We've [thrown heaps of money at border security in recent years](#), and now the thing's pretty damn secure. (Yes, lines are long to cross into Buffalo, New York, and [the DHS secretary has said he'll increase staffing there](#)—though the bill doesn't get that specific.) So it's hard to see this as a high-priority spending item.

It's a bipartisan spending bill, so of course it includes stuff some people like and other stuff different people like. But I'm weary of the math that goes into this. Liberals like to spend federal dollars on the poor; conservatives don't. But

conservatives do like to spend on security! So let's do some of each. Never mind little questions about where there are actual needs and what sort of action would effectively meet them.