

PEACEWORKS



Assessing Afghanistan's 2019 Presidential Election

By Colin Cookman



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 166 | AUGUST 2020

PEACEWORKS

NO. 166 | AUGUST 2020



ABOUT THE REPORT

Drawing on an original set of Afghanistan elections data, this report analyzes the September 2019 Afghan presidential election, focusing on questions related to access to the elections, the counting and vote invalidation process, and political trends compared to the 2018 parliamentary and 2014 presidential elections. Work was supported by the Afghanistan program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: An Afghan man marks a ballot at a polling station in Kabul during the September 28, 2019 presidential election. (AP Photo/Rahmat Gul)

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Peaceworks No. 166. First published 2020.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-820-3





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Summary



Afghanistan's current electoral system structures Afghan political competition, shapes election-day outcomes, and exists in relation to—or at a disconnect from—other processes of competition between organized interest groups in Afghanistan. Drawing on a unique set of results data from the September 2019 presidential election and past elections, this report analyzes where and how prospective Afghan voters were able to participate in the 2019 polls, the decision making behind and adjudication of disputes over which votes would be counted as valid, and how the available results compare with political trends evident in prior elections.

Many factors, including worsening security, polling center closures, tighter voter registration requirements, and modest campaign mobilization efforts, all combined to produce an outcome that suggests Afghan public participation in the 2019 presidential election fell to the lowest levels observed in the past fifteen years, raising serious questions as to the representativeness of the current political order. New reform measures offer the potential for greater confidence than in past elections in the integrity and validity of the final 2019 vote figures, but these controls also pose an accessibility trade-off. Discrepancies and transparency gaps still persist around some of the key decisions made on the part of electoral administration authorities to obtain the final results.

The electoral system codified in Afghanistan's 2004 constitution is not accepted as the primary means for apportioning decision-making power and authority in Afghanistan; rather, the election results mark a first step toward negotiations and renegotiations over sharing power and decision-making authorities. Resolving the conflict in Afghanistan will ultimately require reaching consensus among all major Afghan political actors on how to establish a new agreement on the rules for allocating political power within the country.



Men line up outside a polling station in western Herat city, waiting to cast votes during the September 28, 2019 election. (Photo by Hamed Sarfarazi/AP)

Introduction

The electoral system and the constitution that undergirds it are not accepted as the exclusive or even primary means for apportioning decision-making power and authority in Afghanistan. . . . But elections remain an important and understudied part of the Afghan political system.

Since the overthrow of Afghanistan's last monarchy in 1973, the country has experienced chronic political instability, including a military coup, violent insurgencies, foreign interventions, and civil war. Throughout this unsettled period, the country's major political actors, including those based both inside and outside Afghanistan, have sought to leverage different sources of power in order to claim representation within existing political systems, force changes to those systems, and build new ones. Although the particular identities, interests, and claims to legitimacy of these actors have varied widely, disputes over governing power and process represent the core source of continued conflict for the past several decades.

The lack of agreed-upon rules for structuring political competition in predictable ways has been both a product of and a contributing factor to the lack of trust among rival political actors.¹ In the absence of any enduring consensus on how decisions should be made or confidence in how those decisions are likely to be made in the near future, the competing interest groups in Afghanistan have relied on strategies of maximalist political brinkmanship at best, and at worst the frequent use of organized violence as a means of extracting concessions from or forcing aside their opponents.

The formulation and adoption in January 2004 of the current Afghan constitution, and the presidential election that was subsequently held under that framework in October 2004, were a major step toward formalizing the proposition that mass franchise elections should form the primary system through which political power is distributed in Afghanistan. But the highly centralized Afghan presidential structure has significantly heightened the stakes for a presidential electoral win or loss, and the constitution has thus far produced only one transfer of executive power from an incumbent to a successor (through term limits rather than an electoral loss).² The use of the single non-transferable vote system for parliamentary elections has produced a fragmented legislative body with weak representative connections to other established political organizations; few meaningful powers are endowed on parliament under the constitution to begin with.³

Although metrics for turnout are not directly comparable across election cycles owing to differing voter registration requirements and differing criteria for assessing whether a vote is valid or fraudulent, a persistent downward trend in voter participation appears clear across the years since 2004, reaching a nadir in the most recent elections. This decline has been driven at least to some degree by the Taliban's general rejection of the electoral process, which Taliban communications characterize as a façade for legitimating leaders selected by US and international forces, and by the violent expansion of Taliban territorial and political control over parts of the country during the past decade and a half of the insurgency.⁴

On the international side, progressively increased levels of investment in the post-2001 Afghan state-building project have been accompanied by expectations that elections will be regularly held as a means of providing legitimating signals both domestically and internationally. With these expectations have also come greater external scrutiny of the administration of elections and greater sensitivity to allegations of fraud and

mismanagement. But the formal electoral process has also often been disconnected from the security priorities that still constitute the primary reason for external interest in Afghanistan. Efforts to achieve those priorities are driven to a great degree through partnerships with local leaders and factions that are seen as able to directly support international security objectives, regardless of their standing in relationship to the electoral process or other Afghan domestic constituencies.⁵

The electoral system and the constitution that undergirds it are not accepted as the exclusive or even primary means for apportioning decision-making power and authority in Afghanistan, even by the domestic candidates who contest the polls or the international sponsors who fund the administration of the elections and the state. But elections remain an important and understudied part of the Afghan political system. There are compelling values-based reasons to support the goal of establishing the popular franchise in Afghanistan and to allow Afghan citizens, both men and women, to have a direct voice in choosing the leaders who will represent them in a democratic republican framework. There are also strong reasons for supporting such a system as the best available means for structuring political competition in a way that reflects the diversity of political interest groups within the country and avoids the destructive outcomes that Afghanistan has faced over the past many years. Electoral institutions, contested as they have been for the past decade and a half, have played important roles in shaping the contours of formal political competition in Afghanistan, even if they have not fixed the boundaries of authority through their outcomes alone.

The rules and systems governing the administration of elections are logistically and legally complex, but elections are not a "technical" process that can be divorced from politics in order to achieve an idealized neutral equilibrium. Decisions that alter access to the balloting process, fix the criteria for participating as a candidate or a voter, and set the authorities and

Decisions that alter access to the balloting process, fix the criteria for participating as a candidate or a voter, and set the authorities and processes for validating or invalidating a vote all shape the composition of the potential and actual electorate and have implications for determining the outcome of a given election.

processes for validating or invalidating a vote all shape the composition of the potential and actual electorate and have implications for determining the outcome of a given election. Establishing control or influence over this process is at least as critical for rival candidates as the voter mobilization campaign leading up to election day itself.⁶ Ultimately, the outcome of an election is determined by which votes are counted. In Afghanistan's case, the electoral outcomes have been only a first step toward shaping the contours of a continuing competition for power and influence.

While Afghan election officials and their international supporters have taken steps toward reform, the contemporary electoral process remains opaque in many key aspects, in part due to the limited information available to decision makers and analysts alike. The overall goal of this report is to better understand how the current formal electoral system structures Afghan political competition, shapes election-day outcomes, and exists in relation to or at a disconnect from other processes of competition between organized interest groups in Afghanistan. More specifically, the report draws on an original set of electoral data—generated from official reporting and election observer sources and subsequently cleaned and restructured by the author—to conduct an exploratory analysis of the most recent, September 2019 Afghan presidential election, its administration, and the political trends that can be observed when compared to previous election cycles, including the parliamentary elections held in October 2018 and the last presidential election, held in the summer of 2014.⁷

This report focuses on three key questions: where and how voters in the September 2019 presidential election were able to access the ballot process; how the votes at these sites were counted, validated, or invalidated; and how the political preferences expressed in the

counted votes compare with trends and patterns of support in previous elections. Key findings include significant reductions in access due to insurgent threats and a deterioration of government control, planned and unplanned closures of polling centers, and tighter voter registration requirements. Both of the leading candidates in the 2019 election, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, saw a loss of historical supporters as a result of these restrictions, although each was affected in different ways. While a few national political factions shifted their affiliations, an attenuated campaign period and the lowest vote share accorded to second-tier candidates in any Afghan presidential election to date produced an effective rerun of the two-person presidential runoff election in 2014, from which the incumbent president, Ghani, appears to have benefited. New vote verification procedures appear to have strengthened the integrity of the final results, but at the cost of loss of broader access and the likely loss of participation by some unknown number of real voters. While the invalidation decisions made during the extended auditing and recount process disproportionately reduced President Ghani's provisional vote totals in 2019, they stopped short of overturning his slim margin over a 50 percent majority. Some of the key adjudication decisions that produced these results remain opaque, and important unanswered gaps remain in the public information released by the Afghan election administration bodies. Third-time presidential runner-up Abdullah rejected the outcome of this process, refusing to relinquish his claims to a share of the next government. Ultimately, the electoral process was resolved only through a new power-sharing agreement. But its durability remains uncertain in light of both past tension over the implementation of the unity government formula and the prospect of new, broader negotiations with the Taliban insurgency over the future makeup of the Afghan political system.

Background Context of Afghanistan's 2019 Election



Afghanistan has conducted six nationwide elections since the adoption of the 2004 constitution, with presidential and parliamentary races offset from each other by a year each time.⁸ The 2014 presidential election was the first in which President Hamid Karzai, constrained by term limits, did not return as an incumbent. There followed a high-stakes race to take control of the presidency after nearly thirteen years under Karzai (including his tenure as leader of the interim government that preceded the constitution).

After no candidate met the 50 percent majority requirement in the first round of that election, held in April 2014, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah (who was the runner-up to Karzai in the 2009 presidential election) and former finance minister Ashraf Ghani (who had finished in fourth place in that race) competed in a second-round runoff election held in June 2014. Abdullah and his supporters disputed the outcome of the second round, alleging fraud in the preliminary results, which showed him losing to Ghani, and forced a UN-monitored audit of the vote count.⁹ The dispute was ultimately resolved only through direct mediation by then US Secretary of State John Kerry, which led to a power-sharing agreement between Ghani as president and Abdullah in a new, extraconstitutional “chief executive” position as part of the newly formed National Unity Government.¹⁰

Ongoing disputes over the relative powers of the two leaders continued throughout the tenure of the unity government, particularly concerning appointments to government positions at the national and provincial level. Ghani took early steps to consolidate control over the fiscal operations of the state, including a direct personal

role in approving major procurement contracts.¹¹ In Afghanistan's impoverished war economy, access to government-controlled resources, employment, and other patronage connections represents a key concern for all political constituencies.¹² Abdullah faced continual pressure from his supporters to extract more positions and concessions from Ghani; elements from both factions also split off into new alternative coalitions and configurations several times over the course of the unity government's existence.¹³ Late in his term, Ghani increasingly took steps to push for control over ministries where he had previously ceded appointment discretion to Abdullah, and by the eve of the elections, Ghani was explicit in his unwillingness to accept a replay of the “two-headed government” system.¹⁴ But for Abdullah, achieving anything short of the power-sharing concessions he had managed to secure after the 2014 election, whether through an electorally determined outcome or through other political processes, would represent a substantial loss for himself and his supporters.

A major component of the original unity government agreement in 2014 was a commitment to an electoral reform process, which proceeded fitfully over the course of the government's first years in office as both sides again sought to wrest control of or otherwise exercise vetoes over the process. In September 2016, President Ghani issued a new electoral law by executive decree (overriding parliamentary objections), and in November 2016 new commissioners were appointed to Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC), which administers the election process, and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), which is



Afghan security personnel and foreign forces secure the site of an attack in Kabul, on July 28, 2019. Political offices of the president's running mate, former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, were hit by a large explosion and stormed by an unknown number of attackers. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

responsible for adjudicating election complaints.¹⁵ The chairman of the IEC was replaced by Ghani again a year later in November 2017.¹⁶

Amid the ongoing electoral reform debates and IEC shakeups, parliamentary elections were indefinitely postponed past the five-year expiration of parliament's term in 2015. After multiple delays, these elections were finally held in October 2018.¹⁷ In part in response to allegations of fraud and mismanagement of the parliamentary elections, the results of which took six months to finalize, President Ghani issued another executive order in February 2019 modifying Afghanistan's electoral law again and firing all members of the IEC and ECC.¹⁸ At this point, the eighteen already registered presidential candidates nominated a pool of potential replacements and cast votes to select the new commissioners, with Ghani retaining final authority to decide whether a given

commissioner would be assigned to the IEC or ECC. The new commission members and secretariat chiefs were ultimately appointed on March 3, 2019.¹⁹

Timelines for the presidential election were pushed back multiple times, until preparations were ultimately finalized in late March 2019 for a September 28, 2019 election date.²⁰ President Ghani's constitutional tenure expired on May 21, 2019, but he remained in office, over the objection of his rivals, through the pre-election period, with the extension of his term endorsed by a Supreme Court ruling in April 2019.²¹ Elections for provincial councils, district councils (which have never been elected or formed, despite being mandated under the 2004 constitution and as part of the 2014 National Unity Government Agreement), and parliamentary elections for Ghazni province (which were not held in 2018, and whose 2010 elected representatives continue to sit in parliament) were

originally proposed to take place simultaneously with the presidential election.²² However, in late May 2019, IEC chair Hawa Alam Nuristani announced that plans for those elections would be dropped, and as of this writing no new date has been offered for them.²³

Negotiations between US diplomats and Taliban representatives in Qatar, and the possibility of a new power-sharing negotiation between Afghan factions as an outcome of those talks, overshadowed preparations for the elections in the international policymaker community and among many Afghan political elites.²⁴ President Ghani insisted that the elections proceed as scheduled, and rejected alternative proposals for an interim government sought by his rivals; for Ghani, reelection was a crucial step toward reasserting his legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the international community, his domestic political challengers, and the Taliban. Public mobilization activities by most of the candidates were limited for much of the official campaign period as Abdullah and other candidates sought to pursue alternative paths to power and the international community was split on which diplomatic track to prioritize.²⁵ With the temporary collapse of US-Taliban talks in early September 2019 (they resumed only toward the end of the year), Ghani's insistence on moving forward with the election carried the day.²⁶

After the presidential election was held in September, tabulation and finalization of the results were delayed for several months as officials sought to resolve discrepancies between separate vote-reporting streams and address complaints over disputed votes. New biometric verification requirements led to heightened scrutiny and debate over what constituted a proper valid vote. The finalization of the results—with very minor changes—came only in mid-February 2020, just prior to the finalization of a US-Taliban agreement in Qatar. Ghani was elected to a second term with 50.64 percent of the final valid vote, a narrow margin over the constitutional requirement that the winner of the presidential race secure a majority in excess of 50 percent.²⁷

Abdullah, who received 39.5 percent of the final vote, rejected the outcome, claiming to have secured the majority of “clean” votes; Ghani and Abdullah held parallel competing inauguration ceremonies in early March 2020. The United States refrained from explicitly endorsing the outcome of the election, and initially attempted to broker another compromise between the two sides. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad ultimately attended Ghani's inauguration, and US officials warned against the creation of “parallel governments” or “any use of force to resolve political differences.” This signal appears to have deterred Abdullah from making further claims to the authority to appoint new governors in provinces where he had mobilized the greatest base of support.²⁸ In late March, with no resolution to the standoff and with progress toward the opening of intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban also stalled, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced a \$1 billion cut to assistance to the Afghan government, saying that the United States was “disappointed in [Ghani and Abdullah] and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests.”²⁹

Further mediation efforts by other Afghan political leaders, including former president Karzai, ultimately led to an announcement in mid-May that Ghani would agree to appoint Abdullah head of a new High Council for National Reconciliation, giving him a mandate to direct national strategy on future peace talks with the Taliban and ending the deadlock over the outcome of the elections.³⁰ This agreement appears to repeat many of the commitments made under the previous National Unity Government formulation, which included offering Abdullah a senior title and accompanying government budget and protocol, giving him some measure of influence or control over cabinet ministry and provincial appointments, and making commitments to a process of electoral reform and to holding provincial and district elections in the future. All of these commitments had proved to be points of contention during the previous five-year term of the National Unity Government, and as of this writing, the degree to which the new role for Abdullah will prove to be a durable power-sharing settlement remains to be seen.³¹

Assessing Access to the Vote

Access to an assigned polling center, both during the initial voter registration phase and subsequently on election day, is critical in determining the makeup of the potential and actual electorate. Prospective Afghan voters must appear in person at a polling center, a site set by the IEC at which voting is held; each center contains a set number of polling stations, the booths in which voters cast their ballots.³² (As detailed further in this section, the specific physical locations of the centers, the number of stations assigned to them, and their identifying codes, have been significantly readjusted by the IEC between election periods.³³)

Beginning with the 2018 parliamentary elections, voters were assigned to registration rolls at specific polling centers or stations, a reform measure adopted in part to limit excess ballot distribution and address allegations made during previous election cycles that some voters had fraudulently used multiple registration cards to cast multiple votes.³⁴ These new controls, aimed at forestalling challenges to the integrity of the vote result, come at a cost to voting access, as any potential voters unable to access polling centers either to register or to cast a ballot will find themselves effectively disenfranchised from the formal political system. Administrative decisions by election and security officials on where to distribute and keep open new or existing centers and unplanned disruptions of center openings on election day because of security threats or logistical constraints all contributed to an uneven distribution of access and representation across the country.

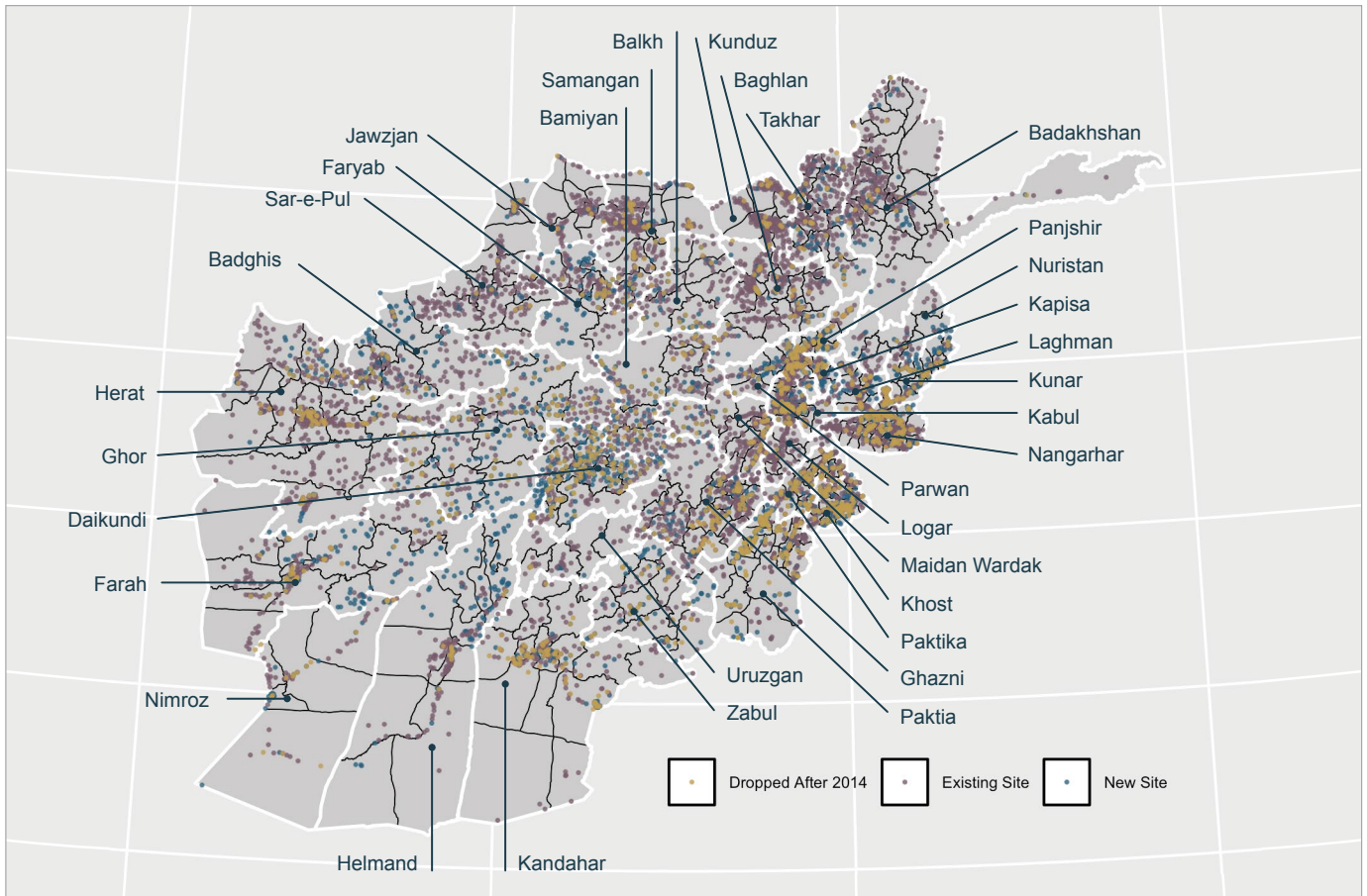
VOTING IN A WAR ZONE

Threats by the Taliban have clearly had an impact on the ability of Afghan election and security officials to administer elections over the past decade and a half of the

insurgency, deterring potential voters from participating and constraining the boundaries of the electorate. As in past elections, the Taliban warned in public statements prior to the 2019 election day of potential attacks against polling sites and called for a boycott of the polls.³⁵ Even in the absence of direct violence, a study of the 2010 Afghan parliamentary elections found evidence that increasing numbers of security personnel present at Afghan polling centers had a deterrent effect on voter participation, either because they signaled potential risks or because of voter antipathy toward police personnel.³⁶

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's post-election report on violence during the 2019 campaign period reported a decline in violence relative to that observed in 2018 but an increase in attacks when compared to the 2014 election; in total, at least 85 civilian deaths and 373 injuries were reported during the 2019 campaign period, almost all of which were attributed to the Taliban.³⁷ The UN does not release detailed disaggregated figures, however, and the lack of any other comprehensive, precise, and reliable data on violent incidents, both during and outside the electoral period, has forestalled detailed analysis of the direct relationships between the armed conflict in Afghanistan and the elections analyzed here.³⁸

The lack of detailed figures creates a large, unobserved security variable in the current data set, which should lead to caution in interpreting any of the accompanying analysis. Public release of the electoral data that inform and accompany this report should aid further research on the relationship between elections and conflict in the future and will hopefully encourage other entities and analysts to similarly make their data available for broader public learning.



Map 1. Polling Center Change in Status, 2014–18

Note: Polling center coordinates may be approximate, and points are not to scale. Includes all centers for which coordinate data is available; not all sites were opened on election day in either period due to either planned or unplanned closures. District boundaries are based on a 399-district data set, and do not reflect subsequent administrative splits to those districts.

In the absence of detailed security information against which to evaluate polling center closures, some analysts and political candidates have alleged that polling center access was deliberately expanded or restricted to produce electoral outcomes meant to benefit the incumbent. These concerns and the potential impact of polling center closures on the makeup of the electorate are considered next.

DEFINING A COMMON SET OF POLLING CENTER LOCATIONS

A first challenge is to identify the polling centers. Several changes were made to polling center siting plans between the last presidential election, held in 2014, and the 2018 parliamentary elections, whose initial polling

center plan also served as the basis for preparations for the 2019 presidential election. Although the IEC identifies each polling center through a unique seven-digit code (the first four digits of which also identify the center's parent province and district), almost all centers were renumbered between 2014 and 2018, confounding easy comparisons across time periods. Tracking the changes made to specific sites is further complicated by the limited amount of other supporting location information released by the IEC, nonstandardized location naming conventions, and other discrepancies between data sources.

Using a combination of methods, including geocoordinate matches, matches by center name and district, and matches by rough geocoordinate proximity, the author was able

to link 5,330 of 6,792 polling centers available from 2014 to corresponding sites planned in 2018; 1,462 locations from 2014 therefore appear to have been dropped.³⁹ From the results of this matching effort and the universe of potential centers for the 2018–19 elections, it can be inferred that an additional 2,090 polling centers were established at new locations not previously used in the 2014 election.

In some cases, these new 2018 polling centers were established as a result of decisions by the IEC to relocate centers to a nearby location; an April 2017 IEC regulation prioritized the use of school buildings or other public facilities as the location for centers, leading to many shifts at centers previously located at town mosques to schools instead.⁴⁰ In other cases the new 2018 centers were established in entirely different areas of the district, likely reflecting the overall deterioration of security during this period and the retrenchment of government control to district centers. Other new polling centers may have been added to existing areas that saw high levels of engagement in past elections, to accommodate additional voters.⁴¹

The geocoordinate data sources available for this matching process—which were generated by separate sources and could not be independently validated—in many cases did not align exactly between the two periods, even when they appeared to specify the location of the same named building. The process of manual matching almost certainly introduced some further errors or omissions, meaning caution should be advised in drawing firm conclusions from this data set. That said, this is likely the most comprehensive public data set currently available that links the two election periods’ physical polling locations (see map 1).⁴²

IMPACT OF 2014 CENTER CLOSURES AND RELOCATIONS

With these caveats in mind, it is possible to conduct some analysis on the potential impact of the closures of the 2014 centers and the distribution of the new 2018 centers. Overall, nationwide, the median straight-line distance (“as the crow flies,” hence not an accurate reflection of actual

transit times for potential voters traveling to a new site) between a closed 2014 center and the nearest available substitute center in 2018 was only 408 meters, but the average varied substantially by region, and in some cases the nearest available replacement center was many kilometers away. The provinces of Farah, Logar, and Kandahar saw some of the greatest distances between closed centers and their nearest available replacement.

While the full range of factors contributing to a decision by the IEC to drop a particular polling center remains unknown, hypotheses that new centers were deliberately concentrated in particular areas to benefit the ultimate winners of the most recent parliamentary or presidential elections appear to be unsupported based on the available results.⁴³ Nationwide, the share of a center’s votes cast for Ashraf Ghani in the 2014 second-round runoff election was positively correlated, to a statistically significant degree, with the subsequent closure of that center in 2018–19. (The converse applies to Abdullah Abdullah’s vote share in the two-person 2014 runoff election, where a higher share of the vote for Abdullah was negatively correlated with a polling center’s closure prior to 2018–19.) Collectively, the centers that were dropped between 2014 and 2018 provided approximately 23 percent of Ghani’s final valid vote total in 2014 and 18 percent of Abdullah’s.⁴⁴

When variations between provinces are also taken into account, however, no correlation between a center being dropped and past candidate vote share is found.⁴⁵ The geographic distribution of center closures between 2014 and 2018 shows a concentration in southern and eastern provinces, such as Paktia, Paktika, and Nangarhar, where Ghani received a large share of his 2014 votes (and where security and government control have long been tenuous). The polling center closure decisions made in the intervening four years appear to have adversely affected Ghani’s potential vote pool by forcing past supporters to go to new centers for voting. But conditions at the provincial or district level appear to be the primary factor driving these closures or relocations, not variations in a given center’s political history.

The IEC's dropping of 2014 sites from its 2018–19 universe of potential sites and the subsequent further closure of sites in the pre-election planning period removed polling locations where roughly a third of all valid votes had been recorded in the 2014 second-round runoff voting.

Newly created and relocated polling centers do not appear to show systematic differences in the levels of voters' political engagement or candidate choices for the 2018–19 elections when compared to previously existing sites. Although new sites did report overall higher turnout rates in the 2019 election, this was not the case at those same sites earlier in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Variations in 2019 again appear to have been driven more by differing provincial or district turnout trends than by the site's status as a new location: when these factors are controlled for, new sites if anything appear to show a weak tendency for lower 2019 turnout.⁴⁶ When compared to results from sites that remained in existence from the 2014 election through the 2019 election, matching results data from 2014 centers that closed to their nearest available 2019 replacement center also did not produce evidence of statistically significant deviations in candidate vote share for either Ghani or Abdullah based on distance to the newly relocated site.⁴⁷ Nor do newly created or relocated centers appear to be significantly different from other existing centers in the share of votes cast for winning candidates in either the 2018 parliamentary elections or the 2019 presidential election.⁴⁸

PLANNED CENTER OPENINGS

Another round of polling center closures took place as part of the IEC planning process in the immediate run-up to the latest elections, which further constrained voter access around the country in disproportionate ways. Following the closures of 2014 polling centers and the opening of new sites in 2018, the IEC established a universe of 7,420 polling center sites potentially available for use in the 2018–19 elections, of which 2,090 (28.2 percent) were sites newly created since the 2014 election. Of the 5,330 previously existing centers on this list, 429 (8.1 percent) had reported no results in the 2014 elections owing to planned or

unplanned closures at the time, suggesting at most around 7,000 centers that could plausibly be opened again. From this total universe of available sites, the IEC ultimately announced plans to open 5,106 centers for the 2018 parliamentary elections (completely omitting Ghazni province, where no parliamentary elections were held) and 5,373 centers for the 2019 presidential election (which were held in Ghazni).⁴⁹ With a few exceptions, these planning choices were based on security reviews held in early 2018, followed by the IEC's conduct of an initial round of voter registration at centers in the spring of 2018 and a subsequent "top-up" voter registration exercise in the summer of 2019. These sites currently constitute the geographic limit of the enfranchised Afghan electorate.

As with the previous closure of 2014 centers, there is variation within the data and limited information from the IEC about all the factors that went into its immediate pre-election planning decisions. However, an available center's planned operating status in both the 2018 and 2019 elections was also negatively correlated with that center's vote share for Ashraf Ghani in the 2014 elections (even controlling for the province in which a center was located), as many of the centers planned to be closed were again concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the country, where Ghani had previously run strongest but where security threats from the Taliban were also gauged to be the highest. This finding also holds when candidate vote shares from closed 2014 centers are assigned to their nearest available 2018–19 replacement.⁵⁰ In other words, while high historical support for Ghani may not have been the determining factor informing these pre-election closure decisions, the closures appear to have fallen hardest on areas where he had previously registered strong bases of support, even after previous closures and relocations had taken place.

Cumulatively, the IEC's dropping of 2014 sites from its 2018–19 universe of potential sites and the subsequent further closure of sites in the pre-election planning period removed polling locations where roughly a third of all valid votes had been recorded in the 2014 second-round runoff voting, of which 62 percent had gone to Ghani and 38 percent to Abdullah.⁵¹ Votes recorded at these locations represented 37.5 percent and 28.7 percent, respectively, of each candidate's final valid vote totals in 2014, again indicative of the disproportionate impact that the pre-election closure decisions had on any attempts by Ghani to repeat his past performance in these areas.⁵² With no voter registration activities carried out for these centers after they were dropped from IEC planning efforts in early 2018, any potential returning supporters would have had to travel to other open centers to register on the rolls, or otherwise forgo participation in the elections.

UNPLANNED ELECTION-DAY DISRUPTIONS

Election-day disruptions of these operating plans further constrained the participation and representation of the potential Afghan electorate. Of the 5,373 centers that the IEC sought to open in 2019, only 4,647 (86.5 percent of planned) were reported to have fully opened, and another thirty-two centers opened only a portion of their planned polling stations.⁵³ These closures were in part driven by a pre-election security review by the Afghan Ministry of Interior (MOI), which in late August 2019 announced closures of 431 of the 5,373 polling centers previously announced by the IEC (8.02 percent of the total planned).⁵⁴ The MOI and IEC never released a detailed list of which specific centers were to be affected by these closures, so it is unclear which of the 726 full center closures reported on election day were deliberately undertaken in response to the MOI review and which were driven by administrative or security constraints on election day itself.⁵⁵

In some cases the election-day closure rate appears to have been driven in part by overly optimistic IEC plans to open sites despite past problems at those locations. Although the IEC did not provide comparable

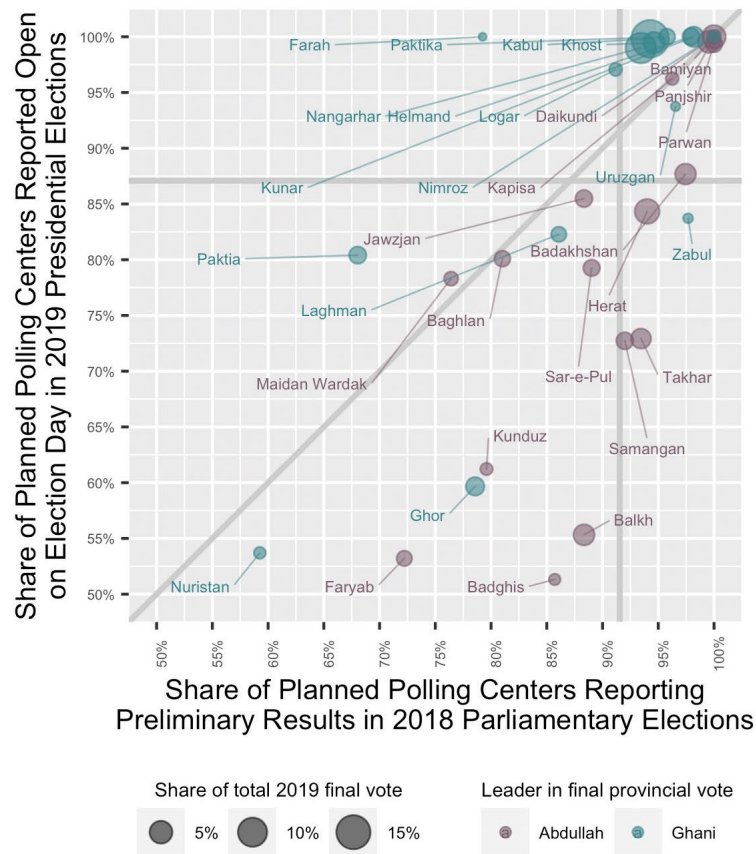
detailed closure status reporting for the 2018 elections, 291 of the 726 centers that were closed in 2019 (or approximately 40 percent of the day-of closures) had also previously reported no results in the parliamentary elections held the year prior.⁵⁶

The net effect in either case was the disenfranchisement of any voters registered to those closed centers, who, even had they been able to travel to a different nearby polling center, would not have been able to cast ballots, given the new station-based registration assignments.⁵⁷ Nationwide, planned but closed centers collectively accounted for 9.3 percent of the registered electorate, or around 895,000 potential voters.

While most of the pre-election planned closures had been concentrated in Afghanistan's south and east, many of the unplanned closures on election day took place in the north and east, including the closure of 126 centers in Balkh province, amounting to nearly 45 percent of the total centers initially planned to be open in that province.⁵⁸ In at least eighteen districts, almost all of which were concentrated in the north or east in provinces such as Faryab or Badghis, none of the IEC's polling centers opened as planned, which collectively totaled approximately 165,000 registered potential voters, or around 1.7 percent of the national total electorate. In many cases this represented a substantial drop in polling center open rates when compared to the parliamentary elections the year prior, as can be observed in figure 1.

As noted previously, Ghani's historical base of support was more affected by the previously planned closures, but Abdullah appears to have suffered disproportionately from the impact of election-day disruptions. It is possible to derive a speculative estimate as to the potential impact of these election-day closures on the 2019 election outcome by extrapolating turnout rates and candidate vote choices, by district where available, to those centers that did not open on election day. This counterfactual projection assumes uniform political preferences and levels of engagement with the electoral

Figure 1. Election Day Closures, 2018 and 2019



Note: Points are provinces; X- and Y-intercepts are national totals. Preliminary results reporting data used for 2018 parliamentary election results due to discrepancies in final results data for Kabul as published by the IEC; the IEC did not report an official closure status for 2018 centers as in 2019. Points below the diagonal line represent a decrease in open rate against planned compared to the 2018 elections, and points above the line an increase.

process across an entire district area—neither of which holds true across all of Afghanistan’s districts—and does not produce estimates for districts where no voting took place at all.⁵⁹ However, were these conditions to hold and had all centers opened as planned on election day, approximately 47,000 additional votes might potentially have been cast, including approximately 18,000 votes for Ashraf Ghani, approximately 24,000 for Abdullah Abdullah, and approximately 4,500 votes for other candidates. These adjusted vote totals would not have altered Ghani’s narrow margin over a 50 percent majority—were this projection to hold, he would still receive 50.3 percent of the final adjusted total, all other things held equal—but they are suggestive of the differential impact of these particular disruptions, and again reinforce the importance of voter access in shaping election outcomes.

VOTER REGISTRATION PATTERNS

With the universe of polling centers where the IEC attempted to hold the election now defined, what variations in voter registration—the first step necessary for an individual to participate in the election process—can be observed at those centers? As mentioned earlier, the 2018 and 2019 elections were the first to assign voters to specific polling centers (in 2018) or polling station booths within those centers (beginning in 2019).⁶⁰ The registration requirements imposed by the IEC are the strictest to be enacted in any Afghan election to date, a factor that has likely contributed to the apparent relative reduction in turnout at the polls when compared to turnout estimates during prior election cycles.

Current IEC procedures indicate that after registering to vote, voters should receive a sticker to affix to their national ID card (the *tazkera*, distributed and overseen by the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority, or ACCRA) to confirm their status; this sticker is then checked against the appropriate polling center or station list on election day prior to the provision of a ballot.⁶¹ In previous years, voters could use any of a number of voter cards issued each election cycle as proof of registration. The proliferation of such cards raised recurrent concerns over potential fraud through the distribution of excess ballots (which could be seized and stuffed) or potential cases of repeat individual voting.⁶²

While the introduction of the new voter list system marked a long-sought electoral reform milestone, the IEC's public communications around its 2018–19 voter registration figures were incomplete or internally contradictory, raising questions as to the accuracy of the new numbers. After an initial registration drive was held in April 2018 at the polling centers planned to be open for the parliamentary elections, the IEC's final 2018 registration list totaled approximately 8.843 million voters.⁶³ Prior to the presidential elections, the IEC also conducted a monthlong “top-up” registration exercise in June 2019 to register newly eligible voters or otherwise update its voter lists.⁶⁴ The IEC announced a new preliminary set of registration figures in July 2019 that it said amounted to a net increase of approximately 317,000 voters (omitting registrations in Ghazni, where the process continued through the summer), although it emphasized that the data released at the time were not final.⁶⁵ The actual change in the detailed preliminary registration reports released alongside this statement was a net decline of 8,443 registered voters from 2018, however.⁶⁶

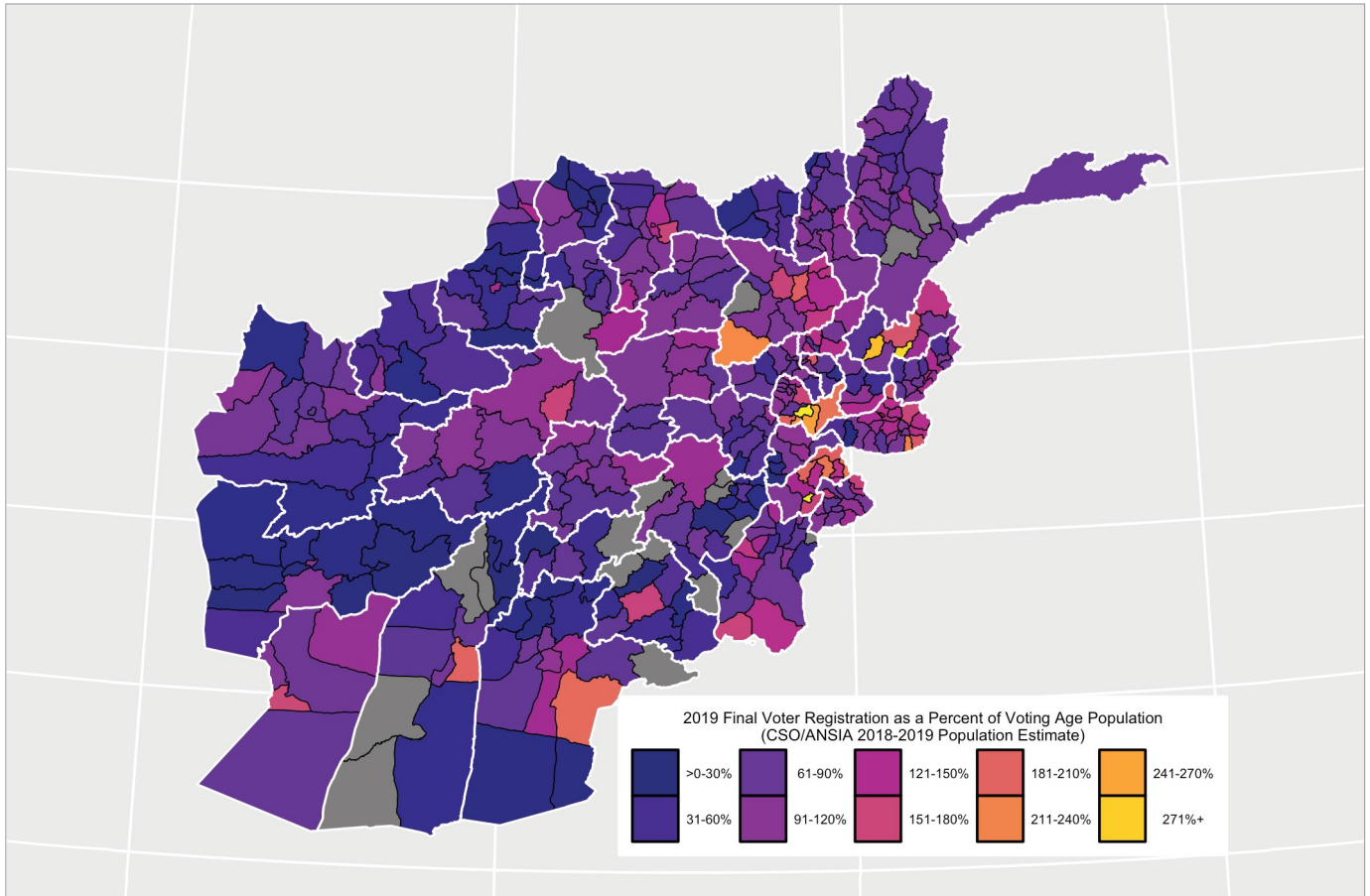
The publication in August 2019 of the IEC's pre-presidential election polling center plan included final voter registration data for all planned centers, superseding the earlier preliminary registration data. These new final registration figures totaled approximately 9.665 million voters. Excluding Ghazni, for which there were

no previous 2018 registration data, this represented a net increase of approximately 595,000 voters over the earlier preliminary 2019 figures and an increase of approximately 587,000 over 2018 data.⁶⁷

Later press accounts indicated that the 2018 voter rolls were also updated in early 2019 to add “[voter registration] books that had not been scanned and some pages that had been missing,” prior to the removal of 428,901 duplicate or “ghost” voter records, which reportedly produced a new total of 9.103 million voters.⁶⁸ By inference, this would indicate approximately 689,000 registrations were added prior to the removal of duplicate records, for a net increase of approximately 260,000 total registered voters over 2018, prior to the beginning of the top-up registration conducted in June. IEC officials had previously confirmed the removal of the duplicate registrations but not the addition of previous missing registrations or other adjustments. This would suggest a net increase of approximately 562,000 registered voters as a result of the top-up exercise, or around 327,000 additional voters if the addition of Ghazni is discounted. The IEC has not offered a public explanation for the discrepancy between these figures and earlier statements.

Because of the previously looser voter requirements and the lack of detailed reporting on registration at the center or district level, there are no comparable figures for prior elections by which to directly benchmark and evaluate the registration figures reported for 2018–19. In cases where 2019 polling center locations can be matched to 2014 voting records, higher levels of registration in 2019 correlate with higher levels of valid final votes recorded in the 2014 second-round runoff election. This suggests that 2019 registration levels at least roughly capture and correspond to the levels of observed voting intensity in 2014—areas with large numbers of past votes also saw large numbers of registrants under the new system.⁶⁹

However, the 8–9 million voters registered during the 2018–19 period is only slightly larger than the maximum total number of votes reported in prior national



**Map 2. Final Voter Registration as a Percentage of Voting Age Population
(CSO/ANSIA 2018–19 Population Estimate)**

Note: District boundaries are based on a 399-district data set, and do not reflect subsequent administrative splits to those districts. 2019 population and voter registration data has been reaggregated to match district boundaries.

elections. Were all votes cast in the 2014 runoff election upheld as valid votes under 2019 criteria, they would represent a turnout of nearly 75 percent against the 2019 registration numbers. In actual practice, the 2019 turnout was less than 19 percent of those registered at the time, suggesting either a much reduced level of actual participation by registered voters or a much reduced pool of potential voters relative to years prior due to the new registration constraints.

Higher registration levels in 2018 and 2019 also positively correlate with a greater share of the vote previously cast at that polling center location for Ashraf Ghani in 2014, even when the polling center's province and total votes in

2014 are controlled for, suggesting a registered potential electorate that could be generally more disposed toward Ghani. However, the total votes recorded at a polling center in 2014 and in some cases the provincial location appear to be the most significant factors overall in predicting 2019 registration levels, and it is unclear how substantial this potential partisan slant in the registered voter pool might have been in terms of affecting 2019 outcomes, particularly given the aforementioned impacts of planned and unplanned center closures. The changes in registration during the top-up period between 2018 and 2019 do not clearly correspond to candidate preference at center locations in 2014, and instead appear to more closely track turnout levels in the 2018 parliamentary

elections, which suggests that polling center locations where registered voters were generally more engaged in the 2018 contest were also more likely to participate in the top-up registration exercise that followed.⁷⁰

The IEC assigns men and women voters to separate polling booths within each center and breaks out registration statistics for male and female voters. Female voting trends are discussed in detail later in this report, but overall female registration was less than 35 percent of total registration nationwide. This is a decline from previous years, in which women were estimated to account for around 40 percent of the registered potential electorate, although again, looser registration requirements in past years limit the comparability of those earlier estimates. The 2019 female registration was equivalent to 45.2 percent of the total estimated voting-age female population. Almost all provinces (including Kabul) saw registration rates equivalent to less than a third of their estimated eligible female voting-age population, however, while Kandahar, Farah, Helmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan provinces all reported female registration rates lower than 10 percent.

GAPS IN CENTER COVERAGE

The IEC has stated a commitment to provide “proper and equitable access to polling centers for all eligible voters.” The IEC’s April 2017 polling center regulations set a minimum threshold of 200 eligible voters to establish a polling center within a settlement, with a maximum five-kilometer distance between a prospective voter’s residence and that person’s assigned center.⁷¹ The IEC authorized further adjustments to these guidelines based on local conditions, however, and in practice, security and administrative constraints appear to have left a significant portion of the country without access to the polls.

The IEC’s published plans offer some insights into the known universe of potential and actual centers that were available, planned, and opened from 2014 to 2019, but the absence of current and publicly

accessible high-resolution data on settlements across the country or detailed Afghan census figures makes it difficult to fully assess further gaps in coverage that are not reflected in the existing polling center plans. The Afghan government has not held an official national census since 1979, and the population estimates released annually by its Central Statistics Organization (CSO, reorganized as the Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority, or ANSIA, in 2018) are based on projections derived from a partial 2003–05 household survey and the 1979 census, both of which omitted portions of the country where security threats limited survey access.⁷² High levels of population displacement, undercounting in rural areas, and accelerated urbanization in major cities all mean that these population figures are certainly not reflective of the actual population distribution on the ground, but they serve as the official basis for most government and donor planning.⁷³

Some efforts have been undertaken by international donors to generate finer-grained estimates of the Afghan population. While many of these efforts have been fragmented over time, proprietary, or classified, the World Population project, an international academic consortium led by the University of Southampton that makes use of satellite observation and statistical modeling techniques to provide global population estimates, offers one potential source of public data. A 2016–17 WorldPop pilot study for the Afghan government that incorporated additional statistical sources and local survey data, as well as a private settlement database produced by the UK firm ALCIS, estimated a population of as many as 34.5 million people, compared to the 27.7 million estimated at the time by the CSO.⁷⁴

These projections have not been incorporated into the WorldPop project’s public data sets, however, which follow official government census estimates and attempt to estimate how those population figures are likely distributed across the country’s geography. WorldPop currently estimates slightly lower overall

population totals than the official figures (approximately 29.6 million people nationwide in 2019 according to WorldPop, as opposed to 30.08 million people according to the CSO/ANSIA).⁷⁵ The project has generally estimated higher population levels in more outlying areas of the country than official figures indicate, although its projections also have higher levels of estimate uncertainty in these places.

With the aforementioned caveats about the reliability of underlying population figures in mind, total registration in 2019 amounted to around 64 percent of the total voting-age population of around 15 million people, based on a general census estimate that approximately 50 percent of the nationwide population falls above the voting-age threshold of eighteen years. However, many provinces saw substantially lower rates of registration—Farah, Uruzgan, Kunduz, Jawzjan, Ghazni, and Zabul provinces all saw registration rates at around 35 percent or less of the estimated voting-age population—while registration in some provinces, including Paktia, Nuristan, Nangarhar, and Nimroz, exceeded 100 percent of the estimated voting-age population. District-level variation in registration rates is considerable (as can be seen in map 2), although the question as to the accuracy of the population denominator creates uncertainty as to whether underregistration or undercounting of the population is the larger determining factor.⁷⁶

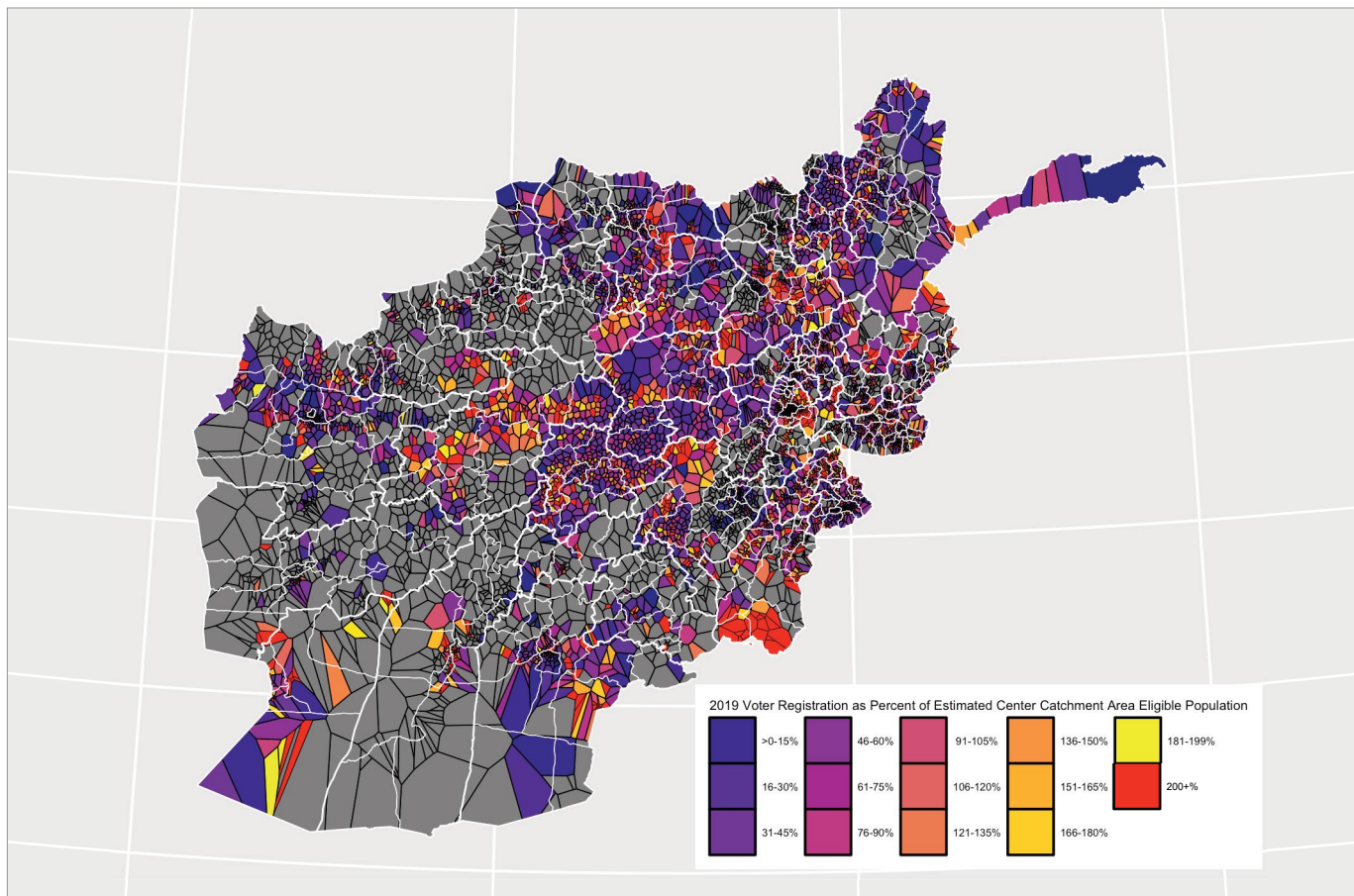
It is evident that the IEC's coverage plans for polling centers and stations do not align with the official CSO/ANSIA estimates of population distribution. The median province in the 2019 election planned for approximately one polling station (each of which was allocated a maximum of 400 registered voters) for every thousand estimated eligible voters. The actual number ranged from 4.04 polling stations per thousand voting-age people in Paktia to 0.82 polling stations per thousand in Farah. Variation in the distribution of coverage is even more widespread at the district level. The bottom quartile of Afghan districts report fewer than 1.28 polling stations planned per thousand voting-age people,

while in the top quartile the IEC planned for more than 3.06 stations per thousand.⁷⁷

This basic measure of coverage assumes that stations are uniformly distributed across districts and not concentrated in particular settlements or district centers, which understates the degree to which outlying communities in those districts may be deprived of access to any nearby voting sites, contributing to underregistration. Using the WorldPop project's higher-resolution data—which makes population estimates down to a grid of approximately 100-by-100 meter squares, as opposed to relying on aggregate figures for an entire district—it is possible to estimate the share of the Afghan population living within a set distance or catchment area surrounding each of the polling centers established by the IEC.

Based on these figures, approximately 7.9 million people, or around 26.7 percent of the total population, are estimated to be living within a one-kilometer radius of the 5,373 polling center locations that the IEC planned to open in 2019. Setting the distance threshold farther, at ten kilometers—double the maximum range set under the IEC's guidelines—yields around 2.58 million people (or around 1.29 million voting-age people, 8.7 percent of the total population) still living outside the immediate area of these polling center sites. This arbitrary distance threshold does not account for actual local travel conditions but points to the potentially still sizable portion of the population for whom visiting a polling place represents a significant investment of time and potential personal risk.

A further effort at calculating polling center catchment areas can be derived by generating polygons surrounding known polling center coordinates. These polygons are idealized, mathematically generated boundaries known as Voronoi polygons or Voronoi diagrams, and again do not reflect actual physical travel conditions, which would inform what center might actually be closest or easiest to access based on a given



Map 3. Afghanistan Polling Center Catchment Areas

Note: Population based on WorldPop population estimates; catchment areas are Voronoi diagrams based on polling center coordinates. District boundaries are based on a 399-district data set, and do not reflect subsequent administrative splits to those districts. For visualization purposes, all centers estimated to have registered in excess of 200 percent of their surrounding catchment area eligible population are in red.

potential registrant's residence.⁷⁸ (Voters are also not necessarily required to register at the center that might be nearest to them as the crow flies.) However, any point within a given polling center's associated Voronoi catchment area is mathematically closer to that center than any other available center, which may offer a more refined estimate of likely catchment areas than simple radius distance thresholds. WorldPop population distribution estimates within each of these boundaries can therefore be used to calculate polling center-level estimates of registration rates against the estimated surrounding population, as shown in map 3.

These center registration rates vary widely against the estimated eligible population in their catchment area,

from a fraction of a hundredth of a percent in some cases to more than a thousand percent. Eliminating all outlier centers that are estimated to have registered above 100 percent of the eligible population in their surrounding catchment areas (producing a set of 3,081 centers, or about 58 percent of those for which registration and location coordinates are available) produces a nationwide median registration rate of 50.9 percent of the eligible population.

While voter registration numbers that significantly exceed estimated eligible population levels raise further questions as to the accuracy of the voter rolls, the appearance of overregistration within polling center catchment areas does not appear to be statistically

It is clear that substantial portions of the Afghan public have no access to elections as a means of choosing their national leadership and must instead either find other mechanisms through which to advance their interests or seek to remain separate from the control of a state that cannot seek their formal political consent through the ballot.

correlated with past Ghani vote share in those centers in 2014.⁷⁹ There are many potential explanations for the appearance of overregistration at a given center: the surrounding population distribution estimate may be inaccurate and there are more people present in the area than expected; the calculated catchment area may not in fact accurately capture an area that the center could reasonably draw from because these polygon boundaries are not informed by actual geographic or transit features; and even if catchment areas are appropriate, the closure of other centers could reasonably push those outlying residents to the nearest open center, inflating its registration against its immediate population surroundings. But this registration metric is a potential means of identifying centers that could be subjected to further scrutiny, as well as centers that should be targets of future registration drives based on apparent under-registration of their available population.


Many areas of the country have no access to registration at all; at least twenty-three of Afghanistan's 421 districts had no planned polling centers in the 2019 election and no associated voter registration data.⁸⁰ (This marked an improvement over the previous year, when no parliamentary elections were held in Ghazni province.) According to CSO/ANSIA estimates, these twenty-three districts comprise approximately 1.08 million people, or approximately 3.5 percent of the total national population estimate. The 41 total districts where no polling centers were open on election day 2019, including both those in which no centers

had been planned and those that failed to open as planned, further amounted to an estimated 2.05 million people, or 6.8 percent of the national population. This represents a substantial deterioration from the 2014 elections, in which only seven districts, or 0.86 percent of the CSO/ANSIA-estimated national population at the time, reported no results on either the first or the second round of the election.

Even in cases that fell short of a total districtwide breakdown in polling access, the elimination or closure of polling centers affected many potential voters in the surrounding locale. Using catchment area calculations, the areas around centers that were dropped between 2014 and 2018–19 collectively comprise around 7.03 million people, according to WorldPop estimates (23.7 percent of total population), or around 3.51 million potentially eligible voters.⁸¹

While the reach of the Afghan state has historically been limited, these gaps in coverage have obvious implications for the representativeness of the formal political system. Although considerable uncertainty remains about the population estimates involved, which is beyond the scope of this report to resolve, it is clear that substantial portions of the Afghan public have no access to elections as a means of choosing their national leadership and must instead either find other mechanisms through which to advance their interests or seek to remain separate from the control of a state that cannot seek their formal political consent through the ballot.

Counting, Auditing, and Validating the Vote



Regardless of how many voters are able and willing to participate at polling locations on election day, the final result of any election is determined by the counting and validation (or not) of those votes. Under Afghan electoral law, the IEC holds responsibility for the administration and vote-tallying process, and the ECC is tasked with resolving complaints filed on and after election day and after the publication of preliminary results. Two major stages of auditing and recounting vote totals took place after the close of the polls in September 2019. The first was led primarily by the IEC in response to discrepancies between polling station tally sheets and biometric voter records, prior to publication of the preliminary results in December, and the second was undertaken in response to decisions by the ECC to address complaints filed after the publication of those results but prior to their finalization in February 2020.

Transparency on the part of both electoral bodies in the 2018 parliamentary elections was minimal, even as the results aggregation phase stretched on for more than six months. Ultimately, the published results for the Kabul parliamentary elections (the last province for which results were announced, and also the province electing the largest number of legislators and with the most candidates contesting) still showed substantial discrepancies between the provincial level aggregate vote totals used to determine winning candidates and the polling center-level results released by the IEC.⁸² In September 2019 the former commissioners of both the IEC and ECC (who had been replaced by President Ghani midway through the parliamentary results count) received prison sentences for allegedly altering the

vote counts in several parliamentary races. While this action may have served as a warning signal to election administration officials in the 2019 race, the specifics of the cases were not disclosed, and no election results appear to have been overturned in response to the ruling.⁸³ The new IEC leadership made modest transparency improvements in the 2019 presidential election, providing more details on its process of counting and auditing results than it had previously done, but some significant gaps remain in its reporting.

The question of what happened during the audit and recount process and why is central to understanding the outcome of the 2019 presidential election. The centralization of the result aggregation and validation process in the offices and warehouses of the IEC and ECC in Kabul—a major feature during the 2014 presidential election, as well as during the extended 2018 parliamentary election process—offered a far more direct means of altering the results of an election than local-level mobilization by a national campaign.⁸⁴ This centralized process offers opportunities for closer scrutiny (if the chain of custody of materials from local centers is upheld), but also a more direct point for influence over the results, whether through the use of the formal complaints and appeals system or through illicit manipulation or fraud.

Reform steps taken for the 2018 and 2019 elections—most prominently, the introduction of biometric voter verification—reduced options for individual-level voter fraud. These measures may also have provided controls against the capture and mass manipulation of an entire polling center's results by local power brokers by tightening



Election workers at the Independent Election Commission in Kabul, Afghanistan, on September 30, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

the criteria for a valid vote. However, the stakes of the electoral competition, the history of past political stand-offs over disputed vote counts being resolved through alternative power-sharing negotiations, and continued questions about discretionary adjudication decisions made by the election administration bodies under conditions of limited transparency meant that the new technical reforms did not produce acceptance of the integrity of the final vote count on the part of losing candidates.

DISPUTED VOTES AND CONFLICTING REPORTING STREAMS

New registration requirements link Afghan voters through their *tazkera* national ID card to a specific polling center and station. As a further control against potential repeat voting or other forms of fraud, such as ballot stuffing, the IEC implemented a system of biometric voter verification (BVV) at polling sites in the 2018

parliamentary elections. The procurement process for the BVV system was rushed, leading to limited time for advance preparations, testing, or staff training, and in the 2018 elections IEC officials ultimately broadly waived the requirement that ballots had to be biometrically verified to be accepted as valid.⁸⁵

For the 2019 election, the IEC attempted to introduce clearer processes and criteria for vote verification and polling station validation, again making use of BVV technology. In part at the insistence of the Abdullah campaign and other opposition candidates, and with the backing of the international donor community, IEC officials upheld the requirement that only biometrically verified votes should be accepted as valid, prioritizing the integrity of the vote count over the risk that real voters could be disenfranchised from any breakdown in the BVV system at their assigned polling site.⁸⁶

Voters checking in at the polls were fingerprinted and had their photos recorded on a handheld BVV device, which would generate a scannable QR code sticker to attach to a sealed ballot and an accompanying digital biometric data set or signature, stored in the device's memory card.⁸⁷ This should confirm any ballot's relationship to a real registered voter (limiting options for stuffing ballots, so long as access to BVV devices or QR sticker printers is also controlled), and allow the identification and removal of any duplicate biometric signatures (limiting the chance of repeat individual voting, so long as all such signatures can be centrally checked against one another and any duplicates then identified by their matching QR sticker).⁸⁸

After the polls closed on election day, polling station officers were tasked with counting votes on a tally sheet, a physical copy of which was then sent to Kabul for centralized aggregation, verification, and tabulation; ballot boxes were resealed and shipped to provincial centers in case of further audit orders. Separate from the biometric data records for all verified voters, a digital photograph of the tally sheet and a manually keyed-in summary of results were also transmitted by polling station officers to the National Tally Center in Kabul using the BVV device (in cases where cellular connectivity could be established).⁸⁹ The BVV device itself, containing the records of the number of voters processed and their accompanying digital biometric signature information, was returned to Kabul. The polling station tally sheet, digital verification of those results, and matching biometric voter records formed the basic criteria for the IEC's validation of a polling station's reported vote totals.

Although the majority of polling stations met the IEC's validation criteria, discrepancies between these reporting streams quickly emerged. Because the biometric records data did not include candidate choice, any polling station where there was a discrepancy between the vote totals on the physical tally sheet (which reported votes for each individual candidate) and the biometrically verified voter records (which did not) would have to undergo a recount or audit of the original ballot box

in order to identify those ballots with verified QR code stickers, identify the choice of candidate, and produce an updated and reconciled vote total.

In the week after election day the IEC initially reported a provisional figure of approximately 2.69 million total votes cast—the source of which appears to have been a combination of end-of-election day verbal reports by IEC provincial staff and physical tally sheet estimates—but later revised this number to approximately 1.93 million biometrically verified vote records.⁹⁰ This figure was further revised to 1.84 million biometric records after the technology provider Dermalog removed roughly 86,000 duplicate biometric vote signatures, leaving the IEC to sort out a difference of approximately 850,000 votes (31.6 percent of the first provisional totals) between provisional tallies and the vote counts backed up by unique biometric signatures.⁹¹

AUDITING THE PARTIAL ELECTION-DAY RESULTS

In early November, following provisional tallies but prior to the release of any detailed results, the IEC issued a series of decisions identifying polling stations that were to undergo an initial audit or recount. These steps were aimed at resolving the discrepancies between the two conflicting reporting streams, and also at responding to a set of election-day complaints filed by candidates with the ECC.⁹² Across all criteria categories, the IEC stated that it conducted audits or recounts of 8,494 polling stations out of the 26,580 stations it reported were open on election day, or roughly a third of the total stations open. However, the IEC did not publicly release information identifying all polling stations under all applicable audit criteria, and only 8,268 unique polling stations could be definitively identified on the basis of the information released to the public.

IEC Decision 104 (of November 4, 2019) set a five-vote discrepancy between biometric records and tally sheet counts as the threshold for a recount; in total, this and related criteria covered 5,439 polling stations.⁹³ IEC

Decision 105 (of November 4, 2019) ordered audits for 1,287 polling stations that had sent physical tally sheet results data to the National Tally Center but no accompanying biometric data and for 1,136 stations that were reported by IEC staff to have been open on election day but from which no results data had been received, for 2,423 stations in total.⁹⁴

In IEC Decision 109 (of November 15, 2019) and IEC Decision 112 (of November 21, 2019), 284 polling stations were selected for audit based on voter processing outside regular polling hours as indicated by the biometric device timestamp data. In total, 7,354 polling stations had reported such problems, but based on its assessment of timestamp data the IEC concluded that user setup error was the likely cause of the error in the other 7,070 polling stations not ordered to undergo further audit. With the exception of the few stations identified under Decision 112, the IEC did not publish a list identifying either the audited or potentially affected stations in such outside-hours cases.⁹⁵

The IEC did not issue a separate official decision on the presence of duplicate votes at a station as a criterion for audit, which would have produced the same need for candidate vote reconciliation as other discrepancies between biometric and nonbiometric vote tallies. Observer reporting indicates that these stations in all cases overlapped with other already ordered audit cases. If accurate, the roughly 86,000 duplicate votes removed on the grounds of biometric duplication would be equivalent to 4.7 percent of the initial biometrically verified votes recorded. Beyond aggregate figures, however, the IEC has not released any further details on the vote de-duplication process or explained the threshold it set with Dermalog for establishing a duplicate match.⁹⁶

In another decision (Decision 108 of November 14, 2019) the IEC opted to accept all cases in which discrepancies were reported between the number of voters processed by a BVV device (a number generated by the device) and individual biometric voter data records for those

stations (linked to a specific polling station on a digital memory card).⁹⁷ This discrepancy was initially reported to have led to a “quarantining” of these records in the biometric data system by Dermalog. Although several factors were reported to have produced these problems, switching memory cards (recording multiple station results on a single device, or using multiple devices to submit records for a single station) appears to have been the primary cause of these discrepancies. In total, 4,563 stations were reportedly affected (17 percent of those reportedly open); at 1,466 polling stations there were 30,608 more voters in the device count than the memory card voter count (so vote records appeared to be “missing”), and at 3,097 polling stations there were 168,238 fewer voters in the device count than the memory card voter count (so there appeared to be “extra” votes). Following its assessments, the IEC concluded that most of the discrepancies were due to technical problems, including the use of computers at IEC headquarters to complete the transmission of biometric records that could not be completed in the field due to cell network connectivity problems, or to other malfunctions of the biometric devices, and were not evidence of wrongdoing. In this case as well, however, no detailed identification of the potentially affected polling stations has been released by the IEC.

The Abdullah campaign and several other candidates objected to the IEC’s decisions and opposed the audit and recount process, seeking the invalidation of all polling stations with out-of-hours votes, all votes initially quarantined because of discrepancies between device and memory card biometric records, and all stations initially missing biometric records, which the campaign estimated to collectively total approximately 300,000 additional votes.⁹⁸ The stakes for vote validation and invalidation were high. Because the pool of votes after the implementation of biometric verification requirements was comparatively small, a change of approximately 20,000 votes would have been sufficient to shift margins by around 1 percent, which proved to be within Ghani’s margin of majority.⁹⁹

Abdullah's strategy . . . was most likely informed by his previously successful efforts to force an audit and eventual power-sharing compromise with Ghani after the 2014 presidential runoff election, as well as by past disputes over the validity of the 2009 presidential elections.

Abdullah's strategy during this period was most likely informed by his previously successful efforts to force an audit and eventual power-sharing compromise with Ghani after the 2014 presidential runoff election, as well as by past disputes over the validity of the 2009 presidential election in which Abdullah came in second to Hamid Karzai. However, the lack of clarity about biometric vote records and the potential outcome of the audit may have also contributed to an internal assessment by the Abdullah team that it could plausibly achieve a win based on the information available to them at the time. In parallel with the IEC's tabulation of results, the digital photographs of raw tally sheets transmitted through the BVV system were also made directly available by Dermalog and the IEC to all candidates' campaign teams. Until the ambiguity was gradually removed through the completion of the audit process, the margin between the two candidates at polling stations not subject to audit—which both sides had visibility over, although not all polling station photographs appear to have been successfully uploaded and some were illegible—was much narrower than in the post-audit results, with Ghani receiving 45.4 percent of the vote at stations not under any scrutiny and Abdullah receiving 44.1 percent. Given the past history of disputes, this margin may have seemed surmountable for the Abdullah campaign, but doing so would have required mass invalidation of the remaining disputed votes, over which visibility was much less clear.

In an effort to press their complaints against the IEC's audit criteria, Abdullah's supporters boycotted observation of the audits and blocked recounts from being completed in seven provinces where his support had been strongest, and he was able to quickly mobilize protests at IEC provincial offices.¹⁰⁰ Attempts by the IEC to secure acceptance of its decision during this period and proceed with the audit in these areas were unsuccessful for several weeks, pushing back timelines for the completion of the process.¹⁰¹

However, after more than a month of delay, Abdullah ultimately relented and allowed the process to be completed—though without rescinding his objections to the IEC decisions to date—which led to the completion of the audit in the remaining seven provinces and the publication of preliminary results on December 22, 2019.¹⁰²

AUDIT INVALIDATIONS AND CHANGES

Without the full release of detailed pre-audit provisional vote tallies, a picture of how the voting results changed following this process is still incomplete. However, after the audit was completed and the results were announced, the IEC released reports confirming the full invalidation of all votes at 2,299 polling stations, or 27.4 percent of all stations audited (and 8.65 percent of all stations opened).¹⁰³ Almost all these stations (2,124, or 92.3 percent of stations invalidated) fell under the IEC audit criteria for stations that were initially missing accompanying biometric records; their invalidation upheld the requirement for biometric verification in order for a vote to be counted. The IEC reported the pre-invalidation, non-biometrically verified vote totals for all invalidated stations, totaling 102,021 votes, or the equivalent of around 3.8 percent of the initial non-biometrically verified vote estimates.¹⁰⁴ The remaining 6,000-some stations that were audited saw adjustments to their individual vote totals, but the results were not fully invalidated as a consequence of the audit and recounting process.

Were the centers and stations whose votes were invalidated in 2019 the sites of large-scale fraud findings in past elections as well? The IEC and ECC provided minimal information on the invalidation decisions made in the 2018 parliamentary elections. The large discrepancies in the final results data for Kabul raise questions about the completeness of those results and prevent direct comparisons between the 2018 and 2019 election periods, which might otherwise aid in identifying problem polling centers

where results are consistently overturned or invalidated. Current polling stations (the level at which audits are ordered by the IEC and ECC) do not directly correspond to those active during the 2014 period because the IEC apportioned different numbers of stations per center and different numbers of voters per station. However, it is possible to evaluate vote changes and invalidation decisions made at the polling center level during the 2014 presidential runoff audit—the only occasion when an entire set of preliminary results was fully recounted, under close international and candidate observer scrutiny—and compare those polling centers that can be matched to their 2018–19 counterparts. Based on this, we can confirm that “problem centers” in 2019, where all open polling stations were invalidated, do correlate significantly with the vote-level invalidation changes previously made at those same centers in 2014.¹⁰⁵ During the audit in 2014, 158 polling centers (out of 6,172) saw more than 50 percent of their final vote invalidated, and 87 of these centers (55.1 percent of the “problem centers”) saw all their votes invalidated again during the audit in 2019.

Polling centers that favored Ashraf Ghani in 2014 were the subject of disproportionate scrutiny under the IEC’s audit decisions in 2019, even controlling for the concentration of audits in provinces such as Nangarhar, Paktia, and Kandahar that had broadly favored Ghani during the last elections. In cases where polling centers can be matched between election periods, Ghani’s final valid vote share in 2014 was positively correlated with an initial audit decision by the IEC of all stations at that center in 2019, and the subsequent invalidation of all open stations at the center.

Ghani also appears to have suffered the brunt of invalidation decisions in 2019. Of the scanned results forms released by the IEC for stations whose results were invalidated during the audit—the only source of unadjusted, pre-audit candidate-level vote totals released by the IEC—approximately 85,000 out of the approximately 102,000 votes tallied had been initially recorded for Ghani, or around 83 percent of the total at these stations; Abdullah had reportedly received approximately 11,000

votes, or around 11 percent. Had these stations cleared the audit or had the biometric verification requirements otherwise been relaxed, Ghani would have received 52.4 percent of the new national total of approximately 1.9 million votes, against only 38 percent for Abdullah. While Abdullah’s protests were unable to ensure the up-front invalidation of all polling stations initially found to be missing supporting biometric records, the fact that the results at almost all of the stations in this category were ultimately invalidated after the IEC’s first audit produced a much narrower margin over majority for Ghani than if these controls had been relaxed, as had previously happened in the 2018 parliamentary elections.

The IEC’s decision to allow the investigation (rather than outright invalidation, as sought by the Abdullah campaign) of stations that were initially missing biometric records data did lead to the inclusion of 27,641 votes following the audit process.¹⁰⁶ Because of the prior absence of available biometric records for these stations, these votes are assumed not to be reflected in the pre-audit national-level totals. Ashraf Ghani received approximately 24,000 votes from these stations (2.64 percent of his national total), compared to around 2,100 votes received by Abdullah. All else held equal, the invalidation of these stations as sought by Abdullah would not in and of itself have been sufficient to deny Ghani a margin over the 50 percent threshold required to avoid a second-round runoff, given the accompanying change to the total valid vote denominator.

In cases where the IEC did not outright invalidate an entire polling station’s votes after its 2019 audit, the IEC did not publish pre-audit tallies for individual candidates that would allow an assessment of how vote totals were adjusted during the recount, prior to the publication of preliminary results. It did, however, provide an aggregate pre-audit biometric vote total for each audited station. The IEC did not clarify whether this figure represented a pre- or post-vote de-duplication figure. However, for the stations for which these details were reported, it is possible to calculate the overall net change in biometrically

Table 1. Polling Stations Audited and Results Invalidated by Province

IEC Province Code	Province Name	Total Planned Polling Stations, No.	Total Closed Polling Stations, No.	Total Closed Polling Stations, %	Total Known Audited Polling Stations, No.	Total Open Polling Stations Audited, %	Total Invalidated Polling Stations, No.	Polling Stations Audited with Results Invalidated, %	Total Open Polling Stations with Results Invalidated, %
01	Kabul	4,777	15	0.314	1,133	23.8	181	16.0	3.80
02	Kapisa	481	19	3.95	189	40.9	49	25.9	10.6
03	Parwan	704	1	0.142	106	15.1	24	22.6	3.41
04	Maidan Wardak	516	124	24.0	193	49.2	165	85.5	42.1
05	Logar	310	31	10.0	152	54.5	28	18.4	10.0
06	Nangarhar	2,534	18	0.710	776	30.8	77	9.92	3.06
07	Laghman	513	54	10.5	60	13.1	22	36.7	4.79
08	Panjshir	295	0	0	9	3.05	6	66.7	2.03
09	Baghlan	1,295	263	20.3	712	69.0	320	44.9	31.0
10	Bamiyan	649	2	0.308	17	2.63	6	35.3	0.927
11	Ghazni	828	3	0.362	346	41.9	172	49.7	20.8
12	Paktika	773	0	0	388	50.2	174	44.8	22.5
13	Paktia	1,194	208	17.4	715	72.5	299	41.8	30.3
14	Khost	835	1	0.120	328	39.3	74	22.6	8.87
15	Kunar	586	0	0	125	21.3	5	4.00	0.853
16	Nuristan	286	117	40.9	106	62.7	8	7.55	4.73
17	Badakhshan	1,093	109	9.97	286	29.1	29	10.1	2.95
18	Takhar	1,026	235	22.9	77	9.73	11	14.3	1.39
19	Kunduz	581	184	31.7	51	12.8	29	56.9	7.30
20	Samangan	457	93	20.4	28	7.69	4	14.3	1.10
21	Balkh	1,467	487	33.2	35	3.57	17	48.6	1.73
22	Sar-e-Pul	436	61	14.0	43	11.5	2	4.65	0.533
23	Ghor	798	318	39.8	246	51.2	26	10.6	5.42
24	Daikundi	658	0	0	58	8.81	8	13.8	1.22
25	Uruzgan	200	2	1.00	24	12.1	18	75.0	9.09
26	Zabul	213	22	10.3	154	80.6	26	16.9	13.6
27	Kandahar	1584	17	1.07	750	47.9	233	31.1	14.9
28	Jawzjan	322	23	7.14	13	4.35	3	23.1	1.00
29	Faryab	655	272	41.5	123	32.1	33	26.8	8.62
30	Helmand	937	1	0.107	590	63.0	84	14.2	8.97
31	Badghis	335	170	50.7	5	3.03	2	40.0	1.21
32	Herat	1738	156	8.98	177	11.2	71	40.1	4.49
33	Farah	226	0	0	89	39.4	67	75.3	29.6
34	Nimroz	284	0	0	53	18.7	26	49.1	9.15
National total		29,586	3,006	10.2	8,157	30.7	2,299	28.2	8.65

Notes: Total known audited polling stations are based on available detailed reports released by the IEC, which is not reflective of the IEC's self-reported aggregate total of stations audited (8,494 stations). Ashraf Ghani was the provincial vote leader in rows highlighted in teal. Abdullah Abdullah was the provincial leader in rows highlighted in purple.

Table 2. Net Changes after Audit

Province Code	Province Name	Provisional (Non-Biometrically Confirmed) Votes as of 10-03-19	Pre-Audit Biometrically Confirmed Votes	Net Change after De-duplication	Votes Added from Stations Missing Biometric Data	Known Net Change after Audit	Other Unaccounted-for Net Change	Total Valid Preliminary Votes	Net Change, Pre-Audit Biometrically Confirmed Votes to Preliminary Results	% Change, Pre-Audit, Biometrically Confirmed Votes to Preliminary Results
01	Kabul	49,473	372,343	-17,419	448	-3,326	-2,964	349,082	-2,3261	-6.2
02	Kapisa	34,435	14,998	-426	0	-347	-111	14,114	-884	-5.9
03	Parwan	42,257	34,778	-399	0	-275	-893	33,211	-1,567	-4.5
04	Maidan Wardak	20,560	20,754	-597	0	-269	13	19,901	-853	-4.1
05	Logar	22,939	15,700	-1,650	0	141	5	14,196	-1,504	-9.6
06	Nangarhar	255,052	205,819	-4,118	5,069	-1,141	-1,273	204,356	-1,463	-0.7
07	Laghman	27,537	26,469	-391	0	-49	-99	25,930	-539	-2.0
08	Panjshir	19,205	19,035	-123	0	-3	-516	18,393	-642	-3.4
09	Baghlan	187,340	34,326	-1,721	0	-1,949	-388	30,268	-4,058	-11.8
10	Bamiyan	84,124	84,773	-399	0	129	-2,051	82,452	-2,321	-2.7
11	Ghazni	72,705	57,532	-2,141	27	-1,991	-1,504	51,923	-5,609	-9.7
12	Paktika	48,852	46,098	-7,058	0	-1,414	-6,114	31,512	-14,586	-31.6
13	Paktia	161,655	36,399	-2,999	0	-588	5,574	38,386	1,987	5.5
14	Khost	94,485	82,573	-6,225	0	1,302	216	77,866	-4,707	-5.7
15	Kunar	67,383	67,143	-2,829	0	-185	76	64,205	-2,938	-4.4
16	Noorestan	23,742	13,961	-2,274	0	-810	-8	10,869	-3,092	-22.1
17	Badakhshan	68,038	74,483	-2,927	174	-567	-1,036	70,127	-4,356	-5.8
18	Takhar	64,055	63,577	-296	430	-281	-1,595	61,835	-1,742	-2.7
19	Kunduz	12,881	13,012	-36	0	-54	-246	12,676	-336	-2.6
20	Samangan	39,255	39,044	-574	0	-89	-988	37,393	-1,651	-4.2
21	Balkh	74,701	75,751	-1,406	0	-53	-1,947	72,345	-3,406	-4.5
22	Sar-e-Pul	35,509	35,015	-602	503	-64	-650	34,202	-813	-2.3
23	Ghor	71,603	56,431	-3,255	0	-4,289	-347	48,540	-7,891	-14.0
24	Daikundi	117,506	102,053	-1,315	0	-133	-2,435	98,170	-3,883	-3.8
25	Uruzgan	6,005	6,301	-24	0	-27	-816	5,434	-867	-13.8
26	Zabul	18,378	11,031	-4,003	0	-1,013	-32	5,983	-5,048	-45.8
27	Kandahar	193,741	64,494	-9,115	17,130	-925	-3,211	68,373	3,879	6.0
28	Jawzjan	38,009	38,708	-134	0	-32	-832	37,710	-998	-2.6
29	Faryab	43,464	26,833	-1,046	1,034	22	-247	26,596	-237	-0.9
30	Helmand	115,333	38,233	-3,706	2,826	1,129	-345	38,137	-96	-0.3
31	Badghis	9,961	10,027	-81	0	-1	-281	9,664	-363	-3.6
32	Herat	129,993	119,270	-1,063	0	447	-2,444	116,210	-3,060	-2.6
33	Farah	22,975	12,055	-5,825	0	-80	-1,609	4,541	-7,514	-62.3
34	Nimroz	12,739	10,314	-49	0	-25	-439	9,801	-513	-5.0
National total		269,5890	1,929,333	-86,226	27,641	-16,810	-29,537	1,824,401	-104,932	-5.4

Notes: Ashraf Ghani was the provincial vote leader in rows highlighted in teal. Abdullah Abdullah was the leader in in rows highlighted in purple.

confirmed vote records resulting from the audit, prior to the completion of preliminary results. A net 16,810 votes were removed when compared to the known pre-audit figures at these stations, or slightly less than 1 percent of the pre-audit total count of de-duplicated biometrically confirmed votes.

Table 1 summarizes the first phase of audits and invalidations in 2019 by polling station, at the provincial level. In thirty-eight districts, half or more of all open polling stations were invalidated, and in eight districts (all in Farah province, with the exception of one district in Kandahar), all open stations were invalidated as a result of the audit. When coupled with the planned and unplanned closures discussed in the previous section, forty-nine of Afghanistan's 421 districts—comprising an estimated 1.28 million people, or around 4.4 percent of the national population, and approximately 173,000 registered voters, or 1.8 percent of the registered electorate—contributed no valid votes to the IEC's preliminary results total.

UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS AND APPARENT DISCREPANCIES

While the overall result of this first audit was a decrease in the number of valid votes, 611 polling stations (11.2 percent of all stations for which pre-audit biometric vote totals were available) appear to have increases in their votes in the published preliminary results when compared to the pre-audit biometric vote total previously reported by the IEC prior to the audit. In total, 14,865 votes (0.81 percent of the published preliminary total) appear to have been added at these stations as a result of the audit process—a surprising development, insofar as the previously reported biometric records are assumed to represent a maximum potential vote count per station.

Although it cannot be determined which candidates benefited from these added votes, the stations where this increase was reported collectively reported 63,111 votes in the preliminary results, or around 3.5 percent of the preliminary vote total, and the overwhelming majority of votes at these stations (50,866, or 80.6 percent) went

to Ashraf Ghani. While the votes added during the audit would not necessarily have been decisive in denying or guaranteeing a runoff election, a decision by the IEC or ECC to invalidate the entirety of these polling stations would have done so, were all else held equal. Neither body opted to do so, and scrutiny of these changes on the part of other observers or candidates appears to have been minimal. It is also possible that the IEC's published pre-audit biometric totals were inaccurate in some way, but the IEC has not clarified the discrepancy.

In sum, taking the reported national-level total of biometric votes prior to any other changes in the audit, removing the votes from duplicate biometric signatures, adding votes from stations previously flagged for missing biometric data, and adding the net change in known votes from the audit and recount, produces a remaining unaccounted-for net change when compared to the preliminary vote totals ultimately reported by the IEC in December 2019.¹⁰⁷ The five-vote biometric difference threshold set by the IEC, unobserved changes at the stations for which the IEC did not specify pre-audit biometric totals, or the removal of some biometric vote records at stations that were entirely invalidated, may be the source of some of these unaccounted-for changes. In total, this appears to show another 29,537 additional votes removed on net, although again some cases of added votes appear, notably in Paktia and Kandahar provinces (see table 2). Without more information on pre-audit figures and the de-duplication process, it is unclear whether these are the result of inaccurate tallies or some other adjustment of pre-audit results not reflected in the more detailed polling station-level reporting.

FINAL RESULTS AUDIT

ECC decision making was, as in past elections, largely opaque, and few details were released by either the IEC or ECC as to the changes made as a result of the second audit and recount process that followed the announcement of preliminary results in late December 2019.

Provincial-level ECC offices began a process of accepting complaints from candidates at that time, ultimately taking in approximately 16,500 such challenges by the

close of filings. In mid-January 2020, the ECC announced that 9,866 of these complaints had been rejected, most for lack of supporting documentation, and that a recount had been ordered for 5,378 polling stations.¹⁰⁸ No detailed list of the polling stations that fell under this order was released, but candidates reportedly complained of nonstandardized decisions across provinces in response to identical complaints. Observers also reported considerable overlap among the audit criteria (meaning some stations had potentially been ordered for audit by the ECC multiple times under different criteria) and that some stations were being ordered to undergo a second audit after having already undergone scrutiny during the first round of IEC-ordered audits earlier in the fall.

The provincial orders were not implemented, as a further process of appeals against the provincial-level ECC decisions was undertaken by the national ECC offices; candidates filed nearly 6,400 such appeals.¹⁰⁹ On February 5, 2020, the national ECC issued a new set of orders superseding the lower provincial decisions and calling for a process to sample select polling stations and conduct a partial audit and recount under the three main categories of disputed votes that had previously been raised by Abdullah Abdullah's campaign.¹¹⁰ After a delay of a week and a half, during which the two electoral administration bodies clarified the terms of the ECC orders and a process for implementation, the IEC began the second audit process. The audit moved forward swiftly this time—without the participation of candidate observation from Abdullah's team—and the IEC announced its completion and the release of final results on February 18, 2020.¹¹¹

The ECC's orders included a 15 percent sample audit of 1,103 polling stations out of the 7,354 polling stations that had reported voting outside regular polling hours. The actual list published by the IEC of its sample targets included only 1,085 polling stations, as the IEC's efforts to ensure representation of all provinces in the sample produced fractions that were dropped. Based on the ECC order, if at least 35 percent of the sample (either 386 stations, following the order, or 361 stations, following the

number published) were found to not have "biometric information, a polling station journal, and a valid election day results sheet," all 102,012 out-of-hours votes at all 7,354 polling stations would be invalidated.

At least twenty-two stations in this sample list had already previously been audited and validated during the first audit and recount process on the basis of IEC Decision 112. The IEC had also previously identified 262 polling stations for audit under its Decision 109, and some votes (but not entire stations) were invalidated as a result. However, the IEC did not make public a list of which stations were covered under Decision 109 and did not publish pre-audit vote totals at those stations. Thus some additional stations in the sample, beyond the twenty-two identified under Decision 112, may have also undergone a second audit, but it is not currently possible to identify which.

The ECC also ordered a sample audit of 309 polling stations out of 3,097 stations (a 10 percent station sample) that were initially flagged for quarantine by Dermalog due to reports of 168,238 fewer voters recorded in the BVV device count than in the memory card's transmitted biometric data set for the polling station (so there appeared to be "extra" votes added).¹¹² Twenty-two of the stations sampled under this criterion were also sampled under the out-of-time votes criterion. The 1,466 polling stations that had been quarantined with more votes in the device count than the memory card voter count (so votes appeared to be "missing") were not subject to an audit based on the ECC's orders.

All votes at the stations under this category had been included by the IEC in the preliminary results. Per the ECC order, if at least 35 percent of the sample (either 108 stations, following the order, or 109, following the number published) were again found to be missing biometric information, a polling station journal, and a valid election-day results sheet, all 3,097 polling stations in this category would then be audited to check for the same criteria. Any polling stations that met the criteria would be validated and any polling stations that failed to

meet the criteria would be fully invalidated. Thirty-seven polling stations on the sample list had already been previously audited and validated prior to the announcement of preliminary results during the first audit and recount process, so, assuming this was upheld in the second audit, at least 40 percent of the remaining stations would have had to fail to meet the special audit criteria to trigger a broader audit of all affected stations.

Finally, the ECC ordered a full recount for 298 polling stations out of 2,423 previously flagged during the first IEC audit as having initially been missing biometric voter data. These 298 stations had been validated during the first audit process, reporting a total of 27,641 votes, of which 24,433 were for Ghani (88.4 percent) and 2,140 for Abdullah (7.7 percent).¹¹³ Following the ECC-ordered recount, votes would be invalidated on an individual basis if they were found to be lacking a certified biometric QR code sticker.

WHAT CHANGED, OR DIDN'T, ON THE FINAL AUDIT

After completion of the second audit and recount process and the announcement of final results in mid-February, the IEC reported an overall net change of -453 votes (-276 for Ghani, -149 for Abdullah, and a few other small changes for other candidates) between preliminary and final results. This left Ghani's margin over a 50 percent majority effectively unchanged from the preliminary results and dashed Abdullah's efforts to force a second-round runoff. However, even this small change was not reflected in the more detailed polling station-level results published on the IEC's website. The latter omits eight polling stations that had appeared in the preliminary results, none of which were included in the list of stations to be sampled in the second audit. Only one station had previously reported any votes, and its omission appears to have accounted for the only change to vote totals in the polling station-level results.¹¹⁴ An election observer source provided an internal IEC report to election stakeholders that indicated that twenty-three polling stations had been removed as a result of the audit, but that

report did not specify the criteria for removing stations from the list; of these stations, fourteen still appear in the published results.¹¹⁵ Had all twenty-three been removed, this still would not have produced the net changes in the published IEC national-level results.

Although these discrepancies and other gaps in the available data leave significant unresolved questions about what changes were actually made in the second audit and finalization of results, it is possible to assess some of the possible impacts. The IEC has not explicitly confirmed as such, but none of the ECC's broader invalidation criteria appear to have been triggered based on the stations sampled for scrutiny and the thresholds for action established in the ECC's orders.

Because it had the potential to mass invalidate a large number of votes, the outside-normal-hours vote criterion was the most plausible means by which a runoff could have been triggered based on the ECC orders. The IEC has not published a list of all stations where these outside-normal-hours votes were reported, but an observer source did provide a detailed list. If this source's identifications are accurate, these 7,354 polling stations reported a total of 676,271 votes in the preliminary results, of which 349,918 (51.7 percent) were recorded for Ghani and 258,155 (38.2 percent) for Abdullah. A complete invalidation of all votes at these stations—and no other changes to the results—would have produced a new grand total of 1.148 million votes, 573,950 (49.989 percent) of them for Ghani and 462,835 (40.3 percent) for Abdullah, which would have narrowly triggered a second-round runoff. However, the ECC decision appears to have called at most for the invalidation of the out-of-hours votes themselves and not the full station's results.¹¹⁶

Because the candidate choice of any individual out-of-hours vote that could have been removed is unknown, and because the number of those votes that may have already been removed from the preliminary results under the unpublished Decision 109 audit is also unknown, the exact potential distribution and impact

on the outcome had the ECC's invalidation order been triggered in a counterfactual scenario are currently unknowable. If all out-of-hours votes had been individually invalidated but the remainder of votes at those stations left unchanged, the invalidated votes would have to have broken at least 78 percent for Ghani in order for his resulting vote total to be reduced below a 50 percent majority, all other things held equal. At the stations sampled by the IEC, however, Ghani received only 49.8 percent of the preliminary vote share. While it is possible that the out-of-hours votes disproportionately benefited one candidate or the other, if they were more proportionately distributed, this most likely would not have resulted in a runoff even if the full vote invalidation criterion was triggered.

No complete list of all polling stations that were flagged under initial quarantine is currently available to the author, so it is not possible to estimate the potential impact of a full invalidation for this category of disputed votes. Of the stations identified for sampling, there were 21,195 total votes in the preliminary results, of which 10,340 (48.8 percent) were recorded for Ghani and 8,804 (41.5 percent) for Abdullah. The full invalidation of these sampled stations alone would not have been sufficient to produce a second round, and this criterion faced the highest threshold for triggering any changes to the final vote totals.

Barring evidence of systematic fraud on the part of IEC election workers during the first audit and recount, results at polling stations that were initially missing biometric voter data, which had already been recounted, audited, and validated, were unlikely to be changed by the IEC as a result of the second ECC-ordered audit. Even a complete invalidation of these stations—which was unlikely, following the ECC order that votes be evaluated individually—would not, in and of itself, be sufficient to force a second round, although it would leave a razor-thin margin over the 50 percent majority for Ghani.

Beyond these criteria set out by the ECC and implemented by the IEC in the second audit, the IEC's first audit of results also produced apparent discrepancies and cases where votes appear to have been added during the recount and audit process. These were not identified as meeting criteria for audit or invalidation by the ECC; had they been fully invalidated, they could have potentially triggered a second-round runoff.¹¹⁷ Additionally, forty polling stations reported greater than 100 percent turnout (preliminary votes as a share of total voter registration), accounting for 4,080 votes in total. The removal of these stations, barring other changes, would not have triggered a runoff, but the results from these stations were not invalidated based on the February 5 ECC order or in the publication of final results, raising questions as to the enforcement of voter registration rolls requirements in these cases.

Ultimately, then, the second ECC-ordered audit concluded in rapid fashion, with little clarity on the details of some of its outcomes and with some apparent discrepancies evident in the final results published by the IEC. These and other administrative decisions set the parameters for public participation in the elections and determine which votes are counted and which are not. The biometric vote system on the whole appears to have substantially reduced Ashraf Ghani's final valid vote total; to what degree this represented a triumph of counter-fraud measures or the possible disenfranchisement of voters attempting to pass through biometric controls that were being enforced for the first time remains unclear in the absence of third-party observation capable of corroborating conditions at the polling booth. But the lack of clarity about some key commission decisions, the lack of trust on the part of the opposition candidates, and the political stakes riding on an electoral loss all contributed to a contested outcome and a postelection political crisis that would ultimately be resolved only through negotiations outside the formal electoral process.

Analyzing Political Trends in the Results Data



There are still many gaps in the available data and unresolved questions about the IEC's and ECC's actions that produced the currently available final vote figures for Afghanistan's 2019 presidential election. Because many different access conditions, administrative actions, and validation decisions contributed to producing the final results published by the IEC, electoral results data offer an incomplete picture of underlying political organizations, movements, and voter attitudes. However, taking the results as given, with all the caveats about the available data in mind, we can attempt an analysis of some of the major political trends observable in comparison to prior elections, including changes in participation and political preferences, the role of third-party candidates, geographic patterns of political support, and differences between male and female voters.

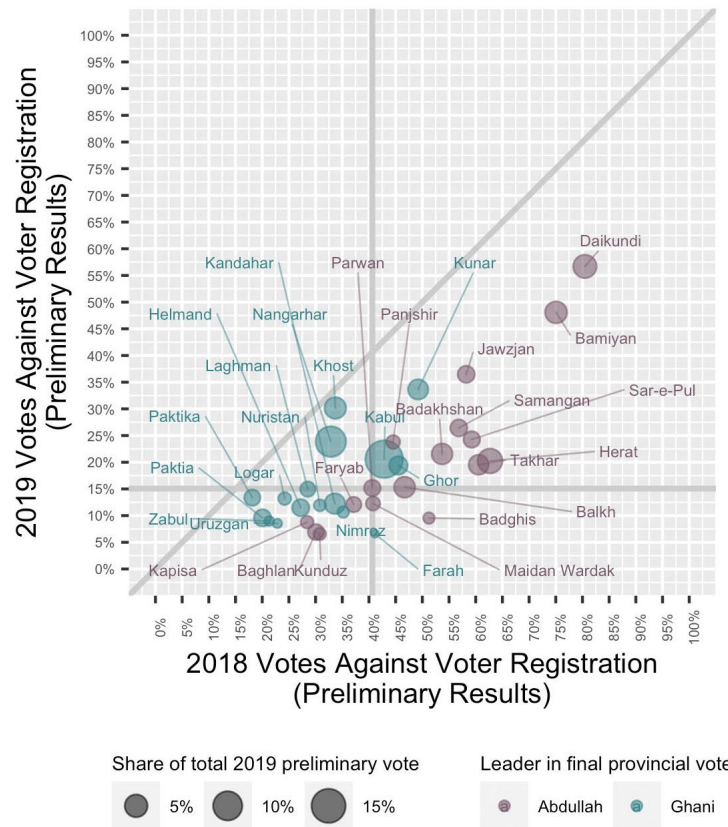
RECORD LOW PARTICIPATION

The absolute number of final valid votes in the 2019 election, approximately 1.82 million, is the lowest recorded in an Afghan election to date, equivalent to roughly a quarter of the final vote total for the 2014 election and approximately 18 percent of voter registrations in 2019. While this figure is clearly indicative of a steep decline in public participation, decoupling and evaluating all the potential reasons for this drop is not easy. Differing requirements for registration and differing criteria for a valid vote mean that a count of "votes in 2014" measures a qualitatively different activity than a count of "votes in 2019." The lack of a fixed voter registry in 2014 also means that detailed turnout rates versus registration rates cannot be calculated for those elections, as can be done for the ones held in 2018 and 2019.¹¹⁸

Although they operate under different voting systems and elect different types of candidates to different roles, the 2018 parliamentary elections offer a closer point of comparison both administratively and temporally to the polls held in 2019. Voter registration numbers increased between the election periods, but the existence of a common baseline of polling center-based registration lists means that it is possible to evaluate the general decline in turnout between parliamentary and presidential elections, as figure 2 does at the provincial level. However, the broader criteria for accepting non-biometrically verified votes in 2018 again make it difficult to disentangle the effects of tighter ballot requirements in 2019 from lower levels of individual voter participation as two potentially competing explanations for the general decline in turnout.

In addition to the security threats and registration barriers that deterred participants, the 2019 election was the first in which no accompanying elections were held for provincial council representatives alongside the national presidential election. Although the formal powers of the provincial councils are limited, they still represent important potential avenues for brokering relations with the provincial and national government.¹¹⁹ Local candidates who might otherwise have contested these races had no opportunity to do so in 2019, meaning that any national presidential campaign would likely have had to provide its own resources or find other inducements to mobilize local political networks to turn out the vote. Owing to the compressed campaign period and the national political elite's focus on peace talks and new power-sharing formulations, the campaigns' ability to

Figure 2. Provincial-Level Turnout Comparisons, 2018 and 2019



Note: Diagonal line represents hypothetical perfect correlation; all points below this line represent a relative drop in turnout between 2018 parliamentary and 2019 presidential election. X- and y-intercept lines are 2019 national medians. Preliminary results reporting data is used due to discrepancies in final 2018 parliamentary results data for Kabul as published by the Independent Election Commission. Ghazni province is omitted due to the absence of parliamentary elections held there in 2018.

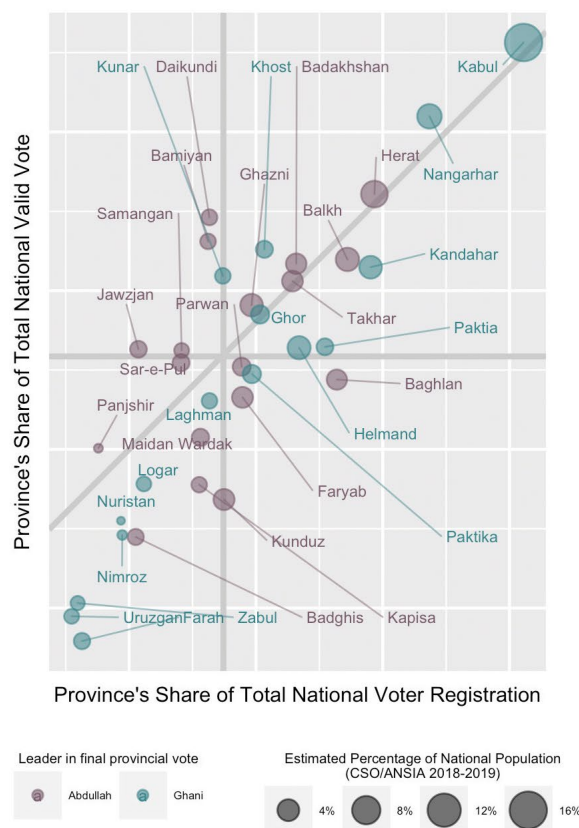
activate local networks in this election appears to have been limited, particularly among candidates lacking the advantages of incumbency. Following a strategic logic that suggests candidates should give at least as much priority to influencing the central vote-counting process and the power-sharing talks that follow as they do to local vote mobilization, their motivation to take on these additional organizing costs may also have been limited.

An alternative measure of participation can be gauged by comparing a provincial (or district or center) share in total national voter registration and that same province's share in the final national total vote tally (see figure 3). Assuming that political engagement in the registration process and participation in voting are closely correlated, one would expect each province to

be represented in both registrants and voters in roughly the same proportions at the national level. However, many factors may lead to variations between a province's share in total national voter registration and its share in the national vote tally, including, potentially, changing access conditions between the registration period and the voting period that could limit voting or the introduction of distortions in the registration process. But the comparison does clearly show some provinces' relative "overrepresentation" in the final national vote tally vis-à-vis their share of the potential registered electorate, and the "underrepresentation" of others.

The overrepresented provinces—those where the province's share of the national vote total exceeded their share of the national registration total—include some

Figure 3. Provincial Shares of Votes and Registration, 2019



Note: A log-10 scale is used to more clearly visualize relative differences between provinces, as Kabul alone comprises nearly 20 percent of both the national vote and national registration. Diagonal line represents hypothetical perfect correlation; all points below this line represent a relative under-representation against registration in the final valid vote, while points above the line are effectively over-represented. The X- and Y-intercept lines are the 2019 national median.

of the obvious major population centers, such as Kabul and Nangarhar, but also the central Hazarajat highland provinces of Bamiyan and Daikundi, which also reported the highest levels of turnout in the 2018 parliamentary elections (although turnout rates there also fell by comparison with the 2019 turnout). These latter two provinces together represent only 3.5 percent of total national voter registration (and around 3.2 percent of the estimated national population) but provided 9.9 percent of all valid votes in 2019. All major candidates sought to include representatives from the Hazara minority on their ticket as the population represents a key potential swing bloc that has been heavily engaged in the post-2001 Afghan state-building project.¹²⁰

AN INCREASINGLY URBAN ELECTORATE

One impact of the reduction in polling sites and shrinking access to the vote noted earlier is the growing overrepresentation of urban centers in the makeup of the Afghan electorate. Although urbanization, population movements, and the patterns of urban environments are often understood to produce changes in social and political behaviors, widely varying definitions are used to classify a given area or population as “urban,” “rural,” or some mixture of both. Classification may be based on different political or administrative structures or status (which may or may not reflect the underlying areal characteristics), population size or density, land usage or built infrastructure assessments, and other factors.

The CSO/ANSIA provides both “urban” and “rural” population estimates in its annual district-level population reporting but does not provide details on its methods for defining each type of population. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization conducted a land use survey using images collected (in 2010) with satellite mapping technology to arrive at area calculations for urban settlements and irrigated farmland; this approach offers the alternative possibility of calculating and ranking district population density based on total population against settled land area (though with growing distortions over time caused by the decade lag behind current settlement patterns).¹²¹ The geolocation data for the current set of IEC polling centers can also be used to construct a density index based on distances between centers, with thresholds assigned—either nationwide or relative to the center’s home province or district—to classify the center and its catchment area of voters as highly densely co-located with other centers (characteristic of an urban environment), highly remote (assumed to fall in more rural areas), or within some normal range for the area.¹²²

The simplest available method of categorizing a set of “urban” areas in Afghanistan takes the boundaries of the thirty-four provincial capital districts, where the Afghan government’s ability to exert control has been the most consistent since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and classifies the remainder of the country’s districts as “rural” outliers.¹²³ The increasing overrepresentation of the provincial capitals in the electorate shows a clear trend line over the past five years. The CSO estimates that the provincial capital centers collectively comprise around 32 percent of the national population, and Kabul city alone accounts for around 14 percent of the national total; the WorldPop project estimates the provincial capitals’ collective share at only around 29.2 percent of the national total and Kabul’s share at 13 percent.¹²⁴ However, the provincial capitals account for approximately 35 percent of the 2019 voter registry and 41.4 percent of the final vote, making them overrepresented in both the potential and actual electorate. By comparison, votes from the provincial capitals accounted for 29.7 percent of the final 2009

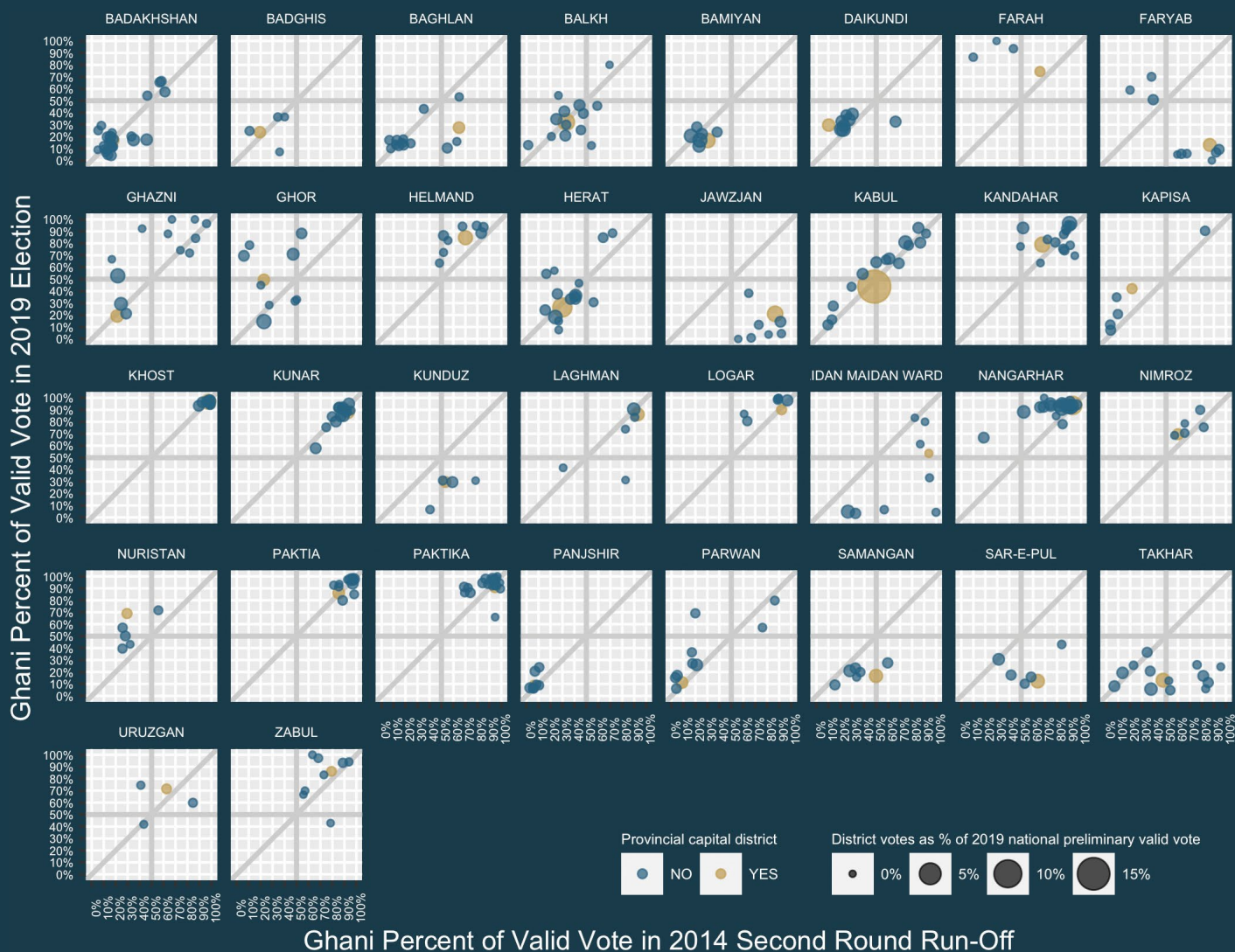
presidential election results, 28.6 percent of the final 2010 parliamentary vote, 30.6 percent of the final 2014 second-round runoff vote, and 38 percent of the total preliminary 2018 parliamentary vote. The national capital of Kabul—where Ghani and Abdullah roughly split the vote—accounted for 12.4 percent of total national voter registration in 2019 but 15.6 percent of the final valid vote.

Below the national level, there is more variation in the relative dominance of a province’s capital in the overall provincial vote total. To take a few examples, final valid votes from the provincial capitals of Badghis, Balkh, and Faryab provinces were all particularly overrepresented in comparison to those districts’ share of total provincial voter registration, while outlying districts contributed greater shares of the vote than the provincial capitals of Ghor, Kandahar, and Logar. With the exception of the provincial capital of Maidan Wardak—where Ghani secured more than half the vote, despite losing the province overall by a large margin to Abdullah—the usually sizable contribution of the provincial centers to the total provincial vote meant that a candidate’s share of the capital district vote and share of the overall provincial vote generally tracked each other closely. Overall, Abdullah received a larger share of his own total votes from provincial capital centers than Ghani (44.5 percent and 38.2 percent, respectively) but a smaller share of the votes recorded in the provincial capitals than Ghani (42.4 percent and 46.7 percent, respectively).

POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS SINCE 2014

After five years of internal disputes within the National Unity Government framework, the 2019 election developed into a rerun of the 2014 presidential election runoff in which Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah first contested directly against each other. In the first round of the 2014 elections, Abdullah had secured a larger plurality, with around 45 percent of the vote against 31 percent for Ghani, but Ghani ultimately was able to broaden his coalition and consolidate support in the two-person runoff held later that summer, taking 55 percent of the second-round vote.

Figure 4. Ghani Vote Share Changes by District, 2014 and 2019



Note: Points are districts; 2019 data has been reaggregated to match 2014 district boundaries. Points below the diagonal line are a loss in vote share in 2019 compared to 2014, points above are an increase in vote share. Ghani received more than 50-percent support in both elections in points in the upper right quadrant, less than 50 percent in both elections in the lower left quadrant.

During the intervening five years, several of Ghani's and Abdullah's supporters shifted their allegiances (in some cases multiple times). The most notable exemplar of such a shift was First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, who spent an extended period of time in exile in Turkey between 2017 and 2018 after facing charges of physically abusing a political rival in Jawzjan province. Both at home and abroad, Dostum participated in a series of opposition political coalitions despite nominally continuing in the vice presidential role.¹²⁵ Dostum split fully with his former running mate and endorsed Abdullah in the 2019 campaign, and his former chief of staff, Enaytullah Babar Farahmand, served as Abdullah's first vice presidential nominee.

Dostum's political base in the northern provinces of Jawzjan, Faryab, and Takhar saw some of the biggest shifts in vote share away from Ghani and to Abdullah between 2014 and 2019, as can be seen in figure 4, which summarizes shifts at the district level. Ghani received roughly 11 percent of his final vote total in 2014 from these three provinces, where Dostum held the greatest political influence; in 2019, votes from these three provinces represented around 14 percent of Abdullah's final total. Dostum's position as the leader of one of the most cohesive national vote banks appears to have been reinforced by these elections—in the power-sharing deal reached in May, he was recognized with the title “marshal of Afghanistan,” the only one of Abdullah's coalition of supporters to be singled out by name in the text of the agreement reached with Ghani. The relative influence of these provinces in the national total vote was reduced when compared to that of other provinces (from 10.1 percent of the final vote in 2014 to 6.9 percent in 2019), however.

The other high-profile national power broker to switch sides between the 2014 and 2019 elections was former Balkh governor Mohammad Atta Noor. Noor had supported Abdullah in the 2014 race; both are officially members of the same Jamiat-e-Islami political party, although the party is highly factionalized, and both have jockeyed for leadership roles within it. Noor's threats to mobilize in potentially violent support of Abdullah's contestation

of the second-round results in 2014 was a major factor in pushing international actors to intervene and mediate the disputed outcome, leading to the eventual National Unity Government agreement.¹²⁶ After those elections, tensions remained high between Noor and President Ghani over control of Balkh province, where Noor had consolidated power since 2001. Noor rebuffed efforts to nominate a replacement but eventually resigned from his long-held position as governor in March 2018, and continues to dominate provincial politics in Balkh.¹²⁷ Forces loyal to Noor also clashed with police aligned with the Kabul government when Ghani attempted to appoint a new provincial police chief in March 2019.¹²⁸ Noor initially floated the idea of running for president himself, and at various points was reported to be backing other candidates, but ultimately withheld a public endorsement. After election day, Noor began to offer more tacit support to Ghani, however, disavowing the likelihood of a second round and this time publicly criticizing Abdullah's supporters' protests and the delays in the finalization of results.¹²⁹

Balkh saw a disproportionately large number of polling center closures on election day 2019, and its turnout rates fell substantially when compared to levels of voting in 2018 and 2014. In the last presidential election, 4.9 percent of the final national vote was cast in Balkh province, where Abdullah won approximately two-thirds of the vote; in 2019, Balkh contributed less than 4 percent of the final national vote. Abdullah was still able to secure 55.3 percent of the vote there, suggesting that, if Atta did indeed unofficially mobilize in support of Ghani this cycle, the Jamiat party, of which he and Abdullah are both nominally members, remains factionalized and Atta's influence over it is not unchallenged, even within Balkh. However, the reduced turnout and reduced share of the vote (in part also due to stronger showings here by some of the other second-tier candidates) in Balkh reduced Abdullah's chances for reducing Ghani's margin of votes at the national level.

Outside these swings, most areas of the country saw generally consistent patterns of support for Ghani and Abdullah between 2014 and 2019, with many districts

Table 3. Candidate Vote Distribution by Province

Province Code	Province Name	Total Final Votes	Ghani Votes		Abdullah Votes		Hekmatyar Votes		Nabil Votes		Other Candidate Votes		Total Non-Ghani / Abdullah Votes	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
01	Kabul	34,9082	16,6619	47.7	14,1881	40.6	14,904	4.27	9,056	2.59	16,622	4.76	40,582	11.6
02	Kapisa	14,114	4,599	32.6	7,089	50.2	1,814	12.9	56	0.397	556	3.94	2,426	17.2
03	Parwan	33,211	7,783	23.4	20,448	61.6	3,324	10.0	257	0.774	1,399	4.21	4,980	15.0
04	Maidan Wardak	19,901	1,279	6.43	17,139	86.1	274	1.38	248	1.25	961	4.83	1,483	7.45
05	Logar	14,196	13,344	94.0	503	3.54	216	1.52	10	0.0704	123	0.866	349	2.46
06	Nangarhar	20,4356	188,462	92.2	4,949	2.42	9,515	4.66	221	0.108	1,209	0.592	10,945	5.36
07	Laghman	25,930	22,769	87.8	469	1.81	2,360	9.10	46	0.177	286	1.10	2,692	10.4
08	Panjshir	18,393	2,079	11.3	15,343	83.4	110	0.598	92	0.500	769	4.18	971	5.28
09	Baghlan	30,258	5,830	19.3	21,009	69.4	1,646	5.44	311	1.03	1,462	4.83	3,419	11.3
10	Bamiyan	82,452	15,021	18.2	55,795	67.7	1,859	2.25	4,120	5.00	5,657	6.86	11,636	14.1
11	Ghazni	51,923	19,259	37.1	26,946	51.9	685	1.32	2,941	5.66	2,092	4.03	5,718	11.0
12	Paktika	31,512	29,499	93.6	828	2.63	794	2.52	121	0.384	270	0.857	1,185	3.76
13	Paktia	38,386	35,657	92.9	1,643	4.28	727	1.89	81	0.211	278	0.724	1,086	2.83
14	Khost	77,866	75,109	96.5	787	1.01	1,625	2.09	72	0.0925	273	0.351	1,970	2.53
15	Kunar	64,205	54,907	85.5	5,072	7.90	3,417	5.32	498	0.776	311	0.484	4,226	6.58
16	Nuristan	10,869	6,290	57.9	3,516	32.3	932	8.57	31	0.285	100	0.920	1,063	9.78
17	Badakhshan	70,127	15,234	21.7	39,246	56.0	6,368	9.08	432	0.616	8,847	12.6	15,647	22.3
18	Takhar	61,835	8,583	13.9	49,516	80.1	1,407	2.28	303	0.490	2,026	3.28	3,736	6.04
19	Kunduz	12,676	3,636	28.7	8,074	63.7	290	2.29	70	0.552	606	4.78	966	7.62
20	Samangan	37,393	7,123	19.0	28,392	75.9	687	1.84	264	0.706	927	2.48	1,878	5.02
21	Balkh	72,345	24,073	33.3	40,078	55.4	1,448	2.00	3,163	4.37	3,583	4.95	8,194	11.3
22	Sar-e-Pul	34,202	6,154	18.0	26,323	77.0	219	0.640	581	1.70	925	2.70	1,725	5.04
23	Ghor	48,540	21,553	44.4	19,849	40.9	1,127	2.32	3,449	7.11	2,562	5.28	7,138	14.7
24	Daikundi	98,170	29,742	30.3	62,521	63.7	303	0.309	3,122	3.18	2,482	2.53	5,907	6.02
25	Uruzgan	5,434	3,518	64.7	936	17.2	525	9.66	135	2.48	320	5.89	980	18.0
26	Zabul	5,983	5,380	89.9	262	4.38	194	3.24	37	0.618	110	1.84	341	5.70
27	Kandahar	68,373	59,467	87.0	3,667	5.36	3,207	4.69	373	0.546	1,659	2.43	5,239	7.66
28	Jawzjan	37,710	7,305	19.4	29,006	76.9	248	0.658	225	0.597	926	2.46	1,399	3.71
29	Faryab	26,596	5,207	19.6	20,476	77.0	175	0.658	181	0.681	557	2.09	913	3.43
30	Helmand	38,137	31,072	81.5	4,878	12.8	1,139	2.99	279	0.732	769	2.02	2,187	5.73
31	Badghis	9,664	2,374	24.6	6,209	64.2	336	3.48	80	0.828	665	6.88	1,081	11.2
32	Herat	116,210	34,199	29.4	56,117	48.3	7,504	6.46	2,968	2.55	15,422	13.3	25,894	22.3
33	Farah	4,541	3,552	78.2	539	11.9	220	4.84	21	0.462	209	4.60	450	9.91
34	Nimroz	9,801	7,186	73.3	1,482	15.1	641	6.54	77	0.786	415	4.23	1,133	11.6
National total		1,824,391	923,864	50.6	720,988	39.5	70,240	3.85	3,3921	1.86	75,378	4.13	179,539	9.84

Notes: Based on final results as reported by the IEC. Ashraf Ghani was the provincial vote leader in rows highlighted in teal. Abdullah Abdullah was the provincial leader in rows highlighted in purple.

Had [Abdullah] taken all of the non-Ghani vote, he would have come within a percentage point of achieving an absolute majority of votes, further raising the stakes for the vote validation process had it produced the opportunity to contest in a two-man runoff.

effectively polarized in support of one or the other candidate. Kabul province, with the greatest concentration of votes, was closely contested; as in 2014, Ghani saw the highest levels of support in the south and east of the country. Although Abdullah's vote totals exceeded Ghani's in more provinces across the country, the margins were smaller than in the areas where Ghani ran strongest. In absolute terms, after Kabul, the large vote pools in the provinces of Herat, Daikundi, and Bamiyan provided Abdullah the greatest number of votes, but he failed to dominate these areas in the way Ghani dominated in Nangarhar and Kandahar, as shown in table 3.

OTHER CANDIDATES

Although eighteen candidates initially registered to contest the 2019 election, including some with national political profiles, the contest was essentially a two-person race between the incumbent Ghani and previous runner-up, Abdullah. Second-tier candidates secured their lowest share of the vote in any presidential election to date, including the first 2004 election, which saw the election of Hamid Karzai. Several of the competing candidates dropped out prior to election day, including former national security adviser Hanif Atmar, who had initially received the backing of former president Karzai and other opposition figures such as Atta Noor but who withdrew after failing to reach agreement over the distribution of power among his supporters.¹³⁰ Third-place and lower candidates collectively secured only 9.8 percent of the final vote, compared to 23.9 percent on the first round of the 2014 presidential election, when no candidate was returning as an incumbent and then president Karzai's endorsement of a successor was left ambiguous.¹³¹

Former insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and former National Directorate of Security intelligence chief Rahmatullah Nabil came in respectively in third and fourth place in the 2019 presidential contest, receiving

3.9 percent and 1.9 percent of the total final vote. In absolute terms, the largest number of votes for Hekmatyar came from Kabul province, although he also received between 9 and 10 percent of the votes in the surrounding central provinces of Kapisa, Laghman, Parwan, Uruzgan, and Wardak. Nabil's candidacy also received the majority of its votes in Kabul but saw its best relative performance in Ghor province; Nabil's first vice presidential running mate, former Lt. Gen. Murad Ali Murad, is a native of that province. Although they received few votes elsewhere, candidates Abdul Latif Pedram (a former presidential candidate and two-term parliamentarian from 2005 to 2018) and Faramarz Tamana (a former Foreign Ministry official and university lecturer) achieved sizable support in their home provinces of Badakhshan and Herat (10.3 percent and 10.9 percent of the respective provincial vote totals), reducing the share available for the top two candidates in those provinces.

Even if Abdullah had captured the entirety of the non-Ghani vote in 2019, he would still have fallen short of an absolute majority. Had he taken all of the non-Ghani vote, he would have come within a percentage point of achieving an absolute majority of votes, further raising the stakes for the vote validation process had it produced the opportunity to contest in a two-man runoff. (Ghani's advantages of incumbency might still have provided an edge in the negotiation of new coalitions with the other eliminated candidates, however.) Had those second-tier candidates turned out more voters nationwide—increasing the total vote denominator—as they had in past presidential election rounds, Ghani's margin over a 50 percent majority also could have potentially been reduced further. However, few candidates mobilized for the elections, pushing instead for the formation of an interim government and the renegotiation of power sharing in conjunction with or in parallel to the US-Taliban negotiations process.

COMPARISONS TO 2018 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

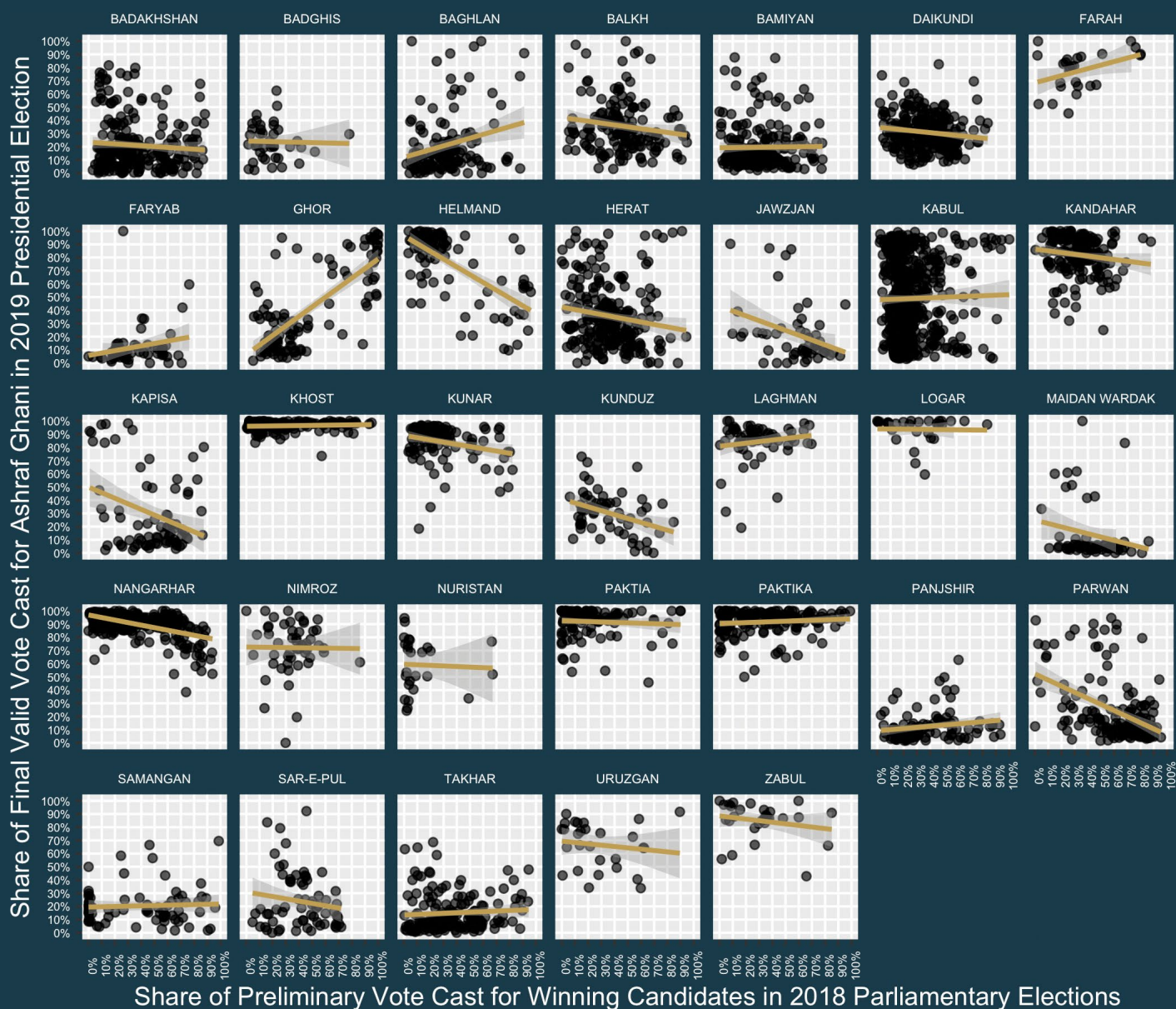
Afghanistan's parliamentary elections are held under a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) process in which multiple candidates compete for multiple open seats in a single constituency (in Afghanistan's case, an entire province, and two at-large national constituencies for members of the Kuchi nomad and Sikh minority communities) and voters are given a single vote to allocate to their top choice. Candidates are then elected in rank order until all available seats are filled. A quota system also guarantees seats for a number of female candidates from each province, an effectively parallel contest that presents voters with a further choice as to whether to allocate their vote to the race between male or female candidates.

The SNTV system limits the ability of political parties to effectively organize voters in support of a broad slate of candidates.¹³² With the threshold required to secure one of several available seats unknown until after the votes are tallied, parties must risk either concentrating all their supporters' votes behind a single candidate (whereas if supporters' votes were distributed more broadly, they might be able to elect multiple candidates and so form a larger bloc more representative of their actual size in the electorate and capable of leveraging the party's interests more effectively in parliament) or splitting their votes too thinly among multiple candidates (who may then fail to achieve the threshold necessary to secure any seats, even if collectively they represent the majority of votes cast in a constituency). SNTV thereby produces a large number of "wasted votes" cast for candidates who are unable to secure a seat but, if said votes were reallocated, could potentially alter the outcome of the race. Overall, votes for all winning candidates have represented around a third of all votes cast in Afghanistan's three parliamentary elections, and many elected parliamentarians secure seats with single-digit percentage shares of the total vote.

One result of this system—which was introduced in part at the urging of then president Hamid Karzai and other proponents of the centralized presidential system—has been the further weakening of Afghan political party structures and the personalization of political organizations, furthering the dynamic of individual high-profile figures building loose coalitions of supporters and flexibly shifting their political alliances as needed.¹³³ Although many have personal ties to existing organizations and interest groups, the overwhelming majority of parliamentary candidates in 2018 contested as independents without formal party affiliation. For the 2019 presidential election, the IEC entirely omitted party affiliation as a candidate identifier on the ballot, and although he has built a strong network of supporters, Ghani, like President Karzai before him, has not associated himself with any party brand. The formal relationship of the competing parliamentary candidates and the presidential candidates that followed them a year later is difficult to establish, then, even in cases where strong affiliations or patron-client relationships may exist.

As figure 5 shows, the share of votes cast at polling centers for candidates who won election in the 2018 parliamentary elections was, with some exceptions, largely not predictive of vote share reported at those same polling centers for the eventual winner of the 2019 presidential election, Ashraf Ghani. The only province with a strongly positively correlated relationship between votes for the winning parliamentary delegation and Ghani appears to be Ghor province, which also shows signs of bimodal polarization in polling centers consistently voting for winning or losing candidates in each election. In other provinces the relationship appears to be either negative (as in Helmand, Kapisa, and Parwan—polling centers that voted most heavily for winning parliamentary candidates in these provinces were least likely to vote for Ghani in 2019) or effectively flat and uncorrelated. The relationship between votes for winning candidates in 2018 and votes for Abdullah Abdullah in 2019 are also uncorrelated in almost all cases, in most cases showing the converse of the vote share for Ghani.

Figure 5. Votes for Winning Candidates in, 2018 and 2019



Note: Points are polling centers. Preliminary data used for 2018 parliamentary election results due to discrepancies in final results data for Kabul as published by the Independent Election Commission.

One possible explanation for this lack of a relationship may be that different sets of voters turned out in the two election periods. Another hypothesis is that voters see no connection between their choice of parliamentary representative and the presidency, either because of the different roles of the president and parliamentarians or because of the staggered election periods. A third possibility is that even with the same set of voters casting ballots under the SNTV system and the presidential system, outcomes will be different because of the distortions introduced by the former system. Finally, it is possible that variations in vote invalidations as a result of the 2019 audit obscure relationships with the 2018 vote. In any case, President Ghani's political base of support appears to be largely disconnected from that of the legislators who have been elected to the current parliamentary term.¹³⁴

MALE AND FEMALE VOTING PATTERNS

Afghan election procedures segregate polling stations for male and female voters. Although no gender details were published for the polling station list in the 2018 parliamentary elections, the availability of the relevant data for the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections allows evaluation of any gender-based variation in turnout and political preferences, if we assume that all votes from a polling station were in fact cast by members of the assigned gender.¹³⁵ (In 2019, at least, this requirement should have been further reinforced by polling station-based registration lists.) Female voters represented 34.5 percent of the registered electorate in 2019 and 31.5 percent of all votes cast; in the 2014 first round, votes from women made up 32.6 percent of the final vote and 37.03 percent of the final valid vote for the second-round runoff.

In 2019, Daikundi was the only province to have reported that more than 50 percent of its votes were cast by women; in half of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces, less than a third of votes came from women, with the greatest gender imbalances reported in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Female registration

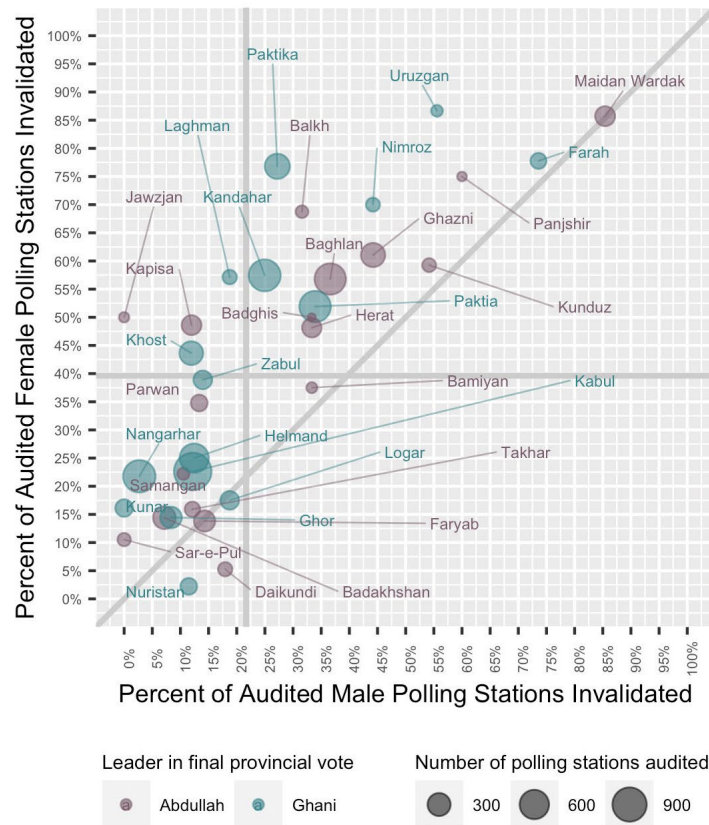
did not differ notably between the urban provincial capital districts and more rural outlying districts, with women forming slightly less than a third of registered voters in both types of districts. Jawzjan, which together with Daikundi and Bamiyan had the highest share of registered female voters, was the only province where votes from urban female voters constituted a significant bloc, constituting nearly 40 percent of all votes provincewide and nearly 50 percent of all votes from the provincial capital of Sheberghan.¹³⁶

Overall, male and female voter preferences aligned closely in choice of candidates in both 2014 and 2019. While there are some notable outliers at the polling center level, in most cases where Ghani won large shares of the available male voters, he also won large shares of female voters, and vice versa for Abdullah. The shares of a candidate's own vote total received from women voters—in other words, how much they might rely on women voters as a portion of their available coalition of voters in a province, district, or polling station—also largely tracked proportionally to the share of the overall votes reported for women voters in the province. Most outliers were derived from cases where a very small number of overall votes received by one candidate gave the few female votes more proportional influence.

The potential social restrictions on access by male observers to polling stations used by women and the lower rates of participation on the part of Afghan women voters have frequently led to concerns that female polling stations could be particularly vulnerable sites for fraud and ballot stuffing. In 2014, votes from female polling stations constituted around 41 percent of all invalidated votes, compared to around 37 percent of all valid votes, indicative of the overrepresentation of female polling stations among those that were invalidated in the second round audit.

In 2019, female polling stations represented 37 percent of all open polling stations but 48.7 percent of all polling stations whose results were invalidated by the IEC during

Figure 6. Male Versus Female Audited Polling Station Invalidation Rates in First IEC Audit



Points are provinces. Points above the diagonal line saw a greater share of audited female stations invalidated than audited male stations, while points below the diagonal line saw a greater share of audited male stations invalidated. X- and Y- intercepts are overall national invalidation rates for male and female stations.

its first audit; in the provinces of Baghlan, Paktia, and Uruzgan, the results from more than a third of all open female polling stations were invalidated, and in Paktika province the results from nearly half of all open female polling stations were invalidated. Although provinces diverged, with some auditing higher proportions of their open male polling stations and others higher proportions of open female polling stations, invalidation rates for the female polling stations that were audited were consistently higher across the country than invalidation rates for the male polling stations that were audited (see figure 6).

Concerns were raised prior to and during the vote that biometric verification requirements—including

photographing voters, a potentially sensitive cultural practice—could deter women’s participation in the elections.¹³⁷ It is possible that these tighter requirements contributed to greater female vote invalidation rates in the audit, with real votes thrown out for lack of supporting biometric information. It is also possible that IEC auditors correctly identified cases of fraudulent ballot manipulation at otherwise poorly monitored female voting stations. This underscores the need for more third-party monitoring both on election day and in the vote validation process. It also highlights the challenge for Afghan women seeking to participate in the electoral process to have their votes counted.

Conclusion



This study has sought to clearly organize as much available information as possible from Afghanistan's recent elections, drawing on the less structured material initially released by the IEC, to explain the practices and factors behind the generation of those figures, as far as can be ascertained from public reporting and insights gathered from other informed observers. It has also sought to present some high-level findings from the available election results in order to contribute to a better understanding of Afghanistan's domestic political dynamics as currently structured through its current electoral system.

While there are many more subjects for statistical analysis yet to be fully investigated beyond the initial explorations in this report, there are limits to the insights available from Afghanistan's published electoral data. This is partly due to the many unanswered questions about the details and origins of the data but more significantly to the many political initiatives and forces not captured by the formal electoral system. Elections remain a contested mechanism for apportioning political authority in Afghanistan, and those who participate in them have accepted electoral outcomes only as the opening bid in a continued negotiation that draws on multiple sources of power and legitimacy.

New registration and voter verification procedures, if implemented with appropriate preparation and clear communication with stakeholders and the public, offer the potential for greater confidence than in past elections in the integrity and validity of final 2019 vote figures and their correspondence to real voters' preferences. But the controls introduced for the 2019 presidential election also pose an accessibility trade-off to the extent that they may deter or deny participation to some voters, who have no alternative recourse in

the absence of any absentee voting or day-of registration options. Afghan officials faced serious security and logistical challenges in administering the 2019 election. But the closure of a polling center, whether as part of a deliberate planning decision made before election day or as an unplanned disruption on election day itself, effectively disenfranchises any voters in the center's assigned catchment area.

As access has diminished nationwide because of Taliban insurgent threats and administrative retrenchment, the Afghan electorate has become increasingly centered in the provincial capitals and urban areas of the country, leaving many segments of the population unrepresented and unable even to attempt to exercise their franchise. Even before the application of audit scrutiny, both leading candidates in the 2019 presidential election lost access to potential voter bases that had provided a third or more of their votes in 2014, in Ghani's case predominantly as a result of the dropping of centers from pre-election plans, in Abdullah's case predominantly because of center closures on election day itself. The historically low levels of votes for second-tier candidates made for a two-person race between the two returning candidates, which appears to have boosted the incumbent's ability to secure an outright majority on the first round.

Many factors, including worsening security, polling center closures, tighter voter registration requirements, and modest campaign mobilization efforts, all combined to produce an outcome that suggests Afghan public participation in the 2019 presidential election fell to the lowest levels observed since the beginning of the current constitutional structure fifteen years ago. This situation raises serious questions as to the representativeness of



Poll workers wait for ballots to count in Bazarak, in the Panjshir valley of Afghanistan, on August 28, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

the current democratic political order. However, Afghan electoral law sets no minimum threshold of participation for establishing a valid election, and as a matter of political strategy, the winners of any election can be expected to assert their legal authorities and claims to public legitimacy no matter how small their apparent “mandate.” Although he has now taken steps toward an initial power-sharing compromise with his electoral rival, President Ghani wasted little time after securing reelection in moving to further consolidate control over the state apparatus as he sought to push back against both his armed and unarmed domestic rivals.¹³⁸

The winner-take-all stakes of the Afghan presidency also pushes the runner-up candidate to use any available strategy to force open alternative routes to power not provided for by an election that produces clearly defined winners and losers. Following the conclusion

of voting, and as his second-place position became apparent, Abdullah Abdullah pursued a strategy of seeking to invalidate as many of his rival’s votes as possible in order to force a runoff election that might give him an opportunity to forge a new political coalition against Ghani or, alternatively, more time to open power-sharing negotiations with Ghani.

While Abdullah was ultimately unsuccessful in his vote disqualification strategy, the polling centers that supported Ghani came under the greatest scrutiny and bore the brunt of most invalidation decisions. Assessments of the available information surrounding audit decisions do not appear to support the contention that Abdullah was in a position to overtake Ghani as the outright front-runner in the race. They do, however, reveal some still unexplained discrepancies in the outcomes of the first and second audits that should

have been the subject of greater scrutiny or clearer explanations by the IEC and ECC.

The lack of transparency on the part of the ECC in its decision making and on the part of the IEC as to the actual adjustments made as a result of the second audit remains a serious concern and a liability for any efforts to establish broader trust and acceptance of election results. The few changes actually made between preliminary and final results means that the most decisive adjustments were those made to the initial, non-biometrically verified and nonaudited vote totals reported at each polling station. But the original details of these provisional pre-audit vote totals have not been made public by the IEC, thus forestalling any comparisons with previous elections' preliminary results.

Outside and domestic observers who prioritize the electoral process as the fairest and most sustainable means of adjudicating transfers of power between competing interest groups must continue to demand transparency and clear public communications around vote counting, validation, and invalidation decisions by the two electoral bodies. Though a great deal of past attention and a great deal of public funding have been focused on the risk of ballot fraud at the local or individual level, the past three national elections have all ultimately been resolved through a highly centralized results aggregation, verification, and tabulation process, without the

establishment in advance of clear standards for adjudication and reconciliation, and with major gaps and discrepancies in the published final results that in many cases remain unresolved and unexplained.

Technical electoral reform adjustments are unlikely to be sufficient in and of themselves to achieve broader political buy-in for the adoption of the electoral rules of competition. Process disputes in Afghanistan's current political system are ultimately disputes about the outcomes produced by those processes, and resolving them requires concessions—willing or unwilling, and often extraconstitutional—on the part of status quo beneficiaries. This report initially posited that an underlying source of the now decades-long civil war in Afghanistan is the disconnect between the outcomes produced by the formal political system and the distribution of power and other sources of legitimacy available to actors who lose out under the existing formal rules but who retain the capability to exercise vetoes over it through means or threat of force. The outcome of the 2019 presidential election, and the prospect of new negotiations with the Taliban and other Afghan parties, underscore the enormous political uncertainty facing Afghanistan. That uncertainty can only be resolved through a renewed negotiation among all major Afghan political actors to establish a new consensus on the rules for allocating political power within the country.

Notes

Although the author bears sole responsibility for all errors of fact or judgment in this report, he would like to express his thanks to the following peer reviewers for graciously sharing their feedback and recommendations for improving the report: Anna Larson, James Long, Roger Helms, Robert Irish, Grant Kippen, Ben Ngumi, Alex Thier, Graeme Smith, Andrew Watkins, Daniel Weggeland, and Brian Vogt. He also thanks Asma Ebadi and Lucy Stevenson-Yang for their translation and research assistance; the Independent Election Commission for releasing elections data in a public form that allows open analysis; the anonymous election observer sources who generously provided additional data sources; the Afghanistan Analysts Network, Afghanistan Elections Data, Map Sync, and OCHA Afghanistan projects for their work on collecting valuable elections reporting and data; former colleagues at Democracy International for providing the opportunity to gain firsthand experience as an observer to the 2010 and 2014 Afghan elections; and colleagues at the United States Institute of Peace, including Belquis Ahmadi, Marjan Nahavandi, Scott Smith, Johnny Walsh, Andrew Wilder, Scott Worden, Ehsan Zia, and many others, for their guidance, support, mentorship, and patience as he worked on developing this project.

1. For more on these themes, see, among other sources, Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Colin Cookman, “Elections as a Disputed Power-Sharing Mechanism in Afghanistan,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2018).
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7. Unless otherwise specified, all figures in this report are derived from this data set, which is available in open source, along with the code used to generate this report, at https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019 (for presidential election data) and https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_election_results_2018 (for parliamentary election data); further details on the sources used to generate the data are included in those repositories. For another open-source collection of elections data, see the Afghanistan Election Data project by the National Democratic Institute and Development Seed at <https://afghanistanelectiondata.org>.
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10. See “Agreement between the Two Campaign Teams Regarding the Structure of the National Unity Government,” available at https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/agreement_nat_unity_gov_aa_ag.pdf.
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33. As an example, polling center no. 0101050 in the 2018–19 elections was located at the Haji Ghulam Dastagir Mosque in Kabul city and contained seven polling stations (five for men, two for women). In the 2014 election, that specific mosque location was identified as polling center number 0101066, which had five polling stations assigned to it (three for men, two for women). In that election, polling center no. 0101050 was instead located at the Tajwar Sultana Girls High School, with eight polling stations. (That school was the location of polling center number 0101062 in 2018–19, with sixteen polling stations.)
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37. The UN methodology also includes Afghan National Police personnel performing civilian support duties during the election period, although these forces often serve paramilitary functions in other contexts. "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Special Report: 2019 Election-Related Violence," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, October 2019, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_special_report_-_2019_election-related_violence_0.pdf.
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- threats at approximately one-fifth of all stations where observers were deployed, but the author found discrepancies in underlying polling station–level documentation used to produce this reporting, leaving actual observation coverage gaps unclear. Local Partnership for Legitimacy through Democracy, “Afghanistan 2019 Presidential Election Observation Report,” February 2020, 20.
39. Of these closed centers, fifty-five (3.8 percent) were either dropped from IEC planning prior to the actual 2014 elections or reported no results in that election, and are presumed to have never opened.
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 41. An unpublished IEC planning document obtained from an election observer, derived from an evaluation of polling centers carried out in January 2018, categorized centers as “new,” “old,” or “relocated,” but these codes do not appear to accurately reflect actual changes to site locations; not all “old” centers match between the sets based on coordinate and center name checks, and not all “new” centers are labeled as such. Additionally, approximately a quarter of all centers are uncategorized.
 42. The key files documenting polling center relationships can be found at https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/pc_plan/pc_code_matching_2014_2018.csv and https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/pc_plan/nearest_replacement_center_2014_2018.csv. Any corrections to the author’s matching efforts are welcome and encouraged, and can be sent through email, Twitter, or GitHub.
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 44. The centers dropped between 2014 and 2018 provided 914,587 out of 3,937,425 total valid votes for Ghani in the final 2014 runoff election and 581,799 votes out of 3,185,465 total valid votes for Abdullah, respectively.
 45. Based on linear regression analysis of *ag_pct_14* against *dropped_from_14* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites. See https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/analysis/pc_analysis.csv.
 46. “Turnout” here is defined as the share of final valid votes cast as a percentage of total registered voters in each center and is based on linear regression analysis of *turnout_19* and *turnout_18* variables against *center_status* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites.
 47. Based on linear regression analysis of *aa_pct_14* and *ag_pct_14* variables against *center_status* and *coord_14_18_discrepancy_in_meters* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, incorporating nearest neighbor polling center substitutes for centers that were dropped after 2014.
 48. Based on linear regression analysis of *winner_votes_18* and *ag_pct_19* variables against *center_status* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites.
 49. Beyond the 233 centers added back between 2018 and 2019 in Ghazni, another forty-nine centers in other provinces were planned in 2019 that had not been previously planned for 2018, and fifteen centers that had been planned in 2018 were dropped from 2019 plans.
 50. Based on linear regression analysis of *planned_2019* variable against *ag_pct_14* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites, and substituting nearest available replacement centers for 2014 centers that were dropped after 2014.
 51. If dropped 2014 sites are linked to their nearest available replacement center in 2019, the impact is somewhat less dramatic, with completely dropped sites accounting for approximately 13.5 percent of the total 2014 second-round valid vote. Gauging the exact impact of center replacements and the degree to which relocations substantially alter voter behavior will likely require further analysis of transportation times and other local-level accessibility considerations.
 52. Without any attempts to associate 2014 sites to their nearest available replacement, in total, 2.39 million votes were recorded at sites either dropped from planning between 2014 and 2018 or dropped from the 2019 pre-election plans, of which Ghani received 1.48 million and Abdullah approximately 913,000. Of the centers from 2014 that were still available in the IEC’s total universe of potential centers but that were dropped from 2018–19 plans, Ghani received 14.3 percent of his final valid vote from these centers and Abdullah received 10.4 percent.
 53. According to IEC Decision 119 of December 22, 2019. Details reported by the IEC omitted ten polling stations (in Nangarhar, 0604106-04, 0608218-05, 0616365-06, 0616369-03, and 0621431-06; in Ghazni, 1113279-07; in Kandahar, 2711172-10, 2711172-11, and 2711172-12; and in Herat, 3210307-05) from both published results and the list of stations officially reported to have been closed or had their votes invalidated, producing a discrepancy between the official count (26,580 stations open) and the polling station–level data set (26,570 confirmed open) that this report is based on. Another 139 of all open polling centers were

reported to have been open but subsequently had the results of all their polling stations invalidated in the postelection audit process. With all the votes invalidated, it is ambiguous as to whether these stations were ever in fact open to real voters.

54. *Reporterly*, “431 Polling Centers to Be closed on Election Day: Mol,” August 28, 2019, <http://reporterly.net/live/newsfeed/wednesday-august-28/431-polling-centers-to-be-closed-on-election-day-moi>.
55. Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials also appear to have further adjusted their closure plans on and immediately before election day, but again did not provide any detailed reporting on the specific centers involved. See Twitter statements by Abdul Moqim Abdulrahimzai, then the MOI director general of operations and plans: <https://twitter.com/AbMoqim/status/1177911548779646976>; <https://twitter.com/AbMoqim/status/1177930120927027201>.
56. This may overstate the number of 2018 closures, as the IEC generally omitted polling centers or stations where all results were invalidated from its reporting; thus some centers that reported no results may have been open but had their results subsequently invalidated.
57. According to election observer sources, voter verification devices did have an override function that would allow a bypass of the voter list requirement, which was intended to allow polling station workers to record votes for administrative and security staff not registered at their place of deployment. Verification devices were able to track the use of this function to flag potential cases of abuse, but the IEC did not release any detailed information on the degree to which the override function was activated, and most observer accounts indicate that voters not found to be present on polling station lists were denied a ballot.
58. Many of these were smaller centers with only a few polling stations each; roughly a third of all stations were closed as a result.
59. While most Afghan provinces showed particular political leanings in favor of one candidate or another, there is too much variation at the polling center level to attempt to project provincial-level preferences onto centers in districts in which no other centers opened for potential comparison. It bears reiterating that the assumption of generally uniform political preferences at the district level holds only in some cases, and not consistently across the country.
60. For 2019, the IEC assigned a maximum of 400 registered voters per polling station booth within a center, which ranged from as few as one officially registered voter to more than 10,000 voters at some of the largest centers in Logar, Kandahar, and Helmand.
61. The issuance of new electronic *tazkera* IDs was itself a major point of dispute within the National Unity Government in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, with different factions opposing or supporting the inclusion of ethnicity and nationality fields as part of the ID. See Ali Yawar Adili and Jelena Bjelica, “The E-Tazkera Rift: Yet Another Political Crisis Looming?,” AAN, February 22, 2018, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-e-tazkera-rift-yet-another-political-crisis-looming.
62. By some accounts, as many as 23 million such cards were in circulation at the time of the 2014 elections. Scott Worden, “Afghanistan Election Conundrum (13): New Voter Registry Too Good to Be True,” AAN, August 28, 2018, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistan-election-conundrum-12-new-voter-registry-too-good-to-be-true.
63. Prior to the publication of the 2018 registration figures, the IEC gave a preliminary registration count of 9.4 million voters, which were subsequently de-duplicated and cleaned to reflect missing registration details. For more scrutiny of the 2018 registration process, also see Worden, “Afghanistan Election Conundrum (13).”
64. Registration changes during this period could be made by voters only at a limited number of “top-up” polling centers, which were generally distributed one per district or urban subdivision.
65. IEC, “IEC Press Release on the Closure of Voter Registration Top Up,” July 1, 2019, www.iec.org.af/en/media-gallery/press-releases/581-press-end-of-vr-20190701.
66. These reports omitted fifteen polling centers with previously known voter registration data and added registration data for five polling centers that had no previously recorded registration data or votes in 2018.
67. Total voter registration for Ghazni was 235,213 registered voters.
68. Azizullah Hamdard, “Over 400,000 Names Struck Off Voter List to Ensure Transparency,” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, October 22, 2019, <http://elections.pajhwok.com/en/2019/10/22/ver-400000-names-struck-voter-list-ensure-transparency>.
69. Based on linear regression analysis of *vr_final_total_19* variable against *total_valid_votes_14* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites. See https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/analysis/pc_analysis.csv.
70. Based on linear regression analysis of *vr_net_change* variable against *ag_final_pct_14*, *total_valid_votes_14*, *turnout_18*, and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites. See https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/analysis/pc_analysis.csv.
71. The regulations call for a maximum distance of three kilometers between voter residences and polling centers in urban areas and five kilometers in rural areas, and a minimum distance of one kilometer between centers in urban areas; these categories are not otherwise defined in the document. See IEC Decision 1-1396.

72. Andrew Pinney, "An Afghan Population Estimate," AAN, 2012, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/22_Pinney_An_Afghan_Population_Estimation.pdf. For CSO/ANSIA population estimates, see <https://nsia.gov.af> (or in digitized format at https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_district_population_data).
73. In theory, Afghan electoral law calls for the apportionment of parliamentary seats on the basis of provincial population, but in practice seats were not adjusted by the IEC for either the 2010 or 2018 parliamentary elections from the original allocations set during the 2004–05 period when the constitution was enacted and the first formal elections were held.
74. WorldPop/Flowminder, "Final Population Mapping for Afghanistan, 2017," unpublished draft report, June 2017.
75. "Spatial Distribution of Population in 2019—Afghanistan," WorldPop, www.worldpop.org/geodata/summary?id=6075.
76. See also a previous analysis of parliamentary registration by Scott Worden, "Past as Prologue? What the Parliamentary Election Results Tell Us about the September Presidential Election," AAN, August 23, 2019, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/past-as-prologue-what-the-parliamentary-election-results-tell-us-about-the-september-presidential-election.
77. At the extremes, Pusht Rod district in Farah province planned only 0.04 polling stations per thousand voting-age people, while Mearzaka in Paktia planned thirteen stations per thousand.
78. For more, see Robert Garrett, Austin Nar, Thomas J. Fisher, and Karsten Maurer, "ggvoronoi: Voronoi Diagrams and Heatmaps with ggplot2," *Journal of Open Source Software* 3, no. 32 (December 2018).
79. Based on linear regression analysis of *vor_pct_catch_elig* variable against *ag_final_pct_14* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites. See https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/analysis/pc_analysis.csv.
80. The number of officially recognized districts is not consistent across Afghan government and donor organizations, and varies across time periods and data sets; as of 2018–19 the IEC follows a list of 421 districts, not counting Shahrak-e-Hayratan in Balkh province, which is classified as a district by the Afghan Geodesy and Cartography Head Office and Arazi Land Authority (for 422 districts in total) but not by the CSO/ANSIA. Data sets of 399 districts or 407 districts are also commonly used, which do not incorporate subsequent "temporary" administrative splits to districts. See the MapSync Afghanistan District Maps project for further discussion and an effort to establish a comprehensive timeline: <https://mapsynch.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=fe0f16a7b8da4157a7d7f9451a802d74>.
81. Catchment areas around centers that registered voters but were closed on election day are further estimated to include the equivalent of about 2.5 million people, or around 1.25 million eligible voters (8.48 percent of total); as noted earlier, in practice these day-of closures affected the equivalent of 9.3 percent of actual voter registration.
82. For further explanation, see https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_election_results_2018#kabul-final-results-discrepancies.
83. "Ex-Chairmen and Commissioners of Afghan Election Commissions Given Jail Sentences," *Khaama Press*, September 3, 2019, www.khaama.com/ex-chairmen-and-commissioners-of-afghan-election-commissions-given-jail-sentences-03949.
84. While they have the potential to impact counts at the margins, particularly in a national-level election, individual-level and even station-level vote fraud represents an inefficient strategy for altering an electoral outcome. Despite widespread popularization of the idea that deliberate repeat voting represents a major risk for electoral fraud, in the US electoral context, one study estimates fewer than 1 in 4,000 (0.025 percent) cases of double voting, and even this low incidence may be explained by measurement errors. Sharad Goel et al., "One Person, One Vote: Estimating the Prevalence of Double Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 2020, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/morse/files/1p1v.pdf>.
85. Staffan Darnolff and Scott S. Smith, "Breaking, Not Bending: Afghan Elections Require Institutional Reform," Special Report no. 454, USIP, August 2019, 11–12, www.usip.org/publications/2019/08/breaking-not-bending-afghan-elections-require-institutional-reform.
86. Haseeba Atakpal, "US Ambassador Wells on Afghan Elections, Peace, Corruption," *TOLO News*, October 16, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-ambassador-wells-afghan-elections-peace-corruption>; "Presidential Candidates Council: No Non-Biometric Votes," *TOLO News*, October 7, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/presidential-candidates-council-no-non-biometric-votes>.
87. The complete five-part biometric data set generated for each verified voter included left and right thumbprints, a photograph of the voter's face, a photograph of the voter's *tazkera* ID card, and a photograph of the voter's previously obtained voter registration sticker.
88. For more procedural background, see "Elections in Afghanistan: 2019 Presidential Election, Frequently Asked Questions," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, September 2019, www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_faqs_elections_in_afghanistan_2019_presidential_election_september_2019.pdf. Concerns were reportedly raised by international donors over the potential compromise of the secrecy of the vote if the verification signature stickers on ballots were linked back to individual voters through biometric records, but these concerns appear to have been overruled on the basis of assurances that this would not be possible. Some complaints did in fact allege the mass printing of stickers to facilitate ballot stuffing.
89. In cases where cellular connectivity could not be established on election day—a widespread problem in many cases due to Taliban threats against service providers—biometric voter verification transmission was made only after the return of the device

- to a provincial IEC headquarters or on arrival at the National Tally Center in Kabul. This transmission—accomplished by removing the memory cards from the devices and uploading the data through Dermalog or IEC staff computers—appears to have produced discrepancies in the number of votes processed by a device and the total number of biometric voter records at a station.
90. Although the information was collected on tally sheets, the IEC did not release detailed information on the number of ballots that were unused, found to be spoiled (marks made for more than one candidate, for example), or invalidated at the polling station as part of the day-of tallying process. Accounting for these ballots may explain changes between initial day-of vote estimates and later provisional totals, prior to the implementation of biometric records scrutiny. In an unpublished report to election stakeholders dated February 20, 2020, the IEC reported 25,915 spoiled ballots, 482,848 ballots invalidated as a result of biometric requirements or other forms of scrutiny in the first and second audit, and 5.68 million distributed but unused ballots.
 91. The IEC did not provide detailed reporting on any of the changes made as a result of the biometric de-duplication effort but the AAN reports a provincial breakdown of these changes. See Ali Yawar Adili, “Afghanistan’s 2019 Election (24): Disputed Recount, Threats Not to Accept Results, and Some Interesting New Data,” AAN, November 21, 2019, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistans-2019-election-24-disputed-recount-threats-not-to-accept-results-and-some-interesting-new-data/; and Jelena Bjelica and Ali Yawar Adili, “Afghanistan’s 2019 Election (23): Disputed Biometric Votes Endanger Election Results,” AAN, November 7, 2019, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistans-2019-election-23-disputed-biometric-votes-endanger-election-results.
 92. The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) did not release a complete list of all polling stations it ordered scrutinized in response to these complaints, which in many cases are reported to have overlapped with other IEC criteria, but reported that it had ordered recounts at 2,296 polling stations on the basis of election-day complaints. Of the polling stations identified by the IEC as undergoing audit, 393 (4.8 percent of all unique stations reported to have been audited, or 17.1 percent of all those ordered for scrutiny by the ECC) were reported to have been selected on the basis of ECC orders alone and not other criteria. See also ECC, “Bulletin Number 22: Status of Election Day Complaints and Appeals Adjudication,” December 24, 2019, <https://iecc.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-12/Bulliten%20%2322.pdf>.
 93. IEC, “Decision No. 104-1398,” November 4, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/en/1398-104.pdf.
 94. IEC, “Decision No. 105-1398,” November 4, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/en/1398-105.pdf.
 95. IEC, “Decision No. 109-1398,” November 15, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/en/1398-109.pdf; IEC, “Decision No. 112-1398,” November 21, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/dari/1398-112.pdf. Although Decision 112 mentioned orders for twenty-three stations in total, it specified only twenty-two in detail.
 96. An unpublished UN Election Support Program report, dated November 12, 2019, reports that of the total 86,225 biometric records removed, 47,527 were removed because of apparent facial matches (55.1 percent of all duplicate record flags), 37,006 because of apparent duplicate voter ID cards (42.9 percent), and 5,882 because of apparent duplicate fingerprints (6.8 percent).
 97. IEC, “Decision No. 108-1398,” November 14, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/en/1398-108.pdf.
 98. The Abdullah team also objected to the IEC’s five-vote threshold for discrepancies between biometric and nonbiometric vote totals. Unofficial translation of Stability and Partnership Election Campaign Central Office Monitoring and Fraud Prevention Directorate letter to the Independent Election Commission, December 10, 2019; see also contemporaneous press coverage, Siyar Sirat, “Abdullah Blasts IEC for ‘Ignoring’ Candidates’ Demands,” *TOLO News*, November 17, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/abdullah-blasts-iec-%E2%80%98ignoring%E2%80%99-candidates%E2%80%99-demands>.
 99. The average polling stations reported approximately seventy-three votes, and the median around sixty-four, so the invalidation of approximately 275 polling stations, or around 1 percent of all open stations, could potentially have had such an impact.
 100. Audit activities were blocked in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Jawzjan, Panjshir, Samangan, and Takhar provinces. For more on the standoff, see Mujib Mashal, “Afghan Vote Crawls toward Crisis, with No Results after 2 Months,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/world/asia/afghanistan-election-ghani-abdullah.html; and Ali Yawar Adili, “Afghanistan’s 2019 Elections (26): A Q&A about the Ongoing Election Stalemate,” AAN, December 8, 2019, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistans-2019-elections-26-a-qa-about-the-ongoing-election-stalemate.
 101. The IEC justified its decisions in an open response letter to the Abdullah campaign: “IEC HQ Detailed Response on the letter of Stability and Convergence Electoral Ticket/Office,” December 15, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/Letter-en.pdf.
 102. IEC, “Decision No. 119-1398” [in Dari], December 22, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/dari/1398-119.pdf.
 103. For the full list of invalidations and closures reported, see www.iec.org.af/results/en/invalid/invalid_by_pc.
 104. The IEC released scanned images of the polling station tally forms for 2,020 invalidated stations, or 87.9 percent of all stations reported to have been invalidated. The author manually transcribed results from these forms; only 759 stations appeared to report non-zero vote counts, for 102,018 votes in total. Scan legibility issues in at least 17 cases were the most likely cause of discrepancies between this account and the aggregate figure provided by the IEC, which reported 760 stations with non-zero votes.

105. Based on linear regression analysis of *pct_invalidated_14* variable against *pc_invalidated* and *province_name_eng* variables in consolidated 2014–19 polling center results data set, for cases where a link has been established between the two sites. See https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_presidential_election_2019/blob/master/analysis/pc_analysis.csv.
106. Of the 298 stations validated under this criterion (10.5 percent of all such stations audited), only 254 reported non-zero vote totals.
107. Pre-audit biometric votes and changes as a result of the de-duplication process are available only at the provincial level. UN Election Support Program briefing of November 11, 2019; Adili, “Afghanistan’s 2019 Election (24).”
108. Electoral Complaints Commission, “Bulletin Number 24: Complaints against Preliminary Results,” January 20, 2020, <https://iecc.gov.af/sites/default/files/2020-01/Bulletin%20No.%2024.pdf>. See also Gulabuddin Ghubar, “Commission Must Answer Over 16,500 Election Complaints,” *TOLO News*, December 26, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/elections-2019/commission-must-answer-over-16500-election-complaints>; and “IECC Rejects 9,866 Registered Electoral Complaints,” *Reporterly*, January 14, 2020, <http://reporterly.net/live/newsfeed/tuesday-january-14-2020/iecc-rejects-9866-registered-electoral-complaints>.
109. Electoral Complaints Commission, “Bulletin Number 25: Appeals Related to Preliminary Results,” January 28, 2020, <https://iecc.gov.af/sites/default/files/2020-02/Bulletin-No.-25.pdf>.
110. For a retrospective summary, see Electoral Complaints Commission, “Bulletin Number 26: 2019 Presidential Elections Overview,” February 27, 2020, https://iecc.gov.af/sites/default/files/2020-03/Bulletin%20No.%2026_English.pdf.
111. Khalid Nikzad, “Poll Results Will Be Announced within Next Two Days: IEC,” *TOLO News*, February 16, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/elections-2019/poll-results-will-be-announced-within-next-two-days-iec>; Mujib Mashal, Najim Rahim, and Fatima Faizi, “Ghani Named Afghan Election Winner. His Opponent Claims Victory, Too,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/world/asia/afghanistan-election-ashraf-ghani.html.
112. The published list of the special audit sample targets lists 311 polling stations, meaning two extra were identified due to fractions resulting from the provincial sampling distribution.
113. Thirty-seven of the polling stations ordered for a second recount by the ECC were included in the preliminary results but reported zero votes. Seven of the polling stations ordered for a second recount by the ECC were not included in the preliminary results data and were also missing on the list of invalidated polling stations. They were ultimately included in the final results, but with zero votes reported.
114. Another four polling stations were added to the final results that were not previously included in the preliminary results; however, all reported zero votes in the final results. All four stations were among those included in the “missing biometric data” category of polling stations ordered for recount by the ECC and were unaccounted for in the IEC’s previous reporting on polling station results invalidation or closure status following its announcement of preliminary results in December.
115. The twenty-three reportedly invalidated stations were: 0104420-04 and 0115544-06 in Kabul; 0608218-05, 0616365-06, 0604106-04, and 0621431-06 in Nangarhar; 0913265-09, 0904097-08, 0913265-08, 0904097-04, and 0913265-02 in Baghlan; 1110176-05 and 1113279-07 in Ghazni; 2701018-13, 2701039-25, 2704077-01, 2711169-03, and 2713189-02 in Kandahar; 2908169-12, 2908169-17, 2907131-02, and 2907135-01 in Faryab; and 3001024-15 in Helmand.
116. There is some ambiguity in the available English-language translations of the ECC orders. Some observer sources suggested that the full polling station votes could have potentially been invalidated had these triggers occurred. See Electoral Complaints Commission, “Bulletin Number 25.”
117. The ECC does not release details on complaints filed, so it cannot be confirmed whether these issues were raised by candidates or not, but public communications by the Abdullah campaign before or after the announcement of results does not appear to have identified this as a concern, focusing instead on the three main categories of complaints and “300,000 votes.”
118. In the 2014 elections, the IEC uniformly distributed 600 ballots per polling station, which was used as a benchmark for turnout.
119. For more on the role of provincial councils, see Thomas Ruttig, “The Butter on the Bread: The Provincial Councils’ Fight for Extended Authority,” AAN, March 23, 2014, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-butter-on-the-bread-the-provincial-councils-fight-for-extended-authority/; and Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, “Why Afghanistan’s Provincial Council Elections Matter,” Peace Brief no. 170, USIP, March 2014, www.usip.org/publications/2014/03/why-afghanistans-provincial-council-elections-matter.
120. Michael Semple, “The Rise of the Hazaras and the Challenge of Pluralism in Afghanistan 1978–2011,” Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, 2011, <https://cmes.fas.harvard.edu/files/cmefiles/semplepolicysummary.pdf>.
121. For FAO land mapping, see www.fao.org/geospatial/resources/detail/en/c/1024570/, or see initial analysis by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction in Appendix F of the January 2020 quarterly report to the US Congress, which relies on satellite-based Landsat population estimates (www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr.pdf).
122. For such a distance index for the known universe of 2018–19 polling centers, see https://github.com/colincookman/afghanistan_election_results_2018#geospatial-data.

123. This simplified method also introduces classification errors, in that Afghanistan's thirty-four provincial capital districts still vary to a considerable degree, with some areas tightly bounded around urban centers and others incorporating substantial surrounding rural or peri-urban tracts within the capital district area.
124. Out of a total estimated population of 30.48 million as of solar year 1398 (2019–20), the CSO estimates 9.68 million residents in all thirty-four provincial capitals and 4.27 million in Kabul city district. The WorldPop project estimates 8.66 million residents in all capitals and 3.85 million in Kabul.
125. Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Vice President Flies to Turkey amid Torture and Rape Allegations," *New York Times*, May 19, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/world/middleeast/abdul-rashid-dostum-afghanistan-turkey.html; Karim Amini, "New Alliance Lists Demands; Calls for Systematic Reforms," *TOLO News*, June 30, 2017, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/new-alliance-lists-demands-calls-systematic-reforms>.
126. Pamela Constable, "Key Abdullah Ally Warns of Afghan Unrest If Vote Recount Is 'One-Sided,'" *Washington Post*, August 14, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/key-abdullah-ally-warns-of-afghan-unrest-if-vote-recount-is-one-sided/2014/08/13/5db8e2b2-230a-11e4-8b10-7db129976abb_story.html. In his memoir covering the period, Secretary Kerry does not identify Noor by name but notes concerns within the State Department over threats to "form a parallel government" and the need to avoid secession, civil war, or a coup (John Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018], 419–20).
127. Sharif Hassan, "Ousted but Not Out: Afghan Strongman Still Calls the Shots, Residents Say," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/ousted-but-not-out-afghan-strongman-still-calls-the-shots-residents-say/2018/05/11/e384e598-52f0-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce_story.html.
128. Abdulah Matin Sahak, "Gunfight Erupts in North Afghan City over Police Chief's Appointment," Reuters, March 14, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics/gunfight-erupts-in-north-afghan-city-over-police-chiefs-appointment-idUSKCN1QV1RU; "Will Use All Options If Recent Agreement Regarding Issue Balkh Is Violated: Noor," *Khaama Press*, March 20, 2019, www.khaama.com/will-use-all-options-if-recent-agreement-regarding-issue-balkh-is-violated-noor-03531.
129. "Elections Won't Go to Second Round, Claims Ata Mohammad Noor," *Khaama Press*, September 29, 2019, www.khaama.com/elections-wont-go-to-second-round-claims-ata-mohammad-noor-04151.
130. The IEC did not formally accept Atmar's withdrawal, and reported vote counts for him. In a decision on November 6, 2019, the IEC said that it would invalidate votes cast for withdrawn candidates Shaida Muhammad Abdali, Nur ul-Haq Ulumi, Haji Muhammad Ibrahim Alekozai, and Zalmai Rassul, and would not use those votes as part of the basis for calculating total votes and the 50 percent majority threshold. Atmar would later be appointed foreign minister by Ghani in early April 2020. IEC, "Decision No. 103-1398," October 20, 2019, www.iec.org.af/pdf/decisions-1398/en/1398-103.pdf; "Atmar's Votes Will Be Counted, Says IEC Commissioner," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, November 6, 2019, <https://factcheck.pajhwok.com/en/2019/11/06/atmars-votes-will-be-counted-says-iec-commissioner>; "Haneef Atmar Appointed as Acting Foreign Minister," *TOLO News*, April 4, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/haneef-atmar-appointed-acting-foreign-minister>.
131. In the 2009 election between Karzai and Abdullah, second-tier candidates managed to secure 20.8 percent of the final vote, and in the 2004 election, in which Karzai and Yunus Qanooni were the top two vote getters, other candidates received 28.4 percent of the final vote.
132. For more on the impacts of SNTV, see, among other sources, Anna Larson, "Political Parties in Afghanistan," Special Report no. 362, USIP, March 2015, www.usip.org/publications/2015/03/political-parties-afghanistan; Andrew Reynold and John Carey, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, July 2012, <https://areu.org.af/archives/publication/1211>; and Thomas Ruttig, "Outside, Inside: Afghanistan's Paradoxical Political Party System (2001–2016)," AAN, May 2018, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/20180506-KAS-AAN-TR-Afghanistans-paradoxial-pol-party-system.pdf.
133. For more on the origins of SNTV, see, among other sources, Ruttig, "Outside, Inside," 23–26; and Suhrke, *When More Is Less*, 178–81.
134. For more analysis of the makeup of the current parliamentary body, see Farid Tookhy, "Legislature and Legislative Elections in Afghanistan: An Analysis," Special Report no. 470, USIP, July 2020, www.usip.org/publications/2020/07/legislature-and-legislative-elections-afghanistan-analysis.
135. The IEC released an incomplete set of scanned polling station results forms for the 2018 parliamentary elections, which include indicator fields for whether the station is designated for male, female, or members of the Kuchi or Hindu/Sikh electorates. No comprehensive digitized list of polling station type was released, and the author has yet to complete efforts to process these images for a partial index of stations by gender assignment.
136. Sixty-two percent of Jawzjan's total voter registration is located in the provincial capital district, and more than 78 percent of all final valid votes in the province were reported from Sheberghan.
137. Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Storay Karimi, "Afghan Women Fear Mandatory Poll Photos Could Stop Them from Voting," Reuters, September 25, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-election-women/afghan-women-fear-mandatory-poll-photos-could-stop-them-from-voting-idUSKBN1WA2WU.
138. William Byrd, "Dismembering Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance," USIP, March 31, 2020, www.usip.org/publications/2020/03/dismembering-afghanistans-ministry-finance.

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NO. 166 | AUGUST 2020

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