



AFGHANISTAN: THE CASE FOR POLLING IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS

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D³ Systems, Inc.

Tracking Attitudes on Afghanistan's Transition Through Pre- and Post-Election Polling

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The Afghan Center for Socio-economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR-Surveys) conducted national public opinion polls before and after Afghanistan's highly anticipated 2014 presidential election, seeking insight into Afghans' voting intentions, issues of concern, and their experience with this fundamental exercise in democracy. The surveys, part of ACSOR-Surveys' internally funded Afghan Futures series, were designed and analyzed by Langer Research Associates and D3 Systems, Inc.

Democratic elections remain a new concept in Afghanistan, and they have been marked by controversy. The Afghan people, as well as the international community, have had limited opportunities to examine public attitudes about candidates, their platforms, the election process, and the country's transition in the years ahead. The research presented here was designed to provide insight into those attitudes and to assess public responses to the election's outcome – a fundamental step on the country's road to greater self-sufficiency.

The pre-election study, conducted in March 2014, found Abdullah Abdullah leading Ashraf Ghani in first-round preferences, with other candidates far behind, results that were closely reflected in the actual outcome. The poll also indicated that Abdullah's lead was insufficient for him to avoid a runoff election – and that in a two-man contest, he and Ghani ran evenly.

While ethnic and regional divisions drove candidate preferences, large majorities of Afghans reported that they could set aside tribal loyalties and accept the ultimate winner. This was confirmed in the subsequent post-election study, conducted in November 2014, after the Independent Election Commission's certification of the election results and the negotiations that led to Ghani succeeding to the presidency, with Abdullah in the newly created role of chief executive.

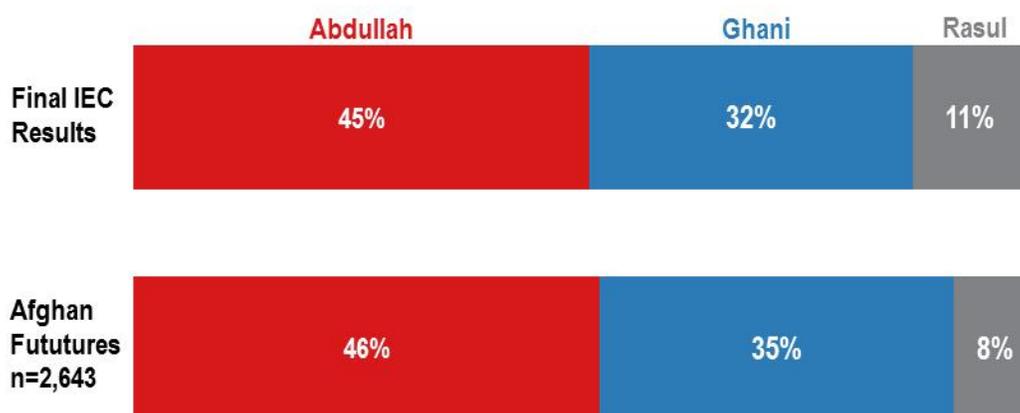
Societies experiencing conflict and transition are difficult to study, but the effort is a vital one, given the dearth of reliable information on public attitudes – a critical factor in progress toward a post-conflict future. Polling opens dialogue where few other opportunities for evidence-based insight exist – in Afghanistan, for instance, demonstrating the extent to which the desire for stability trumped ethnic and political rivalries. Our findings underscored both the validity of professionally conducted international public opinion polling in difficult environments and the unique value of such research.

Prior to the April 2014 Presidential Election

ACSOR-Surveys' pre-election Afghan Futures survey, based on 2,643 face-to-face interviews in a nationwide random sample, found Abdullah leading Ghani among likely voters in the first-round election, 46-35 percent, with 8 percent for Zalmay Rasul and support for other candidates in the lower single digits. Abdullah's lead did not appear large enough for him to avoid a runoff.

Results from Afghanistan's Independent Elections Commission (IEC) five months later found an almost identical actual result: 44.9 percent for Abdullah, 31.5 percent for Ghani, and 11.5 percent for Rasul. An Abdullah-Ghani runoff was declared.

The IEC and Afghan Futures preliminary results were nearly identical, with 45-46 percent for **Abdullah**, and 32-35 percent for **Ghani**, respectively.



Anticipating such a contest, the pre-election survey tested two-candidate preferences in a hypothetical Ghani-Abdullah runoff, finding a virtual 50-50 split between the two among likely voters. The runoff contest tightened because likely voters who did not support either Abdullah or Ghani in the first round favored Ghani by 57-34 percent in a two-way race. That included a 55-31 percent advantage for Ghani among supporters of the third-place candidate, Rasul.

Most notably, ethnic Pashtuns, who splintered among Ghani and other Pashtun candidates in the first round, coalesced around Ghani in a two-way race; he also was broadly backed by Uzbeks, perhaps reflecting his choice of a widely-known Uzbek running mate, Rashid Dostum. Abdullah countered with two-thirds support from Tajiks and Hazaras, two other key groups in the country's tribal mix.

Specifically, Ghani progressed from 49 percent support among Pashtuns in first-round preferences to 75 percent of Pashtuns in a runoff against Abdullah, the survey found. Ghani had 60 percent support from Uzbeks, about one in 10 likely voters.

While Pashtuns are a plurality of Afghans overall, the poll found that Abdullah benefitted from higher anticipated turnout among Tajiks, who predominate in the North, as well as support in the central Hazarjat region and in Kabul. His support was far weaker in the Pashtun-dominated South.



Aside from ethnic and regional divisions, the results showed very few meaningful differences among other groups in support for Abdullah or Ghani – by age, sex, education, urban/rural status or a range of measures about the country’s condition or its direction. Statistical analysis confirmed that ethnic backgrounds and regional divisions were by far the strongest individual predictors of voter preferences, holding other potential factors constant.

Still, regardless of the strength of ethnic and regional loyalty, there was crossover voting: the two-way results found Abdullah winning support from a quarter of Pashtuns and four in 10 Uzbeks, while Ghani, for his part, was backed by 31 percent of Tajiks and Hazaras alike.

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Moreover, in critical results, a broad 83 percent said they would find it very or somewhat easy to accept someone from an ethnic group other than their own as president, and at least seven in 10 Afghans said they would be prepared to accept either of the two runoff candidates, Abdullah or Ghani, as the country's legitimate leader.

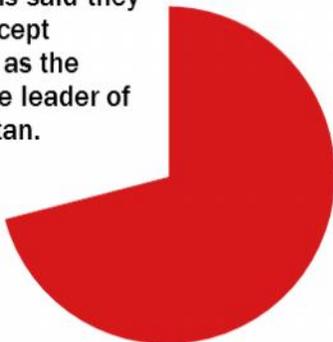
An overwhelming majority said it would be **very or somewhat easy** to accept someone from an ethnic group other than their own as president.



The survey included several other positive results. Fifty-five percent said they expected the vote to be fair and transparent – well more than the 42 percent who said that about the 2009 presidential election in a previous survey. And 82 percent said they were very or somewhat confident that the next president would successfully unite the country around common goals.

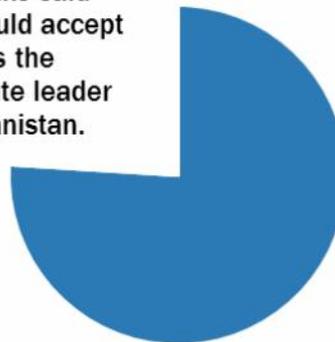
71%

of Afghans said they would accept Abdullah as the legitimate leader of Afghanistan.



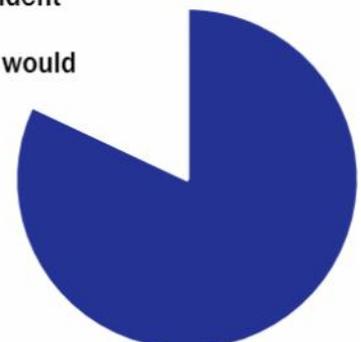
76%

of Afghans said they would accept Ghani as the legitimate leader of Afghanistan.



82%

were confident the next president would unite the country.



Following the April 2014 Election

Post-runoff election data collected during the subsequent wave of the Afghan Futures project confirmed that Afghans overwhelmingly supported the election outcome, rallying behind its new leadership regardless of ethnic or regional divides.

The election in one sense fell short of aspirations: Just 44 percent thought it was fair and transparent, while 53 percent saw it as fraudulent. In the pre-election poll, by contrast, 55 percent of likely voters believed the election would be fair and transparent.

Nonetheless, the ultimate power-sharing agreement achieved broad acceptance, as the pre-election results anticipated. Eighty-seven percent approved of the arrangement in which Ghani assumed the presidency, while Abdullah became chief executive. In a hopeful sign for continued accommodation, 78 percent believed the two could successfully maintain their power-sharing arrangement. Each was seen as legitimately holding his office, by 84 and 78 percent, respectively, and 76 percent of Afghans said they were satisfied with the outcome, even if far fewer were highly satisfied.

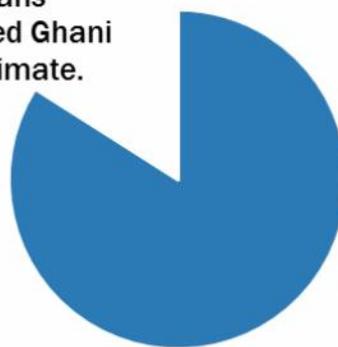
78%

of Afghans
accepted Abdullah
as legitimate.



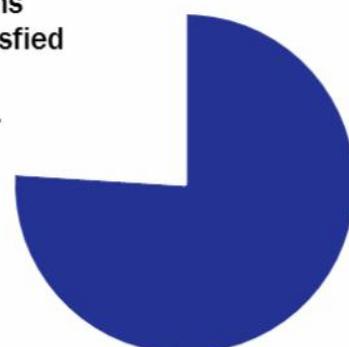
84%

of Afghans
accepted Ghani
as legitimate.



76%

of Afghans
were satisfied
with the
outcome.



Notably, even among those who saw the Ghani-Abdullah runoff election as fraudulent, 84 percent approved of the power-sharing arrangement, indicating a willingness to tolerate improvised measures in search of stability in their battle-scarred nation.

Fewer than half of Afghans saw the April 2014 election as fair and transparent.

Yet a large majority approved of the power sharing agreement.



As in the pre-election poll, large majorities expressed favorable opinions of Ghani and Abdullah alike, 87 and 76 percent, respectively. Ghani, however, was the stronger figure in some measures. Fifty-five percent saw him “very” favorably, and 56 percent expressed strong confidence that he could unite the country politically; corresponding numbers for Abdullah fell to 36 and 34 percent, respectively. Further, if their current arrangement were to come apart, the public by a broad margin, 66 vs. 21 percent, thought Ghani would prevail as the country’s leader.

Ghani’s support exceeded Abdullah’s especially in the country’s South and East, reflecting Ghani’s Pashtun roots, and again reflecting the pre-election findings on regional divisions. At the same time, Ghani’s “strong” support was higher than Abdullah’s across all regions, save Kabul.

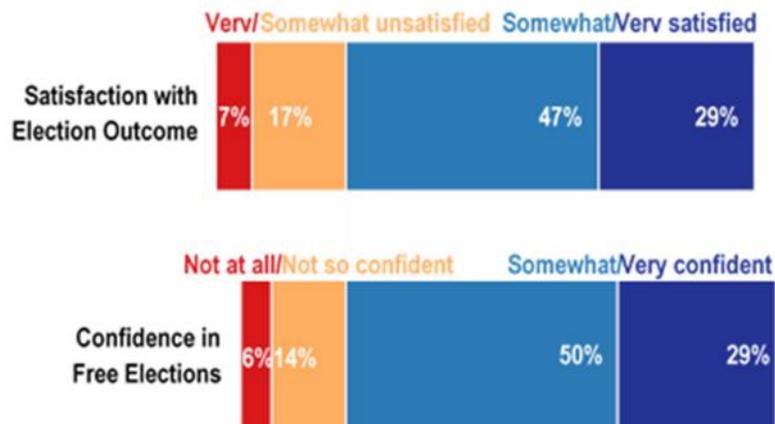
Notably, 78 percent of those who reported voting for Abdullah saw Ghani as the country’s legitimate president, and 76 percent of Ghani voters said that Abdullah legitimately achieved his office. At least eight in 10 voters on both sides also thought the two would be able to maintain their power-sharing arrangement, as did seven in 10 or more across regions and ethnic groups.

There was no majority consensus on who benefitted most from perceived fraud. Thirty-eight percent said Ghani mainly benefitted, vs. 27 percent for Abdullah; an additional 21 percent said both took equal advantage. The fractured result could be one reason the public appeared willing to set this concern aside.

Remarkably, even among Afghans who saw the election as fraudulent, 67 percent said they were satisfied with the outcome. And – in a potentially key result for the country’s future - 74 percent in this group said a system of freely electing leaders can work in Afghanistan. The numbers were similar among Abdullah voters, despite their candidate’s inability to claim the top job.

Still, there were limits to the public’s acceptance of the election process. While 76 percent were at least somewhat satisfied with the outcome, far fewer, 29 percent, were very satisfied with it. And while, as noted, 80 percent were confident that a system of freely electing leaders can work in Afghanistan, far fewer (29 percent) were very confident of that. The latter result suggests that unfettered public support for democracy remains a work in progress.

Large majorities were satisfied with the election outcome and expressed confidence in free elections, although few were *very* satisfied or confident.



Looking Forward

The April 2014 election and subsequent transition represented a critical stepping stone toward Afghanistan's stability and development. Beyond obtaining election-related insights, the survey data provide unique guidance for progress in the post-election period, as covered next.

Current Conditions and the Country's Direction

Results in the post-election survey marked the country's difficulties, but also found improvements in living conditions in the last few years and substantial optimism for the future. The resolution of the disputed election and the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States may have brightened the public mood, despite continued difficulties in terms of development and security alike.

Specifically, the number of Afghans who said their country was heading in the right direction increased by 13 points from fall 2013 to fall 2014, to 61 percent. Despite economic deprivation and poor infrastructure in many locales, ratings of local living conditions improved by 9 points, to 73 percent. Seventy-six percent expected local conditions to improve further in the year ahead.

Nearly six in 10 in the post-election survey expected better security, and 62 percent expected the new government to make progress against corruption. Complaints about corruption among local officials, the police and the national government, however, remained extremely widespread.

In terms of basic living conditions, positive ratings of the ability "to afford things you want and need" were up by 14 points to 58 percent. Ratings of the affordability of food and fuel increased by 12 and 18 points, respectively, from their 2010 levels. The availability of medical care was rated positively by 56 percent, essentially unchanged.

Afghans shared a growing sense of optimism following the election. More rated their **overall living conditions positively** and **said Afghanistan was heading in the right direction**.

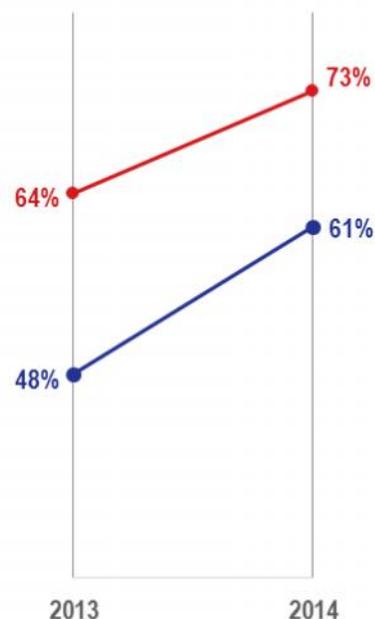
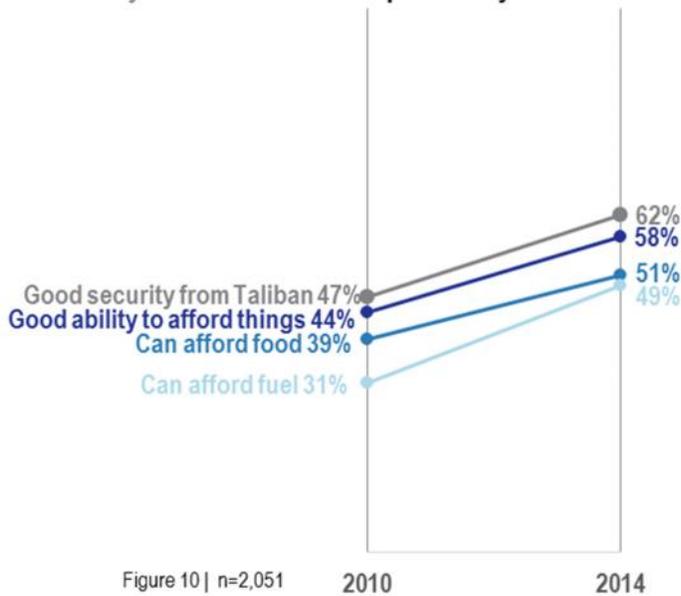


Figure 7 | n=2,051

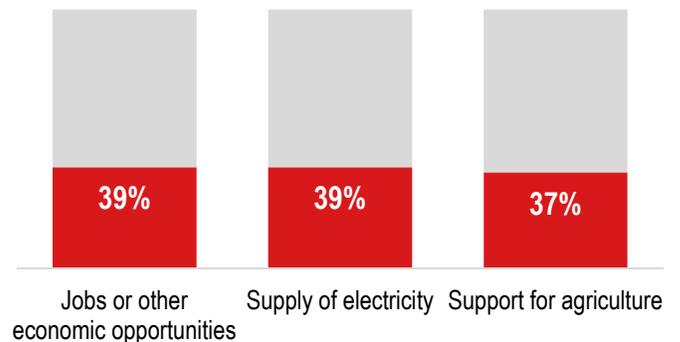
Compared with four years ago, Afghans were more likely to say they could afford fuel and food and rated their ability to afford things and their security from the Taliban positively.



For all the country's economic difficulties, the prevalence of some consumer products rose sharply. A new high of 72 percent of Afghans reported having a mobile phone, up considerably from 59 percent in 2010 and only 31 percent in 2005. Fifty-seven percent said they had a television; 21 percent, a satellite dish; and 42 percent, a motorbike, all new highs. Still, just 19 percent of Afghans owned a refrigerator, and only 6 percent reported having Internet access.

Basic services and unemployment remained persistent problems. Only 39 percent rated the availability of jobs and economic opportunity positively. Ratings of other fundamentals, the supply of electricity and support for agriculture, also continued to be weak, with 39 and 37 percent reporting the availability of these resources positively. Not quite a third rated either the national economy or their personal finances positively.

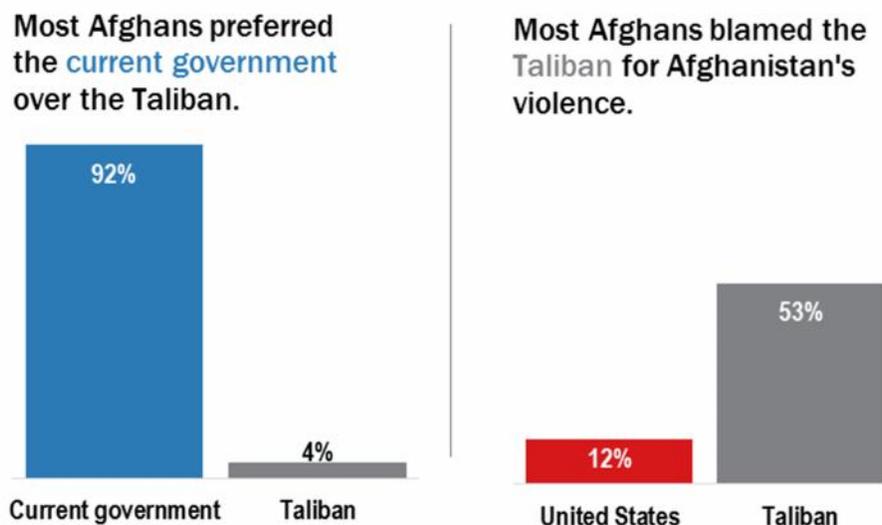
Well fewer than half rated the following positively:



Perceptions of the Taliban and Foreign Presence

A record 92 percent of Afghans preferred the current government over the Taliban, a sentiment that has been very widely held (by 82 to 92 percent) in nearly a decade of polling. The Taliban remained vastly unpopular; just 4 percent preferred the group to the current government. By a wide margin of 62-36 percent, the public rejected the notion that the Taliban had become more moderate.

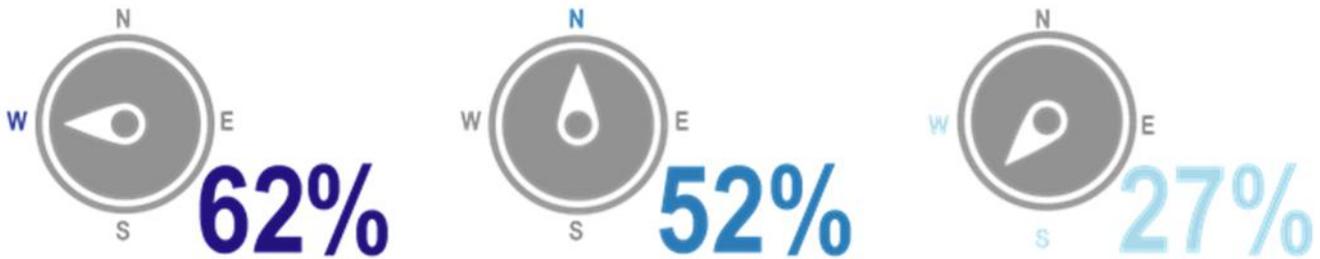
However, tolerance of the Taliban, while still comparatively low, rose: 21 percent said they supported the presence of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, double the number who said the same in 2010. An even larger number, 31 percent, supported the presence of foreign jihadi fighters, up by 14 points in the same time period.



Far more, 77 percent, supported the presence of U.S. forces, and 67 percent said the same of NATO/ISAF forces more generally. Despite the country's travails, eight in 10 said it was a good thing for the United States to have ousted the Taliban in 2001, and many more blamed either the Taliban or al Qaeda for the country's violence (53 percent) than blamed the United States (12 percent). The latter was about half what it was in 2012, coinciding with a sharp reduction in the U.S. deployment.

Two-thirds favored a major ISAF role in training Afghan forces in the future. Indeed, a plurality of 46 percent said they would like to see a greater commitment of U.S. forces after this year than currently is planned. (Of the rest, a quarter supported the planned drawdown, and 29 percent preferred that fewer or no U.S. forces remain.) There was wide regional variability in support for more U.S. forces: 62 percent in the West and 52 percent in the North, compared with a low of 27 percent in the Southwest, the Taliban's prime stronghold.

Support for U.S. forces is lowest in the Southwest region of Afghanistan, the prime stronghold of the Taliban.



Comparing to 2010, perceived security from the Taliban and other armed groups was up by 15 points; while the reasons aren't entirely clear, this may reflect a changed dynamic, as ISAF forces have withdrawn and the Taliban have consolidated their hold on some areas. Indeed, reported security from the Taliban increased sharply in some of the areas where they'd gained greater control, the East and South Central regions. This finding suggests some Afghans' priority may not be whose flag flies over their village, but rather the extent of security they feel.

Indeed, 71 percent said they would like to see the government negotiate a settlement with the Taliban rather than continue fighting, and six in 10 expressed willingness for Taliban members to join Afghan security forces if they laid down their arms. An equal number, though, were unwilling to cede control of some provinces to the Taliban in a peace deal.

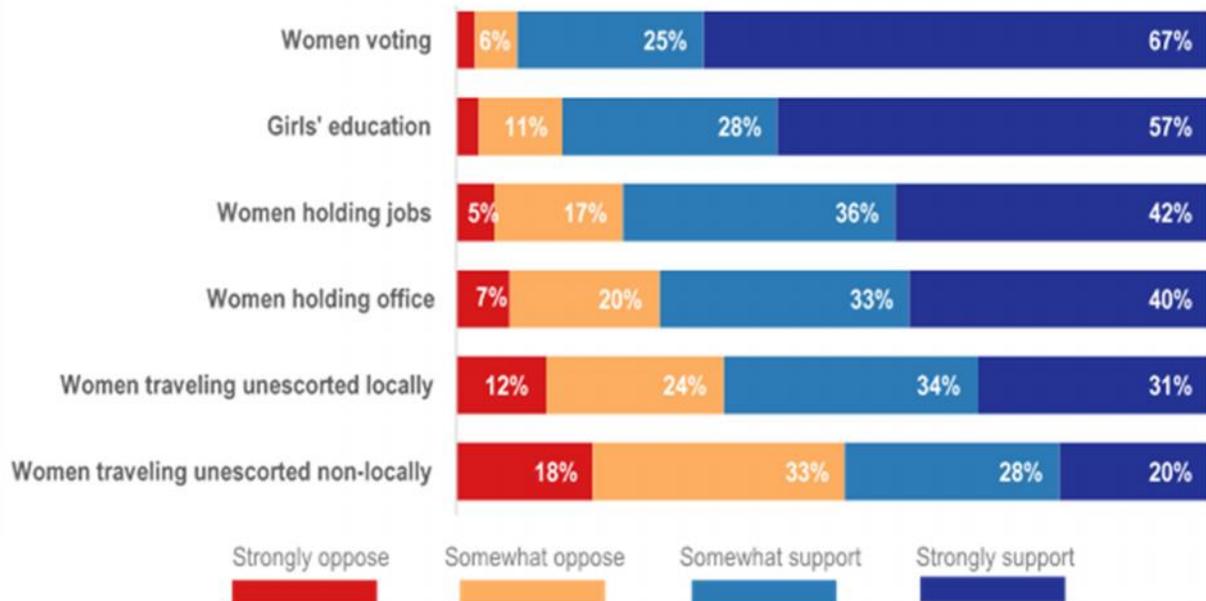
In a result that challenges Western sensibilities, substantial numbers said they would accept circumscribed women's rights in exchange for a settlement with the Taliban. Sixty-five percent would accept restrictions on women leaving the home unescorted; half or nearly half said they would accept bans on women working, holding political office, attending school and voting. It is noteworthy that men and women expressed these views in essentially equal numbers.

Women's Rights

Generally, support for women's rights was highest among urban women, followed by urban men, then by rural women, and sharply lower, in most cases, among rural men. Three-quarters of the country's population lives in rural areas.

Willingness to cede women's rights in an agreement with the Taliban seems to indicate the extent of war-weariness in the country. Absent the possibility of deal-making with the Taliban, many Afghans expressed support for these rights. Chief among them, 92 percent supported women voting, two-thirds strongly. Eighty-five percent supported girls' education, 57 percent strongly. Eighty-five percent supported women holding jobs, 57 percent strongly. Eighty-five percent supported women holding office, 57 percent strongly. Eighty-five percent supported women traveling unescorted locally, 57 percent strongly. Eighty-five percent supported women traveling unescorted non-locally, 57 percent strongly.

Substantial numbers of Afghans expressed support for women's rights. Support was highest for women voting and girls' education, compared with women holding jobs and traveling freely.



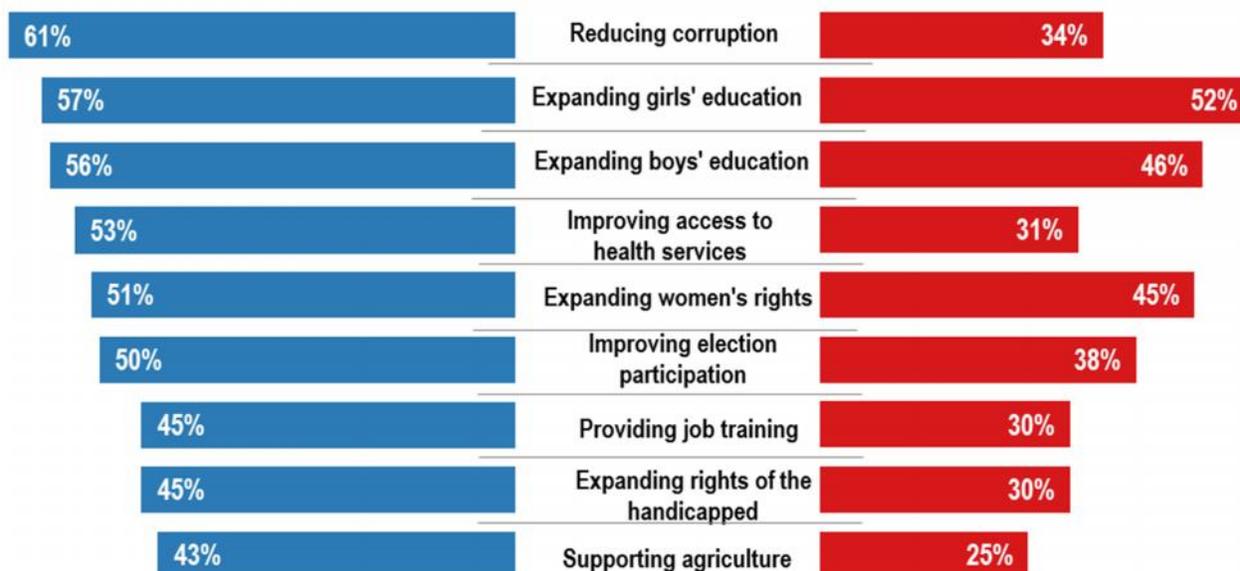
About three-quarters also supported women holding jobs or government positions, and about two-thirds supported women leaving their home unescorted within their own area. Just four in 10, though, supported the first two strongly, falling to three in 10 for the latter, and fewer supported women traveling unescorted outside their local area.

Activities and Effectiveness of CSOs

The survey found a positive impact of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country, a sector expected to gain in importance as military intervention wanes. Fifty-four percent of Afghans said CSOs were active in their areas. Where they do operate, many said these organizations are making things in the country better, particularly in terms of improving education, supporting women’s rights, reducing corruption and expanding access to health services.

Most strikingly, among the 54 percent who said CSOs were active in their area, 61 percent saw such organizations as effective at combatting official corruption. Where CSOs were not active, only 34 percent saw them as helping reduce corruption; many instead had no opinion.

Afghans who said CSOs were active in their area were more likely to believe CSOs make a difference in their community, compared with those who were unaware of CSOs operating locally.



In locales where they operated, 57 and 56 percent, respectively, credited CSOs with improving girls’ and boys’ education, while another 53 percent said they had boosted health services. Anywhere from 51 to 43 percent saw evidence of CSOs making strides on other issues.

Seventy-six percent said United Nations funding for CSOs is a good thing; fewer, but still a majority of 57 percent, endorsed funding of CSOs by the United States and European Union countries alike.

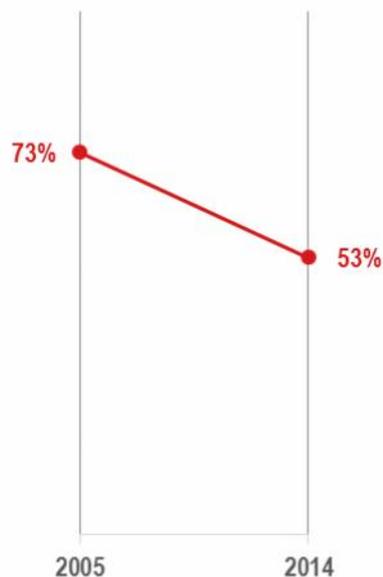
Opium

In a particularly troubling result, the number of Afghans who said they regard the cultivation of opium poppy as “unacceptable in all circumstances” fell to 53 percent – the fewest on record, and drastically down from a peak of 73 percent in an ABC News poll with field work by ACSOR-Surveys in 2005. The result corresponded with record-high opium cultivation and production, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Fifteen percent of Afghans saw the cultivation of poppies for opium as acceptable in all cases – a small number, but a new high in polling back to 2005. The rest, 32 percent, called it acceptable if there’s no other way to earn a living.

Acceptance of growing poppies was highest by far in the country’s main poppy-growing regions, the West and Southwest, as well as in the central Hazarjat region and in the East. Majorities in these areas – 78, 76, 62 and 54 percent, respectively – saw cultivating opium poppies as acceptable, either in all cases or if there’s no alternative. That finding represents a serious challenge for Afghanistan and the international community alike in the years ahead.

The percentage of Afghans who see the cultivation of opium poppy as “unacceptable in all cases” declined.



Conclusion

Polling in Afghanistan has offered valuable insights in the pre- and post-election periods alike. The findings offer an objective look at public attitudes in Afghanistan, providing for better understanding of current conditions and important guidance for the future. Overcoming the challenges of conducting research in conflict environments brings the voice of the people to the table – an essential element of conflict resolution and progress toward a peaceful future.

For more information, please visit:

www.acsor-surveys.com

www.d3systems.com

www.langerresearch.com

Methodology

The ongoing Afghan Futures studies have been sponsored as a public service by ACSOR-Surveys since 2010 to track the course of public attitudes in Afghanistan.

The pre-election survey was conducted from March 10-18, 2014, among a face-to-face random national sample of 2,643 Afghans age 18 and older. Interviews were conducted in Dari and Pashto in all 34 of the country's provinces. Of the 420 potential primary sampling units in the country, 167 were inaccessible to all interviewers for security or transportation reasons, 70 inaccessible to male interviewers specifically, and 97 inaccessible to female interviewers, resulting in non-coverage of 10 percent of the Afghan population by men, 15 percent of the Afghan population by women, and 13 percent of the population overall. Including design effects, results have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2.5 points for the full sample and +/- 4 points for the sample of 1,190 likely voters. Results were reported Thursday, May 15, 2014, at the annual conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in Anaheim, California.

The post-election survey was conducted from Nov. 4-12, 2014, among a face-to-face random national sample of 2,051 Afghans age 18 and older. Interviews again were conducted in Dari and Pashto in all 34 of the country's provinces. Of the 420 potential primary sampling units in the country, 81 were inaccessible for security or transportation reasons, and 89 were inaccessible to female interviewers, resulting in non-coverage of 11 percent of the Afghan population by men, 25 percent of the Afghan population by women, and 18 percent of the population overall. Including design effects, results have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2.5 points for the full sample.

Field work for both surveys was provided by ACSOR-Surveys in Afghanistan. Sampling, field work oversight, and data tabulation were produced by D3 Systems, Inc. of McLean, Va. Design, oversight, and analysis were provided by Langer Research Associates of New York, N.Y. This paper was prepared by Gary Langer of Langer Research Associates, Matthew Warshaw of ACSOR-Surveys, and Jessica Beaird of D3 Systems, Inc.