

Public Opinion on Afghanistan: All the Numbers Get Worse

Majorities now critical of President and not confident that U.S. policies will be successful

New York, N.Y. — September 25, 2009 — A new Harris Poll finds that a 54% to 36% majority of adults now gives President Obama negative ratings on his handling of Afghanistan. Only 14% of adults feel confident that U.S. policies there will be successful and fully 55% are not confident. These numbers show a substantial decline in public support for the president's policies since Harris Polls conducted earlier this year, and in previous years.

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll of 2,334 adults surveyed online between September 8 and 15, 2009 by Harris Interactive.

The main findings of this Harris Poll include:

- The 54% to 36% majority that now gives the president a negative rating on Afghanistan compares with 51% to 36% majority who gave him a positive rating in April.
- A third (35%) of Democrats and most (60%) Independents, in addition to 75% of Republicans, now give him a negative rating.
- Only 8% of all adults now believe that the situation in Afghanistan is getting better, while 42% think it is getting worse. In April only 28% thought it was getting worse.
- Only 14% of the public are now confident that U.S. policies will be successful, down from 27% in April; while almost a third (31%) are unsure, that leaves 55% who are not confident, up from 40% in April this year.
- A 42% plurality of adults see no difference between the situation for U.S. troops in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Of the remainder who have an opinion, many more (36%) think the situation is worse in Afghanistan (than in Iraq) than those who believe it is better (10%).

A comparison of public opinion now and in earlier years

Several of these questions were asked when President George W. Bush was in the White House. The public's pessimism now is somewhat stronger than it was in most of these surveys:

- The 55% who are not confident that U.S. policy will be successful compares to 45%, 41%, and 54% in 2005, 2007, and 2008.
- The 42% who believe the situation in Afghanistan is getting worse compares to 30%, 26%, and 37% in 2005, 2007, and 2008.

So what?

These new poll numbers put more pressure on President Obama to do something new in Iraq, at a time when the military commanders are asking for more U.S. troops and Vice President Biden has suggested cutting U.S. forces there.

On the other hand, the president has his hands more than full with health care reform and the nation’s economic problems and must wish that he could avoid taking an unpopular decision to increase troop levels, or the controversial step of reducing them. But doing nothing is not an attractive option either. He seems to be between a rock and two hard places.

**TABLE 1
OBAMA’S HANDLING OF AFGHANISTAN**

"Now turning to Afghanistan, overall how would you rate the job President Obama has done in handling Afghanistan over the past several months?"

Base: All Adults

	April 2009	Sept. 2009	Political Party		
			Republican	Democrat	Independent
	%	%	%	%	%
Positive (NET)	51	36	18	57	32
Excellent	10	5	2	9	2
Pretty Good	41	32	16	49	29
Negative (NET)	36	54	75	35	60
Only fair	26	35	43	26	40
Poor	10	19	33	8	20
Not sure	13	10	7	8	9

**TABLE 2
SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN – GETTING BETTER OR WORSE**

"Do you think that the situation in Afghanistan is...?"

Base: All Adults

	July 2005	May 2007	August 2008	April 2009	September 2009			
					Total	Republican	Democrat	Independent
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Getting better	17	12	11	12	8	10	9	5
Getting worse	30	26	37	28	42	45	40	45
No real change	37	36	35	45	41	40	44	40
Not sure	16	26	18	16	9	5	7	10

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 3
CONFIDENCE IN SUCCESS IN AFGHANISTAN?

“How confident are you that U.S. policies in Afghanistan will be successful?”

Base: All Adults

	July 2005	May 2007	August 2008	April 2009	September 2009			
					Total	Republican	Democrat	Independent
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Confident	25	22	17	27	14	14	17	11
Not confident	45	41	54	40	55	61	50	58
Not sure	30	37	29	33	31	25	33	32

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 4
COMPARISON WITH IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN BETTER/WORSE FOR US TROOPS

“Compared to Iraq, do you think the situation in Afghanistan is...?”

Base: All Adults

	May 2007	August 2008	Jan. 2009	April 2009	September 2009			
					Total	Republican	Democrat	Independent
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better for U.S. troops	36	13	9	13	10	10	10	10
Same for U.S. troops	34	40	40	39	42	44	44	41
Worse for U.S. troops	9	28	35	30	36	39	35	36
Not sure	21	20	16	18	12	7	11	13

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States September 8 and 15, 2009 among 2,334 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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