



Afghanistan and the Polls: Change the Question - Change the Numbers

By Brian MacDonald
Senior Defence Analyst
Conference of Defence Associations

Every new poll released by Canadian polling firms on public support (or the lack of it) for the Canadian mission in Afghanistan seems to be immediately followed by media headlines declaring that Canadian support for the mission is declining, or that Canadian public opinion has overwhelmingly rejected continued Canadian participation in the Afghanistan mission.

A closer look at the numbers, however, casts considerable doubt on these quick media conclusions.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting the polls lies in the fact that the two principal polling firms involved with the longest databases use very different questions in their polls.

Strategic Counsel, which is the pollster of choice for *CTVGlobeMedia*, asked its respondents: "Overall, do you strongly support, support, oppose or strongly oppose the decision to send Canadian troops to Afghanistan?"

Ipsos-Reid, which is the pollster of choice for the *Canwest News and Global Television* network used a very different question: "Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the use of Canada's troops for security and combat efforts against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan?"

And the different questions produced quite different results.

Over the period from March 2006 to July 2007 *Strategic Counsel* conducted eleven polls. The average "Support" level reported was 41.1%, with support in Quebec, at 27.6%, running well behind that in the Rest of Canada at 45.4%.

Good evidence for the Doom and Gloom Headlines, maybe?

Maybe not.

The ten *Ipsos-Reid* polls over essentially the same period (March 2006 to August 2007) showed an average "Support" level running at 51.5%--some ten points higher than the parallel *Strategic Counsel* polls, and with "Support" in Quebec at 36.5%--some 8.9 points higher than the *Strategic Counsel* number of 27.6%, and at 57.5% in the Rest of Canada—some 12.1 points higher than the *Strategic Counsel* number of 45.4%

Interestingly, *Ipsos-Reid* also did a series of tracking polls (polls which ask the same question at periodic intervals so that opinion movement over time can be tracked) under contract for DND over the period from Sep 19-21, 2006 to Mar 20-22, 2007, which showed clearly how changes in the specific wording of a question can produce sharply different results.

The baseline, plain vanilla, question was "Overall, would you say that you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose

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Canada's activities in Afghanistan?"

That question got an average support level of 51%, with 19.4% of respondents "Strongly Supporting," and 31.6% "Somewhat Supporting" the mission. Those opposed amounted to 45.8%, with 21.8% "Strongly Opposed," and 24% "Somewhat Opposed" to the mission.

The Quebec numbers were less supportive than those in the "Rest of Canada", with an average support level of 33.2%, with 7.4% "Strongly Supporting" the mission, and 25.8% "Somewhat Supporting" the mission, for a total opposition level of 64.2%.

Change the question to include a statement of purpose for the mission, however, and the results go up, in some cases dramatically.

Change the question to emphasize the combat mission, to "Would you say that you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose Canada's military operations in Afghanistan such as helping to secure the environment for the civilian population through activities that include combat," and the support level rises 11.8 percentage points over the "plain vanilla" question, to an average of 62.8%.

Change the question to emphasize the diplomatic dimension, to "Would you say that you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose Canada's diplomatic work in Afghanistan, such as helping the Afghan people re-build government institutions," and the average support level soars 29.6 percentage points over the "plain vanilla" results to 80.6%.

Change the question to emphasize the development mission, to "Would you say that you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly

oppose. Canada's development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, such as helping to train teachers, build health clinics, and clear landmines" and the average support level climbs further to 85.4%, 34.4 percentage points above the "plain vanilla" level.

So—what can we conclude from the way that differences in question wording can drive the numbers?

We can probably conclude that those Canadians who are opposed to the Afghanistan mission will, no doubt, find comfort in the *Strategic Counsel* question and results.

And that those, like the Conference of Defence Associations, who support both our troops and our mission, will take comfort in the robust wording of the *Ipsos-Reid* question, which leaves no doubt whatsoever that we are speaking of the role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan as one which is to help "to secure the environment for the civilian population through activities that include combat."

No pussyfooting there!

A copy of the Ipsos-Reid study is posted on the Government of Canada Public Opinion Research Reports website at <http://amicus.collectionscanada.ca/porr-rrop-bin/Main/RouteRqst> as Report POR 175-05 *Afghanistan tracking questions final report*.

Details of the polls done by *Strategic Counsel* for *CTVGlobeMedia* and by Ipsos-Reid for *CanWest News and Global Television*, including the polling methodology used, can be found on their respective websites.

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The Conference of Defence Associations
222 Somerset St., Suite 400B
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2P 2G3
Telephone : (613) 236-1252
Facsimile : (613) 236-8191
E-mail : cda@cda-cdai.ca