

# **Electoral Reform and the Experience of Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan Comprehensive Report**

**Political System  
Reform Studies III**

**Mohammad Irfani & Nafay Choudhury**



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Elections in Afghanistan  
Comprehensive Report**



**Political System Reform Studies III**

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The analysis provided in the research paper relate to the research team and do not reflect the official position and viewpoint of Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies and the research funding institution, Center of National Endowment for Democracy (NED).



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## **Electoral Reform and the Experience of Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan**

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## Executive Summary

In less than two decades, a culture of democratic governance has begun to emerge in Afghanistan, with the country having gone through three presidential and two parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, the democratic institutions remain mired with difficulties and shortcomings, which must be addressed through progressive and adaptive reforms. This study, based on systematically gathered survey data, covers the perspectives of 1305 individuals spread across 13 provinces, making it the largest and most comprehensive study on Afghan elections to date.

The simplicity of the single non-transferable voting (SNTV) method – with ‘one vote for one candidate’ – has helped it to gain a level of popular acceptance in the electoral process. However, the SNTV system also leads to elected officials being unaccountable to their constituents. Constituents surveyed in this research clearly felt that elected officials did not represent their needs but rather pursued their own interests. Under the SNTV system, an entire province serves as a constituency, and several elected officials are concurrently responsible for representing the province. The result has been a low level of engagement between MPs and local communities. Thus, the difficulty that arises concerning electoral reform is that, on the one hand, individuals prefer the majoritarian system of voting, while, on the other hand, they feel disempowered by the outcome of the existing SNTV majoritarian system as it leads to unaccountable MPs. Elections on all levels in Afghanistan remain mired in difficulties, which have only been exacerbated by the highly fraudulent 2014 presidential elections. Confidence between the government and citizen remains tenuous, and confidence in the IEC is weak.

### Key Findings

- While Afghanistan has had two parliamentary elections since 2002, the success of these elections is very questionable. This survey revealed an electorate that voted without knowledge of the candidates’ political orientations, felt MPs to be largely

unaccountable, and possessed limited knowledge of the electoral system.

- Elected MPs remain largely unaccountable to their constituents once they take office. The vast majority of voters are unhappy with the low level of accountability of MPs. Some 53% of respondents feel that elected MPs simply pursued personal interests (figure 13). Voters are by-and-large dissatisfied with their MPs and have not benefitted from their efforts in parliament (figure 10).
- Across the various demographics – ethnicity, province, gender – the vast majority of voters are unaware of the political orientation of the candidates for whom they voted (figures 15, 16, 17).
- The vast majority of voters (63%) have a preference for independent and educated candidates. This finding corresponds with the general distrust of political parties in Afghanistan. While individuals recognize that political parties should serve the national interest (39%) and serve their electorates (16%) (figure 25), a mere 21% prefer a voting system that involves political parties (figure 21). This finding can be explained by the fact that even though electorates desire political parties that represent national interests, they understand that in reality, parties are mired in partisan, ethno-politics.
- Overall, public opinion of the IEC is weak (figure 14). Some 47% of respondents viewed the performance of the IEC positively while 45% viewed it negatively (the remaining respondents had ‘no opinion’). The fact that almost half of all voters do not view the IEC favorably speaks to its widespread lack of credibility. Tellingly, nearly 18% viewed its performance as ‘very bad’, whereas only half that amount (9%) viewed it as ‘excellent’. The various ambiguities surrounding the mandate of the IEC, appointment of commissioners, and role of its members only further weakens its credibility.
- The vast majority of voters (55%) prefer a majoritarian electoral system, where an individual casts a single vote for one person (figure 21).

## Recommended Electoral Reforms

- The **first recommendation** is to have smaller electoral districts, as this will help to promote better accountability. To ensure minority representation, these smaller districts must maintain the unity of any minority community and avoid splitting them across different precincts. Defining electoral districts is a complex process and sensitive since it has a direct bearing on the outcome of elections. Delineating new district boundaries must be based on reliable population statistics and must be implemented by an independent, disinterested party. Local communities must be consulted in this process rather than assuming to know their opinions.
- The **second recommendation** is to move towards a ‘combined’ FPTP and SNTV system at present. Male candidates would participate in a single-member constituency system, with only one winning candidate representing the constituency. To maintain female representation in the parliament, female candidates would continue to run in a province-wide SNTV system for the moment; over time, constituencies at the sub-provincial level must also be specified for female candidates so that they may also follow the FPTP system. This system would help promote greater accountability and also lay the initial conditions needed for the development of broad-based political parties, though this reform alone would not promote such parties.<sup>1</sup>
- The **third recommended** reform is for the government to introduce laws regarding political parties. The goal of these laws is to promote accountability and transparency amongst political parties and their leaders. These laws must ensure that political parties have a clear national mandate, an elections process for leadership positions, protocol for holding individuals accountable, and transparency in their sources of funding. Political parties are essential for the proper functioning of the country and to keep the

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on this proposal, see the section below on “Selecting the Most Appropriate System”.

government accountable. Once broad-based political parties gain a footing in the country, other electoral arrangements such as a proportional system can be given further consideration.

- One of the challenges in introducing further reforms to the electoral system is the deep distrust that individuals have for political parties. Parties remain dominated by ethnic political parties and are headed by strong individual personalities who garner support from ethnically homogenous patrons. If the size of electorates is reduced, it may provide an opportunity for political parties to reassess their affairs and recast their operations. The development of broad-based, multiethnic parties that pursue national interests is a political project that will not be achieved overnight. Rather, change is more likely to take place incrementally as parties see benefits in forming new allegiances. Political parties must be regulated by law to promote their transparency and accountability. Despite their current shortcomings, political parties are absolutely essential if Afghanistan is to function as a truly representative democracy.
- **Finally**, the Afghan government must take ownership of elections by having disputes resolved through the appropriate mechanism. The IEC and ECC must be able to fulfill their mandates without interference from outside actors. To date, many elections disputes have been resolved through the involvement of strong political actors (both national and international) while ignoring mechanisms established for this purpose, thus undermining their credibility and operability. The result is that elections bodies lack any teeth to carry out their mandate.

## Introduction

### Introduction to the study

There are few events that determine the democratic operation of a government as much as elections. Elections provide an opportunity for citizens to voice their concerns and choose representatives and platforms that correspond to their needs. A functioning democracy vitally depends on elections as a means of empowering citizens and channeling their opinions and perspectives. A democratic political system should strive to pursue policies and objectives that reflect the people it governs.

However, as is often the case, the devil is in the details. Simply providing individuals the opportunity to vote does not immediately correlate with a political arrangement that will represent the interests of those voters. Furthermore, people may prefer certain forms of political arrangements to others, depending on whether they view the ultimate objective of elections to be efficacy, representativeness, or otherwise. These considerations all come to the fore in the case of Afghanistan, where the political system is still in a period of transition and elections continue to undergo calibrations and reforms. Currently, parliamentary elections follow the Single Non-Transferable Voting (SNTV) system, and two rounds of parliamentary elections have been held under this system. Nonetheless, functional elections do not necessarily imply their desirability. Whether an elections process achieves a formidable outcome depends on the objective it seeks to attain. If an elections process and its objectives are mismatched, then the claim of establishing 'a government for the people' may be an illusion even if properly administered.

This study on Afghan parliamentary elections focuses on the views and experiences of electorates. With Afghanistan heading towards its third parliamentary elections, an 'elections culture' has slowly emerged in the country, where people have gained a level of familiarity with the voting process. This study seeks to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of the burgeoning elections culture by canvassing the experiences of voters throughout the country. In investigating Afghanistan's elections culture,

the study specifically examines the level of knowledge that lay individuals have of the elections process, views on governance in the absence of political parties, and perspectives on the representativeness and accountability of members of parliament once elected. One of the goals of elections is to provide individuals the ability to govern the country vicariously through their elected representatives. Understanding the experience of voters in Afghanistan where democratic governance remain in its infancy can help to identify strengths as well as acknowledge weaknesses, thereby recommending changes that reflect the existing reality in the country.

### **Contribution to the existing literature**

This study adds to the burgeoning literature that has slowly amassed on democratic governance in Afghanistan, particularly since 2001.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on the country's electoral process and the experience of electorate through examining his/her electoral preferences. The unique contribution of the current study is that it is the most systematic and widespread study on the experience of parliamentary elections. This study surveyed 1287 individuals spread across 7 provinces. The survey is backed up by in-depth interviews with 18 election candidates spread across 6 other provinces. These surveys help to provide insights on the way in which voters understand the elections process, elected officials, and the parliamentary systems. Furthermore, this study canvasses the past experiences of voters, which are likely to impact their future participation in elections, and the values that voters feel to be most important to them. Many past studies on Afghan elections base their recommendations solely on international best practices and macro-analyses of voting patterns in previous elections.<sup>3</sup> This study goes a step further by surveying a wide voter-base across the country, thus making it possible to gauge the existing options for electoral reform against on-the-ground experience.

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<sup>2</sup> This literature is addressed below in the literature section.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Reynolds and John Cary, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform", AREU July 2012

## Models of Electoral Systems

### Delineating electoral systems

To understand the implications of elections for political governance, the elections process must be analyzed on two fronts. First, elections can be analyzed in terms of the form of representation it creates. The common models are majoritarian, proportional, and mixed systems. A properly constituted democratic system may involve any one of these election processes. Significantly, the choice of election process will have significant implications for the way the parliament organizes its affairs and makes decisions. Second, underlying elections are certain objectives that elections and, moreover, democratic societies, seek to pursue. These objectives must be properly identified and evaluated against the chosen electoral process. In this way, the specific desires of citizens can be assessed, thereby providing insight on what may be the most suitable election process. Each of these fronts is considered in turn.

### Types of electoral systems

#### Majoritarian systems

Majoritarian systems are the most common worldwide, being followed by 87 out of 217 countries.<sup>4</sup> This system pursues the mantra of ‘majority rule’, as the group that gains a majority of the vote is given a strong ability to govern the country and make decisions on behalf of all citizens, including those whose votes ended up on the losing side. As Mainwaring explains, this system “emphasizes that democracy is majority rule and is based on a concentration of power.”<sup>5</sup> While minority groups will likely exist within the legislature, their ability to influence decision-making will normally not be proportional to their votes as they may face difficulty in securing candidates that represent their specific interests.

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<sup>4</sup> International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/question-view/130357> (Access 11 Feb 2018)

<sup>5</sup> Scott Mainwaring, “Two Models of Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 12, Number 3, July 2001, pp. 170-175, 170

The most common majoritarian system is the so-called ‘first-past-the-past’ system, which requires a simple majority. Within electoral districts, voters cast a single vote, and the candidate receiving the most votes will be declared the single winner in that precinct. In jurisdictions that host two dominant parties each competing for the most votes, it is not uncommon for the winning candidate to receive an absolute majority of the votes. Once all of the winning candidates across all of the constituencies are tallied, the party with the most seats forms the government. This arrangement, while straightforward, may lead to various peculiarities. The winning party may end up with less than a majority of the popular vote. For example, the 1951 British elections saw the Conservative Party securing a majority of seats in the parliament though it secured fewer total votes than the competing party, Labour (Conservative Party 48%; Labour 48.8%).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, majoritarian systems normally assumes two political parties being dominant within the elections process, thereby leading to a win-by-majority. However, in many instances, several popular parties compete for a seat within a precinct, and thus the possibility – and even likelihood – of winning without an absolute majority exists. As the number of candidates that voters can choose increases, so does the likelihood of voters splitting their votes and, in turn, the required number of votes for a simple majority also decreases.

The goal of majoritarian systems is to facilitate the running of the government based on the will of the majority. As Pippa Norris writes, “The focus is effective governance, not representation of all minority views.”<sup>7</sup> The winning majority (assuming a group forms a majority) will be given vast powers in the parliament to execute its mandate in line with the will of the majority. Once the parliament is elected, it can then proceed to pass bills and implement legislation without great resistance from minority parties. Accountability is maintained – at least in theory – through regular elections as voters are able to vote-out any candidate or party that has not

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<sup>6</sup> Pippa Norris, “Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems”, *International Political Science Review*, 1997, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 297-312, 301

<sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris, 301

performed their mandate or that has lost the confidence of a wide base of citizens.

## Proportional systems

Many societies adopt the perspectives that a majoritarian system simply cannot do justice to the diversity of views of individuals within the society. The number of proportional systems worldwide is 85 out of 217 countries, nearly equal to the number of majoritarian systems.<sup>8</sup> The proportional system “promotes the idea that democracy should represent as many citizens as possible and a simple majority should not govern in an unfettered fashion.”<sup>9</sup> By having the seats in parliament reflect the composition of votes, discussions within parliament will also be able to represent the diversity of views held by voters.

Two general methods exist for selecting candidates. First, in an open-list system, voters select both a party as well as the candidate within the party that they prefer. The particular constituency will have a number of seats, which will be allocated to parties according to the number of votes their candidates have fielded. Second, a closed-list system operates similarly, with one distinction that voters only vote for a political party. The party has an internal ranking of its candidates, and thus party seats will be filled according to that list. For example, if in an election for 30 seats, party A gets 50% of the overall vote, it will fill those seats with the top 15 names on its internal, pre-established list. For both open-list and closed-list systems, a range of possibilities exists in the way the constituency may be defined. Normally a constituency is regional, with each region being allocated a certain number of seats, which are then apportioned according to the final vote tally in that region. In a few places, the entire country serves one constituency, and thus the allocation of seats directly reflects the national vote apportionment.

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<sup>8</sup> International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/question-view/130357> (Access 11 Feb 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Scott Mainwaring, 170

The key objective attained through the proportional system is greater representation. Rather than allowing the majority to govern as it wishes, it seeks to include a greater number of parties within the legislative decision-making process. With greater representation and inclusion comes the possibility of arriving at parliamentary decisions that are representative of a wider number of perspectives and citizens. The nature of proportional systems is that they encourage a greater number of political parties as well as voter participation since electorates are more likely to have their votes impact the political process in one way or another. Pippa Norris's study of electoral systems in 53 countries found that majoritarian systems on average had three major political parties, whereas proportional systems had four. Furthermore, average voter turnout was 65.4% in majoritarian systems, where as it was 75.7% in proportional systems.

### Mixed systems

Mixed systems, as the name suggests, combine elements of both majoritarian and proportional systems. In this way, they try to capture some of the benefits available through both systems, namely, efficiency and representativeness. This may be the case where a certain portion of the vote is selected through a majoritarian system while the remaining portion is selected from a closed- or open-list competition. These systems may be helpful for countries that seek to promote a strong parliament capable of passing legislation easily but that also hope to include the voices of minority groups that would otherwise be excluded.

## Framework for selecting an appropriate system

### The underlying objectives of an electoral system

While defining an ideal elections model may be simple enough, far more difficult a task is selecting the most appropriate system for a country. Much discussion has been dedicated to the question of whether one system dominates over another in a country. To assess the most appropriate elections system for a country, the normative criteria proposed by Pippa Norris helps to provide an understanding of how visions

of democratic governance translate into election processes. As Norris writes, “The heart of the debate concerns the central criteria which an electoral system should meet, and whether strong and accountable government is more or less important than the inclusion of minority voices.”<sup>10</sup> Norris outlines four factors for understanding the underlying objectives of an electoral system:

**1. Government Effectiveness:** The more a strong and effective government is sought, the more a country should gravitate towards a majoritarian system. Strong government specifically entails the dominance of a single political party capable of implementing its policies without having to form coalitions. As the number of parties’ increases, the need for coalitions and compromise also increases, thereby decreasing the ability of a single-party to execute its policies without regard to others.

**2. Responsive and Accountable Government:** While government may be assessed in terms of its effectiveness, it may also be scrutinized in terms of accountability towards their constituents. For example, in single-member constituencies elected officials may be more responsive to the needs of their constituents than in multi-member constituencies, since in the latter case MPs may shirk responsibilities by claiming them to be the responsibility of another elected representative. Furthermore, in majoritarian systems where candidates need to secure a simple majority in their constituency, a small change in votes can completely reverse an elections outcome, with the incumbent seats being lost to opposing candidates. In proportional systems, changes in votes will not have the same drastic effect. Since parliamentary representation is pegged to voter percentages, fluctuation may mean that parties shrink or expand. This renders voters less powerful in being able to hold officials accountable.

**3. Fairness to Minority Parties:** The proportional system strongly gives preference to minority parties in the government. Minority groups often have particular difficulty in having their voices represented in the government, particularly if their membership is disbursed over a geographic region. Majoritarian systems are not good at fielding the

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<sup>10</sup> Pippa Norris, 304

opinions of minority groups, nor do they give such groups the power to hold governments accountable during elections. One means of addressing this problem is that governments may adopt a mixed election process, which provides for some level of representation to minority groups.

**4. Social Representation:** Elections may seek to promote the inclusion of underrepresented groups such as women, and ethnic and religious minorities. As a general observation, women have weaker representation in the parliament in countries with majoritarian systems.<sup>11</sup> The election system may institute a quota system, which may involve a mix of majoritarian and proportional systems. Proportional systems can facilitate social representation by having policies about the composition of party members (for example, to promote gender parity, a party roster may alternate between male and female).

**Summary chart of factors affecting choice of voting system**

<b>Government effectiveness</b>	Majoritarian systems prefer a strong, single-party government whereas proportional systems may require coalitions consisting of several parties.
<b>Responsive and accountable government</b>	In majoritarian systems, small fluctuations in voting patterns can change results and thus elected representatives should be more responsive to voters.
<b>Fairness to minority parties</b>	Proportional systems are more likely to include the voices of minority groups. These groups may even form part of government coalitions.
<b>Social representation</b>	Purely majoritarian systems tend to underrepresent various social groups. Promoting greater social representation is possible under both systems. In proportional systems, this may be done through party policies.

*Table 1: Summary chart of factors affecting choice of voting system*

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<sup>11</sup> Pippa Norris, 306

## Principles for reforming the electoral system

This above-mentioned framework provides a basic understanding of the underlying objectives of an electoral system. But in order to reconsider the electoral system in a heterogeneous country like Afghanistan, a wider understanding of the electoral representation that goes beyond the dichotomies of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ should be articulated. Afghanistan experiences the unique difficulties of being a conflict-ridden society with citizens having very limited knowledge of elections and having many rural areas isolated from wider societal discourses. Given the continuing instability in the country, it is often the case that the most vocal positions are those that are also the most polarizing, for example political parties based on ethnicity. In this regard, the writings of Peter Emerson sheds light on alternative electoral systems and their ability to provide a middle ground for democratic inclusiveness. The problem is how to turn the voting rights into decision-making power. In his book entitled “Defining Democracy: Voting Procedures in Decision-Making, Elections and Governance”, Emerson criticizes the mainstream democratic system for not being sensitive enough towards the inclusivity of decision-making procedures as much as it is obsessed with the formation of the majority rule through elections. “In many instances of political decision-making, the ‘A-or-B?’ question is the equivalent to asking “Are you left-wing or right-wing?” The actual majority opinion, however, is often somewhere in the middle, in the realm of a silent majority. A better term would perhaps be the ‘silenced’ majority, silenced by being presented with only two options, neither of which adequately represents their viewpoint. In some cases, the outcome of a majority vote will not correspond with the real majority opinion, let alone ‘the will of the people’.”<sup>12</sup>

Comparing different voting systems and their ability to make consensus among various stakeholders, Emerson suggests that “consensus voting” – involving not only a multi-option vote, but also a multi-option debate – may produce better results as it provides the outcome popular amongst everybody, and not necessarily just the majority. Therefore, to design and

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<sup>12</sup>Peter Emerson, “Defining Democracy; Voting Procedures in Decision-Making, Elections and Governance”, 2th edition, Springer, 2012, Preface, page xii

implement a proper electoral reform, three sets of principles should be laid down, including:

- 1- **Principles of proportionality** and voters' choice upon which electoral systems should be based,
- 2- **Principles of inclusiveness** as the foundation of any decision making, and
- 3- **Principles of power-sharing** between various stakeholders.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 95

## Understanding Elections in Afghanistan

### Why reform the electoral system

The point of departure for reforming the electoral system varies in different contexts depending on the objectives that the system seeks to attain. Reasons for reforming an electoral system include: altering the electorates both in terms of population size and geographic boundaries; addressing a political crises; guaranteeing future electoral victories as often favored by leaders with autocratic leanings; encouraging electoral participation; promoting political legitimacy; maintaining the status quo; excluding the opposition; forming coalitions; raising or eliminating barriers for participating in the parliamentary system; providing impetus for development of political parties; simplifying the voting process; reducing the possibilities of fraud in the elections; concentrating or decentralizing power; altering the overarching political system; etc. These reasons are not mutually exclusive and any elections reforms will likely cover several objectives concurrently. Besides political objectives, the constitutional framework may provide instruction on democratic governance and electoral representation, as well as the limits on potential reforms.

While Afghans tend to hold mixed – and often acrimonious – feelings towards the notion of ‘democracy’, they generally view elections more positively. Anna Larson’s research on Afghan perceptions of democracy found that, “In contrast to the more general discourse of democracy and democratization [for which many Afghans remain weary], the idea of holding elections (which is not always associated with democracy) is not seen as a hostile imposition of foreign culture in Afghanistan.”<sup>14</sup> While Larson’s research points to the symbolic importance of elections, “experiences of what these representatives have been able to provide during their term in office are usually negative.”<sup>15</sup> Her research helps to document the distinction between the general positive view that people have of elections but the negative experiences on the ground “which have

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<sup>14</sup> Anna Larson, Deconstruction “Democracy” in Afghanistan, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2011

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

been marred with fraud, ambiguity, and the suspicion of foreign interference.”<sup>16</sup>

Afghan elections, while are arguably viewed more favorably than the notion of ‘democracy’, still falls short of meaningfully creating a political system where individuals feel represented. The study by Noah Coburn and Anna Larson on perceptions of Afghanistan’s electoral processes found that, “Many described elections as simply a new mechanism for ruling elites to solidify and extend their power, sometimes using violence in the months leading up to the polls to demonstrate the extent of their control in a given area.”<sup>17</sup> MPs employ various means to gain support in their areas, which can help to ensure their victory. Some MPs rely on “their reputations as violent leaders during the jihad and civil war” alongside patronage network; others help local communities by introducing small projects for the local population; others still rely on ethnic parties that rely on voters from a particular ethnic base.”<sup>18</sup> The case of one MP who focused on introducing new projects to her community reveals that some communities do reap certain benefits. However, such initiatives are at the discretion of the MP, as many resort to forms of intimidation to ensure victory and, once elected, operate outside of the law.<sup>19</sup> For many, “elections are being used to legitimize or ‘rubber stamp’ the control of power”, where strategic actors manipulate local populations to accrue political advantages.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Justifying the Means: Afghan Perceptions of Electoral Processes” United States Institute for Peace, 2013

<sup>18</sup> Noah Coburn “Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> One elected MP, Pacha Khan Zadran of Paktia, built a road to his house that cut through private land without the owner’s consent; he also installed two wells on his property that were meant for the community. Zadran was a militia leader who opposed the Taliban, which had already garnered him some fame (and infamy) amongst the local population. Noah Coburn “Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II” AREU 2010, p. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan’s 2010 Parliamentary Election and Its Alienating Impact”, AREU Briefing Paper Series, February 2011.

Does the parliamentary electoral system of Afghanistan need to be reformed? Perhaps the system needs to be replaced altogether? If changes are required, then how should they be pursued? The focus of this study on parliamentary electoral reform is motivated by the prevailing dissatisfaction with the current majoritarian approach of the elections, which follows the SNTV system. In this section we review some of the existing literature on electoral reforms in Afghanistan, highlighting some of the major quagmires faced by the electoral system, and specifically, the problematic implications of the SNTV system.

### Constitutional framework for elections

With regards to the parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, the Constitution does not prescribe a specific voting system. It leaves open the possibility of following a majoritarian, proportional, or mixed system. Nonetheless, the constitution defines general characteristics of what it considers as a general and fair electoral system. It declares that the number of delegates should be proportionate to the population of each constituency. Also by supporting a gender quota system, the constitution indirectly implies that the province is the unit for dividing the electoral constituencies. Article 83 of the Constitution states:

*Members of the House of People are elected by the people through free, general, secret, and direct elections. Their mandate ends on the 1st of Saratan of the fifth year after the elections, and the new assembly starts its work. The election of the members of the House of People shall be held within 30 to 60 days before the expiry of the term of the House of People. The number of the members of the House of People shall be proportionate to the population of each constituency, not exceeding the maximum of two hundred fifty individuals. Electoral constituency and other related issues shall be determined by election laws. Electoral constituency and other related issues shall be determined by election laws. The elections law shall adopt measures to attain, through the electorate system, general and fair*

*representation for all the people of the country, and proportionate to the population of every province, on average, at least two females shall be the elected members of the House of People from each province.*

Despite mandating the legislature to regulate the election law, the Constitution implicitly pre-determines some of the important components of the electoral system. Any significant changes to the electoral system that go beyond the broad contours outlined by the constitution or that affect the gender quota would require constitutional amendment.

Following one line of interpretation, the Constitution could be constructed as advocating majoritarian values as seats in the parliament are allocated “proportionate to the population of each constituency”. According to the current SNTV system, the top vote-takers in a given constituency gain seats in the parliament. Similarly, in single-seat constituencies following the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting systems, a single voter is chosen based on the greatest votes gained. The main thrust of a majoritarian interpretation of the Constitution is that “proportionate” should mean seats being selected directly proportionate to votes, whether through SNTV, FPTP or some other form of ‘majority’ voting system.<sup>21</sup> The majoritarian approach towards elections presents certain challenges for electoral representation in Afghanistan since it is based on the dichotomy of majority against minority, favoring an A or B approach rather than being open towards more consensual forms of decision-making. A majoritarian system makes it difficult for minority groups to be represented within the parliament.

A second line of interpretation would view the Constitution as advocating a proportional system of elections. One method of achieving a parliament that is “proportionate to the population of each constituency” is by

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Majority’ is in brackets here because under the SNTV system, winning candidates are very likely to possess significantly less than 50% of the vote (and the total percentage of their votes may even be in the single digits!). This troubling result is discussed more thoroughly in the next section: ‘Afghanistan’s Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) System’.

tallying the votes in a particular jurisdiction and then allocating these votes according to political parties, either open-list or closed-list. Such a system would also entail the presence of registered political parties, though also allowing for independent candidates to run for office. A proportional system does a better job in reflecting diverse views within a particular constituency since it favors the presence and participation of minority parties in the parliament. Critiques of the proportional system cite the phrasing of article 83 of the Constitution, which calls for “free, general, secret, and direct elections.”<sup>22</sup> A proportional voting system, as the argument goes, would lead to members being elected indirectly, thereby violating the Constitution. However, this critique is far from clear, as it turns on the interpretation of the term ‘direct’. Even in elections with party-lists – whether open or closed – the selection of winning candidates is directly traced to the vote-count. The choice of majoritarian or proportional system provides competing views on methods used for counting votes, though both fundamentally depend on those votes. These arrangements can be contrasted with votes that take place within the parliament where elected officials act as representatives of their constituents; the latter participate indirectly in the parliament through their representative(s). A second and more pragmatic critique of the proportional system targets the fledgling state of political parties in the country. Political parties are still taking shape throughout the country. In its initial period of operation in the 1960s and 70s, parliamentary elections were largely an individual affairs, which one author referred to as “parliamentary anarchy” since each official sought to speak the unique issues of their constituency.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, the term ‘political party’ came to be associated with the Soviet-influenced socialist parties and later on by the different mujahideen factions.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, many individuals to this day view political parties with suspicion. Further complicating this sentiment is the current arrangement of political affiliations, which remain deeply influenced by ethnic affiliation rather

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<sup>22</sup> Ahmadullah Archival, “Afghanistan’s Broken Electoral System” *Foreign Policy*, 11 November 2015. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Marvin Weinbaum, “Afghanistan: Nonparty Parliamentary Democracy” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 7 (Oct 1972: 5-24).

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Reynolds and John Carey, “Fixing Afghanistan’s Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform”, *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, July 2012, p. 6.

than political objectives that cut across a wide cross-section of society. Thus, for many, a greater role of political parties within the parliament would be viewed more as a liability than a means of strengthening its operation.

### **Afghanistan's Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) System**

Afghanistan currently hosts a single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) system. The SNTV system follows the motto of "one person, one vote",<sup>25</sup> where each individual is entitled to vote for one winning candidate. A constituency is allocated a number of seats, and multiple candidates run for the various seats available, with the winning candidates being those who received the most votes. In Afghanistan, the voting constituency is the province. While individuals cast a single vote, they will inevitably have several officials who represent them in parliament, since elected representatives are accountable to their entire constituency, which is their province. The number of votes required for a candidate to win will depend both on the number of seats required and the number of candidates vying for position in the parliament. As the number of candidates increases, the likelihood of vote-splitting also increases, and thus candidates may be able to secure a seat with a fewer number of overall votes. Thus, the winning candidates almost certainly will receive less than half of the popular votes, and when votes are split amongst many candidates, then it becomes increasingly likely that a large portion of voters end up voting for losing candidates.

Since it was proposed, many scholars, observers, and practitioners have pointed out the shortcomings of the system, suggesting the system causes difficulties in holding fair and transparent elections.<sup>26</sup> Despite these warnings, the SNTV system has been used in two consecutive rounds of parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2010, both marked as fraudulent.

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<sup>25</sup> Nafay Choudhury, "Afghan Parliamentary Elections".

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds and Carey, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System".

The elections law prescribes an SNTV system for parliamentary elections,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that, “in every province the seats including the Kuchi seats are awarded to the candidates who have garnered the most valid votes.”<sup>28</sup> According to the elections law, 239 seats (out of 250) of the parliament are being allocated proportional to the population of each province. A further 10 seats are allocated to Nomads, and 1 seat is allocated to members of the Hindu and Sikh community.<sup>29</sup> Anyone eligible to register himself/herself as a candidate may run for a parliamentary seat. Thus, the system strongly encourages the participation of independent candidates, particularly those with a localized backing of firm supporters. The seats are allocated in proportion to the population of each province with at least 2 seats in each province. A glimpse at Afghanistan’s previous elections can provide one an understanding of the proliferation of candidates. Kabul, which has 33 seats available in the parliament, saw 400 candidates vying for these seats in the 2005 elections and 660 in 2010.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the electoral system also allocates 68 of the seats in the parliament to women to encourage their political participation.<sup>31</sup> Female candidates thus do not run against their male counterparts but rather vie against other female candidates for the seats allocated to women.

### Altering constituency boundaries

During the past two rounds of parliamentary elections (in 2005 and 2010), the province served as the electoral constituency. Based on this formula, several MPs concurrently represented the entire province, rather than having individual MPs representing specific regions. In the revised version of the election law (2016),<sup>32</sup> the option of dividing the electoral constituencies into smaller divisions is being considered. Article 35 of the current electoral law suggests that “For the purpose of determining electoral constituencies, and dividing them into smaller constituencies, the Commission shall determine the Wolesi Jirga and Provincial Councils electoral constituencies in a manner, in which the provisions of clauses (4

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<sup>27</sup> This voting system is defined through article 6, 50 and 52 of the Election Law.

<sup>28</sup> Article 50 and 52 of the Election Law.

<sup>29</sup> Article 48 of the Election Law.

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds and Carey, “Fixing Afghanistan’s Electoral System”, p.4

<sup>31</sup> According to article 51 of the Election Law

<sup>32</sup> Afghanistan’s elections law, Official Gazette, 2016, Issue Number (1226)

and 6) of the article 83 of the constitution are observed.”<sup>33</sup> Though the proposal for dividing the electoral constituencies into smaller units may serve the purpose of holding MPs more accountable, it nonetheless leaves a number of questions unanswered. The elections law does not stipulate whether elections will follow the SNTV system, FPTP system, or some variation of a proportional system. If smaller constituencies retained the SNTV system, meaning that several MPs continued to represent a particular constituency, then the accountability of MPs may remain limited.

Another unclear issue relates to residency. Article 39 of the elections law only asserts that “a person who runs for or is appointed as a member of the National Assembly, besides meeting the requirements for voters...Shall be an Afghan citizen or shall have obtained the citizenship of the State of Afghanistan at least 10 years before the day of candidacy or appointment.” This article implies that whoever holds a level of political support in a particular area can run for parliamentary seats anytime, anywhere. Clientelism and ethnic politics are some of the problems that may endure under this formula.

### Illusion and disillusion of the SNTV system

A key criticism of the SNTV system adopted by Afghanistan is that it leads to a weak and fragmented parliament. In his article entitled “The Curious Case of Afghanistan” Andrew Reynolds stresses that the choice of the SNTV system was not based on adequate understanding of the system but rather was chosen out of negligence and misunderstanding. According to him, the initial proposal put forward was a closed-list PR system, but as it was not presented properly, it was dropped in favor of the SNTV. “Afghanistan ended up with SNTV not as a result of extensive deliberation and careful evaluation of its pros and cons, but rather by a fairly random

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<sup>33</sup> According to clauses 4 and 6 of Article 83 “The number of the members of the House of People shall be proportionate to the population of each constituency, not exceeding the maximum of two hundred fifty individuals. (4) The elections law shall adopt measures to attain, through the electorate system, general and fair representation for all the people of the country, and proportionate to the population of every province, on average, at least two females shall be the elected members of the House of People from each province (6).

process of elimination.”<sup>34</sup> Others, more cynically, contend that the US pushed the SNTV system because they preferred a weak legislature that would not challenge the executive.<sup>35</sup>

Reynolds warns about the inadequateness of the system by stating that, “SNTV’s undesirable consequences include a high disproportionality between votes and seats, a tendency to exclude minority parties, increased clientelism and corruption and the fragmentation of the ruling party.”<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Barnett Rubin writes that the system:

*virtually guarantees the formation of an unrepresentative parliament of local leaders with no incentive to cooperate with one another or the government. It places a premium on vote buying and intimidation, since swinging even a small number of votes can easily affect the outcome. Well-organized parties that can propose a limited number of candidates and discipline voters to spread their votes among them can win a disproportionate share of seats. 37*

The results of the 2005 elections provide a blaring example of the peculiarities of the SNTV system. In his analysis of this election, Thomas Johnson found the following:

*Kabul is the most populous province in the country with over a three million people. However, 1,193,472 registered voters cast only 399,810 valid votes (35 per cent). As presented in Table 4, Mohaqeq received the highest percentage of votes*

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Reynolds, “The Curious Case of Afghanistan”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 2006, pp. 104-117.

<sup>35</sup> Based on conversation with US officials who were involved in proposing the SNTV system for Afghanistan.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Reynolds, “The Curious Case of Afghanistan”.

<sup>37</sup> Barnett Rubin, “Afghanistan: The Wrong Voting System” *New York Times* (16 March 2005) Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/16/opinion/afghanistan-the-wrong-voting-system.html>

*of any candidate in Kabul—13.2 percent. Qanooni and Dost were the next two largest voting percentages, with 7.8 and 7.7 per cent, respectively. The other 30 winning candidates received from 2.5 to 0.4 percent of the vote. That 30 of the 33 representatives elected to the parliament from the country's capital individually received less than 3 per cent of their constituents' votes is amazing. Of the Kabuli electorate, 46 per cent voted for losing candidates, which would not be surprising if only two or three candidates were running; but for Kabul representation in the legislature there were 387 candidates. The aggregate nationwide votes collected by all Wolesi Jirga winners represented only 35.8 per cent of the total vote. Put another way, 64.2 per cent of the Afghan voters supported losing candidates.*

The significant findings of Johnson's research is that the SNTV system creates a very weak sense of democratic representation. With the majority of voters voting for losing candidates (in the case of Kabul), elected officials cannot be truly viewed as widely representative of their constituents. A great number of officials were elected with a very small proportion of the vote, as evidenced by the 30 out of 33 seats from Kabul that received less than 3% of the vote. The SNTV system furthermore creates a paradox in that as more candidates run for positions, the number of votes likely required for winning a seat decreases because of vote splitting. In turn, the potential to reap great benefits from ethnic voting, voter intimidation, vote buying, and fraud also increases, resulting in an overall election fraught with problems. As evidence of such fraudulent behavior, 3 provinces had a voter turnout greater than 100% in the 2005 elections.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The provinces were Nuristan, Paktika, and Panjshir. Other provinces showed unusually high turnout as well. See Thomas Johnson, "Afghanistan's post-Taliban transition: The state of state-building after war" Central Asian Survey (March–June 2006) 25(1–2), 1–26, p. 17-8.

The SNTV system, while seemingly simple and straightforward, thus creates highly peculiar – and problematic from the stance of representation – results. Johnson argues that, “The goal of any electoral process should be to ensure that a representative government can be formed, but in the case of Afghanistan, the SNTV is significantly hampering the development of representative institutions... the SNTV system clearly distorts multi-seat constituencies.” The SNTV system creates a lopsided result, which favors more highly concentrated areas over rural and disbursed regions: “On the surface, basing the number of seats on population might seem logical but the smaller population districts run the risk of not being represented or at least underrepresented. This results in an imbalance in the level of representation between urban and rural areas.”

### Poor support for underrepresented group

The parliament is a multi-member institution tasked with making decisions on behalf of citizens. For discussion and decisions to take into account a diverse and wide array of views, representatives in the parliament should reflect on the diversity of Afghan society. However, Afghanistan’s majoritarian approach towards elections, namely through the use of the SNTV system, does not clearly work in favor of all the stakeholders. Candidates with large patronage networks have a greater likelihood of success. Ethnic voting is encouraged based on the notion that the more one’s ethnicity is represented in the parliament, the more one’s voice will be heard.<sup>39</sup> Groups that have small or dispersed populations may be unsuccessful in being able to put forward their own candidate, thus limiting their representation in the parliament.

### Discouraging political parties

Under the SNTV system, candidates run as individuals not as parties or blocks. Individual voters cast their votes in favor of individual candidates rather than political parties or blocks. While this platform is praised for being friendly to independent candidates, critics mention how it prevents

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas H. Johnson “The Illusion of Afghanistan’s Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Elections”, *Journal of Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2018, Vol 29, Issue 1.

political parties from using their monitoring and mobilizing features during the elections and within the parliament. In systems with political parties, electoral victory is very much dependent on the strategic planning of the political parties to get the best out of the overall trend in the Election Day.<sup>40</sup> However, under the SNTV system, political parties have few options at their disposal to monitor their candidates as they have less incentives to be organized systematically. In many cases candidates while being supported by certain political parties, chose not to stick with their party's agenda as they rather preferred to use their personal networks to get through the election process.<sup>41</sup>

The SNTV works strongly against the presence of political parties. Andrew Reynolds and John Carey sharply criticize the SNTV system, stating that:

*No other electoral system used to select national parliaments presents such great obstacles to the development of parties, or to their ability to turn support among voters into representation. Except for SNTV, almost every other method of electing representatives from multi-member constituencies allows groups of candidates to pool their votes together so that support for one helps the group as a whole. This is true for list proportional representation (list PR) systems (used in most democratic countries), for transferable vote systems (for example, Australia and Ireland), and for bloc vote systems that allow voters to cast votes for multiple candidates (as in many Arab nations).<sup>42</sup>*

Under the SNTV system, political parties are constrained by various tactical considerations while campaigning for electoral victories. In a given

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<sup>40</sup> "Political Parties in Afghanistan, A Review of the State of Political Parties After the 2009 and 2010 Elections" National Democratic Institute, 2011

<sup>41</sup> Oliver Lough, "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections" 2012, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

<sup>42</sup> Reynolds and Carey, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System".

constituency, since several positions are available, a political party may encourage several candidates to run for elections; however, these candidates have no reason to work together but rather would be inclined to usurp each other's votes to secure their own victory. Furthermore, if a political party decides to run too many of their candidates, it risks splitting its votes and losing the elections, with the winning seats going to those candidates that have not suffered vote-splitting, even if the political party has widespread support in the constituency. Political parties thus face an impossible balancing act under the SNTV system, thereby preventing their development within the political system. Consequently, the parliament is largely divided and lacks a sense of overall cohesion, with individuals pursuing their own individual objectives or – on occasion – that of their constituencies.

## Political Parties and Renewed Push for Electoral Reform

In the latest efforts for changing the current electoral system, on 24 February 2018, leaders and representatives of some 21 influential (Jihadi) political parties and groups convened a conference in Kabul calling for the current SNTV parliamentary voting system to be transformed into a proportional representation system. They declared that as political parties, they have the right to promote the role of their parties in parliamentary elections. Major political parties including the Jamiat-e Islami, Hezb-e Islami, Wahdat-e Islami, Jonbish- e Milli Islami, Harakat-e Islami, Mahaz-e Milli Islami, and Afghan Millat “called in particular for parties to be allowed to field party-based candidates lists and votes cast for these lists being transferable in each constituency in order to “prevent wastage of people’s votes.”<sup>43</sup>

In their statement, the group also raised a number of other demands, including the establishment of a monitoring room for political parties within the Independent Election Commission (IEC) that would allow

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<sup>43</sup> Ali Yawar Adili, “Afghanistan Election Conundrum (5): A late demand to change the electoral system”, Afghanistan Analyst Network <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistan-election-conundrum-5-a-late-demand-to-change-the-electoral-system/8> March 2018, accessed on 21 April 2018

political parties to monitor the elections process alongside IEC officials. Though the IEC appreciated the demands of political parties in principle, with regards to changing the electoral system, IEC officials said that such reforms would not be possible as they could delay the conduct of the upcoming elections.

Once again on June 12, 2018, representatives from 35 political parties renewed the push for changing the electoral system calling upon the government and the Independent Election Commission to reform the electoral system before the upcoming parliamentary elections. Representatives of political parties called for reforming the current SNTV into a multi-dimensional representing system.<sup>44</sup> They emphasized that all stakeholders including the national figures, political parties, and movements and the electorate, as a whole would benefit from a reformed system. The protesting political parties threatened that if their demands and recommendations are not taken seriously, they would boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections. They also warned that fake ID cards may be utilized to manipulate the elections in favor of certain candidates.

The latest push to strengthen the role of political parties in the electoral system is based on a proposal put forward by the government through the Special Electoral Reform Commission (SERC) in 2015. In December 2015, the SERC suggested shifting from SNTV to a mixed-proportional representation voting.<sup>45</sup> However, due to widespread disagreements among the various political stakeholders and bureaucratic problems,<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Under the MDR system, in theory, there could be four categories of candidates: 1) independent individuals; 2) list of ad hoc alliance of individuals; 3) list of party candidates and; 4) list of a coalition of parties. The list would be open and voters would still vote for individuals, but the determination of the winners would be done in two steps – first counting how many seats the best-performing lists had earned and then awarding seats to the individuals on these lists with the most votes.

Please see: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistan-election-conundrum-5-a-late-demand-to-change-the-electoral-system>, accessed on April 30, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Ahmadullah Archiwal “Afganistan’s Broken Electoral System”, Foreign Policy, November 11, 2015, Online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/11/afghanistans-broken-electoral-system/>, accessed on April 22, 2018

<sup>46</sup> According to the Constitution, the parliament cannot amend the electoral law in its last working year. Apparently, since the expiry of the original five-year term of the current

these reforms have yet to be adopted within the current electoral system.<sup>47</sup>

The Independent Election Commission has set October 20, 2018 as the date for legislative and district council elections. The IEC authorities emphasized that, “the vote could go ahead this year despite the difficulties in areas controlled by the Taliban”.<sup>48</sup> President Ashraf Ghani also has vowed to hold the parliamentary elections before the presidential elections scheduled for next year. Previously “the polls have been repeatedly pushed back due to security fears and logistical challenges”.<sup>49</sup>

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parliament (ie 2015), the government counted every passing year as the “last working year” of its legislative term.

<sup>47</sup> According to the NUG political agreement - signed in 2014, the NUG was obliged to reform the electoral system before the supposedly 2015 parliamentary elections.

<sup>48</sup> “Afghanistan pledges October date for parliamentary election”, Reuters News, April 1, 2018. Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-election/afghanistan-pledges-october-date-for-parliamentary-election-idUSKCN1H810L>

<sup>49</sup> “Afghanistan Sets October Date for Parliamentary Elections” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (RFERL), April 1, 2018. Online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-parliamentary-elections-october-taliban-security/29138221.html>. Some main concerns and challenges regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections are being discussed in the report.

## Methodology

To reconceptualize the parliamentary electoral system in Afghanistan, one needs to know the characteristics and sentiments of the current system in place. It becomes necessary to refine our understanding of the electoral system by reexamining the experiences of the electorates on the ground. The existing literature highlights some of the disturbing problems of the parliamentary elections in Afghanistan including the shortcoming of the SNTV, but it falls short of providing information on the experiences of individual voters in those elections.

Based on a literature review and initial research, the research team decided that ordinary voters and the candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections are the two main stakeholders of the electoral reform. Therefore, the survey is conducted within the framework of mixed methods research (qualitative and quantitative methods) in two phases. Accordingly, a quantitative questionnaire and question-guide were designed to assess the stakeholders' opinions about parliamentary politics in the country and the alternative narratives for changing the electoral system. The questionnaire was generally built upon the following themes:

- 1- General assessment of the previous parliamentary elections,
- 2- General perception of the electorates about the function of parliament and responsibilities of the MPs,
- 3- The alternative voting choices,
- 4- The status of electoral districts,
- 5- The status of political parties in parliamentary politics,
- 6- The role of women in parliamentary elections, and
- 7- Attitudes towards various decision-making procedures<sup>50</sup>

The study covers the perspective of 1305 individuals spread across 13 provinces, making it the largest and most comprehensive study on Afghan elections to date.

With regards to sampling, due to the lack of census on the size of Afghanistan's population, we determined the size of our sampling based

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<sup>50</sup> The survey questionnaire is available in Annex 2.

on our organizational capacity; therefore 1287 individuals across the seven provinces of Kabul, Herat, Qandahar, Balkh, Bamiyan, Gazni, and Jawzjan have been surveyed. In Kabul province, about 400 individuals have been surveyed and in other provinces, 150 individuals were interviewed respectively. Female and male respondents were interviewed in equal numbers. Both female and male professional interviewers from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds were involved in the fieldwork to ensure the cultural connectedness with the respondents across various regions. The survey was conducted both in urban and rural areas through random sampling across various demographic stratifications including age, sex, income, ethnicity, educational background, marital status, and employment status. As ethnicity plays an important role in the politics of Afghanistan, we strived to divide the entire sample equally among the four major ethnic groups, namely Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, and Hazaras. However, some 100 individuals have been approached completely randomly regardless of our categorization of ethnic groupings. Furthermore, security concerns impacted the fieldwork in rural areas, therefore we conducted the survey in more secure areas. The surveys were carried out from January to April 2018.

In the qualitative part of the survey, 18 parliamentary candidates across six provinces of Badakhshan, Faryab, Farah, Paktia, Daykondi, and Nimroz were approached for in-depth interviews. In each province 3 individuals were interviewed. At least one female candidate was interviewed in each province. These interviews took place between April and June 2018. The candidates were approached randomly across different communities making sure that both experienced and inexperienced candidates had a chance to express their electoral perspectives. The field researchers also tried to conduct interviews with various types of candidates including independent candidates, candidates of political parties, and candidates affiliated with civil society organizations. The comments gleaned from qualitative interviews helped to provide greater context to some of the quantitative findings of this study and in some ways provides a counter-balance to the opinions of voters. Any reference to 'informants' in this research refers to parliamentary candidates, while 'respondents' refers to individual voters.

## Demographic Dynamics

<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male
	49.6%	50%

Table 2: Percentage participants according to gender

<b>Residency</b>	Rural	Urban
	26.65%	73.35%

Table 3: Percentage participants according to residency

<b>Provincial Breakdown</b>						
Kabul	Ghazni	Jawzjan	Kanadahar	Herat	Mazar	Bamian
30.1%	11.7%	11.7%	11.7%	11.7%	11.7%	11.7%

Table 4: Percentage participants according to province

<b>Ethnicity</b>					
Tajik	Pashtun	Hazara	Uzbek	Mixed	Other
26.9%	27.3%	26.8%	16.1%	0.8%	2.2%

Table 5: Percentage participants according to ethnicity

<b>Age Group</b>			
18-30 years	31-45 years	46-60 years	61 and above
62.4%	24.4%	10.8%	2.4%

Table 6: percentage participants according to age

<b>Education Level</b>						
Illiterate	Primary school	Secondary school	High school	Bachelor's degree	Higher degrees	Religious education
18.7%	8.9%	8.8%	23.7%	34.3%	4.2%	1.5%

Table 7: percentage participants according to education

<b>Occupation</b>					
Unemployed	University student	Housewife	Private sector	Government sector	other
20.7%	14.5%	10.9%	33.8%	17.5%	2.5%

Table 8: percentage participants according to occupation

<b>Income Level (Afghani)</b>	
Above 100000	0.9%
71,000-100,000	1.5%
41,000-70,000	7.3%
21,000-40,000	13.3%
11,000-20,000	33.2%
1-10,000	43.9%

*Table 9: percentage participants according to income*

### **Data on Qualitative Interviews**

<b>Provinces</b>	<b>Total number of parliamentary candidates interviewed</b>	<b>Number of females interviewed</b>
Farah	3	1
Nimroz	3	1
Daikondi	3	1
Faryab	3	1
Badakshan	3	1
Paktia	3	1

*Table 10: number of participants to the qualitative interviews*

### **Limitations of the Study**

A few disclaimers are warranted regarding the demographics of the survey. While every effort was made to get views from a wide spectrum of individuals, this study also faced certain limitations. First, insecurity in certain areas of the country, particularly rural areas, made it impossible to conduct surveys in those regions. As a result, the percentage of individuals surveyed was approximately three-quarters from urban areas and one-quarter from rural areas. This figure represents a sizeable rural population (343 individuals); still, even more surveys from remote regions would have been desirable given the large number of citizens that live outside of urban areas. Second, categories of ethnicity, occupation, and education level, while diversely spread, do not represent the demographics of the nation. The challenges and contingencies that arise in conducting surveys in a conflict-ridden society make it difficult for the survey to perfectly match

the demographics of the total population. Thus, the next best option was to ensure a wide representation of voters were covered by this survey. Furthermore, the survey findings are disaggregated according to the different categories whenever relevant to show the details of the survey findings.

Overall, this survey represents the largest and most systematic study to date on Afghan parliamentary elections, covering detailed information on voter experience, preferences, hesitations, and desires for reform. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the findings of the survey through a framework for elections reforms.

## Findings of the Electoral Reform Survey

### I. Identification of the parliamentary elections

Though the preparation for holding the next round of parliamentary elections is under way, when asked “what type of elections first comes to your mind”, most respondents (72%) said that when talking about elections, they would think of presidential elections. By comparison, only 19% of the respondents cited parliamentary elections. Some 3% of the respondents cited provincial council elections and 1% of the respondents said that when talking about elections, nothing comes to their mind at all (Figure 1).

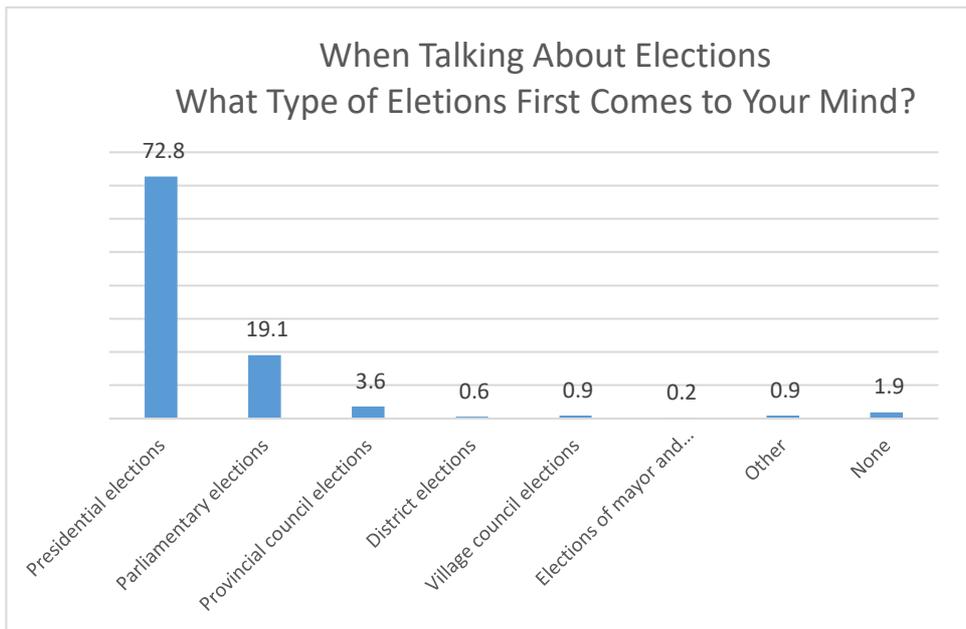


Figure 1: Voters and type of elections

This trend is consistent with the answers given to the question on the most important type of elections. Most respondents (76%) said that they consider “presidential elections” as the most important type of elections, while 17% of the respondents think of “parliamentary elections” as the

most important type of elections. Only 1% of the respondents cited “provincial council elections” and 1% of them cited “village council elections”, as the most important type of elections. Meanwhile, 1% of respondents said that they did not think any type of elections are important. One respondent commented on the issue by saying “given the fact that nobody cares about serving the people, I don’t care about any kind of elections” (Figure 2)

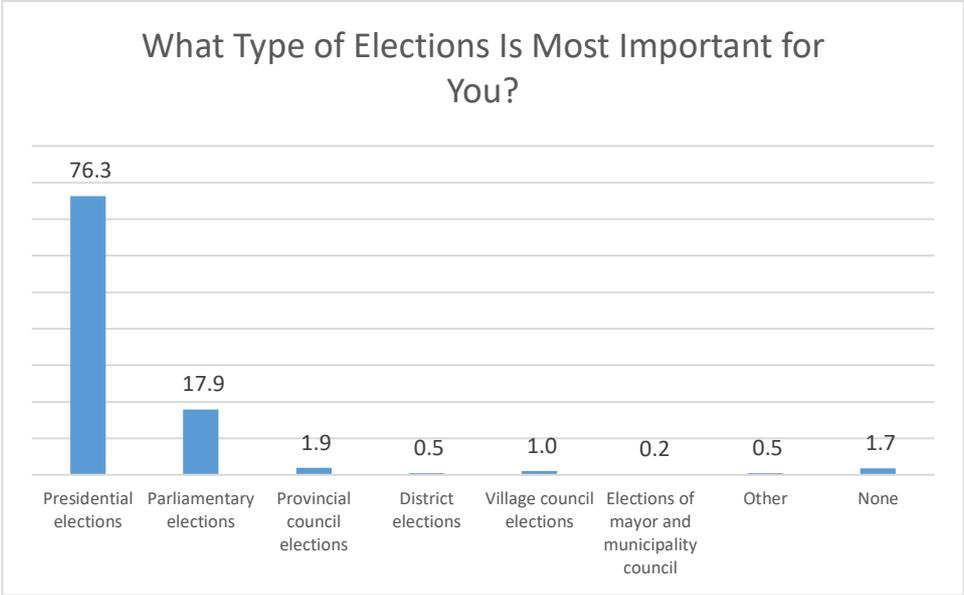


Figure 2: The most important type of elections

Looking at the differences amongst ethnicity, more Pashtun respondents’ (28%) than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds said that parliamentary elections are the most important type of elections. In comparison, 16% of Uzbek respondents, 14% of Tajik respondents, and 13% of Hazara respondents considered the parliamentary elections as the most important type of elections (Figure 3).

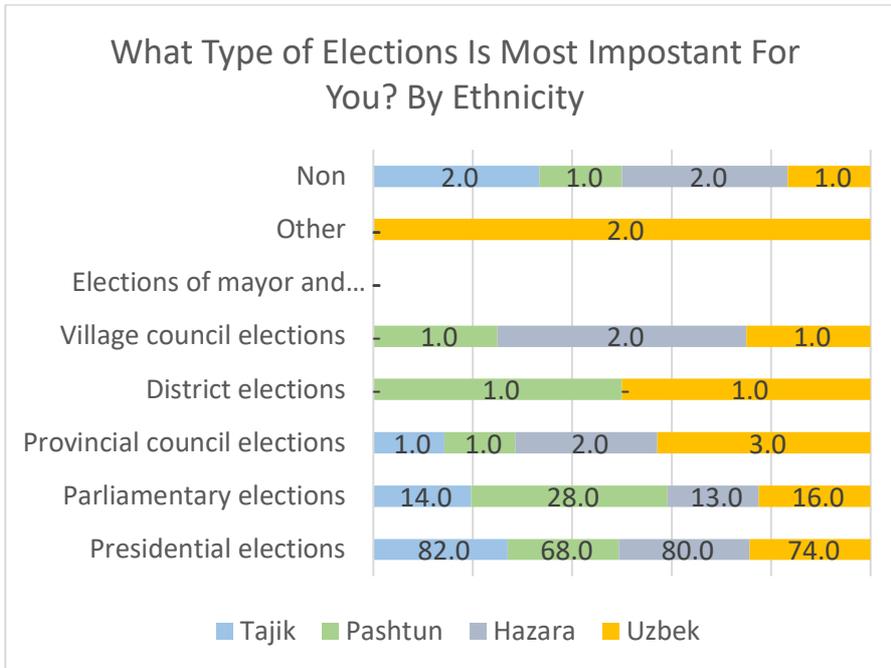


Figure 3: The important type of elections, by Ethnicity

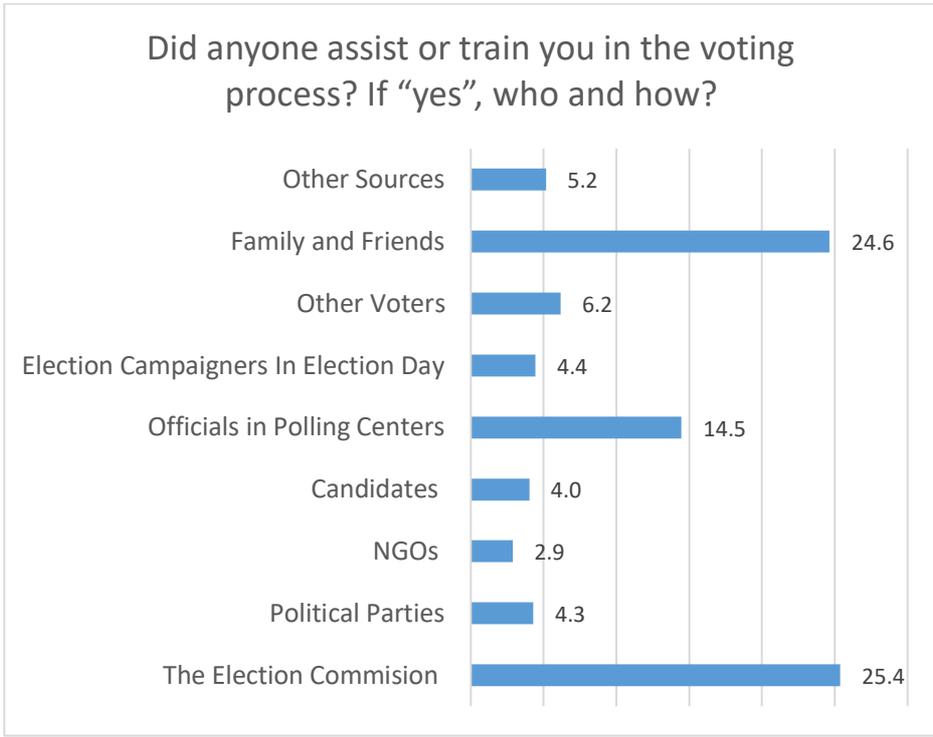
Relatively more respondents (54%) from Kandahar province than respondents from other provinces cited parliamentary elections as the most important type of elections. This could be compared across the provinces including Kabul (13%), Ghazni (10%), Jawzjan (20%), Herat (6%), Mazar (12%), Bamiyan (15%). More female (22%) than male (13%) respondents think of parliamentary elections as the most important type of elections. Opinions of urban and rural respondents do not significantly differ.<sup>51</sup>

### Training on Voting

About 37% of respondents reported that they have been trained or helped through the voting process either before or on Election Day, while 40% of the respondents said that they did not receive assistance. It was asked

<sup>51</sup> The difficulty in interpreting the findings of 'urban' vs. 'rural' respondents in this study is detailed in the section on "Rural and Urban Participation" below.

from the respondents which agency trained or helped them through the voting process, if any. Most of the respondents (25%) said that before Election Day, they learned how to vote in workshops held by “the Election Commission”. About 4% of the respondents reported that before Election Day they learned how to vote in workshops held by a “political party”, and another 4% of the respondents said that before Election Day they learned how to vote in meetings held by their favored “candidates”. Some 2% of the respondents said that before Election Day they learned how to vote in “workshops held by some NGO”, while 24% of the respondents said that they learned how to vote from “family members and friends”. Meanwhile, 14% of the respondents said that on Election Day “an official in the polling center” helped them out with the voting”. Some 6% of the respondents said that on Election Day they had been helped with the voting by some other voter”. Another 4% of the respondents reported that on Election Day, “some elections campaigners affiliated with their preferred candidates”, helped them out with the voting procedure. “About 5% of the respondents referred to other sources such as television (Figure 4). This data indicates that a large number of voters lack knowledge of the voting process and thus turn to others – some of whom have clear conflicts of interest – when casting their vote.



*Figure 4: Agencies Who Helped or trained the Electorate with the Voting*

As one can observe, the Election Commission has apparently done a relatively good job in training people on how to vote in parliamentary elections. In comparison, other official agencies including political parties have not been so active in the process of electoral training. A considerable portion of the respondents have gone through their personal network (family and friends) to learn about the voting process. The data shows that ignorant voters have been susceptible to potentially illegal manipulation of their vote by interfering forces (such as the election campaigners, other voters, and officials in polling centers) during Election Day.

### **The level of enthusiasm for parliamentary elections**

In the survey, 62% of respondents reported that they voted in previous parliamentary elections, while about 37% of the respondents had not. In comparison to Tajik (62%), Pashtun (53%), and Uzbek (62%) respondents,

more Hazara respondents (69%) said that they have voted in parliamentary elections. By province, more respondents in Bamiyan (82%) than respondents in any other provinces reported voting in parliamentary elections (figure 5).

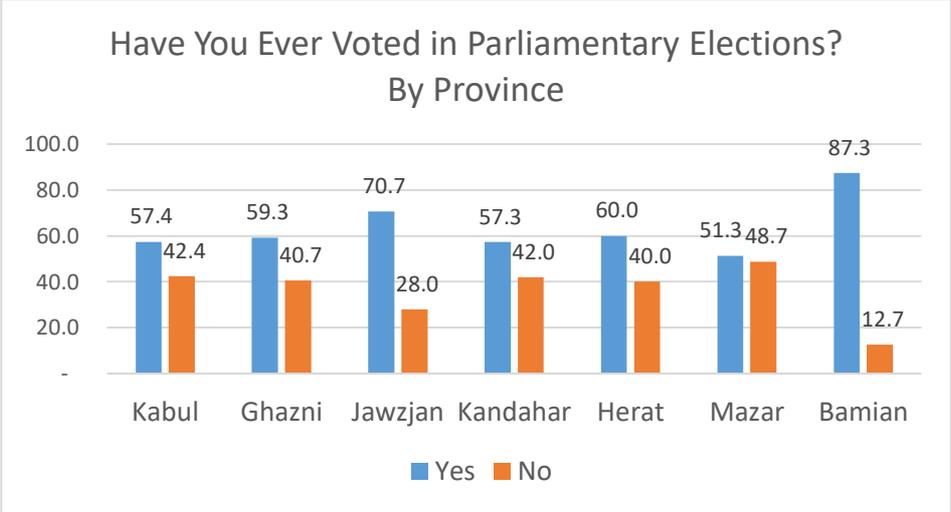
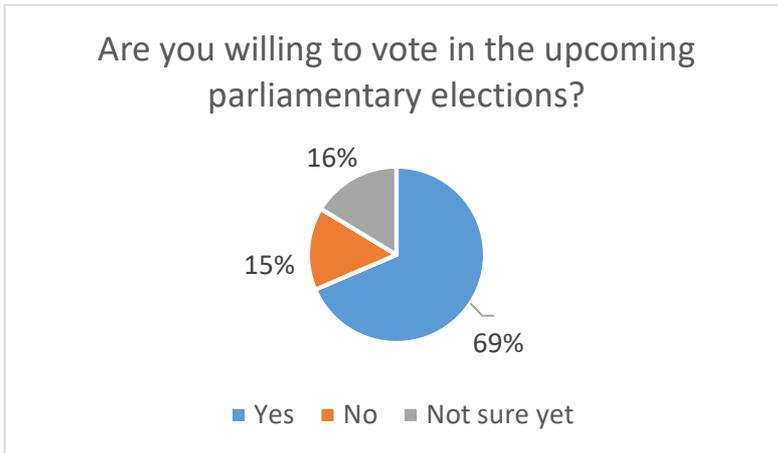


Figure 5: Voting in Parliamentary Election, by Province

The higher rate of participation in parliamentary elections reported in Bamiyan province is partly attributable to the relevant secure environment of the province. It also has a correlation with the fact that Bamiyan is home to a considerable portion of Hazara respondents (interviewed in this survey) who reported the highest rate of participation in parliamentary elections among the various ethnic communities.

Most of the respondents (68%) said that they were willing to participate and vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections, while 15% of the respondents, said that they would not participate in the next round of parliamentary elections. Meanwhile some 16% of the respondents said that they are not sure yet (Figure 6).



*Figure 6: Willing To Vote in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections*

While more Pashtun respondents than those from other ethnic backgrounds referred to parliamentary elections as the most important type of elections, fewer Pashtun respondents (62%) than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds said that they were willing to participate and vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. More Hazara respondents than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds declared that they had the intention to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections (Figure 7).

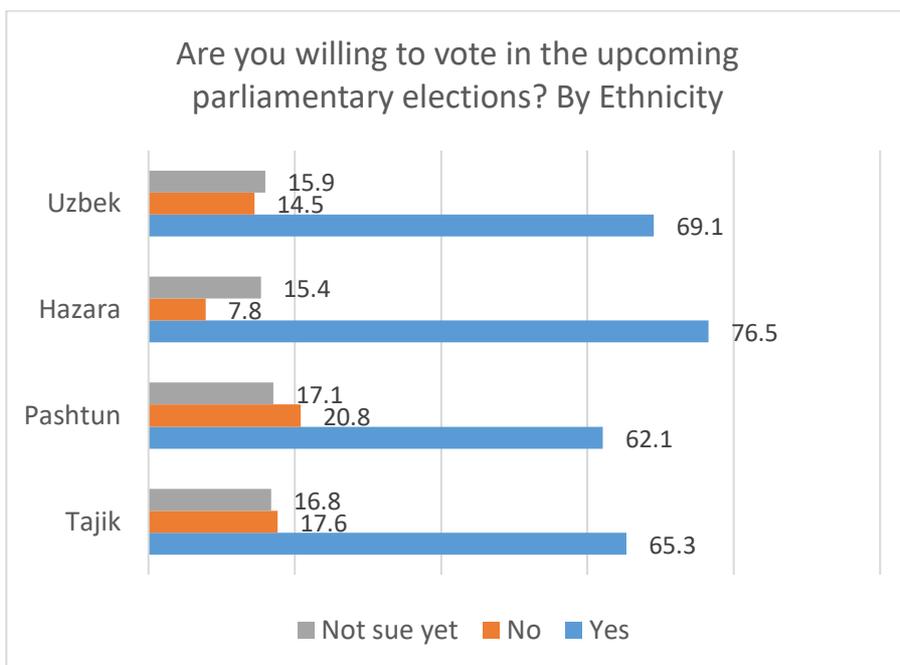


Figure 7: Willing to Vote in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections? By Ethnicity

The existing level of interest amongst different ethnic communities in participating in the upcoming parliamentary elections may be attributed to several factors, including the cultural mindset, the security situation, and the electoral literacy in various constituencies.

When asked about the role of elections in the running of the country, key respondents expressed the important role they have in the proper functioning of the government. One respondent commented, “The election of MPs by the people have many positive aspects; those who are elected by people, know the people’s problems and pains best. Parliamentary elections help to resolve the intermingling problems within a nation-state.”<sup>52</sup> Another stated, “Elections in general are a positive phenomenon, regardless of their scope and quality. It is a moral obligation to participate in elections. Elections are needed in order for people to be able to elect their leaders and determine their laws.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Joma Khan Naser, independent candidate from Nimroz province

<sup>53</sup> Abdullatif Pedram, political party candidate from Badakhshan province

Nonetheless, respondents also expressed reservations about the current elections system. The low level of literacy among the parliamentary candidates, the lack of political knowledge among the electorate, and poverty are some other major disrupting factors that could adversely affect the entire process. “Two causing factors bring the elections process into a deadlock: poverty and insecurity. Because of poverty, the voting process gets corrupted through trading votes with money. On the other hand, warlords and powerful people threaten the process through intimidation and terror.”<sup>54</sup> Corruption is widely perceived as existing within the elections process. “The widespread fraud and cheating is the most important challenge of the parliamentary elections. Unfortunately trading the votes in elections is a widespread phenomenon. People can vote several times and nobody cares about it. The government can stop this, but it won’t.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Farhad Isar, independent candidate from Faryab province

<sup>55</sup> Gul Ahmad Farahi, independent candidate from Farah province

## Male and female participation

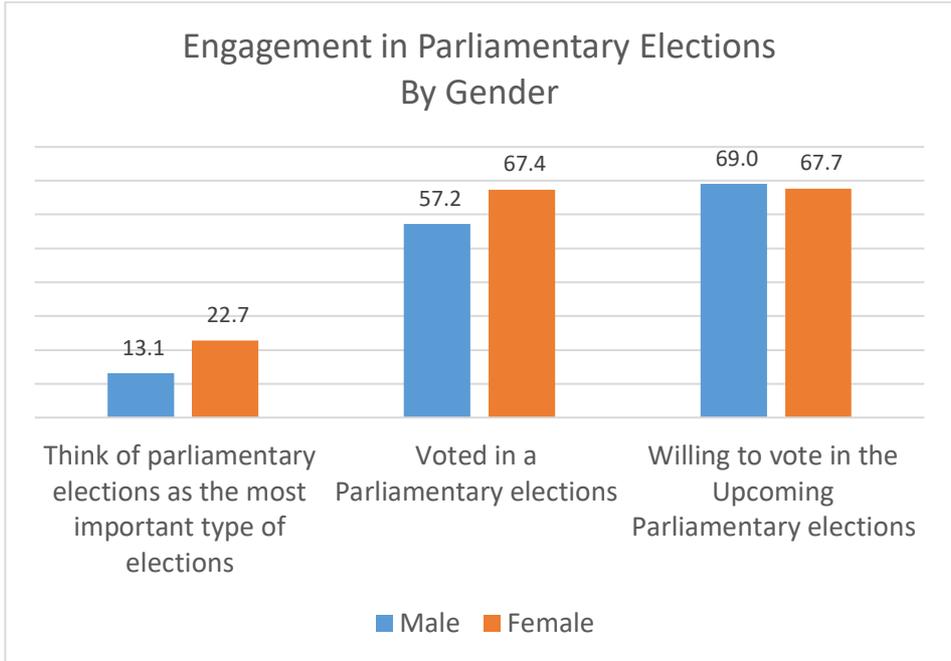


Figure 8: By Gender

The data shows that female respondents are progressively engaged in parliamentary elections, surpassing the male respondents in certain aspects (Figure 8). It will be shown later in the report that females' engagement in parliamentary elections is supported by most of the male respondents too. (Figures 33 and 34)

## Rural and urban participation

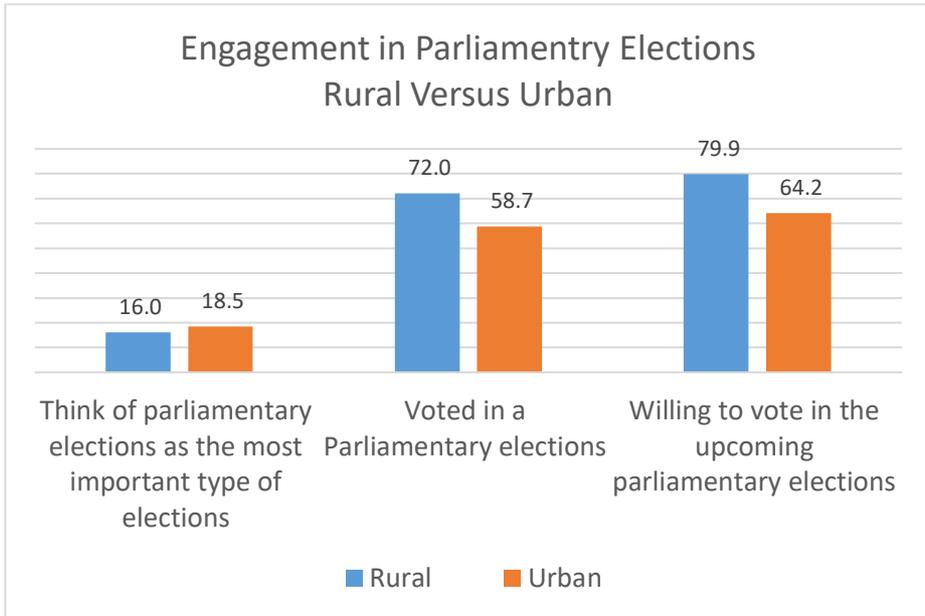


Figure 9: By Residency

Surprisingly, more rural (72%) than urban (58%) respondents and more female (67%) than male (57%) respondents reported having voted in parliamentary elections. This surprising finding may have a number of explanations. First, as mentioned below in fig 17, more women than men mention knowing their platform of their candidate, thus providing them greater motivation for voting. Second, in rural areas, group actions are viewed more strongly, and thus when community leaders mobilize voting, they would likely be more successful in getting their community members to vote. Nonetheless, it may be alternately argued that these findings on urban and rural voting patterns may be misleading. As mentioned in the methodology section, the rural areas surveyed were in safer regions; however, no such limitations existed in surveys of urban areas. Individuals from safer rural areas have a particular impetus to vote as they would be aware that insecure regions in their locale would have very few voters going to the polls, and thus candidates from insecure areas would not pose a serious competition. Future research may help to more closely identify the motivations of voters leading to this surprising voting pattern.

## II. Accountability and representation

### The level of satisfaction with the performances of MPs

Most respondents who voted in a parliamentary election reported “dissatisfaction” with the performance of their MPs. A mere 9% of the total respondents said that they were “satisfied” and 15% of the respondents said that they are “somewhat satisfied”. The same category of the respondents were asked if they ever benefited from the efforts of one of their MPs. About half of the respondents (47%) said that they have not benefited from the efforts of their parliamentary representatives. A small portion of the respondents (6%) said that they have benefited from the efforts of their MPs, and 10% of respondents said that they have “somewhat benefited” (Figure 10).

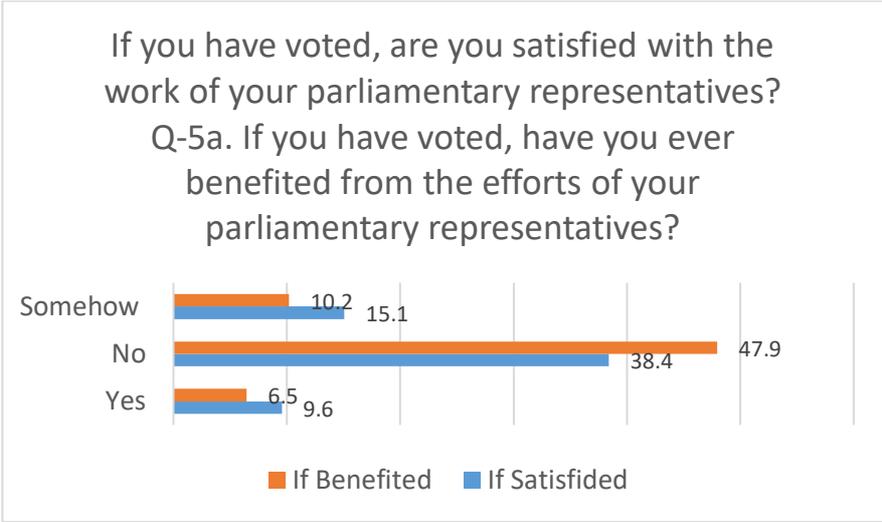


Figure 10: Satisfied and Benefited (for those who voted)

This trend is consistent with the answers given to the same sets of questions by those respondents who have not voted in parliamentary elections. Most of those respondents who have not voted in parliamentary elections (32%) emphasized that they are not satisfied with the performances of the MPs, and some 33% reported that they have not benefited from the efforts of the MPs. Only 5% of this group of respondents said that they are satisfied with the performances of the MPs

and 3% of them said that they have benefited from the efforts of the MPs. Some 11% of this category of the respondents said that they are “somewhat satisfied” and 6% of them said that they have “somewhat benefited” from the efforts of the MPs (Figure 11).

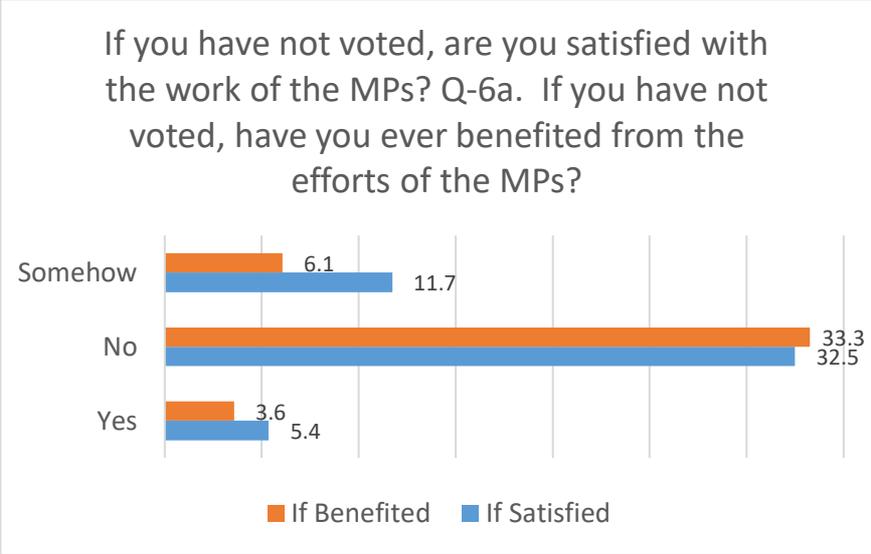


Figure 11: Satisfied and Benefited (for those who did not vote)

Clearly, dissatisfaction with the performances of the MPs is the dominant trend both among the respondents who voted in parliamentary elections and those who did not. The strong level of dissatisfaction amongst the general population may partially explain their disinterest amongst many in participating in elections. On the other hand, the fact that amongst both groups of the respondents there is some level of satisfaction with the work of the MPs could be interpreted as partial success of the parliamentarians in serving the electorates interest.

**Who's accountable to whom?**

The respondents were asked whom they think the MPs are accountable to. A considerable portion of the respondents (31%), said that “they are accountable to the nation”, while 24% of the respondents said that “they are accountable to their constituencies”. 15% of the respondents said that

“they are accountable to the president”, and 4% of the respondents said that “they are accountable to the political parties”. Meanwhile 13% of the respondents said that, “they are not accountable at all”. About 5% of the respondents said that, “they are accountable to the powerful and rich people”, while a small portion of the respondents (2%) believe that the MPs “are accountable to the foreigners” (Figure 12). A few respondents commented on the issue by saying “the MPs only think about their personal interest and privileges”.

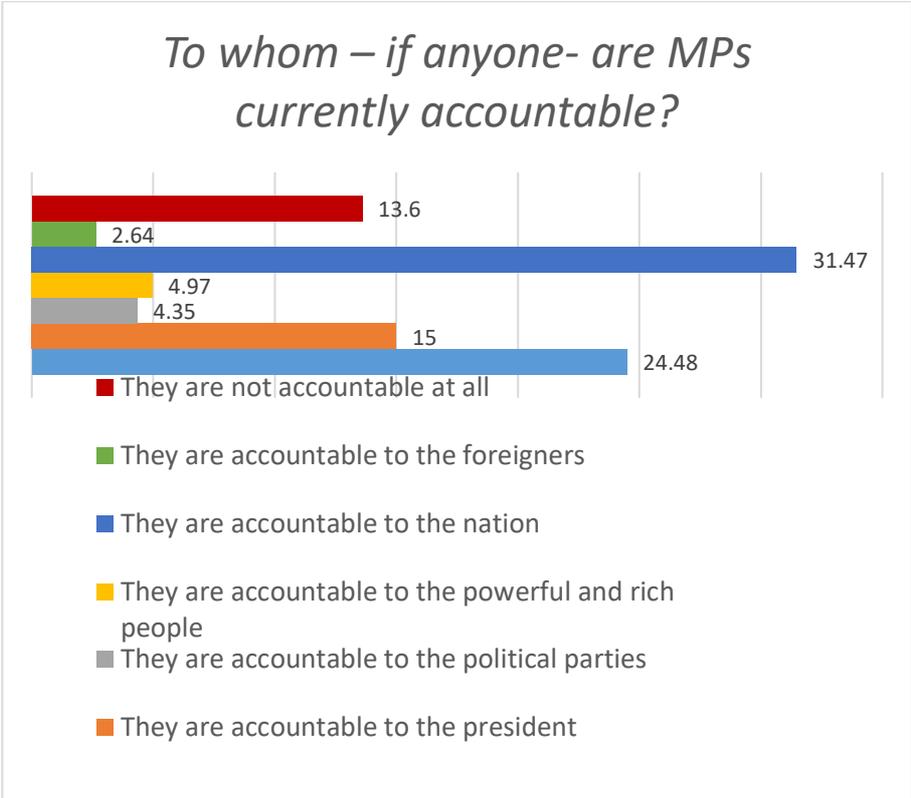


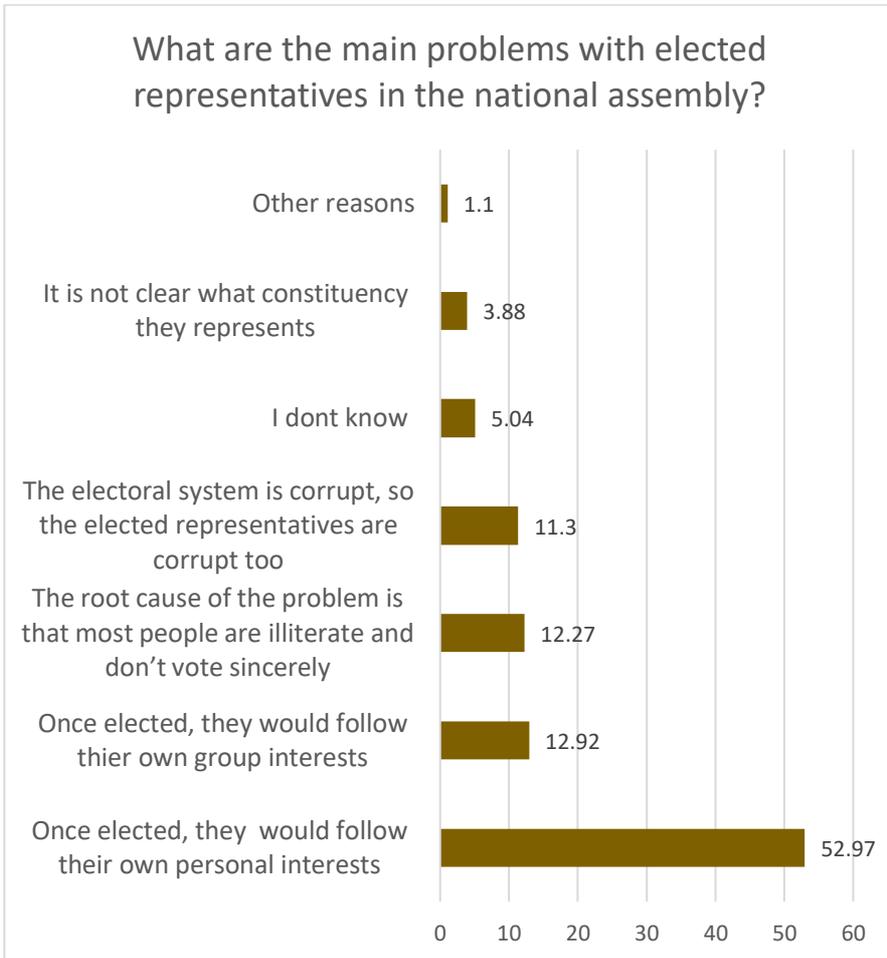
Figure 12 : Perception about the accountability of the MPs

The prevailing trend shows that generally the respondents strongly believe that the MPs are supposed to be accountable to the nation as a whole. The fact that only 25% of respondents knew that MPs have a primary responsibility towards their constituencies points to an underlying lack of knowledge on the purpose of elections. Furthermore, since the parliament

has the role of keeping the executive in check, it is concerning that 15% of respondents felt that MPs should answer to the President.

### Reasons behind the weak performances of the parliamentarians

It was asked from the respondents what are the main reasons behind the weak performances of the parliamentarians. From the viewpoints of about 53% of the respondents, the main reason behind the weak performances of MPs is that once the candidates are elected as MPs, “they would follow their own personal interests”, while 12% of the respondents said that “once elected, the MPs would follow their own group interests.” Another important reason behind the weak performance of the MPs is considered to be the low rate of literacy among the electorates: “the root cause of the problem is that most people are illiterate and don’t vote sincerely” (12%). 11% of the respondents emphasized that “the electoral system is corrupt, so the elected representatives are corrupt too.” By contrast, only 3% of the respondents said that, “It is not clear what constituency they represent.” 5% of the respondents declared that they “don’t know”, while 1% of the respondents referred to other options. Some of the comments made by the respondents are as follows: “most MPs don’t have proper knowledge and skills they need to handle parliamentary affairs properly; they are illiterate people.” “The problem is that the MPs are divided into different factions.” “The prevailing ethnic politics inside the parliament is the root cause of the problem.” “They have cheated in the elections, so they are not real representatives of the people.” One particular respondent commented on the issue by saying “because they don’t fulfill their promises, they are not reliable as representatives of the people” (Figure 13).



*Figure 13: Main reasons behind the weak performances of the MPs*

It could be interpreted from the data that the disconnection between the MPs and the electorates following the elections is an important causal factor for the weak performances of the MPs. MPs follow their own personal and group interests, and they have essentially no one to hold them accountable. Most respondents felt that the MPs are to be blamed for their weak performances. In this regard, the viewpoints of respondents across the different demographic stratifications do not differ dramatically. This finding correlates with the finding in figures 10 and 11 on the dissatisfaction that individuals have with their MPs. Overwhelmingly,

individuals agree that MPs lack accountability and are given a free-hand once elected.

The unsatisfactory performance of incumbent MPs is as a major shortcoming of the current system. One MP mentioned, “In this situation, the ordinary voters cannot get what they want. They have no faith in the elections. Those who won the previous elections didn’t fulfill their responsibilities. The fact is that many of the candidates in previous elections won the elections with the help of certain political parties through the use of illegal funding.”<sup>56</sup>

### An overall assessment of the previous parliamentary elections

58% of the respondents reported either their complete (39%) or partial (19%) satisfaction with the logistical aspects of the previous parliamentary elections including the timing of the elections and the actual location of polling centers. Surprisingly, only 7% of the respondents reported their dissatisfaction. This indicates that the independent election commission has done a relatively good job in specifying the time and place of the previous parliamentary elections across the different constituencies.

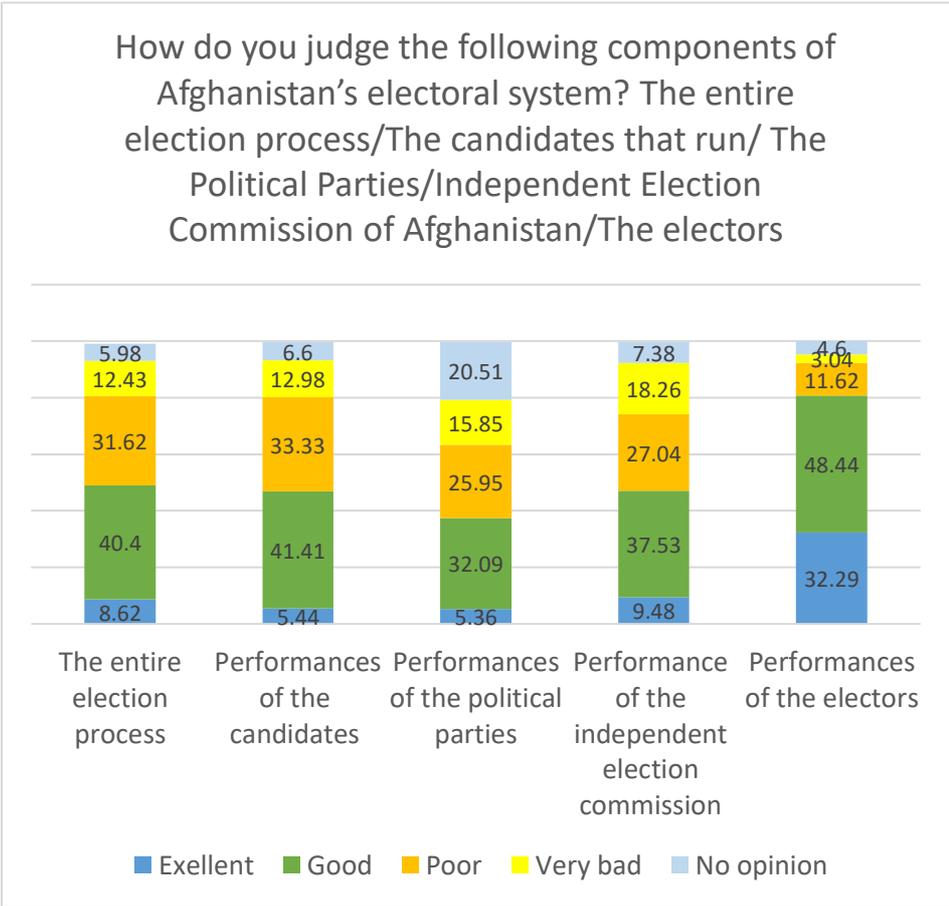
Besides asking the respondents opinions about the election process in its entirety, respondents were also asked to express their opinions about the performances of the various players in the previous parliamentary elections including the ordinary electorates. Around half of the respondents (48%) hold a positive opinion about the overall election process, while roughly the other half (43%) hold a negative view. Meanwhile, about 6% of the respondents declared that they have no opinion. This is similar to the general assessment of the respondents about the performance of the parliamentary candidates. While 46% of the respondents hold a positive view about the performances of the candidates, 45% of the respondents hold a negative view. Around 40% of the respondents stressed a negative opinion about the performance of the political parties, while 37% of the respondents hold a positive view. A

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<sup>56</sup> Mohammed Hassan Sardash, independent candidate from Faryab province

considerable portion of the respondents (20%) declared that they have no opinion on the matter.

With regards to the performance of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), about half of the respondents (46%) hold a positive view and half of the respondents (45%) hold a negative view. 7% of the respondents said that they have no opinion about the performance of the Election Commission. Interestingly, most of the respondents (80%) hold a positive view towards the performance of the electorates while only 14% of the respondents stressed a negative opinion. 4% of the respondents said that they have no opinion on the matter (Figure 14).



*Figure 14: Evaluation of the previous parliamentary elections*

The data clearly indicates that the level of readiness of the electorates in the previous parliamentary elections surpassed that of all the other players. Furthermore, this information reveals that individuals' perception of the elections process was viewed differently than that of MPs' performance. Respondents were largely happy with the elections process despite being largely unhappy with the performance of their elected officials (Figures 10 and 11).

The candidates interviewed expressed discontent and frustration over the constant change in the rules concerning elections participation. One key respondent mentioned, "Every day the Independent Election Commission comes up with some new regulations; once they said that in order to register individuals as voters they should present their national ID cards. Then they changed the rule saying that a copy of national ID card shall be enough for voter's registration. Then again they asked for the original copy of national ID card plus that it should be stickered. People don't trust the Election Commission."<sup>57</sup> Others mentioned how the voice of voters were overlooked in the elections process. "The electorate is at the core of every elections. I hope that the electorate gets what they want. But I am not optimistic at all. The ordinary voter does not play any role in the structure of power. In previous presidential elections, they ignored the electorates' votes and subsequently formed a coalition government."<sup>58</sup>

According to these key informants, the principal challenge of the IEC is acting independently. "First of all, the Independent Election Commission should preserve its independence. Since all the commissioners are appointed by the government, the Election Commission cannot act independently. The Election Commission should be supervised by a democratic body consisting of real representatives of people. This should be the main purpose of electoral reform."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Samiullah Ahmadzai, civil society candidate from Paktia province

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad Jawid Razaat, independent candidate from Farah province

<sup>59</sup> Farhad Isar, independent candidate from Faryab province

### III. Electoral reforms in parliamentary elections

#### Political awareness of the electorates

About 24% of the respondents who voted in parliamentary elections said that before voting they had been aware of the political orientation of their candidates, while 39% said that they had not. More rural (52%) than urban (34%) respondents reported ignorance towards the political orientation of the candidates they voted for. The level of awareness of the respondents towards the political orientation of the candidates they voted for also differed to some extent both across provinces and among the respondents of different ethnic backgrounds (Figures 15 and 16).

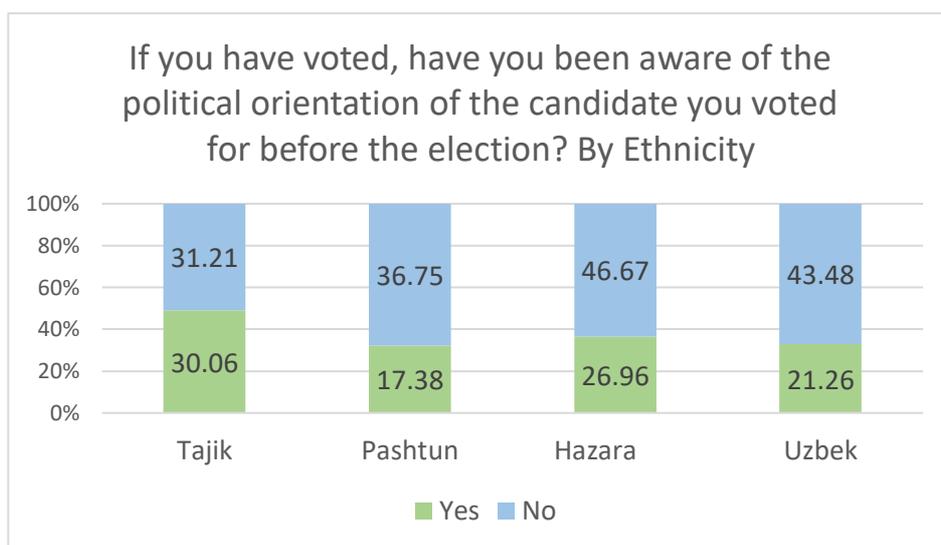


Figure 15: Voters' Awareness of the political orientation of the candidate, by ethnicity

Among the respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, Pashtun respondents reported a relatively higher level of ignorance towards the political orientation of parliamentary candidates they voted for. On the other hand, more Tajik respondents than those from other ethnic backgrounds reported that they were aware of the political orientation of the candidate they voted for in previous parliamentary elections.

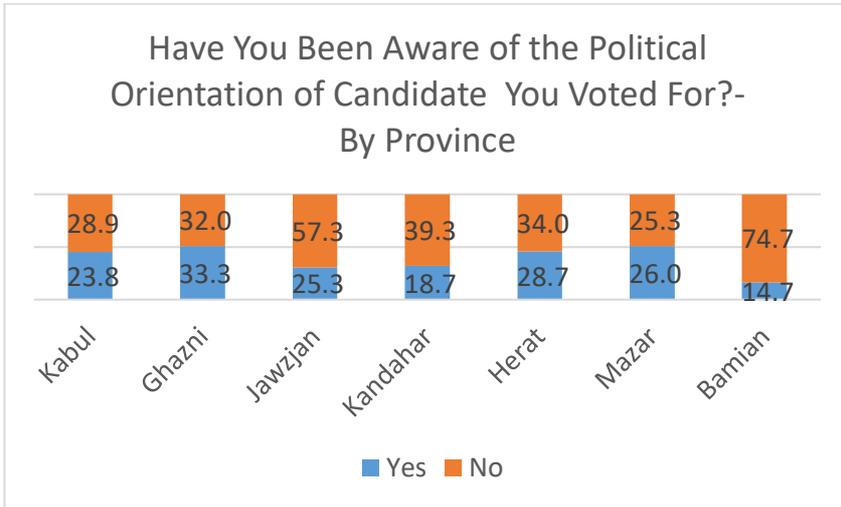


Figure 16: Voters' Awareness of the political orientation of the candidate, by province

Interestingly, more female (34%) than male (14%) respondents said that before voting they have been aware of the political orientation of the candidates they voted for (Figure 17). Considering the highly conservative nature of society, it could be interpreted that women who participated in the elections either trusted their male relatives on the political orientation of the candidate they voted for or they only voted for well-known candidates.

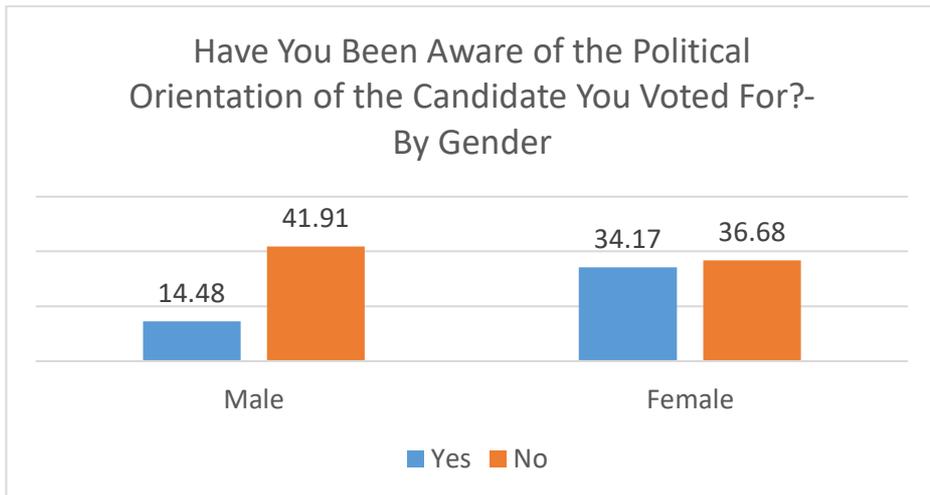


Figure 17: Voters' Awareness of the political orientation of the candidate, by gender

The overall lack of knowledge that voters have on the political orientation of candidates is clear. This lacuna can likely be attributed to the infancy of democratic representation in Afghanistan. Voters and even many candidates are still becoming accustomed to the roles and responsibilities associated with parliamentary elections. Furthermore, a great number of candidates ran as independents, as expected under the SNTV system. Independents may have a less clearly developed political orientation as opposed to a political party because they represent only a single voice within the parliament.

The respondents were asked about their willingness to get actively involved in election campaigning in favor of a particular candidate. Most respondents (44%) said that they were not interested in getting actively involved in election campaigning in favor of particular candidates, while 33% of the respondents expressed their interest. 20% said that they were not sure yet. The respondents' answers to this question differs across the provinces (Figure 18).

The parliamentary candidates interviewed in this study emphasized the expected rhetoric of targeting a broad base of voters. While ethnic voting continues to plague parliamentary elections, none of the candidates associated themselves with the practice, instead emphasizing their own more 'benevolent' approaches. "I campaign among people from all walks of life. During my career in the provincial council, I helped out many people. People knew me for a long time. However, I hope that people of my own neighborhood would vote for me. I think that youth and civil society activist will also vote for me."<sup>60</sup> "I would mainly talk to youth and the intellectuals. I am personally coming from an intellectual family, therefore I expect that educated people would vote for me. I would use various channels to communicate my messages including holding sessions with elders and using social media."<sup>61</sup> "My audience is the electorate as a whole – including the intellectuals, the businessmen, the farmers and all the other citizens. I represent the National Congress Party of Afghanistan;

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<sup>60</sup> Hafizullah Mobarez, independent candidate from Paktia province

<sup>61</sup> Azizullah Nurzahi, independent candidate from Nimroz province

therefore, my campaign spending is provided by members of my own political party and the party followers. In the past in some places we didn't spend a penny as local sympathizers themselves organized the election campaign."<sup>62</sup> It is not surprising for elected MPs to be seeking votes from a wide base of voters, since a greater number of votes is always to their benefit. No candidate vocally mentioned relying on 'ethnic vote' (i.e. vote due to ethnical affiliation). While such voting practices are widespread, it would be dangerous for any MPs to openly mention their reliance on – let alone their tactic support for – ethnic votes given the widespread disdain that voters have towards this practice even if they follow this practice.

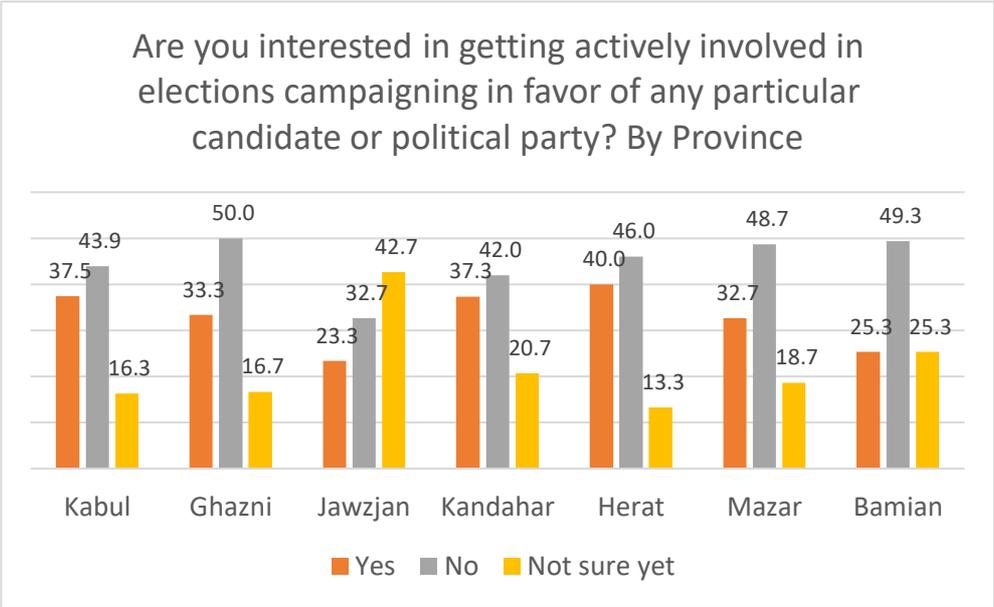


Figure 18: Willing To Participate in the Elections Campaigning, by Province

From among the different ethnic communities, the Uzbek respondents showed less enthusiasm (28%) for election campaigning in favor of particular candidates, while the Pashtun respondents expressed the greatest interest (38%). The Tajik and Hazara respondents reported the same level of interest, each 33%. The respondents' answers across the

<sup>62</sup> Abdullatif Pedram, political party candidate from Badakhshan province

other demographic stratifications do not differ significantly. As an overall tendency, respondents with higher education levels were more interested in election campaigning than respondents with lower education levels.

### Political reliability of the candidates

When asked, “what type of candidates do you trust in parliamentary elections?” interestingly, most of the respondents (63%) said that they trust “the educated and independent candidates”. 11% of respondents said that they trust candidates of political parties, and 10% of respondents said that they trust candidates from their own ethnic community. A small portion of respondents (5%) said that they trust candidates from their own neighborhood. Around 2% of respondents said that they trust other candidates and 6% of respondents said that they trust none of the various types of candidates (Figure 19).

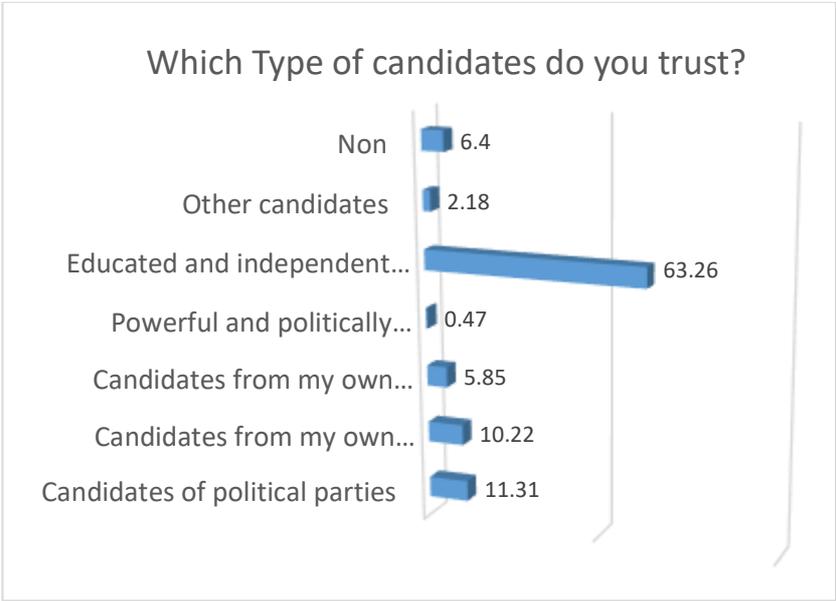


Figure 19: The Most Trusted Types of Candidates

The data shows that favoring the “educated and independent candidates” over the other types of candidates is a common trend among all demographic stratifications. But the tendency towards various types of candidates differs across the different demographic stratifications. More female (68%) than male (58%) respondents inclined towards the “educated and independent candidates”, while more male (66%) than female (62%) respondents favor the “candidates of political parties”. Figure 20 shows the varying inclinations of the respondents towards the different types of candidates across the provinces.

Various types of parliamentary candidates	The rate of approval by Provinces						
	Kabul	Ghazni	Jawzjan	Kandahar	Herat	Mazar	Bamian
Candidates of political parties	16.8	5.3	12.0	14.7	10.0	4.7	7.3
Candidates from my own ethnic community	11.8	12.0	10.7	10.7	1.3	14.7	8.0
Candidates from my own neighborhood	3.7	5.3	4.0	13.3	2.7	1.3	14.0
Powerful and politically influential candidates	0.3	-	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
Educated independent candidates	60.2	71.3	63.3	52.0	81.3	61.3	58.0
Other candidates	1.1	3.3	2.0	0.7	1.3	8.7	-
Non	6.3	2.7	4.7	8.0	2.7	8.7	12.0

Table 11: The rate of approval by Provinces

The respondents' high level of trust for the "educated and independent candidates" may be attributed to the existing electoral system (SNTV) that encourages voting for strong individual figures. As figure 20 below reveals, people expressed their approval of the 'one person, one vote' systems, showing that the SNTV system has become familiar to voters. It is not unreasonable for individuals to have an affinity for the status quo, even if they find it imperfect, versus the uncertainty of change. The low level of trust for the "candidates of political parties" can be partly attributed to the fact that the term "political parties" in Afghanistan quickly conjures the images of the Soviet communist party and various Mujahedeen parties, along with the corresponding atrocities that took place during those periods of Afghan history. Many of the current political parties remain legacies of those earlier parties. Furthermore, political parties remain largely centered around ethnicity without clear national programs in mind.

The surprising finding on the low level of trust for the candidates of one's own ethnic "community" and "neighborhood" may be an indication of the widespread discontent, at least in principle, on the manipulation of the elections by ethnic and local leaders. This does not, however, disclaim the fact that in practice, many individuals continue to vote according to the decision of their community leaders.

A trending comment made by some of the respondents emphasizes that, "it's not important who will represent me in the parliament; they must serve the people and not misuse their power." A few respondents commented on the issue by saying, "I trust those candidates who are being trusted by my own family members." Some female respondents said that they will trust whomever their husband trusts. Some Uzbek respondents commented on the issue by saying, "Whomever is trusted by 'Baba Dustum', we will trust." These comments reveal the plurality of perspectives on how to choose a candidate, varying from emphasis on qualified candidates to candidates who are already attached in some way to an individual's wider social network.

Part of the reason for the prominence of independent candidates is the negative perception of political parties from past experience. One informant mentioned, “In previous rounds of parliamentary elections, those candidates who associated themselves with political parties did not win. But the same people running as independent candidates succeeded. At the moment this is the trending mode. Considering the past experiences, I think that most people won’t vote for political parties – at least in Badakhshan.”<sup>63</sup> Political parties continue to be viewed as partisan and ineffective. “Through the existing electoral system, everyone can independently run for the office. They can present their programs and gain people’s trust. Since the existing political parties don’t have any programs, they are not able to garner meaningful votes.”<sup>64</sup> “People are not happy with the performances of political parties. They think of political parties as warlords. People support the educated young elites.”<sup>65</sup>

Nonetheless, while independents may be preferred, they are not necessarily viewed as a clear solution to the existing problems in parliament. They are often weak and uncoordinated, limiting the impact of their voice in the parliament. “Independent candidates cannot play an effective role in parliamentary elections. The elections are hijacked by a handful of special people and political parties. Only a few independent candidates, based on their own popular status, manage to enter the parliament.”<sup>66</sup> “Independent candidates must play an important role in any elections. But I don’t believe that they can play any significant role in the next round of parliamentary elections; because they lack the means and money. This is what matters.”<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, one informant also pointed out that the line between independent and party candidates can sometimes be blurred. “They say that if the candidates are not affiliated with political parties, they could easily win the elections. But personally, I have never seen an independent candidate who could win the elections

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<sup>63</sup> Nilufar Ibrahim, independent candidate from Badakhshan province

<sup>64</sup> Mohammad Islam Yaftali, independent candidate from Badakhshan province

<sup>65</sup> Gulam Haidar Salehi, independent candidate from Daikondi province

<sup>66</sup> Forozan Barekzai, civil society candidate from Farah province

<sup>67</sup> Gul Ahmad Farahi, independent candidate from Farah province

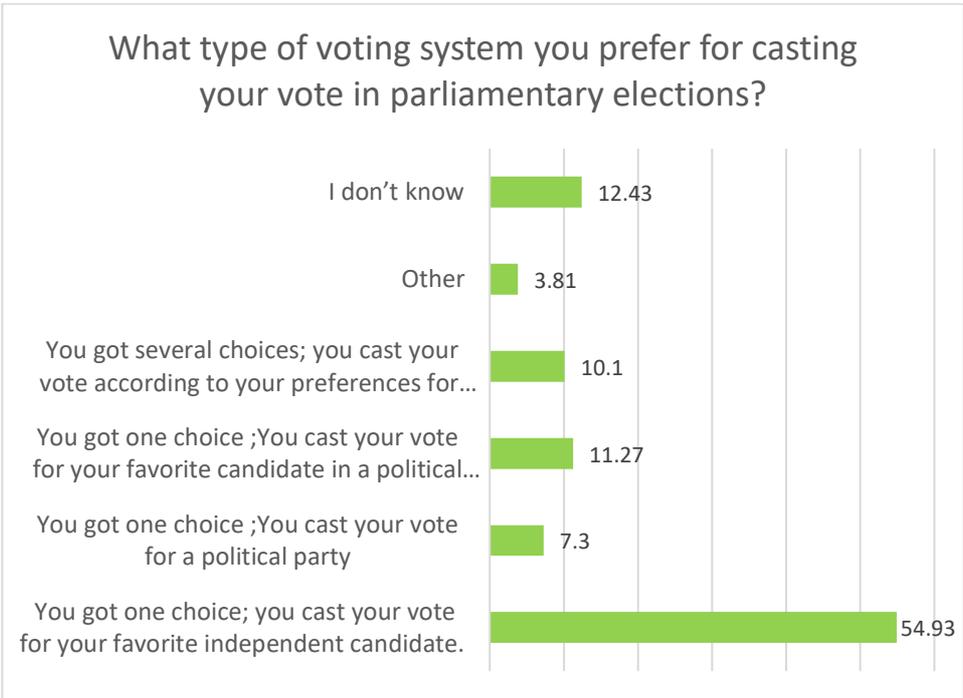
independently. I believe that in order to win the elections any candidate needs political support.”<sup>68</sup>

### The choice of voting system

It was asked from the respondents if they prefer one particular voting system over another. Respondents provided the following answers, in order of preference: (a) you get one vote and you cast it for your favorite independent candidate (54%); (b) You get one vote and you cast it for a political party (7%); (c) You get one vote and you cast it for your favorite candidate in a political party (11%); and (d) you get several votes and you cast them according to your preferences for several candidates in different constituencies (10%). 12% of respondents said that they do not possess knowledge of the various voting systems and 3% of the respondents referred to other voting systems without further explanation. As one can observe, most respondents reaffirmed their tendency for favoring the independent candidates (Figure 20). The data reveals that after two rounds of parliamentary elections, the majoritarian system of voting has gained a level of legitimacy, as it represents the preferred method of voting. This finding must also be gauged against the fact that most of the respondents were under 30 years of age, most who will have never have any other experience with elections.

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68 Mohammad Zahir Qolakzada, political party candidate from Daikondi province



*Figure 20: The Choice of Voting System*

Party politics and multi-voting systems are not popular notions among the respondents. One particular respondent commented on the issue by saying, “It is not logical to vote for several candidates simultaneously because you may lose your voting power.” Various reasons could explain this response, including the respondents’ lack of experience of alternate voting systems and a lack of understanding of how several votes would affect MP accountability.

Nonetheless, considering all alternatives together (i.e. alternatives to the ‘one person, one vote’ method supported by 54% of respondents), a considerable portion of the respondents (43%) either seek alternative options or simply are open to other voting systems. Views on the various voting systems are similar across the different demographic stratifications. However, interesting variations exist across the provinces (Figure 21).

## What type of voting systems you prefer for casting your vote in parliamentary elections? By Province

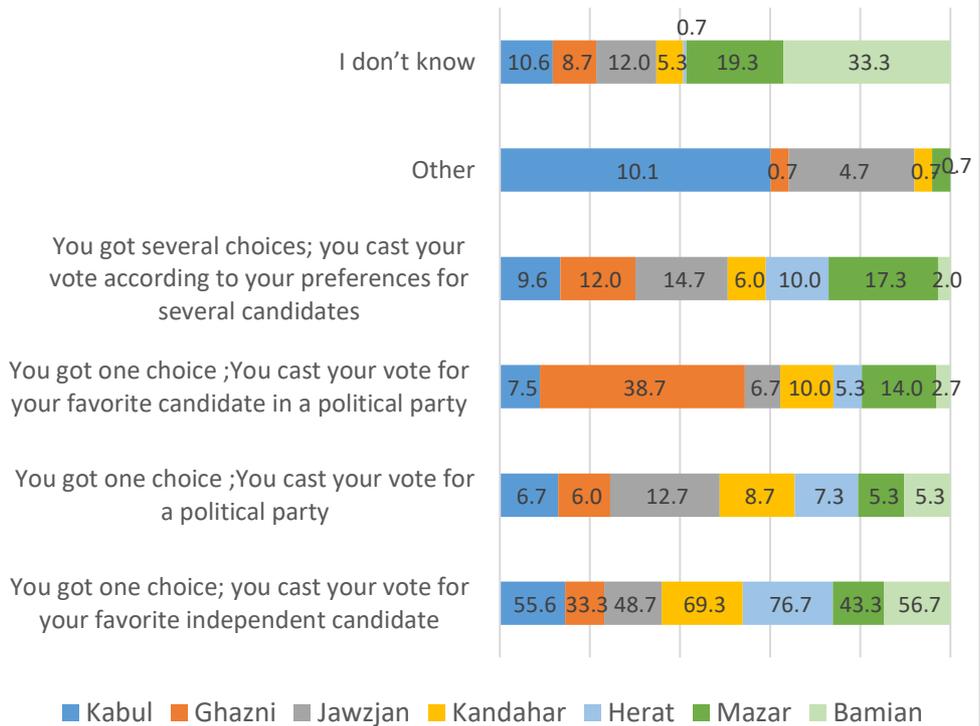


Figure 21: The Choice of Voting System, by province

The data shows that to some extent, respondents' choices across different provinces are influenced by their environment. Various contextual factors including the electoral culture of the people and their exposure to altering electoral ideas could be influencing factors. Interestingly, a significant number of respondents from Ghazni province inclined towards an open list PR system, while in Herat, an overwhelming majority of candidates preferred the SNTV system.

Only a handful of the key informants knew about varying voting systems. "I think the existing electoral system which is based on free, secret and direct voting is good. In this way, individuals can look after the transparency of the elections themselves. This is not the problem. The

problem is the monitoring process which is not being implemented properly.”<sup>69</sup> Others referred to biometric, electronic and computerized voting systems as best alternative voting systems. “The best voting system is the biometric system, so no one could use more than one vote and no under-aged person could participate in the elections. To reform the electoral system, first of all the existing national ID cards must be replaced by electronic ID cards, and secondly, it’s important for us to use a computerized voting system.”<sup>70</sup>

Some of the interviewed MPs did not have a particular recommendation for reform but recognized the ‘wasted votes’ caused by the SNTV system. “Unfortunately through the current voting system, the will of electorates has been marginalized. There are no proper criteria for determining the number of candidates in each constituency. As the size of the population increases, the number of candidates also increases and therefore the electorate’s votes becomes dispersed. That’s why the electorate’s interest is not being taken seriously. A few people reach their goals, but the majority’s will is marginalized.”<sup>71</sup> Another informant added, “I don’t have any alternate opinion on this. I just hope that whatever voting systems are chosen, the electorates’ votes are not stolen.”<sup>72</sup>

### Vote counting procedures

Respondents were asked about their preferred vote counting procedures in parliamentary elections. Respondents clearly favored an overall majoritarian approach. Most respondents said that they would be satisfied with a simple majority vote counting system (54%), while 21% of respondents preferred an absolute majority counting system. In comparison, proportional counting was preferred by merely 15% of respondents. 1% of respondents referred to other options and 1% of

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<sup>69</sup> Nilufar Ibrahim, independent candidate from Badakhshan province

<sup>70</sup> Mohammad Hasan Sardash, independent candidate from Faryab province

<sup>71</sup> Samiullah Ahmadzai, independent candidate from Paktia province

<sup>72</sup> Ahamd Jawid Razaat, independent candidate from Farah province

respondents held no clear opinion about the various vote counting formulas (Figure 22).

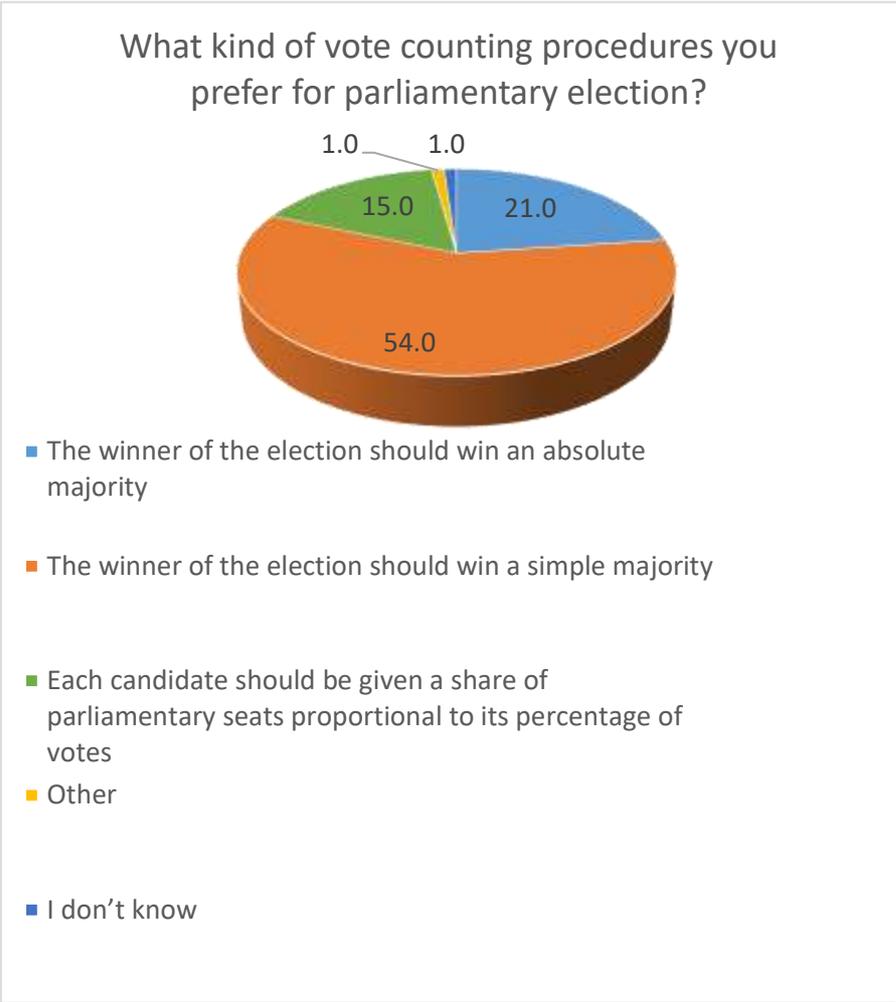


Figure 22: The Choice of Vote Counting Procedure

This trending choice of vote counting procedure may be partly attributable to the familiarity that respondents have with the existing electoral system, which requires a simple majority.

### The size of electoral districts

Regarding the size of electoral districts in parliamentary elections, 44% of the respondents preferred the status quo where each province is considered to be a multimember electoral district. 15% of respondents said that they prefer single member electoral districts. Another 10% of respondents were in favor of smaller multi-member electoral districts, while 5% of respondents preferred bigger multi-member electoral districts. Other options include: (a) dividing electoral districts based on ethno-cultural concerns in single-seat constituencies; and (b) dividing the electoral districts based on ethno-cultural concerns in multi-member constituencies, and were each preferred by 5% of respondents. 12% of respondents stated that they “don’t know” (Figure 23).

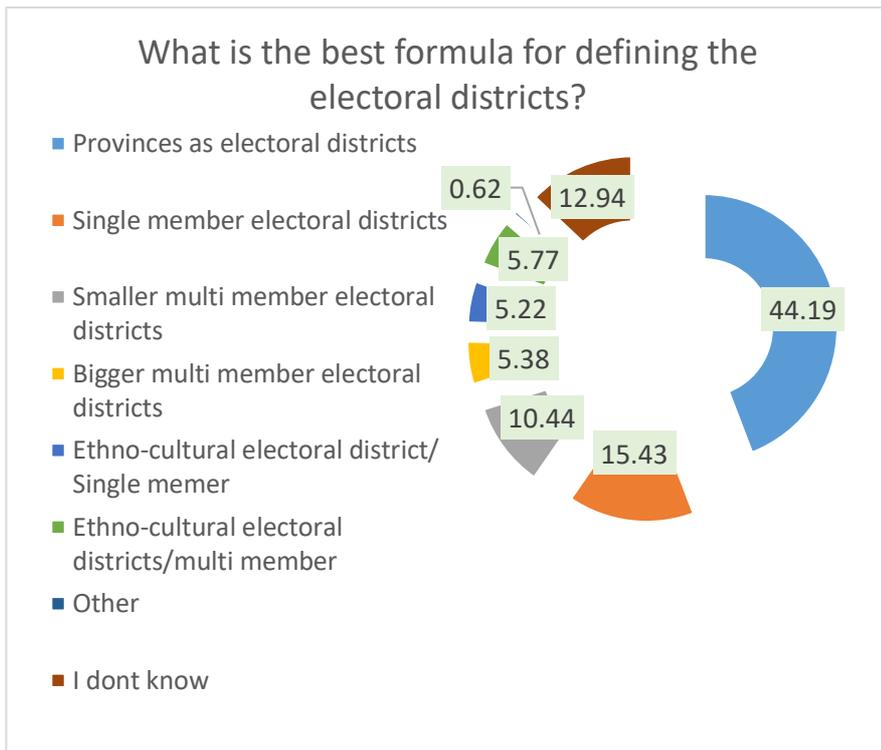


Figure 23: The Choice of Electoral Districts

Though a large portion of the respondents are in favor of the existing formula of province-wide electoral districts (44%), a significant portion of

the respondents (40%) are also in favor of change if the varying alternative choices are considered together. The options of “single member electoral districts” and “smaller multi-member electoral districts” represent the second and third most popular choices, respectively. This trend was consistent across the various demographic stratifications.

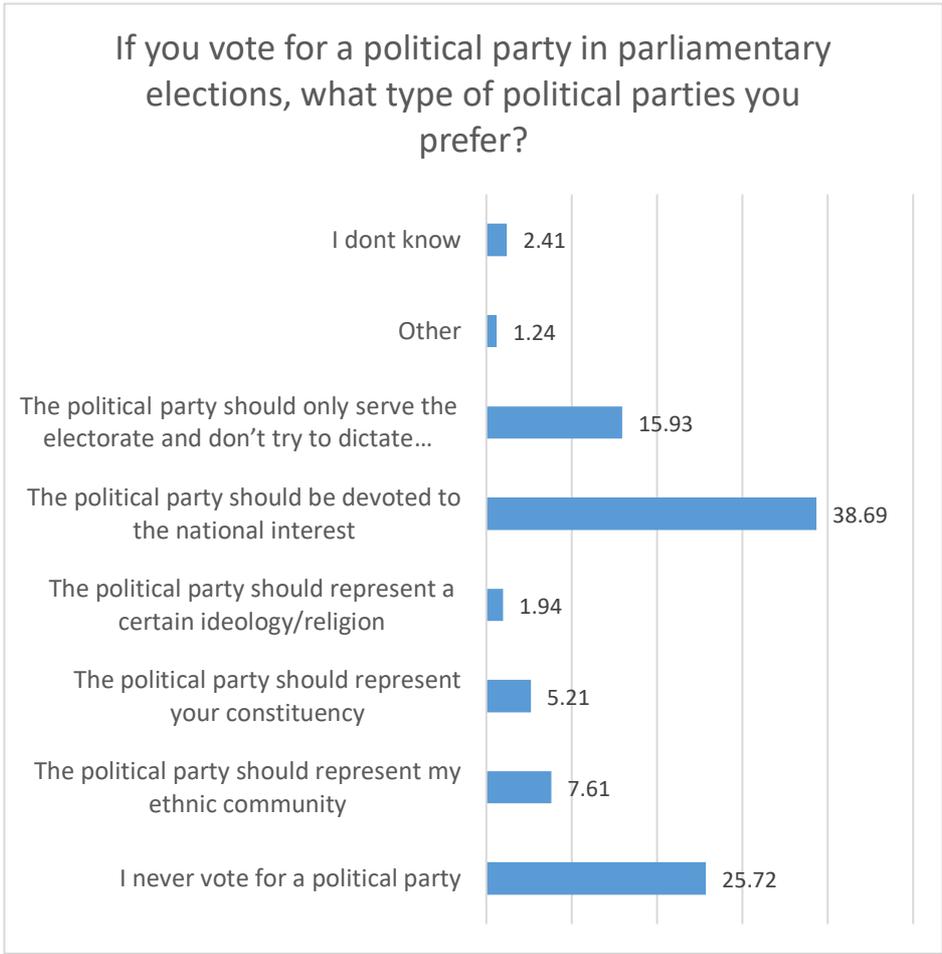
Some key informants mentioned that the government must do a better job in reaching out to remote areas. “We expect that the government facilitate the electorates’ participation in the elections. In some remote areas, people have to walk for two hours in order to get to the polling centers. More polling centers must be set up.”<sup>73</sup>

### The choice of political parties

When asked about the ideal characteristic of a political party, most respondents (38%) said that “a political party should be devoted to the national interest”, while 15% of respondents stressed that “a political party should only serve the electorate and don’t try to dictate anything.” A considerable portion of the respondents (25%) said that they would “never vote for a political party.” 7% of respondents said that “a political party should represent my ethnic community”, while 5% of respondents said that “a political party should represent my constituency.” A small portion of the respondents (1%) said that “a political party should represent a certain ideology/religion”, and 2% of the respondents stated that they “don’t know” (Figure 24).

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<sup>73</sup> Mohammad Zahir Qolakzada, political party candidate from Daikondi province



*Figure 24: The Choice of Political Parties*

The fact that 75% of respondents were at least hypothetically open to the notion of political parties suggests that such parties have the opportunity to expand their influence through elections. With slight differences, the respondents from across the demographic stratifications are in favor of a nationalistic and program-oriented political party. This suggests that in order for political parties to be able to expand, they need to be more attune to the needs of their electorate and the nation, not merely their ethnic, religious, or regional interests. Nonetheless, this desire for change faces immense challenges, most notably the current practice of parties that relies on ethnic affiliation. These parties and – most notably – their

leaders, have the most to lose with the emergence of such broad-based parties and thus are likely to impede their development. The country is thus stuck in a chicken and egg dilemma with regards to the development of political parties that go beyond mere ethnic interests.

Various MPs expressed a desire for political parties to play a greater role in the future. “I am in favor of restoring party politics in Afghanistan. But it takes time to produce trustable political parties. For the time being, the current electoral system which favors independent candidates is preferable. In previous elections, we have seen that even leaders of political parties registered themselves as independent candidates in order to garner votes. People don’t have good memories of political parties.”<sup>74</sup> Another stated, “Unfortunately, we don’t have political parties such as those that exist in developed countries. Political parties in Afghanistan are known to play ethnic politics, and no real national political party exists. Supporting political parties only causes disasters.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Noor Akbari, political party candidate from Daikondi province

<sup>75</sup> Forozan Farahi, independent candidate from Farah province

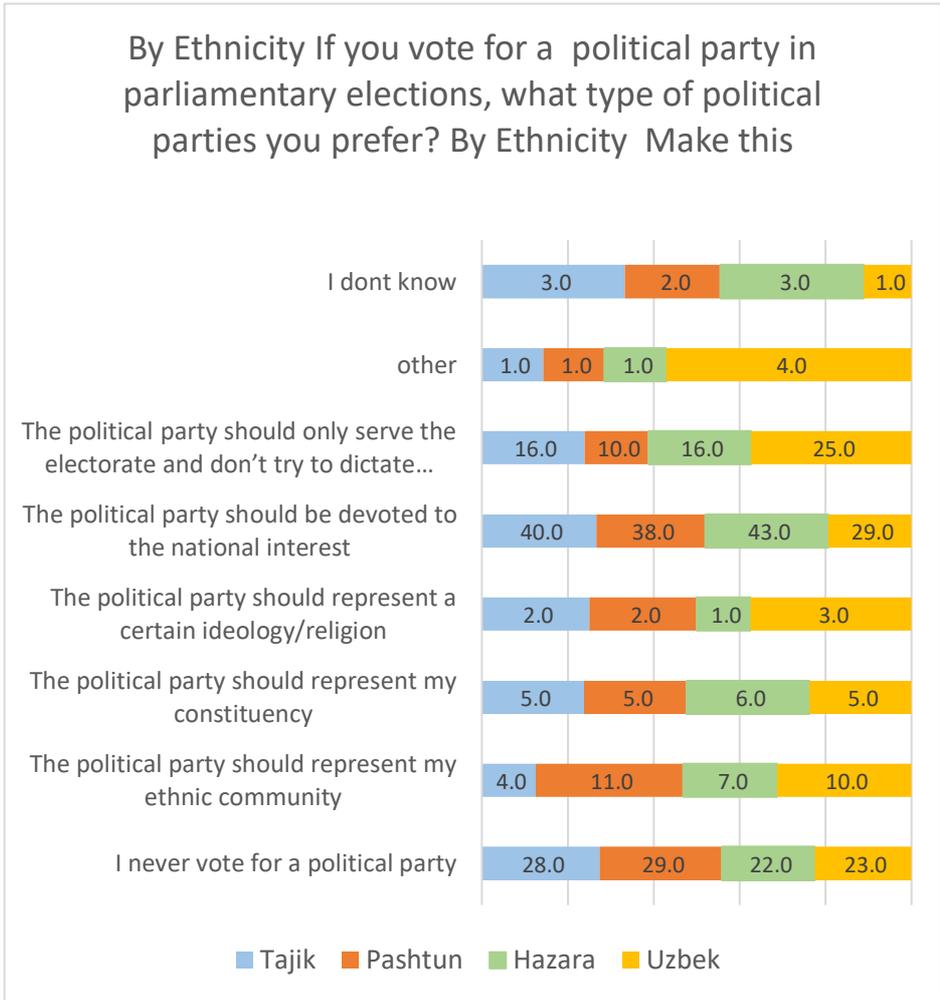


Figure 25: The Choice of Political Party

Figure 26 illustrates the choices of respondents disaggregated according to ethnic backgrounds. All ethnic groups indicated their preference for political parties based on ‘national interest’ that could ‘serve the electorate’. No ethnic group particularly supported the notion of parties based on ‘ethnic community’, despite the widespread practice of such voting patterns. As mentioned earlier, this finding shows the difference in how voters view the role of political parties ‘in principle’ and their voting patterns ‘in practice’.

**The course of leadership inside the parliament**

The respondents were asked about leadership in the parliament. Half of the respondents (50%) said that “all MPs must have their say” in the management of parliamentary affairs, while 22% of respondents said that “independent MPs” should lead the course in parliament. In comparison, only 8% of the respondents supported “political parties” as leaders of the parliament. 3% of respondents said that “parliamentary groups” should lead the affairs of the parliament and another small portion of respondents (2%) preferred other options. One respondent commented on the issue by saying “it’s not important who should lead the parliament; they must think of the poor people.” One particular respondent said that, “the government must establish an administration for the leadership of the parliament.” Another respondent stated that, “parliament should be free of any imposition”. Meanwhile 12% of the respondents stated that they “don’t know” (Figure 26).

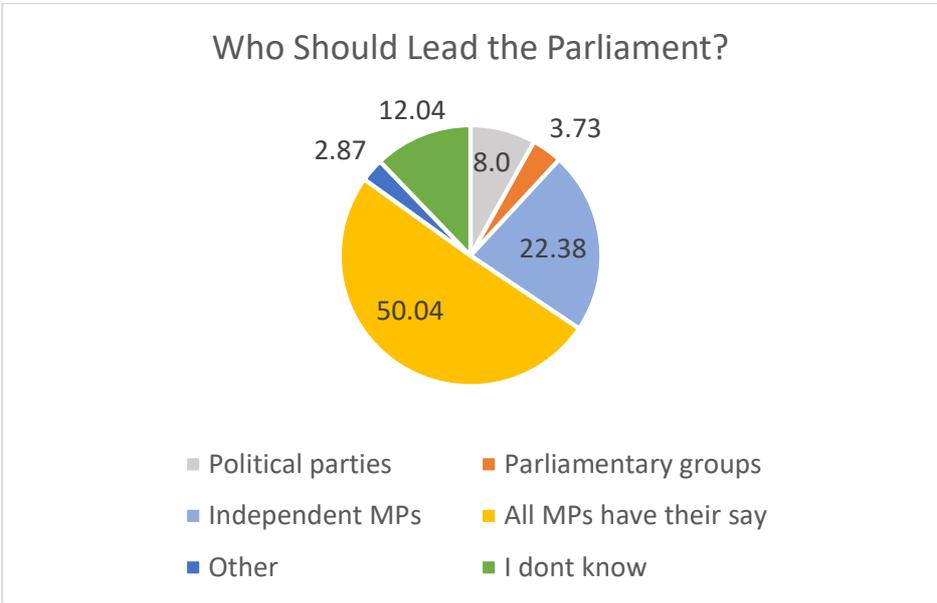


Figure 26: Leading the parliament

It could be interpreted from the data that most of the respondents prefer consensual forms of decision-making procedures inside the parliament. Furthermore, independent MPs were clearly preferred to those associated with a political organization. This trend was similar across the demographic stratifications.

Informants clearly conveyed dissatisfaction about the poor performance of parliamentarians within parliament. “The way parliamentarians discuss issues in the parliament is not acceptable. Some of the MPs are totally absent from the sessions of parliament as they follow their own personal businesses. In parliament, they always fight each other over unimportant and minor problems. They rarely discuss important and big issues such as problems related to security and wellbeing of the people. If a minister is given a vote of no confidence, the ruling may be changed easily through political deals.”<sup>76</sup> Another informant stated, “I don’t have the experience of being an MP. But if I judge them based on the internal rules of procedures of parliament, their performance is not acceptable. Some MPs are being heard and some others are not being heard. They don’t have the opportunity to include their viewpoints into the agendas.”<sup>77</sup> On the same lines, another candidate remarked, “The individualistic way of debating impacts decision-making in parliament. This is not acceptable. The MPs must debate issues according to the rules of procedures of parliament.”<sup>78</sup>

### Arranging party politics inside the parliament

The respondents were asked, “what would be the best arrangement for party politics inside the parliament?” 26% of respondents said that they preferred a “one-party system”. 12% of the respondents said that a “two-party system” would be the best arrangement for party politics in the parliament. Other arrangements such as “having two big political parties with smaller political parties around” and “having three strong political parties with smaller political parties around”, each gained 10% and 12%

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<sup>76</sup> Ahamd Jawid Razaat, independent candidate from Farah province

<sup>77</sup> Tahmina Shojaa, independent candidate from Faryab province

<sup>78</sup> Farhad Isar, independent candidate from Faryab province

support, respectively. A sizeable fraction of the respondents (16%) said that the best arrangement for party politics in the parliament would be a situation where “several political parties with roughly the same strength” manage the affairs of parliament together. About 3% of the respondents referred to other options, while a considerable portion of the respondents (18%) stated that they “don’t know”. A few of the respondents commented on the issue emphasizing that, “they don’t trust the current political parties because they only care about their factional interest.” One particular respondent said that, “no party system would be the best arrangement for adjusting the politics in Afghanistan.” Another respondent said that, “the only thing that matters is stability and peace in the country” (Figure 27).

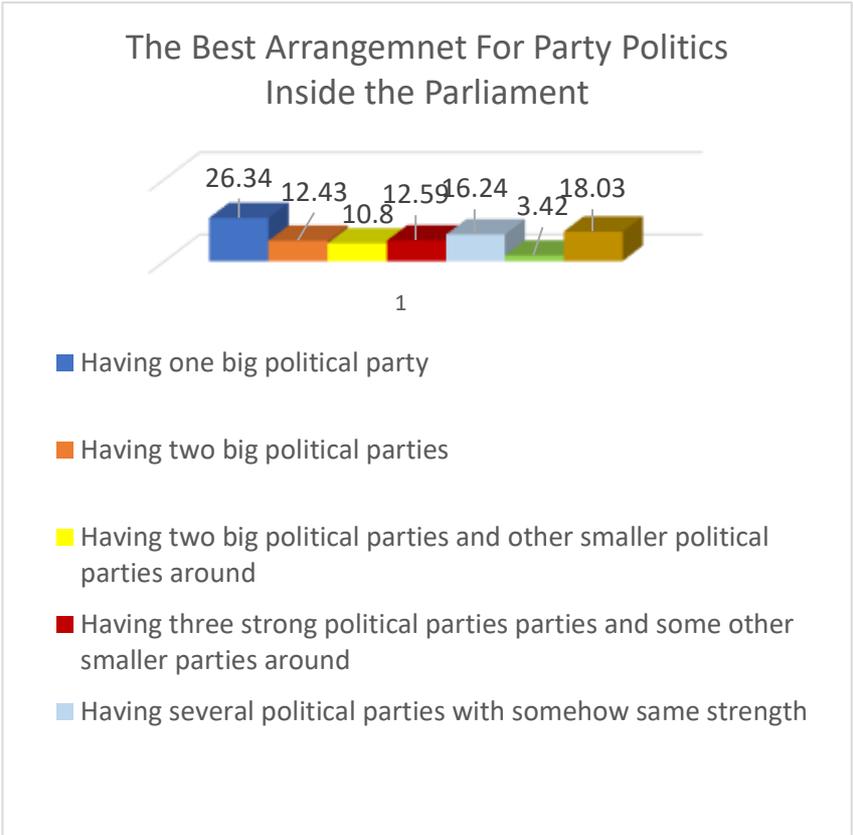
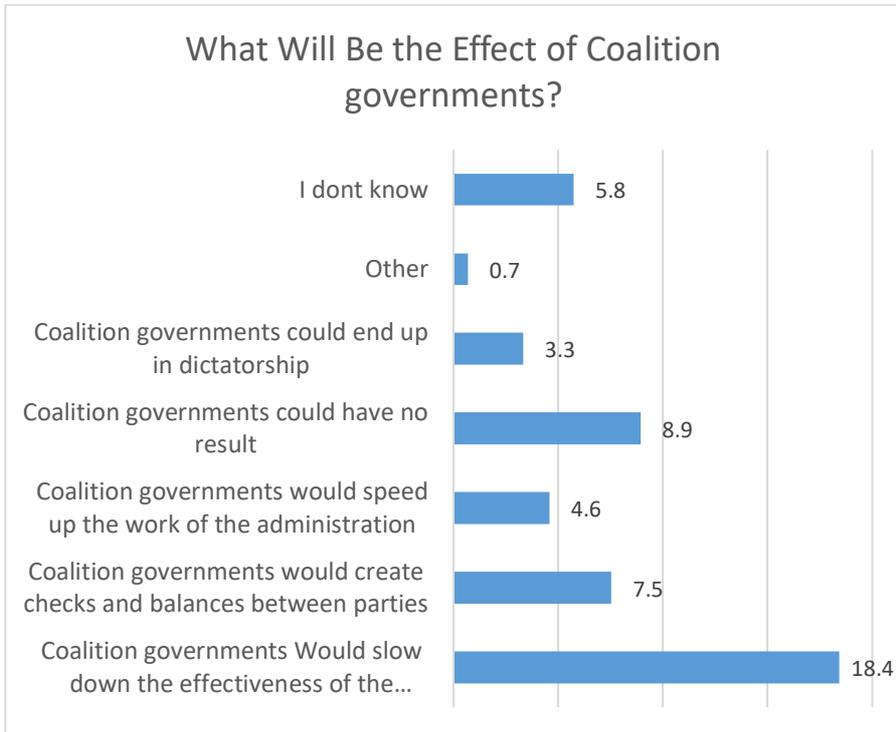


Figure 27: If political parties run the parliament, what kind of arrangement you prefer?

The data indicates that while the “one party system” is the most popular choice amongst respondents, taking all the alternate choices together, most respondents are in favor of a multi-party system. Also, the significant number of respondents who did not have a particular opinion (18%) suggests a widespread lack of general knowledge amongst respondents on the way political parties operate and maintain accountability within the parliament by providing checks and balances. Furthermore, the overall negative perception of the respondents towards the coalition governments (presented in the next section), would present a big challenge for party politics in the parliament.

### Coalition governments

The respondents were asked if they knew anything about “coalition governments”. Most respondents answered “No” (55%), while 34% of the respondents answered “Yes”. Another portion (8%) of the respondents said that they were “not sure”. Moreover, regarding the possible implications of coalition governments, 18% of the respondents said that, “coalition governments would slow down the effectiveness of the administration and create infighting”. Another 8% of the respondents said that “coalition governments could have no result”, and 3% of the respondents said that “coalition governments could end up in dictatorship”. In comparison, only 7% of the respondents said that “coalition governments would create checks and balances between the parties” and 4% of the respondents said that “coalition governments would speed up the work of the administration.” 5% of the respondents stated that they “don’t know” (Figure 28).



*Figure 28: The effect of coalition governments.*

Given the fact that before the current mediated NUG, people of Afghanistan had never experienced a coalition government, it seems natural that most respondents have no idea about such an arrangement. Furthermore, it could be interpreted that the prolonged experience of infighting between the rival forces in contemporary Afghanistan has created deep pessimism towards the establishment of coalition governments.

#### The goal of electoral reforms

The respondents were asked about the end goals that should be brought about through electoral reforms. 33% of the respondents said that “making the process of voting easier” should be the ultimate goal of the electoral reform. A considerable portion of the respondents (26%) advocated for the “overall change of the political system” while 16% of respondents said that, “improving the relationship between the MPs and

the electorate should be the ultimate purpose of the electoral reform. In comparison, only 7% of the respondents advocated for “improving the status of the political parties” while 6% of respondents preferred “increasing the choices of the electorate in the voting process”. 7% of respondents stated that they “don’t know”, while a small portion of the respondents (1%) referred to other options. A few of the respondents commented that “first and foremost the credibility of the elections should be restored”, “the transparency of the elections should be guaranteed”, “the only important matter is improving the security situation in the country and creating job opportunities for the people.” One respondent said that “the electoral reform is not something of real value, and thus I don’t have any expectations” (Figure 29).

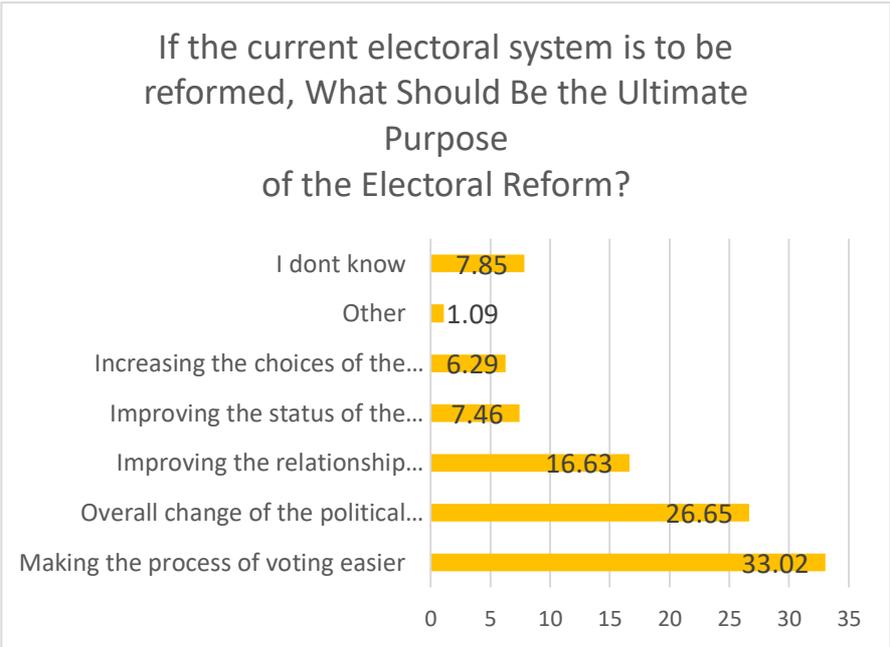


Figure 29: The ultimate outcome of the electoral reforms

While the option of “Making the process of voting easier” is somehow easy to understand, it is open to a variety of interpretations. One way to make the process of voting easier is to use technological devices, thereby assisting in the counting of votes. Furthermore, the ballot paper could be

designed in such a way that is easy to handle by the ordinary electorate. During the 2010 elections, Kabul had 666 candidates running for a total of 33 seats.<sup>79</sup> The resulting ballot took the shape of a lengthy document, made all the more complicated by the limited literacy of many voters.

Interestingly, the second most popular option was a call for structural reform to the political system. This trend is in line with the findings of two previous AISS studies on comparative politics.<sup>80</sup> Both these studies showed that to some extent, the call for change to the current political system is a popular trend in Afghanistan across a wide section of society.

Key informants commented that the current reforms being undertaken by the Independent Election Commission of issuing stickers on national IDs were not particularly desirable. “Putting stickers on the national ID cards does not guarantee transparency. It’s better to replace it with electronic national ID cards. Besides that an electronic database must also be set up to control the voting.”<sup>81</sup> Others echoed the importance of a transparent, computerized system. “We have to upgrade the voting system. Through the usage of new technologies and computer systems, the results of the elections could be announced immediately after holding the elections. Delays in accounting the results of the elections is a major disturbing factor.”<sup>82</sup>

Some key informants also mentioned that the government should also have greater financial oversight of the elections process. “The government should regulate the election spending. At the same time, the election

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Johnson (2018) “The Illusion of Afghanistan’s Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Elections, Small Wars & Insurgencies”, 29: 1-37, 14.

<sup>80</sup> The current paper is the third consecutive study in a series of AISS studies on comparative politics. The first study is entitled “Afghanistan’s Constitution and Society in Transition; Assessment of public opinion and proposals for a constitutional amendment”, (AISS- 2016), and the second study is entitled “The Challenging Path towards Democracy in Afghanistan; An Assessment and Critique of National Debates on Alternative Political Systems in Afghanistan”, (AISS-2018).

<sup>81</sup> Mohammad Zahir Qolakzada, political party candidate from Daikondi province

<sup>82</sup> Joma Khan Naser, independent candidate from Nimroz province

candidates must be supported and funded by the government and the international community. Especially independent candidates should be supported; because they don't have the support of political parties."<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, other informants were also weary of the government's ability to fulfill such a role. "The government only supports wealthy people and the affiliates of political parties while ignoring the rest of us. We are completely disappointed because nobody cares about us. We need financial and spiritual support. We spend our own money in the election campaign, but we are not hopeful at all."<sup>84</sup>

### The main stakeholders of electoral reform

A considerable fraction of respondents (43%) said that "ordinary voters" should be the main beneficiaries of electoral reforms. 16% of respondents said that "the independent candidates" are the main stakeholders of the electoral reform", while another 11% of respondents said that "government officials" are the main beneficiaries of electoral reforms. About 10% of the respondents cited "political parties" as the main stakeholders and a small portion of the respondents (6%) said that the electoral reform will benefit "rich and powerful people". Meanwhile, 10% of the respondents declared that they "don't know". 2% of the respondents referred to other options.

Respondents make various comments such as: "the opposition parties will benefit from the electoral reform"; "the electoral reform will guarantee the stability of the government"; "it depends on the nature of reform and the leading figures"; "only time tells us what will happen"; "only God knows what will happen." One particular respondent said that, "Gulbuddin Hekmatyar will benefit the electoral reform as he plans to ally with the Taliban and kill people". Another respondent said that, "if the process of reform is transparent, it will benefit the nation" (Figure 30). These comments reveal an uneasiness about the possibility of reforms being abused by various interested actors.

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<sup>83</sup> Mohammad Hasan Sardash, independent candidate from Faryab province

<sup>84</sup> Gul Ahmad Farahi, independent candidate from Farah province

### In your view who are the main stakeholders of the expected electoral reforms?

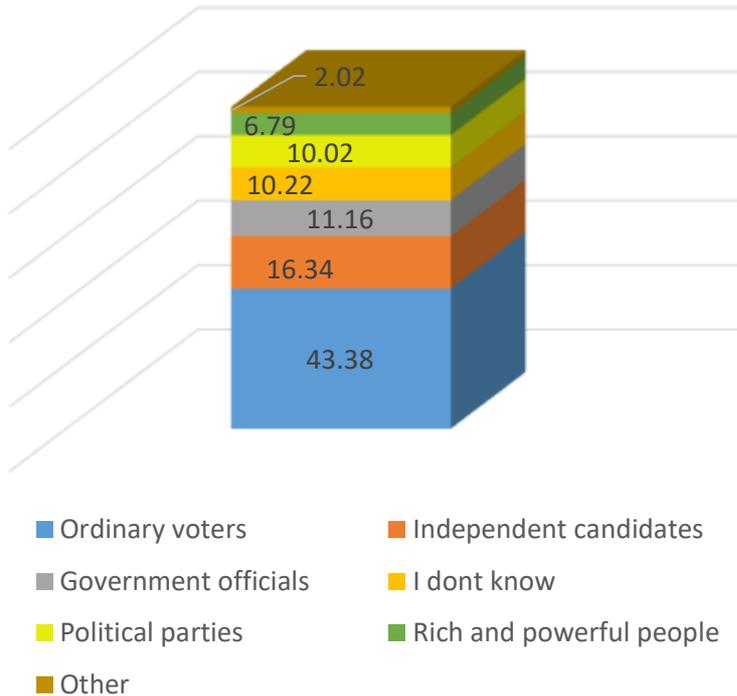


Figure 30: The main stakeholders of the electoral reform

The data shows that most of the respondents consider the notion of electoral reform as something positive that entails rewards for various political players, especially ordinary voters and the independent candidates. Nonetheless, there was no shortage of apprehension that any reform may end up working in the interest of a small and powerful group of officials.

One of the goals of reform should be to provide voters with greater knowledge of the elections process, since this understanding remains at its infancy throughout the country. “Both voters and candidates lack proper knowledge about their roles and responsibilities. The Election

Commission can hold workshops to train people on the matter. The parliamentary candidates should be trained about their responsibilities as MPs. But the Election Commission should not be influenced by politicians. Currently, the rules of procedures of the Election Commission is flawed and needs to be reconsidered.”<sup>85</sup>

#### **IV. Statements**

##### **Identification of the electorate**

In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to state their viewpoints regarding a set of statements about their personal and communal political situation. Table 12, shows the prevailing trends according to their responses.

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<sup>85</sup> Samiullah Ahmadzai, independent candidate from Paktia province

Statements		The rate of approval		
		Yes	No	Not Sure
s1	I understand the role of the parliament in Afghanistan.	62%	30%	6%
s2	In parliamentary elections I trust whom you vote for.	59%	20%	18%
s3	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of my personal relationship with the candidates.	29%	61%	8%
s4	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of the candidate's relationship with my community.	69%	20%	10%
s5	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of promises of the candidates.	46%	36%	17%
s6	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I accept the instruction given by my political party, telling me who to vote and how to vote.	20%	65%	13%
s7	My community solves all of its problems without relying on the MPs.	53%	30%	15%
s8	My parliamentary representative is interested in my opinion and the opinions of my community.	28%	49%	22%
s9	In the next parliamentary elections, I will vote for women candidates.	74%	14%	10%
s10	Women should be given reserved seats in the parliament.	69%	24%	5%

*Table 12: Statements on the voters' personal and communal political situation*

One trend revealed by the data is that more than half of the respondents (62%) believed that they knew the role of parliament. This finding stands

at odds with other responses that revealed that voters had little idea about the political orientation of candidates (figures 15, 16, 17). Furthermore, despite the various criticisms on the current electoral system, more than half of the respondents (59%) say that in parliamentary elections they will trust whom they vote for. Also the promises of the candidates during election campaigns are still considered to be important by nearly half of the respondents (46%).

The general perspective towards the role of women in parliamentary elections is another interesting development. About three-quarters of respondents (74%) stated that in the next round of parliamentary elections, they would vote – or at least consider voting – for women candidates. Further, more than two-thirds of respondents stressed their approval for the quota seats for women in the parliament (69%). Interestingly, in both cases more male than female respondents state their support for women in parliament (Figure 31).

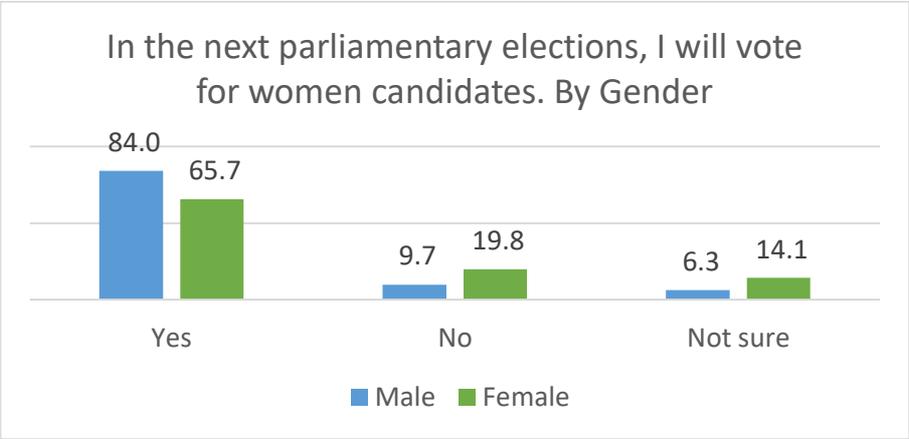
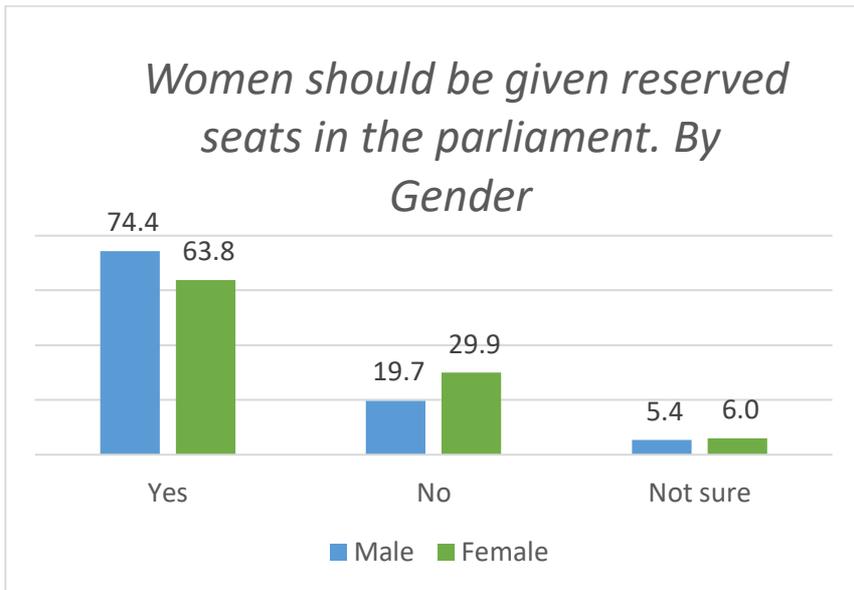


Figure 31: Willingness to vote for women candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections



*Figure 32: Women should hold quota seats in the parliament*

As one can observe, female respondents are less optimistic about the role of women in parliament than male respondents. They are also slightly less supportive than male respondents of seat quota for women in parliament (Figure 32). While 19% of the female respondents declared that they will not vote for women candidates, 29% of the female respondents stated that they are against the quota seats for women in parliament. While one could interpret this as women being less supportive than men of female candidates, from another angle, it could be interpreted that by altering the rule of quota seats for women in parliament, female respondents are seeking more a competitive role for women candidates in parliamentary elections.<sup>86</sup>

Respondents provided differing views on the quota system for women MPs. Some supported this approach stating, “Given the fact that women

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<sup>86</sup> While the idea of a quota systems is to encourage women to vote, it also acts as an effective ceiling, since under the current system, the number of seats allocated for women cannot exceed the quota.

comprise half of the population, it is necessary to improve their status in elected institutions. At least two to three women from every province must enter the parliament; during the past decades women have been deprived and suppressed politically and culturally. This is the obligation of both the government and the citizens to improve the status of women in society.”<sup>87</sup> Others noted that while a quota may encourage women candidates, it could potentially act as a ceiling and prevent participation. “Women’s political rights are being limited through the rule of quota seats. On the one hand, it guarantees two seats for woman candidates in each province, while on the other hand, it prevents other female contenders from taking part in open competition. I think besides the quota seats, female candidates should also be given the opportunity for entering the parliament in open competition.”<sup>88</sup>

While great participation of women in elections may be desirable by some, those individuals also recognize the challenges women face in the elections process. “Our sisters have the same electoral rights as our brothers do. But unfortunately the situation is not ready for their meaningful participation in the elections. In some places, voting centers are so far away from the people and some families impose travel restrictions on their female members. In other instances, male members of the family force females to vote for certain candidates.”<sup>89</sup> “Giving women quota seats in parliamentary elections is a good thing. But women also must have their own motivation and feel secure to participate in the elections. Nowadays, in many parts of the country women even don’t have national ID cards; they don’t have money and means necessary to take advantage of their own political rights.”<sup>90</sup> A female senator noted that, “If women are given roles in political parties, they can improve their status. With regards to women’s rights, unfortunately it is only on paper. Women’s rights in practice are being ignored and undermined. Personally,

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<sup>87</sup> Tahmina Shojaa, independent candidate from Faryab province

<sup>88</sup> Abdullatif Pedram, political party candidate from Badakhshan province

<sup>89</sup> Samiullah Ahmadzai, independent candidate from Paktia province

<sup>90</sup> Ahmad Jawid Rafaat, independent candidate from Farah province

I am happy that as a women senator, I have been able to play an effective role in the upper house of the parliament.”<sup>91</sup>

The fact that over two-thirds of respondents (69%) think of their community relationship with the parliamentary candidates shows that social and cultural bonds play an important role in the decision-making of the electorates. Nonetheless, more than half of the respondents (53%) reported that their communities do not rely on their MPs to solve community problems. Moreover, about half of the respondents (49%) do not think that their MPs are interested in having their opinions heard. This finding would suggest that while electorates are *in theory* hopeful their elected officials will represent their needs, they are fully aware that *in practice* these MPs lack accountability, and thus electorates do not hold expectations on the continued engagement of elected MPs in their community’s ongoing affairs. The data also suggests that most of the respondents prefer to practice their voting right according to their own conscience, rather than being instructed by political parties (statement 6).

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<sup>91</sup> Rohgul Khairzad, independent candidate from Nimroz province

## Emerging Trends in Election Participation

### Voting Experience vs. Experience with MPs

The study reveals a clear distinction between the experience that voters have in participating in elections, which has generally been positive, as opposed to their experience with their MPs, which has been far more negative. When asked about parliamentary elections, 62% of respondents had previously voted in parliamentary elections (figure 4). Moreover, 69% expressed their interest in participating in future parliamentary elections, with a further 16% still undecided (figure 6). This information corresponds with the overall experience individuals have with the elections process. Nearly 50% of individuals were satisfied with the process as opposed to 44% who were dissatisfied (figure 14). Moreover, over 80% of these respondents were happy with the performance of general voters. Respondents thus generally express an overall sense of contentment with the elections process and their willingness to participate (in greater numbers) in upcoming parliamentary elections. This finding is consistent with previous qualitative studies that distinguish between ‘elections’ and ‘democracy’.<sup>92</sup> Whereas the notion of ‘democracy’ has a negative connotation associated with ‘foreign’ and ‘western’ interference, the notion of ‘elections’ remains more positive, as it allows individuals a means of participating in political governance.

The data reveals a number of further trends in voting experience. First of all, voters showed little knowledge of the political orientation of candidates. Figure 33 (below) clearly shows that both urban and rural voters alike were overwhelmingly unaware of the political orientation of their candidates. Their impetus for voting thus must have been otherwise – they may have wanted to gain the experience of participating in elections or their community elders (particularly in rural areas) may have encouraged them to vote for a particular candidate.

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<sup>92</sup> Anna Larson, “Deconstruction ‘Democracy’ in Afghanistan”.

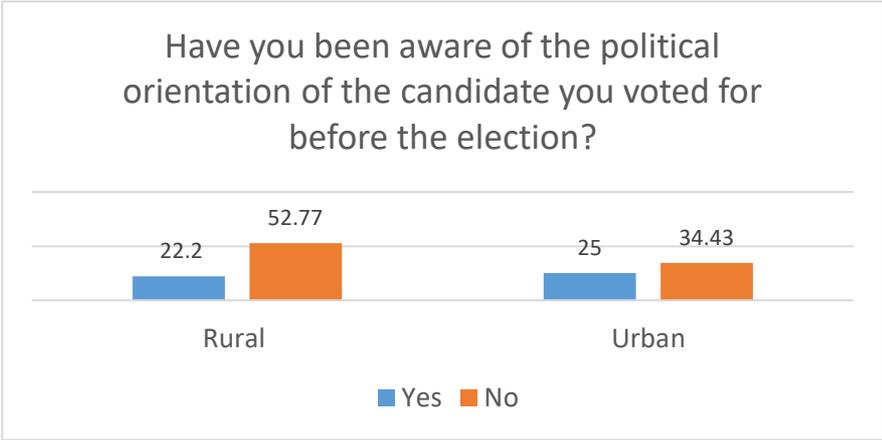


Figure 33: Awareness of political orientation of candidates in rural and urban areas

Second, variations exist amongst different ethnicities on their interest in participating in elections. The order of interest of groups interested in voting in future elections is Hazara (76.5%), Uzbek (69.1%), Tajik (65.3%), and Pashtun (62.1%). The fact that Hazaras expressed the greatest interest in participation may be attributed to the higher level of education amongst many Hazaras, better security in certain geographic areas populated by Hazaras in the provinces,<sup>93</sup> and the comparatively better level of organization amongst Hazara political groups, which translates into the mobilizing of supporters.

Experience with MPs, as opposed to the elections process, was overwhelmingly negative. Individuals, whether or not they voted, voiced their overwhelming dissatisfaction with their MPs (figures 10 & 11). Similarly, the majority of respondents commented on how their community would resolve internal problems without the help of their MPs (figure 32, s7) and that their MP was not interested in their opinion or that of their community (figure 32, s8). Individuals thus have an overall low opinion on the ability of their MP to present their needs. Overwhelmingly,

<sup>93</sup> Security in the provinces is emphasized here since within Kabul, the Hazara community has disproportionately been the target of attacks and insurgency.

respondents felt that once elected, MPs would simply pursue their own political interests (figure 13). While this problem can be attributed to a variety of factors, it is likely exacerbated by prevailing perceptions about the accountability of MPs. The greatest proportion of respondents (31.4%) felt that MPs were accountable to the nation, whereas only about a quarter (24.48%) of respondents felt that the MPs were primarily responsible to their constituents. Given that so few individuals felt that MPs were accountable to their constituents, it should not be a surprise that MPs failed in fulfilling this role, as indicated in the overall disappointment in their performance. Furthermore, even though widespread dissatisfaction was felt towards MPs, respondents overwhelmingly indicated their trust for the MP they voted for (figure 32, s2). This may be because candidates for whom respondents voted may have failed to win a seat.

Furthermore, the data also revealed a number of paradoxes on making MPs more accountable. First of all, while individuals felt that MPs follow their own personal interests rather than that of their constituents, they also strongly preferred (63%) educated and independent candidates (figure 19). Independent candidates may seem to be a logical choice in holding the government accountable, but they are also more difficult to hold accountable than party candidates, the latter of whom are expected to at least follow party political orientations. Candidates of political parties, however, received support from merely 11% of respondents, which can be attributed to the low trust individuals have in political parties. This creates an overall problem in accountability, since distrust in political parties raises the dilemma of 'who guards the guardians.' Second, the largest proportion of respondents (44%), were in favor of the province as the electoral district, even though smaller provincial districts would more likely increase accountability (figure 24). Still, the data indicates that about half of the respondents were in favor of some other district formulation, since leaving open the possibility of change.

## Familiarity with the Current System

Afghanistan has now gone through two rounds of parliamentary elections, and it is clear from the data that individuals have developed a level of familiarity with the current system. First, individuals strongly opted for a ‘one person, one vote’ system. While the SNTV system follows this method of voting, so do other majoritarian systems. Of the available options, respondents were least interested in casting votes for political parties on a closed list. Second, individuals strongly opt for educated and independent candidates (62%), while expressing little interest in candidates from political parties (21%; figure 19). Third, amongst the possible vote-counting procedures, individuals were overwhelmingly interested in the current simple majority votes (figure 23). This counting procedure as followed by the SNTV may lead to the winning candidate holding a very small portion of the votes.<sup>94</sup> Fourth, respondents were most in favor of the current electoral district size of the province (44%; figure 24), though the fact that about half of the respondents preferred another district size indicates that some willingness for change exists.

These four findings show that despite the various misgivings that individuals have about the elections process and elected officials, recent past experience with parliamentary elections has played a role in shaping the expectations of respondents. The electorate strongly supports a majoritarian model of voting, while also preferring independent candidates to political parties. For many individuals in the country (particularly those born during or after the Mujahedeen period in the 1990s), experience with and exposure to elections remains limited. The SNTV system represents a means – and arguably, a successful means – at slowly reconfiguring individuals’ mindsets toward the importance of elections for overall governance.

Any electoral reforms must take into consideration the significance of the existing support for the current system. As Reynolds and Carey write, “One

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas H. Johnson “The Illusion of Afghanistan’s Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Elections”, *Journal of Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2018, Vol 29, Issue 1.

of the central tenets of electoral reform is to avoid wholesale overhauls and, as far as possible, to build on existing institutions and experience.”<sup>95</sup> The main change that individuals seek in electoral reform is simplifying the voting process (33%), which would imply building on what people already know rather than introducing radical changes to the system (figure 30). Given the low level of general education throughout Afghanistan and the limited exposure that most people have to the notion of constitutional governance, radical reforms are more likely to confuse and frustrate rather than promote the elections process. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the respondents note the second most desired objective of electoral reform should be an ‘overall change to the political system’ (27%; figure 30). This would imply a high level of dissatisfaction amongst many individuals with the current political arrangements, which may be an indication that potentially drastic electoral reforms would be viewed negatively. Still, the safer route would be to progressively introduce reforms while increasing overall knowledge about the elections process amongst the general population across the country.

### Party Politics: Idealism vs. Reality

A clear distinction exists between what people desire from political parties and their actual experience with parties. While individuals may believe that political parties in theory have a role to play in building the nation, they express clear and overwhelming distrust for such parties in practice. Political parties are viewed as an essential ingredient in the majority of functioning democracies worldwide. Afghans too recognize that political parties have the potential to strengthen the nation. When asked about the key characteristics of viable political parties, the largest proportion of respondents felt that they should serve national interests (39%), while an additional 16% felt that political parties should serve electorates (figure 25). Thus, a combined 55% of respondents felt that political parties could have a role in the political system. Nonetheless, this aspiration has been a

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<sup>95</sup> Reynolds and Carey, “Fixing Afghanistan’s Electoral System”, p. 18.

difficult one to achieve. Tellingly, this same figure found that a quarter of individuals would never vote for political parties.

Overwhelmingly, the data very clearly conveys the deep mistrust that continues to exist with respect to political parties. Only 11% felt that their most trusted candidate would be from a political party, as opposed to 63% who supported individual candidates (figure 19). Political parties are thus clearly not the driving factor in the choice of candidates. One of the roles of political parties is to hold candidates accountable to the party platform. However, few respondents felt that candidates were responsible to political parties (4%; figure 12). Furthermore, when asked about the performance of different actors/bodies during past elections, individuals were least impressed with the performance of political parties (only 37% of respondents viewed them favorably; figure 14).<sup>96</sup> Of all provinces, Kabul seemed to have the most support for political parties, and even then, only amongst 16.8% of the Kabul-based respondents (figure 20).

The strong resistance to political parties presents clear challenges in having them play a central role of the choice of voting system. Voters were not interested in voting for political parties in elections, whether through an open-list (11% support) or closed-list (7% support) system; rather, they overwhelmingly preferred voting for independent candidates (54%; figure 21). Furthermore, a mere 8% of people felt that political parties should lead parliament (figure 27).

The clear implication of these findings is that political parties do not support national interests and for this reason, they fail to inspire confidence in voters. The current operating political parties are largely based on ethnicity rather than some clear national interest. The four leading parties, *Jamiat-i Islami*, *Hizb-i Islami*, *Hizb-i Wahdat*, and *Junbesh*, largely trace their support to Tajik, Pashtun, Hazara, and Uzbek patrons, respectively. The leaders of these parties have strong individual personas from their reputation as former mujahideen leaders and leading

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<sup>96</sup> The other actors/bodies assessed were individual candidates, Independent Election Commission and electorates, all of which viewed more positively.

community figures, continuing to wield considerable support amongst their patrons.<sup>97</sup> As mentioned earlier, one Uzbek respondent commented how he would vote according to the recommendations of ‘Baba Dustum’. The country does not host strong political parties with broad-based membership cutting across ethnic lines. While some such smaller groups exist such as *Hezb-e-Haq-wa-Edalat* (Truth & Justice Party),<sup>98</sup> they are largely overshadowed by ethnic-based parties.

Political parties are still viewed with great suspicion in Afghanistan. The public widely continues “to associate today’s political parties with the violence of 1979-2001”, leading to challenges in viewing “political parties as simple political entities rather than as fronts for military organization[.]”<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, individuals have a valid reason to be somewhat suspicious of political parties given their continued “lack of policy-based platforms and their reliance instead on the personality and patronage networks of the leader.”<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, there does not seem to be any clear trend that parties are moving towards more strongly developed platforms, as parties and their candidates remain fixated on short-term political gains through securing the most seats in parliament. Furthermore, the SNTV system may disincentivize certain opportunistic candidates from actively promoting party platforms since candidates are running against their fellow party members during elections, and vote splitting may very well adversely affect their chances of winning.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Anna Larson, “Political Parties in Afghanistan”, USIP March 2015, Special Report, p. 7

<sup>98</sup> *Hezb-e-Haq-wa-Edalat* consists of a coalition of dissidents who opposed the Hamid Karzai regime. It hosts a multiethnic membership and is not dominated by any particular group.

<sup>99</sup> Anna Larson, “Political Parties in Afghanistan”, p. 2

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Reynolds and Carey provide a clear and succinct explanation of the challenges political parties would face strategically putting forward several candidates in parliamentary elections, since an incorrect distribution of votes amongst candidates may have highly adverse effects on a party’s ability to secure the most possible seats. See Reynolds and Carey, “Fixing Afghanistan’s Electoral System”, p. 5.

**Selecting the Most Appropriate System**

Having looked at the survey answers and identified the salient trends that emerge from the data, this information may now be assessed against the theoretical framework proposed by Pippa Norris, which takes into account various objectives of government as well as voter expectations. The following chart assesses the various criteria put forward by Norris against the answers provided by respondents.

<p><b>Government effectiveness</b></p>	<p>Respondents clearly favored a majoritarian system. A simple majority vote for winning candidates was clearly preferred to other counting methods, such as allocating seats according to proportion of votes (figure 23).</p> <p>Tellingly, relatively few respondents (8%) felt that political parties should lead parliament. Instead, they overwhelmingly preferred that MPs be independent and have the ability to voice their own opinions (figure 27). Similarly, the vast majority of voters said they trusted and preferred voting for independent candidates, while only a small portion would consider voting for political parties (figures 19 &amp; 21). Furthermore, when asked to hypothesize about the best arrangements of political parties if they were presented in parliament, the largest proportion of voters opted for a single party (figure 28).</p> <p>Finally, respondents did not have a positive view of coalition governments. The largest proportion of voters felt that coalition governments would ‘slow down the effectiveness of the administration’ (figure 29). This assessment is in fact correct, since</p>
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	<p>coalition governments do slow down decision-making in an effort to reach consensus between parties. However, comparatively fewer respondents expressed “checks and balances” to be a primary effect of coalition governments (ibid.).</p> <p>In sum, respondents conveyed their strong preference for a majoritarian system. Coalition governments require the presence of political parties, and the data reveals the continued weariness amongst voters towards such parties. As a precursor to any discussion on a proportional voting system, the image and performance of political parties must first be improved.</p>
<p><b>Responsive and accountable government</b></p>	<p>While individuals were generally happy with their voting experience, they were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the performance of MPs (figures 11 &amp; 12). It was clear that respondents felt that MPs required greater accountability; respondents also felt that MPs would not represent individuals or communities but rather their own political interests (figure 13).</p> <p>One manner in which MPs may be held accountable is by allowing voters to vote out incumbents in subsequent elections (as advocated by majoritarian systems). Another means of ensuring accountability is having MPs follow party platforms. However, given the low trust that individuals have in political parties, this option remains problematic.</p>

	<p>In sum, respondents felt that MPs lack accountability, and a majoritarian system would best respond to their needs. Political parties continue to lack the requisite legitimacy to hold MPs accountable. One means of promoting accountability would be to reduce the size of constituencies. Furthermore, if political parties are able to strengthen their presence, they may be in a position to play a greater role, and subsequently proportional voting methods may gain more appeal.</p>
<p><b>Fairness to minority parties</b></p>	<p>Despite the many undesirable results of the SNTV system, one possible benefit (certainly not without controversy) is that it may be able to provide minority groups an opportunity to lobby behind a single candidate. Conversely, candidates coming from populous ethnic groups may risk losing if several hopeful candidates run in elections and split the votes of their patrons.</p> <p>A first-past-the-post system would raise the stakes for all voters as winning candidates would ‘take all’. Practically speaking, minorities would likely have less representation under such a system since majority groups would have a far stronger incentive to ensure votes are not split between voters from their groups. One way to protect minority groups is for elections officials to delineate electoral precincts specifically with such groups in mind. Since minorities conglomerate in particular areas; any such area should be included within a single electoral precinct rather than being divided amongst several precincts. For</p>

	<p>example, the Dashte Barchi area of west Kabul is predominately populated by the Hazara population; an electoral precinct should cover this entire area, not divide it into portions.</p> <p>While a proportional system may help to promote minority representation, political parties continue to lack widespread support amongst minority and majority groups alike.</p>
<p><b>Social representation</b></p>	<p>Respondents overwhelmingly supported the current practice of reserving seats for women in the parliament and even expressed their intention to vote for female candidates in the upcoming elections (figure 32). Furthermore, the data did not reveal ethnicity as a barrier when voting (figure 7).</p> <p>The current majoritarian system allows for social representation amongst various groups. The quota for women in the parliament is largely viewed positively amongst respondents as it ensures representation from groups that have historically played a much more limited role in politics.</p>

*Table 13: The various criteria put forward by Norris against the answers provided by respondents*

**Overall Assessment**

Overall, individuals remain strongly in favor of a majoritarian voting system. The major challenge in moving towards a proportional system is the poor image of political parties. Parties lack widespread trust and legitimacy amongst the population. Parties remain dominated by ethnic politics and are headed by strong individual personas who garner support from ethnically homogenous patrons. While voters view the role of political parties as representing national interests, the reality is that the

political parties remain consumed by myopic, short-term strategies that can help to secure the most seats. Political parties themselves also face difficulties due to the wider political environment, which does not provide them with adequate support to develop systematic operations.

However, this inclination towards a majoritarian system does not entail that the SNTV system is the best possible choice. It was clear that elected MPs were largely unaccountable to their constituents. One of the specific criticisms of the SNTV system is the low level of accountability it fosters amongst elected officials. Furthermore, the SNTV system arguably undermines the successful operation of political parties, since individuals from the same party are effectively running against one another in an attempt to secure the most votes. The system makes it very difficult for political parties to strategize and put forward several candidates in a single jurisdiction. At its core, the SNTV system favors strong individual figures over those associated with a party-wide political platform. The current setup thus creates a chicken-and-egg scenario. Individuals prefer majoritarian systems like the SNTV system because of their distrust for political parties, but political parties, in turn, are hampered from developing because of the nature of the SNTV system, which favors strong individuals.

**A first step** towards better accountability under a majoritarian system would be to reduce the size of the electoral district. The current electorate – the entire province – is too expansive an area for accountability to be effective. If MPs represented small geographic areas, then electorates in one area would not have to compete with electorates in another for the attention of their MPs. Consequently, electorates should benefit from better representation and better ability to keep their MPs accountable. Delineating electoral districts is a complex and sensitive process since it has a direct bearing on the outcome of elections. A move to making electoral districts small must be based on reliable population statistics and must be implemented by an independent, disinterested party. Elections management should avoid becoming involved in the delineation process as such an approach would risk being viewed as politicized. Local

communities must be consulted in this process rather than assuming to know their opinions.

To ensure that minority representation is preserved under the current system, particular care must be taken to ensure that the boundaries for electoral precincts does not divide a minority community. A minority community may constitute a sizeable minority or even majority within its precinct, thus helping to ensure representation.

**A second, more progressive reform** would be to adopt a first-past-the-post system by having candidates in (smaller) electoral precincts competing for a single candidacy position. This significant reform is the only way to address some of the major shortcomings of the SNTV system. The survey of voters emphasized how MPs are largely unaccountable towards their constituents. Furthermore, the SNTV system encourages political membership based on ethnicity and prevents the development of parties based with broad-based memberships that pursue national interests. The FPTP system is a step towards remedying both of these problems. Constituents would have a single MP to hold accountable in parliament. Candidates would only be competing against individuals in their electoral precinct, raising the possibility of political allegiances across precincts. Furthermore, the first-past-the-post system still preserves the ‘one person, one vote’ rule, as it provides individuals with a single vote, which they cast for a single candidate, with the winning candidate receiving a simple majority. It must be noted that the FPTP system alone does not create political parties. Rather, it allows for them to gain momentum, unlike the SNTV system, which works against the development of political parties.

The quota for women in parliament should be maintained (and, indeed, any change to the quota would require a constitutional amendment). For female candidates, they should continue to be selected under the SNTV system at the moment. This means that votes cast for male candidates would go towards the FPTP system, while votes cast for female candidates would be assessed using the SNTV system. The reason for this arrangement is that with smaller electoral districts, not enough seats are

allotted for females in the parliament for a representative to come from each district. The current SNTV system helps to ensure equitable distribution of candidates from different provinces. Furthermore, voters will still only have to cast one ballot, and whether they vote for a male or female, the overall system will still preserve 'one person, one vote'.<sup>102</sup> Over time, this arrangement for female candidates should change with sub-provincial constituencies being specified for female candidates to run in single-seat constituency elections. For the moment, this 'combined' approach (FPTP for male candidates and SNTV for female candidates) would not impede the development of political parties, since the FPTP system would represent the majority of seats in parliament, and for candidates under this system, the conditions are better suited for the development of parties. Whether or not they seize this opportunity is their individual prerogative.

**The third recommended reform** is for the government to introduce laws regarding political parties. The objective of these laws must promote the accountability and transparency of political parties and their leaders. The development of broad-based, multiethnic parties that pursue national interests is a political project that will not be achieved overnight. Rather, change is more likely to take place incrementally as parties see benefits in forming new allegiances. Political parties must be regulated by law to promote their transparency and accountability. Laws and regulations can ensure that political parties have a mechanism for electing leaders, decision-making, holding individuals accountable, and transparency of finances. Political parties are essential for the proper functioning of the country and to keep the government accountable. Once broad-based

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<sup>102</sup> One small complication could arise if a female candidate receives more votes than the leading male candidate in the single-member constituency in her locale, but less votes than the required number to gain a seat in the parliament under the SNTV where she is competing against other female candidates. While this complication is highly unlikely, one way around it is to have female candidates be a part of both systems. Female candidates would first be assessed under the FPTP system, and those who have not won (which would represent the vast majority them) would then be assessed under the SNTV system. Another alternative would be to have all women part of the SNTV system except if they declare their interest in participating in the FPTP system.

political parties gain a footing in the country, other electoral arrangements such as a proportional system – which first requires the operation and support of broad-based political parties – may be given further consideration.

**The fourth recommendation** is to have the Afghan government take ownership of elections by having disputes resolved through the appropriate mechanism. The IEC and ECC must be able to fulfill their mandates without interference by outside actors. To date, many elections disputes have been resolved through mediation and the involvement of strong political actors (both national and international) while ignoring mechanisms established for this purpose, thus undermining their credibility and operability. The result is that elections bodies lack any teeth to carry out their mandate.

**Finally**, voters must be educated on the role of political parties and their voting power in elections since if enough voters seek change in the way parties operate, then parties may feel the urge to alter their dynamics.

## Conclusion

### Recommended Electoral Reforms

- The first recommendation is to have smaller electoral districts, as this will help to promote better accountability. To ensure minority representation, these smaller districts must maintain the unity of any minority community and avoid splitting them across different precincts.
- The second recommendation is to move towards a 'mixed' FPTP and SNTV system. Male candidates would participate in a single-member constituency system, with only one winning candidate representing the constituency. To maintain female representation in the parliament, female candidates would continue to run in a province-wide SNTV system. This system would help promote great accountability and also lay the initial condition for the development of broad-based political parties, though this reform alone would not promote such parties.
- The third recommended reform is for the government and parliament to introduce laws regarding political parties. These laws must ensure that political parties have a clear national mandate, elections for leadership positions, protocol for holding individuals accountable, and transparency in their source of funding. Once broad-based political parties gain a footing in the country, other electoral arrangements such as a proportional system may be given further consideration.

### General Recommendations

- The Afghan parliament needs to be improved through electoral reforms. Electorates in various constituencies across rural and urban areas and different demographic stratifications are considerably in favor of participating in parliamentary elections. They also appreciate the objective electoral reforms.
- Safeguarding the elections process must be preserved in any meaningful electoral reform. This supervisory role is specifically

the responsibility of the Independent Election Commission. The various stakeholders, including political parties, ordinary voters, incumbent MPs, and the government as a whole, must each play their role to ensure a fair and transparent elections process. Reforming the electoral system will not bring about significant changes if the elections process is not safeguarded by the various interested players.

- A timeline for implementation of electoral reforms is needed in order to give various stakeholders adequate time to adjust their election strategies. Proper scheduling is essential to ensure that the reform process is transparent and debated. Reforming the electoral system just prior to an election is highly inadvisable.<sup>103</sup> The parliamentary ruling that prohibits voting on the electoral law in the last administrative year of incumbent parliament should be respected.
- In order to fix inconsistencies within the electoral system, reforms should be initiated through an overall review of the electoral framework, encompassing various local and national elections across the spectrum of political decision-making processes. A comprehensive review of the electoral framework could also provide insights on reforming the entire political system. The choice of electoral system should entail long-term objectives rather than being fixated on short-term considerations.
- In order to have a functioning parliament and responsible MPs, electorates must be better educated on the role of elections for themselves and their communities. Overwhelmingly, voters clearly conveyed that they did not know the political platform of the candidates when they voted. It is the responsibility of both activists and politicians to improve the knowledge of the elections process

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<sup>103</sup> The unexpected announcement of the Election Commission on June 25, 2018 that Ghazni province shall be divided into three smaller constituencies, was an example of arbitrary decision-making. It sparked a bitter debate about the negative consequences of such decisions on certain ethnic groups. But in particular, the Election Commission's decision was contrary to article 36 of the election law, which asserts that the status of the electoral districts should be determined 180 days before holding the elections.

amongst voters. Providing electoral trainings should be considered an important activity before holding any elections. Electoral training is also an opportunity for various players to improve their relationship with their constituencies. Knowledgeable voters will be less susceptible to external interferences during Election Day.

### **Enhancing Accountability**

- The electoral reform should not only be considered as a matter of “technical distribution of parliamentary seats to the winners of the elections or the issue of “vote casting methods in Election Day”. Electoral reforms must be geared at empowering the electorates, both through the vote casting and seat distribution methods during the elections process, and the decision-making procedures inside the parliament once the election is over. New mechanisms are required to ensure that incumbent MPs remain accountable to their constituents and that they engage in parliamentary politics in a manner that promotes national interests rather than personal gains.
- The electoral boundaries should facilitate a meaningful relationship between the electorates and the MPs. Currently, province-wide districts exist in parliamentary elections, and multiple candidates each represent entire provinces. This arrangement drastically reduces any sense of responsibility on the party of the elected MPs. It also hampers the ability of communities to remain connected with elected officials. Smaller districts would be a first step towards helping to promote greater accountability.
- Various proportional representation (open list, closed list, free) and mixed voting systems including “MMPR”<sup>104</sup>, “MDR”<sup>105</sup>, and

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<sup>104</sup> Multi-member proportional (MMPR) is a PR electoral system based on two ballots and two counts, the first is under FPP in small constituencies, the second under PR-list, is in larger regional or national constituencies.

<sup>105</sup> Multi-dimensional representing; Under the MDR system, in theory, there could be four categories of candidates: 1) independent individuals; 2) list of ad hoc alliance of individuals; 3) list of party candidates and; 4) list of a coalition of parties. The list would

“PR-STV”<sup>106</sup> could be considered as alternatives to the current SNTV. The SNTV system causes a very large proportion of votes (often well above 50%) to be wasted. Furthermore, this system hampers the development of political parties, the latter of which is crucial for a functioning democratic political arrangement. However, change must be introduced gradually. The population is just being introduced to the notion of elections, and thus drastic changes may risk undermining the efforts in fostering a widespread elections culture. Individuals are strongly in favor of a majoritarian system, and thus proposed electoral reforms must take this factor into account.

### **Fostering Political Parties**

- In order for political parties to be able to play an enhanced role in parliamentary politics, they need to be reformed and oriented towards national programs and agendas. In this way, they may be able to gain widespread support and trust of the electorates across various constituencies. The current dilemma is that while individuals hope political parties will work towards national interests, they are well aware that the current practice is for parties to be formed around strong political figures with a large number of ethnically homogeneous patrons. Furthermore, the SNTV system does not encourage candidates to work together – an essential aspect of political parties – since all candidates in a single province are competing against one another. Both voters and political parties are trapped within this system of political patronage based on strong individual figures. Reducing the sizes of

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be open and voters would still vote for individuals, but determining the winners would be done in two steps – first counting how many seats the best-performing lists had earned and then awarding seats to the individuals on these lists with the most votes. Please see: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistan-election-conundrum-5-a-late-demand-to-change-the-electoral-system>, accessed on April 30, 2018.

<sup>106</sup> The Single Transferable Vote (STV), where voters rank-order candidates in multi-member districts, is another well-established proportional system.

districts may help to create greater incentive for cooperation amongst individuals working in various districts. Furthermore, while the STNV system has support, it must also be weighed against options such as the single-constituency (first-past-the-post) options, since such an arrangement would remain consistent with the strong desire for Afghans to have “one vote for one candidate” while also more strongly supporting the development of political parties as compared with the current arrangement.

- Amongst other things, political parties could introduce a gender quota in their electoral lists and try to effectively engage people in elections campaigning. Afghans support the current gender quota system as a means of promoting representation from a particular underrepresented group. A gender quota amongst parties could be a means to maintain the presence of women but also loosen the current gender quota in parliament, which would then allow for more flexibility in reforms.

## Annexes

### ANNEX 1- The survey's questionnaire

#### **PART 1: Questions (Note: Check one option to answer each question, except said otherwise.)**

- 1- What type of elections first comes to your mind when talking about elections?
- a) Presidential elections      b) Parliamentary elections      c) Provincial council elections  
d) District elections      e) Village council elections      f) Elections of mayor and municipality council elections      g) Other      h) None
- 2- What type of elections is most important for you?
- a) Presidential elections      b) Parliamentary elections      c) Provincial council elections  
d) District elections      e) Village council elections      f) Elections of mayor and municipality council elections      g) Other      h) None
- 3- Have you ever voted in Parliamentary Election?
- a) Yes      b) No
- 4- Did anyone assist or trained you in the voting process?
- a) Yes      b) No
- If “yes”, how were you helped? Check all that apply
- a) Before the election day, I learned how to vote in a workshop held by the election commission
- b) Before the election day, I learned how to vote in a workshop held by a political party
- c) Before the Election Day, I learned how to vote in a workshop held by an NGO.

- d) Before the Election Day, I learned how to vote in a meeting held by my favorite candidate.
- e) An official from the polling station helped me out in the Election Day.
- f) Someone affiliated with my preferred candidate, helped me out in the Election Day.
- g) Some other voter helped me out in the Election Day.
- h) I learned how to vote from my family members and friends
- i) Other. Please explain

5- If you have voted, are you satisfied with the work of your parliamentary representatives?

- a) Yes            b) No            c) Somehow

A) If you have voted, have you ever benefited from the efforts of your Parliamentary representatives?

- a) Yes            b) No            c) Somehow

6- If you have not voted, are you satisfied with the work of the MPs?

- a) Yes            b) No            c) Somehow

A) If you have not voted, have you ever benefited from the efforts of the MPs?

- a) Yes            b) No            c) Somehow

7- If you have voted, have you been aware of the political orientation of the candidate you voted for before the election?

- a) Yes            b) No

8- Was it convenient to vote relative to the location of the polling place and the times to vote?

- a) Yes            b) No            c) Somehow good

9- How do you judge the following components of Afghanistan's electoral system?

<b>Please mark in the table!</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Very Bad</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
The entire election process					
The candidates that run					
The Political Parties					
The Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan					
The electors					

10- Are you interested in getting actively involved in elections campaigning in favor of any particular candidate or political party?

- a) Yes      b) No      c) Not sure yet

11- Are you willing to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections?

- a) Yes      b) No      c) Not sure yet

12- Which Type of candidates do you trust?

- Candidates of political parties'
- Candidates from my own ethnic group
- Candidates from my own neighborhood/district
- Powerful and politically influential candidates
- Famous and rich candidates
- Educated candidates
- Other candidates (please explain)

Non

13- What type of voting systems you prefer for casting your vote in parliamentary elections?

- a) You got one choice ;you cast your vote for a political party
- b) You got one choice ;You cast your vote for your favorite candidate in a political party
- c) You got one choice; you cast your vote for your favorite independent candidate
- d) You got several choices; you cast your vote according to your preferences for several candidates
- e) Other. please explain
- f) I don't know.

14- What kind of vote counting procedures you prefer for parliamentary elections?

- a) The winner of the election should win an absolute majority
- b) The winner of the election should win a simple majority
- c) Each candidate should be given a share of parliamentary seats proportional to its percentage of votes
- e) Other. Please explain
- f) I don't know.

15- What is the best formula for defining the electoral districts?

- a) Each province should be considered as one constituency; existing formula ( each province is considered as one constituency and the number of seats equates the number of population)
- b) Single member electoral districts; (one seat for one electoral district)
- c) Multi member electoral districts; Dividing the current electoral districts into smaller constituencies (each constituency holding about 4 to 5 seats)

- d) Multi member electoral districts; Dividing the electoral districts into larger constituencies
- e) Electoral districts should be divided based on ethno-cultural concerns; single seat
- f) Electoral districts should be divided based on ethno-cultural concerns; multi member
- g) Other. please explain
- h) I don't know.

16- Have you heard of coalition governments?

Yes    b) No    c) not sure

A) In your view, what would be the effect of coalition governments?

- a) Coalition governments would slow down the effectiveness of the administration and also create in fighting.
- b) Coalition governments would create checks and balances between parties.
- c) Coalition governments would speed up the work of the administration.
- d) Coalition governments could have no result.
- e) Coalition governments could end up in dictatorship.
- f) Other. please explain
- g) I don't know.

17- If you vote for a political party in parliamentary elections, what type of political parties you prefer?

- a) I never vote for a political party.
- b) The political party should represent my ethnic community.
- c) The political party should represent your constituency.
- d) The political party should represent a certain ideology/religion.
- e) The political party should be devoted to the national interest.
- f) The political party should only serve the electorate and don't try to dictate anything.
- g) Other. please explain
- h) I don't know.

18- In your view who should lead the parliament?

- a) Political parties
- b) Parliamentary groups
- c) Independent MPs
- d) All MPs have their say
- e) Other. please explain
- f) I don't know.

19- If political parties run the parliament, what kind of arrangement you prefer?

- a) Having one big political party
- b) Having two big political parties
- c) Having two big political parties and other smaller political party around
- d) Having three strong political parties plus other smaller political parties around
- e) Having several political parties with somehow same strength
- f) Other. please explain
- g) I don't know.

20- If the current electoral system is to be reformed, what should be the ultimate outcome of the electoral reforms?

- a) Making the process of voting easier
- b) Overall change of the political system
- c) Improving the relationship between the MPs and the electorate
- d) Improving the status of the political parties
- e) Increasing the choices of the electorate in the voting process
- f) Other. please explain
- g) I don't know.

21- In your view who are the main stakeholders of the expected electoral reforms?

- a) Ordinary voters
- b) Government officials
- c) Political parties
- d) Independent candidates

- e) Rich and powerful people
- f) Other. please explain
- i) I don't know.

22- To whom – if anyone- are MPs currently accountable? Check all that apply

- a) They are accountable to their constituencies.
- b) They are accountable to the president.
- c) They are accountable to the political parties.
- d) They are accountable to the powerful and rich people.
- e) They are accountable to the nation
- f) They are accountable to the foreigners
- g) They are not accountable at all
- h) Other. please explain

23- What are the main problems with elected representatives in the national assembly? Check all that apply

- a) Once elected, he/she would follow his/her own personal interests.
- b) Once elected, he/she would follow his/her own group interests.
- c) It is not clear what constituency he/ she represents.
- d) The electoral system is corrupt, so the elected representatives are corrupt.
- e) The root cause is that most people are illiterate and don't vote sincerely
- f) Other. please explain
- g) I don't know.

**Yes/No Questions – Respond to each of the following questions with yes or no:**

Statements		Yes	No	Not Sure
s1	I understand the role of the parliament in Afghanistan.			
s2	In parliamentary elections I trust whom you vote for.			

s3	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of my personal relationship with the candidates.			
s4	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of the candidate's relationship with my community.			
s5	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I think of promises of the candidates.			
s6	When I vote in parliamentary elections, I accept the instruction given by my political party, telling me who to vote and how to vote.			
s7	My community solves all of its problems without relying on the MPs.			
s8	My parliamentary representative is interested in my opinion and the opinions of my community.			
s9	In the next parliamentary elections, I will vote for women candidates.			
s10	Women should be given reserved seats in the parliament.			

## **PART 2: Demographic Information**

Age	18- 30 <input type="radio"/>	31-45 <input type="radio"/>	46-60 <input type="radio"/>	61- max <input type="radio"/>
Marital status	Single <input type="radio"/>	Married <input type="radio"/>		
Ethnicity	Tajik <input type="radio"/>	Pashtun <input type="radio"/>	Hazara <input type="radio"/>	Uzbek <input type="radio"/>
Gender	Female <input type="radio"/>	Male <input type="radio"/>		
Province	Kabul <input type="radio"/>	Ghazni <input type="radio"/>	Mazar-e Sharif <input type="radio"/>	Qandahar <input type="radio"/>
	Hersat <input type="radio"/>	Jawzjan <input type="radio"/>	Bamian <input type="radio"/>	
Residency	Rural <input type="radio"/>	Urban <input type="radio"/>		

Education level	Illiterate <input type="radio"/> Primary school <input type="radio"/> Secondary school <input type="radio"/> High school <input type="radio"/> Bachelor's degree <input type="radio"/> Master's degree and higher <input type="radio"/> Religious education <input type="radio"/>
Occupation	Unemployed <input type="radio"/> Student <input type="radio"/> Housewife <input type="radio"/> Private sector <input type="radio"/> Government sector <input type="radio"/> Other <input type="radio"/>
Income level	None <input type="radio"/> 1- 10,000 Afghni <input type="radio"/> 11-20,000 Afghni <input type="radio"/> 21-40,000 Afghni <input type="radio"/> 41-70,000 Afghni <input type="radio"/> 71-100,000 Afghni <input type="radio"/> 101,000-max Afghni <input type="radio"/>

## ANNEX 2- Qualitative questions guide

### **Part 1: Key Informant Personal Information**

- 1- **Name:** .....
- 2- **Education level:** -----
- 3- **Candidature type:**
  - a) Independent candidate
  - b) Party candidate
  - c) Civil society candidate
  - d) Other ( Please specify):
- 4- **Residency:**
  - a) Original residency (City, District, Village)
  - b) Current residency (City, District, Village)
  
- 5- **Contact:**
  - a) Phone Number:
  - b) Email Address:

### **Pat 2: questions:**

1. What are the advantages & disadvantages of the current electoral system? Please explain.
  
2. A) What is your opinion about the enhancement of the role of political parties in parliamentary elections?  
B) Are political parties able to utilize the current electoral system in their advantage? Please explain.
  
3. A) What is your opinion about the role of independent candidates in parliamentary elections?  
B) Are independent candidates able to utilize the current electoral system in their advantage? Please explain.
  
4. What is your opinion about the status of women in the electoral system? Please explain.

5. Does the current electoral system work for the ordinary voters?  
Please explain.
  
6. A) What reforms should be implemented in order to improve the electoral system?  
B) What should be the main and ultimate purpose of reforming the current electoral system?
  
7. A) Are you familiar with various voting systems for electing MPs?  
B) What would be the best voting system for electing MPs? Why?
  
8. A) What do you think about the way the MPs debate issues in the parliament? Is it satisfactory or not? Please explain.  
B) Are there any alternative ways to improve the debate methods in the parliament?
  
9. A) Where do you focus your electoral campaigns in the upcoming parliamentary elections? Among whom?  
B) Whom do you expect to vote for you in the upcoming parliamentary elections?  
C) Where do you get your electoral campaign funding from?
  
10. As a parliamentary candidate, what do you want from the government? What is your expectation from the government?

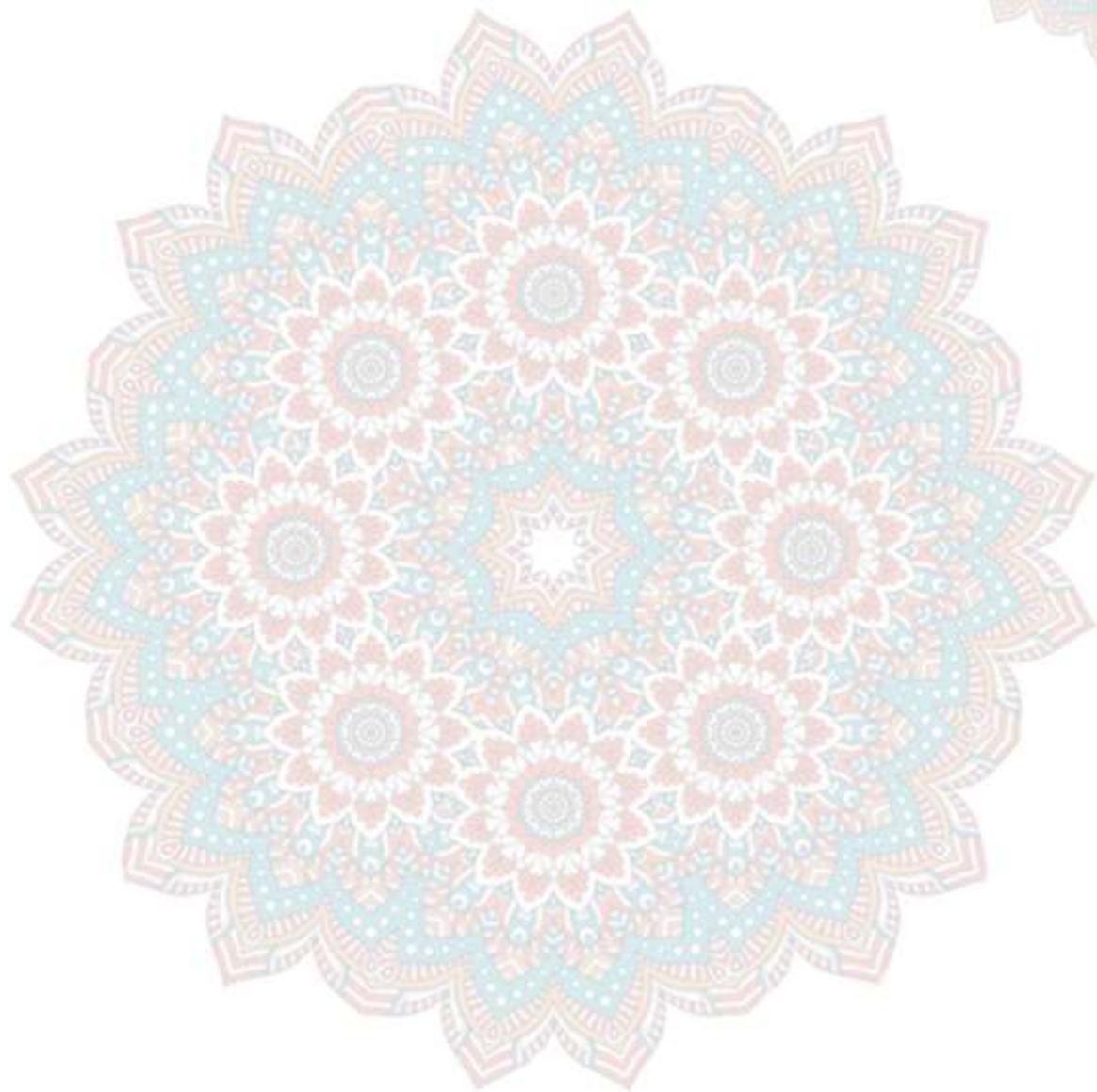
## **Authors Biographies**

### **Mohammad Irfani**

Mohammad Irfani, AISS researcher, graduated from Ibne Sina University (Kabul, 2013) majoring in sociology, and currently is doing a MA program on IR; Politics and Security at OSCE Academy in Bishkek. He is a founding member of “Afghanistan Sociology Group “which is an independent organization (Website: Padidarha). During his career he worked on “Religious Radicalization Trends”, “Peace Process and reconciliation”, “Constitutional political system” and “Regional studies”. Previously, he has co-authored three AISS research papers including: “Social Media and Articulation of Radical Narratives in Afghanistan (2015)”, “Afghanistan’s Constitution and Society in Transition (2016)”, and “The Challenging Path towards Democracy in Afghanistan; An Assessment and Critique of National Debates on Alternative Political Systems in Afghanistan (2017)”.

### **Nafay Choudhury**

Nafay Choudhury is a research fellow at AISS and a PhD Researcher at King’s College London. His thesis, funded by the SSHRC (Canada) and Modern Law Review, involves an ethnography of Afghanistan’s money exchangers to understand how trust relationships may sustain complex financial transactions. His research explores issues of social and legal ordering, economic exchange, identity, and legal development. He is currently a resident Research Fellow at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies. Nafay was previously Assistant Professor of Law at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), where he taught and researched in the areas of contract law, legal pluralism, legal education, Islamic education (particularly madrasas), sociology of law, legal development, and the rule of law. He joined AUAF as a Postdoctoral Fellow of the Afghanistan Legal Education Project at Stanford Law School, playing a central role in establishing Afghanistan’s first English-medium law program. He has contributed peer-reviewed articles to *Asian Journal of Law & Society*, *Suffolk Transnational Law Review*, *Afghan Journal of Legal Studies* (forthcoming), and *Religion, State & Society*.



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