

Final report

Strongmen or technocrats?

Experimental
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leadership
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Afghanistan

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Abstract

Political leadership in fragile states is often comprised of a combination of informal power brokers and technocratic elites. However, few studies to date have sought to quantify how these political orders correspond to public leadership preferences or which typologies of leadership are most conducive to consolidating state legitimacy. This paper uses experimental conjoint analysis to estimate leadership preferences in three provinces in northern Afghanistan. Contrary to what is widely assumed, the findings suggest that Afghans living in this region prefer leaders who are younger, highly educated, and who share the same ethnicity, while older leaders with religious education are penalized. These preferences hold across different age and income groups. Experimental treatments testing the effect of exposure to insecurity and corruption on leadership preferences had trivial effects on these preferences.

Introduction

Fragile states beset by political violence often opt for political settlements that bring traditional power brokers and armed combatants into formal leadership positions. However, there is little empirical evidence about how these political settlements are viewed by the public and to what extent they impact the political legitimacy of the state. In war-torn societies, what kinds of leaders do citizens prefer? How do preferences vary between generations, genders, and across different socio-economic groups? Do residents living in more insecure areas have different preferences to those living in relatively safer areas? And finally, to what extent are these preferences altered by exposure to corruption and insecurity?

This study uses an experimental conjoint methodology to closely approximate the decision-making process for voters in fragile states – in this case, respondents living in three provinces in northern Afghanistan. The conjoint methodology employed in this experiment assesses the relative importance of different candidate attributes by asking respondents to choose between two profiles of potential leaders. The attributes — age, gender, ethnicity, education, professional experience, and place of birth -- were randomized in each profile, and participants repeated the experiment three times. Using this methodology, I was able to test several prevailing theories on leadership preferences in Afghanistan at once, making statistically valid comparisons of the salience of different attributes in determining preferences. Some of the randomized profiles suggested more technocratic, non-traditional leaders, while some evoked a strongman type of leader with a military background and a comparatively low level of education.

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The research design therefore tests for preferences regarding different typologies of leadership. I also tested how exposure to treatments on insecurity or corruption might affect these preferences.

The findings suggest that, on balance, Afghans living in the surveyed areas prefer younger, highly educated leaders of the same ethnicity. These preferences hold among different age and income groups. While there was a moderate preference for male leaders, this preference exists only amongst males in the sample, while female respondents had no significant preference regarding gender. Exposure to corruption and insecurity treatments had minor effects on leadership preferences.

Political Order and Leadership in Fragile States

Fragile states are frequently characterized by hybrid political orders where traditional leaders and patrimonial networks coexist with rational-legal state institutions (Bratton and de Walle, 1997; Boege et al., 2008; Migdal, 1988; Raeymaekers et al., 2008; Meagher et al., 2014; Albrecht and Moe, 2015). Given a lack of sophisticated party systems with well-defined rules and norms, the characteristics and political skill of leaders in navigating between these dynamics is crucial in determining the degree to which states are successful in transitioning out of fragility (Narasimhan, 2012). In the worst cases, failures in leadership can exacerbate ethno-nationalist tensions, potentially increasing the likelihood of political violence (Cederman et al., 2010).

Previous studies have focused on the outsized role of strongmen or “warlords” – armed actors with varying degrees of autonomy from state control – in states with weak formal institutions. While these strongmen are typically regarded as a challenge to state authority, scholars have noted their ability to recast themselves as political actors within the formal state, often enjoying a significant degree of public support and an unmatched ability to effectively mobilize identity-based coalitions (Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Reno, 2002). In the absence of effective state institutions, warlords may also be better placed to deliver public goods and services to local populations, particularly security (Harris, 1999; Lin, 2002). However, others have documented the rapacious nature of warlords and their followers towards local populations (Lezhnev, 2006) and argued that these individuals corrode state consolidation and legitimacy in the long run (Malejacq, 2016). While warlords often claim to enjoy a significant degree of legitimacy in local communities, we have little empirical evidence about the extent to which presumed support for strongmen is a genuine reflection of voter preferences, or driven by coercion and/or a crowding out of potential competitors.

In countries where significant ethnic cleavages exist, a large literature explores the salience of ethnicity in understanding voter preferences, particularly the degree to which patronage-based politics reinforces ethnic favoritism. While a significant amount of evidence demonstrates that citizens living in weak states have a voting preference for co-ethnics (Chandra, 2007; Posner, 1999), scholars have increasingly acknowledged the multidimensional nature of ethnicity – manifested in language, religion, tribe, or clan for example – and have noted that ethnic preferences

can be tempered by other cleavages or cross-cutting interests (Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Posner, 2005). Other evidence points to voters preferring leaders who come from their own regions, as these leaders are believed to better represent their interests (Blais et al., 2003; Post, 1963).

Untangling the various dimensions of political preferences in fragile states – in other words, evaluating which cleavages are most important – is challenging. A few studies have attempted to do so using quantitative methods, which have cast some doubt on the primacy of ethnicity or clientelism in determining leadership preferences. Dunning and Harrison (2010), for example, found experimental evidence that ethnicity is less salient than cross-cutting *cousinage* links in determining voter preferences in Mali. Using survey evidence from Ghana, Lindberg and Morrison (2008) found that only a small percentage of voters were motivated by clientelism or ethnicity in their preferences, and were more inclined to base their vote on policy issues. By contrast, Wantchekon (2003) found that political campaigns based on clientelism were more effective than programmatic campaigns in Benin.

While these studies focus on comparing responses to programmatic and clientelistic agendas, we lack evidence on how voters behave in weak democracies lacking parties with well-developed programmatic agendas. In circumstances where the personal attributes of leaders are paramount, how do voters prioritize group-based characteristics like ethnicity compared with personal attributes, such as a candidates age or gender? Moreover, how do these ascriptive characteristics compare with meritocratic attributes such as education or military prowess?

In practice, voters must make judgments about candidates based on a simultaneous assessment of a wide range of attributes. Moreover, these judgments may be tempered by individual or collective experiences. Exposure to insecurity or crime has been found to have significant effects on voter behavior, dampening voter turnout and turning voters against incumbent governments (Ley, 2014). There is some evidence that the prevalence of public corruption has similar effects, reducing not only voter turnout (Caillier, 2010; Faller, 2015) but support for both incumbents and challengers (Chong et al., 2014). However, other evidence suggests that people residing in countries with high levels of corruption are less likely to punish politicians for engaging in corrupt practices (Cameron et al., 2009).

In fragile states, where both insecurity and corruption are often widespread, there is still a dearth of evidence as to how both factors affect voter preferences for leadership attributes. When citizens are concerned by insecurity, are they more inclined to select male leaders with military experience with the expectation that they are capable of providing security? Alternatively, when concerned about corruption, are they more likely to avoid voting for strongmen, who have been particularly associated with venality? How do these issues affect voter preferences for meritocratic or ascriptive characteristics, such as education, ethnicity or gender? This paper contributes to the debate by examining interactions between all of these factors in northern Afghanistan.

Political Competition in Afghanistan

I chose Afghanistan as a case study to examine these interactions for a number of reasons. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan adopted democratic institutions with regular Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Despite widespread allegations of fraud, the country experienced its first-ever peaceful transfer of power between two elected governments after Presidential elections in 2014 (Giustozzi and Mangal, 2014). Afghanistan has a number of cross-cutting ethnic, tribal, cultural and religious cleavages, most significantly between the predominantly Pashtun south and the Tajik and Uzbek-dominated north. Currently, Afghanistan can be characterized as a neo-patrimonial state with weak institutions, highly dependent on external support and facing a growing Taliban insurgency that has spread throughout the country.

In addition to ethnic and tribal cleavages, successive generations in the country have experienced vastly different forms of governance. Afghanistan's turbulent politics over the past 40 years has produced significant generational cleavages between those who came of age during a relative era of peace before the Soviet invasion of 1979, a brutal conflict between the Soviet-backed communist government and Islamist *mujahedeen* fighters which came to an end in 1992, a period of chaos during the civil war of 1992-1996, a theocratic and politically isolated Taliban regime between 1996-2001, and finally the Western-backed Islamic Republic that has existed from 2001 to the present day. These experiences are likely to have had a large effect on shaping the behavior of Afghan leaders and expectations of leadership within the public as a whole. Throughout these periods, insecurity has been a lasting problem for Afghanistan's civilian population, who have endured multiple waves of political violence across all regions of the country. Afghanistan is therefore an ideal context to explore how security concerns shape leadership preferences.

Political leadership in Afghanistan is dominated by a combination of warlords and other former combatants, intermingled with a substantial number of foreign-educated Afghans who returned to the country after the fall of the Taliban. Both of its post-Taliban presidents, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, returned to the country from a long period of exile after 2001. Whereas former President Karzai was well known for his skill in engaging with the country's traditional elites, the current President, Ashraf Ghani, is a former academic and world bank employee and has been described as "the technocratic alternative to the politics of warlordism and corruption" (Packer, 2009). After taking power, Ghani's administration appointed younger, more educated leaders in positions of power throughout the provinces: "Many governors have modern skill-sets and assets, they are younger, and also lacking in one of the main credentials of the past: fighting experience" (Roehrs and Suroush, 2015). Nonetheless, warlords retain a great deal of power in Afghan politics – including the powerful governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammad Nur, and Ghani's Vice President Rashid Dostum – and Ghani has struggled to reign in their influence. For his part, Ghani himself has sometimes been criticized for being "out of touch" and taking a "high-minded", arrogant approach to politics (Bengali and Latifi, 2014; Harooni and Birsal, 2016).

Northern Afghanistan is a particularly suitable region of the country to explore determinants of leadership

preferences. It is more ethnically diverse than the rest of the country, with large numbers of Tajiks and Uzbeks living with a sizeable minority of Pashtuns and smaller communities of Turkmens, Hazaras, and other ethnic groups. Additionally, while the entire region is at risk of insecurity, some provinces are more secure than others. The context therefore allows for testing preferences between ethnic groups and between those living in relatively secure versus insecure areas.

Experimental Design

I use a choice-based conjoint design to test leadership preferences amongst respondents. While conjoint analysis has long been used to conduct market research, it has only recently been employed in political science (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Additionally, many conjoint studies are conducted in university laboratories using students as subjects, thus limiting the external validity of the findings (Franchino and Zucchini, 2015). Furthermore, previous conjoint studies in political science have generally focused on dynamics in developed countries, while published studies using conjoint analysis in the developing world are still relatively rare.

However, conjoint analysis offers unique opportunities for conducting research in developing countries, particularly for household surveys. Respondents are often reluctant to answer sensitive questions truthfully, instead providing answers they believe surveyors want to hear. In insecure or politically oppressive areas, respondents fear of reprisals for providing unsatisfactory answers may exacerbate this tendency. A choice-based conjoint design mitigates social desirability bias by testing preferences for multiple factors at once, making it difficult for respondents to guess what a satisfactory answer might be (Wallander, 2009). Individual respondents are asked to choose between profiles but not to justify their choice, allowing respondents more scope to express their true preferences. For example, a respondent might feel strongly against being represented by female candidates, but may feel uncomfortable expressing this preference to a surveyor. However, in conjoint experiments, respondents are aware that the surveyor cannot trace which attributes are most important in driving their choices, and may therefore express their preferences with greater candor. Because leadership choices are a particularly sensitive topic in Afghanistan, a conjoint design is a methodologically sound choice for examining respondent preferences.

The conjoint design for this study is an adaptation of the candidate experiment pioneered by Hainmueller et al. (2014). In my experiment, enumerators asked respondents to choose between two randomly generated profiles of potential leaders. Before seeing the profiles, respondents were read a short explanatory text:

Now I am going to show you a few pairs of profiles of potential leaders and ask you to choose, between the two, the one that you think would be the best advocate for you.

Respondents were subsequently shown a randomly generated pair of profiles of potential leadership candidates according to the attributes in Table 1, and asked: *Given a choice between these two profiles, which person would*

*you prefer as a leader?*¹ Outcome variables were measured in two ways: first, the forced-choice result was codified as 1 if the candidate profile was selected and 0 if the profile was not selected. Second, after respondents chose between the two profiles, they were subsequently asked to evaluate each profile on a scale of one to five: *On a scale of 1-5, where one indicates that you think the person is absolutely unsuitable to represent you as a leader, and where five indicates that the person would be an ideal leader for you, where would you rate the first profile? (Profile A)/ Using the same scale, how would you rate the second profile (Profile B)?* These ratings are recoded as 1 if the rating is above the midpoint and 0 if not.

The attributes selected for these profiles were selected to reflect particularly salient divisions in Afghan society that previous studies suggest should be important in determining leadership preferences: age, education, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, and professional experience. I distinguished between foreign and domestic university degrees for two reasons. First, having a foreign degree implies a long period of time spent out of the country, which respondents may see as beneficial in terms of building leadership skills and connections, or conversely may resent as elitist and out of touch. Second, having Western-educated leaders has been positively linked with democratization (Gift and Krcmaric, 2017) implying at least some link between programmatic agendas and foreign education. While other attributes, such as tribal affiliation, may also be important, they were omitted due to complexity and evidence collected during fieldwork suggesting that, in the areas of northern Afghanistan where data was collected, ethnic cleavages are highly relevant.² Additionally, place of birth options were restricted to provincial levels rather than district or village levels. While local identities may also be important predictors of leadership preferences, an unreasonably large number of options would be necessary to include all potential areas where the data collection took place.

Certain combinations of attribute levels evoke particular typologies of leadership. For example, a candidate profile of a young university-educated leader with donor agency experience suggests a person who is comfortable working with foreigners and likely to govern with a technocratic mindset. Conversely, an older candidate with a non-university education and a military background would suggest a candidate closer to the strongman model of leadership. Similarly, a candidate with religious education hailing from Kandahar may stimulate memories of Taliban leadership and is therefore a subtle way of testing for evidence of attitudes towards the Taliban without asking respondents directly.

I imposed two restrictions on randomization in order to avoid implausible candidate profiles. First, I restricted candidates with military experience to males only. Although there are women currently serving in the Afghan army, it is still considered highly unusual. Second, all candidates from Kandahar were defined as having Pashtun ethnicity only, as Kandahar province is overwhelmingly Pashtun.

¹In this experiment, the precise leadership position was deliberately left ambiguous. Specifying a particular leadership position, such as President or Governor, might have caused respondents to imagine the current incumbent while participating in the conjoint experiment, which may have in turn biased the results.

²In other parts of Afghanistan, particularly more ethnically homogeneous areas, tribal affiliations are likely to be a more important predictor of leadership preferences.

Table 1: Attributes of Candidate Profiles

Attributes	Values
Age	28
	37
	49
	57
	68
Education	Madrassa
	Educated to High School
	University Education in Afghanistan
	University Education Abroad
Gender	Male
	Female
Ethnicity	Pashtun
	Tajik
	Uzbek
	Hazara
	Turkmen
Place of Birth	Balkh
	Kabul
	Kandahar
	Saripul
	Kunduz
Professional Experience	Business Owner
	Donor Agency Employee
	Government Employee
	Military
	Private Sector Employee

Respondents had the choice of doing the survey in either Dari or Pashto, the two main languages of Afghanistan. Survey translations in both languages were piloted to ensure that the terminology was clear in layman terms before the data collection took place. Due to high levels of illiteracy in Afghanistan, enumerators were trained to read all questions aloud to respondents and to assist them with examining both profiles. Robustness checks between respondents with no education and respondents with some formal education did not yield major differences, suggesting that respondents without a formal education were able to complete the conjoint exercise with the assistance of an enumerator. More information about robustness checks is provided in Appendix B of the supplementary information.

The experiment also tested whether exposure to insecurity and corruption have effects on leadership preferences. Before starting the conjoint experiment, participants were exposed to one of three randomly-selected short vignettes: one describing general insecurity in Afghanistan; one describing the prevalence of predatory corruption in the country; and one describing the practice of nepotistic corruption in how public appointments are distributed. A fourth control group received a neutral vignette describing generic facts about Afghanistan. The full text of each vignette is provided in Appendix A of the supplementary information.

Finally, the survey collected demographic information on respondent ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, place of birth and gender. This information was used to determine how leadership preferences differ between these groups. I also used the demographic information to determine to what extent respondents expressed a preference for leaders with characteristics similar to their own.

This research design has several advantages over previous studies on leadership preferences in fragile states. Instead of testing single hypotheses about leadership preferences, the randomization of multiple attributes in conjoint analysis allows for empirical comparisons between many factors by measuring them on the same scale. Additionally, this study makes a novel empirical contribution by combining a randomized vignette experiment with conjoint analysis, using the vignette as the independent variable and respondent leadership preferences as measured by the conjoint experiment as the dependent variable.

The validity of the conjoint experiment rests on three assumptions. The first assumption is that no carryover effects exist between the three rounds and that respondents would therefore make the same choices irrespective of the order of the profiles. Assumption two is that there are no profile order effects caused by certain attributes being placed before others as participants are reviewing the profiles. Assumption three is that potential outcomes are statistically independent of the profiles, which automatically holds if the profiles are properly randomized. These assumptions are discussed later in the paper in the section on robustness checks and in Appendix B of the Supplementary Information.

Sample

The data presented in this paper come from a household survey of adults conducted in northern Afghanistan between August 2016 and January 2017. The survey was conducted in three provinces: Balkh, Saripul, and Kunduz. These provinces range from relatively secure (Balkh) to moderately insecure (Saripul) to highly insecure (Kunduz)³ More information about security conditions in each province is provided in Appendix A of the Supplementary Information.

Sampling in Balkh and Saripul was conducted using the Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) method. This was not possible in Kunduz due to insecurity and a lack of reliable population data; instead, sampling points were drawn from a list of accessible areas only.⁴

In each province we targeted 800 respondents but slightly oversampled in order to discard incomplete responses. The final data sample includes 2,485 complete survey responses, each of which includes three rounds of the conjoint experiment. I have not applied any post-stratification weights to the results presented below due to the fact that a formal census has not been conducted in Afghanistan since 1979 and there is consequently a lack of reliable auxiliary data with which to compare the sample.

Surveyors faced several security incidents during the course of data collection, and enumerators could not access areas under the control of insurgents. Consequently, the sample is limited to areas with a minimum degree of security and does not capture opinions of civilians living in areas outside of government control. The results therefore cannot be considered fully representative of any of the three provinces in the sample. However, the survey collected data from a range of age, ethnicity, gender, income, and education levels in the target population. The sample is not limited to urban areas, but includes a large number of small rural settlements as well. Although the data presented below cannot be considered purely representative, the sample can be presumed to have greater external validity than a pure convenience sample.

Results and Analysis

Following the methodology set out by Hainmueller et al. (2014), I estimate Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) to complete the analysis. The AMCE represents the average difference in the probability of a leadership profile being selected when comparing two different attribute values, where the average is calculated over all possible combinations of the other leadership attributes. This allows for a direct comparison of means between different attributes and attribute levels (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015). More information about the estimation of AMCEs is provided in the Supporting Information.

Figure 1 displays results for the overall sample of respondents. In general, the results provide strong evidence

³These categories were based on security assessments in early 2016 at the outset of the project. The data collection took place in Balkh and Saripul between August and September 2016 and between December 2016 and January 2017 in Kunduz. Additionally, 50 pilot surveys were collected in May 2016 in Kabul but were not included in the final sample.

⁴During data collection, a number of sampling points in all three provinces needed to be substituted due to unforeseen security issues. In these cases, the substitute points were selected from the same district as the original sampling point and were a similar size and ethnicity whenever possible.

that respondents prefer university educated leaders and penalize respondents with a religious education. This was true for both foreign and domestically-educated leaders: having a university degree from abroad increased the probability of being chosen by 0.16 (SE=0.01) compared to a baseline candidate with a high school education, while having a degree from an Afghan university conferred a benefit of 0.14 (SE=0.01) against the baseline. These results do not support the proposition that those who studied abroad are penalized for being out of touch; in fact, studying abroad confers a slight additional benefit to potential candidates. Conversely, leaders who received education in a madrassa received a penalty of 0.05 (SE=0.01) against a baseline candidate, implying that a traditional religious education is not highly valued in candidates.

The results also showed moderate preferences for younger leaders, though not necessarily too young. The most preferred candidates in their late 30s; respondents gave 37 year olds a 0.037 (SE=0.01) advantage over a baseline candidate of 28. By contrast, older leaders in their late 60s received a penalty of 0.043 (SE=0.01). Other age groups were not significantly different from the baseline.

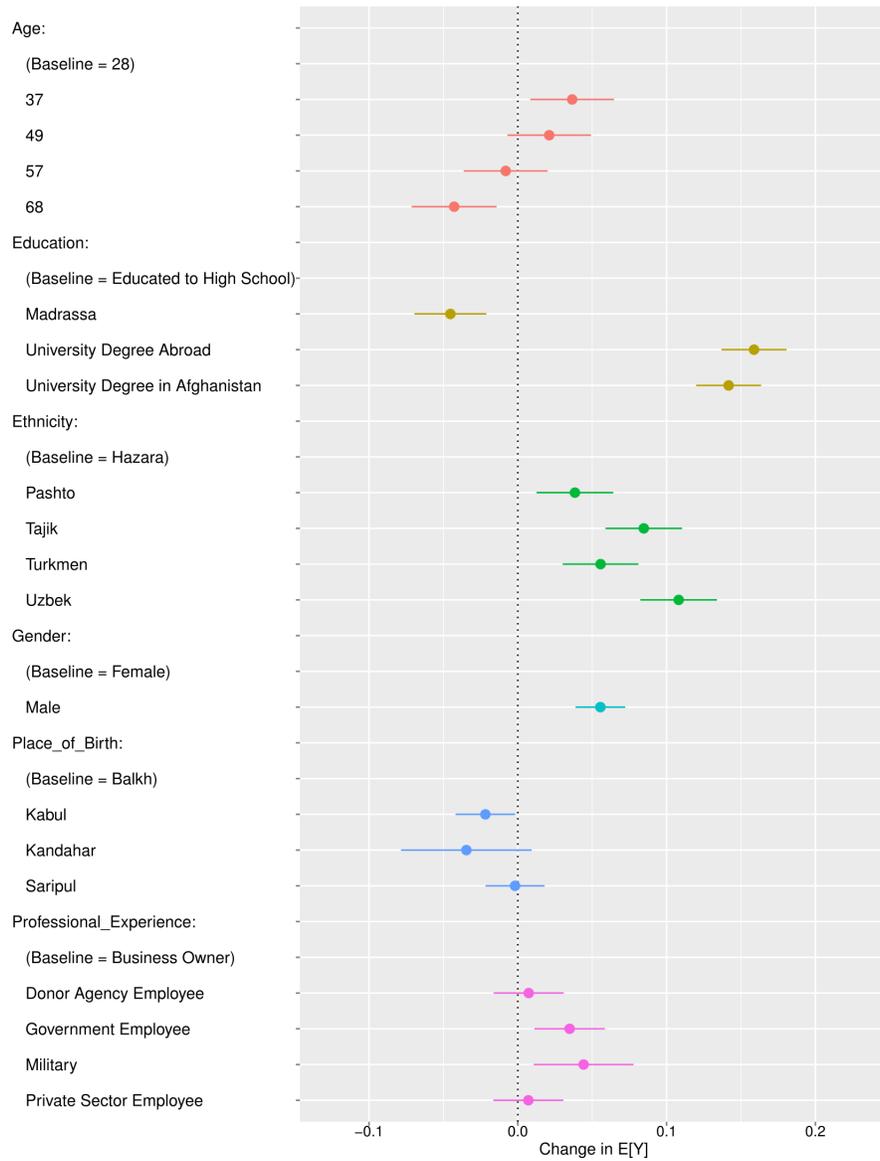
Respondents did not appear to be particularly attracted to candidates born in northern provinces, nor did they express strong preferences for candidates from elsewhere in the country. Leaders from Kabul were slightly penalized by 0.022 (SE=0.01) against a baseline candidate from Balkh, but other provincial options were not statistically significant. By contrast, ethnic attributes were a much stronger predictor of preferences. In the overall sample, Uzbek candidates received a 0.11 bonus (SE=0.01) against a baseline Hazara candidate. Indeed, Hazara candidates were significantly less likely to be selected than all other ethnic groups. This last finding is not particularly surprising, given that Hazaras have been longstanding targets for discrimination in the country.⁵

With regards to how candidate gender influenced leadership choices, male leaders received a 0.055 bonus over female leaders (SE=0.008), an unsurprising finding in a highly conservative society. However, other attributes, such as education and ethnicity, are still stronger predictors of leadership preferences than gender, even for male respondents. For example, while males in the sample preferred male leaders by 0.095 (SE=0.01), they prefer university graduates who studied abroad by 0.16 (SE=0.02) and graduates who studied domestically by 0.14 (SE=0.02) compared to the baseline. Women in the sample expressed similar preferences for university graduates: a 0.16 bonus for foreign-educated (SE=0.02) and a 0.14 bonus for domestically-educated university graduates (SE=0.02) compared to the baseline, but had no significant preference for either gender (Appendix C).

The last attribute concerns the role of candidates professional experience in determining leadership preferences. Respondents gave moderate bonuses to those with government experience (0.035, SE=0.01) and those with military experience (0.044, SE=0.01) compared to business owners. Candidates with a private sector background or with donor agency experience were not significantly more likely to be preferred over the baseline. These findings underline the fact that, while business owners and private sector employees have become more prominent in Afghan society in recent years, leadership is still more strongly associated with the public sector in Afghan society.

⁵For a summary of historical discrimination and the growth of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan, see Simonsen (2005)

Figure 1: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Selected as Preferred Leader



Note: This plot shows estimates of the effects of the randomly assigned candidate attribute values on the probability of being selected as a leader. Estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model detailed in the SI. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

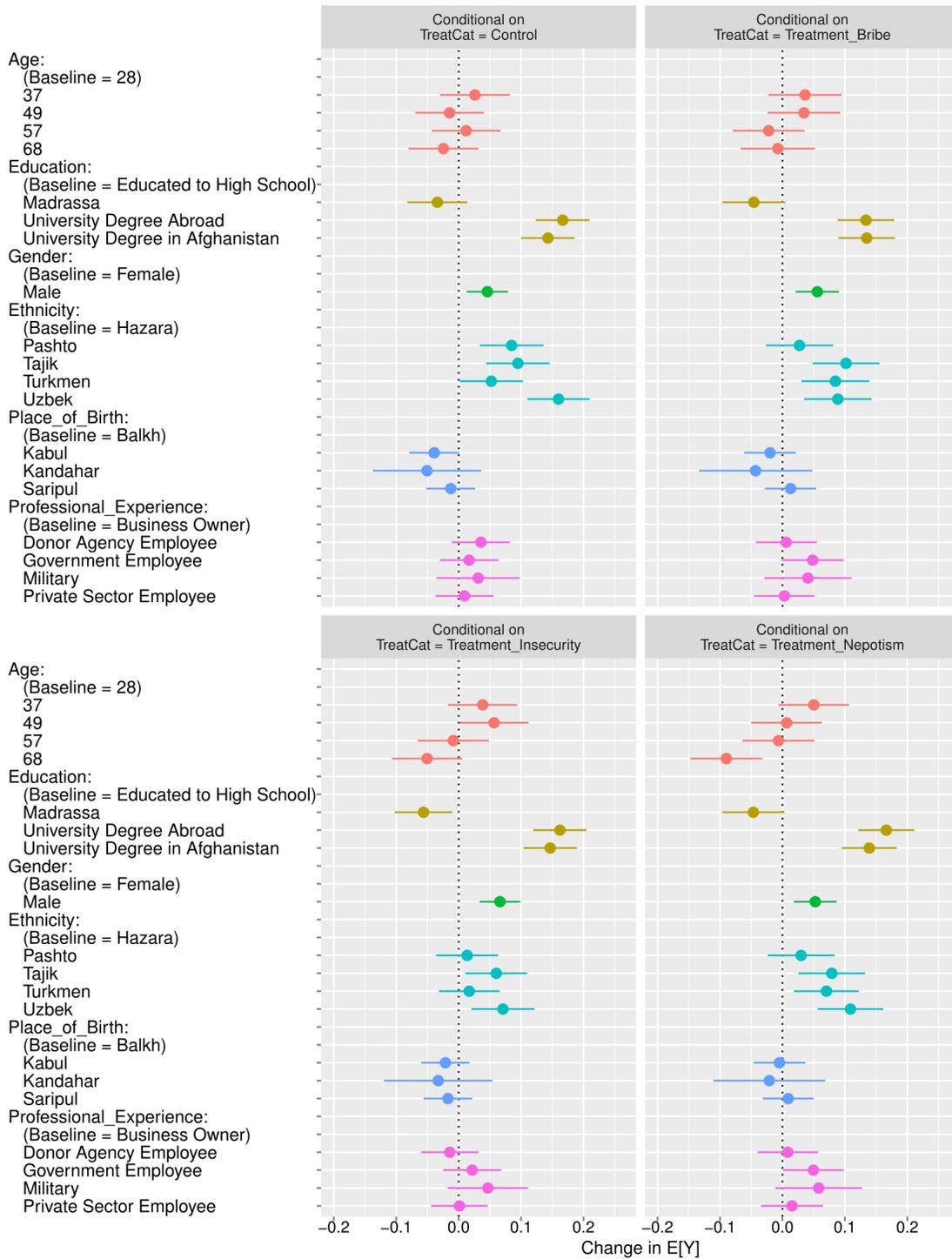
Effects of Vignette Experiment on Leadership Preferences

Using a two-stage experimental design, I was also able to estimate to what extent exposure to vignettes on corruption or insecurity had a significant effect on leadership preferences. Three vignettes describing predatory corruption, nepotistic corruption and insecurity in Afghanistan, as well as a control vignette describing generic facts about the country, were randomly selected and read out to respondents before they engaged in the three rounds of conjoint selection. For the analysis, I fitted a model with interaction effects for the Treatment variable and conducted t-tests between the control estimate and each of the treatment estimates for each of the attributes, with a null hypothesis of no significant difference between control and treatment samples.

I found that exposure to the vignettes had only trivial effects on conjoint results, as shown in Figure 2. For almost all attributes, differences between the conjoint results in the control group and the results in each treatment group were statistically insignificant. I found significant effects in only one case: those exposed to a vignette on insecurity were 0.07 less inclined to select people with Uzbek ethnicity when compared to those in the control group ($p=0.015$). This could be plausible, as some respondents may be inclined to see Uzbek militias, for example, as being associated with insecurity, and may therefore be more reluctant to select an Uzbek leader. Alternatively, respondents may believe that an Uzbek leader would be less effective at reducing insecurity compared to leaders of other ethnicities. In any case, the statistical effect is only weakly significant and is not replicated for other ethnicities. One would expect in the north that Pashtuns would be particularly associated with insecurity, yet there are no significant effects on selecting Pashtuns as leaders either way. There is therefore little conclusive evidence that exposure to vignettes had much effect on respondent preferences regarding ethnicity or any of the other attributes.

There could be several explanations for the fact that the vignettes had little impact on leadership preferences amongst respondents. First, it is possible that the vignettes were not sufficiently understood. To account for this, I included a manipulation check administered immediately after the vignettes were read aloud to assess respondents level of understanding. The results of the manipulation check suggest that respondents by and large understood the content of the vignettes, and therefore the treatments were effectively administered (see supporting information). Alternatively, it could be the case that peoples leadership preferences are extremely fixed, and exposure to a single vignette describing insecurity or corruption would not be sufficient to induce changes in leadership preferences. Finally, it could be the case that peoples leadership preferences are indeed fluid enough to change after exposure to treatment, but that insecurity and corruption are not necessarily the most important determinants to consider. Future candidate experiments should replicate the effects with alternative vignettes in order to understand to what extent these results are typical.

Figure 2: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Selected as Preferred Leader by Treatment Received by Respondent



Note: This plot shows estimates of the effects of the randomly assigned candidate attribute values on the probability of being selected as a leader, conditional on vignette treatment received. Estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model detailed in the supporting information. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Interaction Effects for Age, Income, Ethnicity, and Education

To understand how respondent ethnicity, generational cleavages and socio-economic status might impact leadership choices, I fitted models with interaction effects for age, income, ethnicity and education. I then tested for differences between conditional AMCEs using an F-test against the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between the AMCEs for each subgroup.

Conditioning the AMCEs on the respondents own ethnicity provided even stronger evidence for the salience of ethnicity in driving leadership preferences, showing that respondents tend to strongly favor leaders from their own ethnic groups. Pashtun respondents were 0.25 (SE=0.02) more likely to select a Pashtun leader against a baseline Hazara candidate, Uzbeks prefer Uzbek leaders by 0.23 (SE=0.02), Tajiks prefer Tajik leaders by 0.15 (SE=0.02), and Turkmens prefer Turkmen leaders by 0.16 (SE=0.07), although Turkmens also prefer Uzbeks by a slightly higher margin (0.19, SE=0.06). These results are contrary to studies in other developing countries that have found mixed or weak evidence for the salience of ethnicity in determining voter choice. In this region of Afghanistan, ethnic cleavages continue to be strong predictors of leadership preference.

Recent generations in Afghanistan have experienced radically different forms of governance, which may lead to different expectations with regards to political leadership between different age groups. To test this, I examined differences in leadership preferences between different age groups. I divided the sample into the following age quartiles: 18-23, 24-33, 34-49, and 50+.⁶ Contrary to the expectation that older generations might be more conservative or traditional in their preferences, I found very little evidence for this hypothesis – on the contrary, preferences between younger and older generations are very similar, as shown in Appendix C of the Supporting Information. The only substantive difference I found is that both the youngest age group (18-23) and the oldest age group (50+) expressed significant preferences for men (0.075 (SE=0.015) and 0.084 (SE=0.0175), respectively). It is not surprising that older generations would be more likely to favour male leaders; the results for the youngest age group are more surprising. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that both age groups favorably prioritized other factors such as higher education and ethnicity over gender in leadership characteristics.

To investigate how preferences might vary between socio-economic groups, I examined differences between high and low-income subgroups. A low income household was defined as one in which respondents annual household income was 50,000 AFS (approximately 732 USD) or less, medium income was defined as between 50,000-100,000 AFS (approximately 732 and 1,465 USD) and high income was defined as greater than 100,000 AFS (1,465 USD)⁷. Individuals with low and high incomes could reasonably be expected to have different political preferences owing to

⁶While there are no exact estimates of Afghanistans age distribution, over 40 percent of people are estimated to be under the age of 14 (CIA, 2017). The survey was limited to adult respondents only; the age distribution is younger than most developed countries but is plausible given Afghanistan's population estimates.

⁷Average per capital national income in Afghanistan is approximately 610 USD (World Bank). However, most Afghans live in large households with multiple earners, and many rely on informal incomes with irregular salaries. Additionally, women are often excluded from the workforce and are dependent on male relatives for income. Therefore, total household income is a more appropriate measure than individual incomes. I also measured annual rather than monthly income because many Afghan households are dependent on seasonal incomes that fluctuate considerably at different times of the year

divergent economic interests. Low-income individuals in particular may feel alienated from highly educated leaders and therefore express stronger preferences for traditional forms of leadership.

However, respondents income levels had few significant effects on leadership preferences. As shown in Figure 4 in the Supplementary Information, despite the fact that low-income individuals are less likely to have received an education, they preferred university educated leaders at roughly the same proportions as high income and medium income respondents. Low-income respondents gave university educated leaders who studied abroad a 0.15 bonus (SE=0.025) and leaders with a university degree from Afghanistan a 0.13 bonus compared to a baseline high school educated leader (SE=0.025), statistically indistinguishable from high income respondents who gave foreign and domestically educated leaders a bonus of 0.16 (SE=0.016) and 0.15 (SE=0.016), respectively. There were also no significant differences between preferences with regards to leaders age, gender, or professional experience.

On the contrary, ethnic preferences were more salient amongst low-income respondents across all ethnic groups compared to medium and high-income respondents. This was particularly the case for Pashto and Tajik leaders. For example, low-income respondents gave Pashto and Tajik leaders a bonus of 0.12 (SE=0.03) and 0.15 (SE=0.029) against a baseline Hazara candidate, respectively, whereas high-income respondents were only 0.01 more likely to prefer Pashtuns (SE=0.019) and 0.05 more likely to prefer Tajiks (SE=0.019) against the baseline. One possible explanation is that low-income respondents may be more dependent on employment and other economic benefits distributed through ethnically-based patronage networks. Another is that individuals with higher levels of income are more likely to have access to education and work which may lead to greater opportunities to engage with other ethnicities, potentially having a moderating effect on ethnic preferences.

To investigate the impact of education on leadership preferences, I examined variation in AMCEs between subgroups with different levels of educational achievement. Respondents were divided into subgroups with no education, those with primary school/madrassas as the highest level of education, those educated to a high school/vocational training level, and those with some university or with a university degree. As shown in Figure 5 of the Supplementary Information, the results were similar to disparities between income groups. There were no significant differences in preferences for age, place of birth, and professional experience attributes. Similarly, the importance of ethnic preferences declined with more education, becoming statistically insignificant amongst those with university education. Respondents with at least some university education were also significantly more likely to prefer leaders who had been educated abroad than those who had never attended university ($p=0.004$). These results suggest that investments in education may lead to future dividends in improving ethnic pluralism.

Insecure Provinces and Military Leadership

Finally, I examined whether living in a more insecure province increased preferences for leaders with a strong military background. I used an f-test to examine the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between preferences for military leaders in the three provinces. As shown in Figure 6 of the supplementary information,

there was no significant difference in preference for leaders with a military background which were borne out by the result ($p=0.412$). This was consistent with outcomes in the experimental treatment on insecurity, which had only trivial effects on leadership preferences. There is, therefore, little evidence for the proposition that greater insecurity causes citizens to prefer leaders with fighting experience. On the contrary, irrespective of security conditions, people in all three provinces are more likely to prefer university-educated leaders to those with military experience.

Robustness Checks

In the supplementary information, I report results for a number of robustness checks. First, I compared AMCEs in the conjoint choice model to respondent evaluations of each candidate profile on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates that a candidate is completely suitable and 5 indicates that a candidate is completely unsuitable. I compiled evaluation results in the sample and compared them to results from the conjoint choice model. The results of the two models are broadly similar.

I also ran robustness checks for carryover effects between the three rounds of profiles. As each respondent participated in three rounds of the conjoint experiment, the assumption is that there are no carryover effects between profiles—namely, that respondents would make the same choices regardless of which order they received the profiles. Consistent with that assumption, I found that AMCEs are similar across the three rounds. The results are displayed in the supplementary information.

The validity of the conjoint experiment is also conditional on assumptions that there are no attribute order effects and that the profiles are indeed randomized. I used *Qualtrics* software on mobile phones and tablets for the data collection. Because the software randomizes the order that attributes were displayed in each profile and the composition of the profiles, we can assume these assumptions are fulfilled.

Discussion and Conclusion

The conjoint methodology used in this study improves on previous studies of voter preferences in fragile states in that it allows us to empirically estimate and compare the relative importance of different candidate attributes. The results suggest that, contrary to scholarship arguing in favor of public support for traditional warlord candidates, voters across a range of age and socio-economic groups prefer highly educated younger leaders. They also strongly prefer candidates of their own ethnicity, a trend that is stronger amongst low-income respondents and those without a university education. Military and government experience only conferred a small benefit on candidates. However, the results also showed that despite the emergence of some high profile business owners in recent years, public sector experience is valued over private sector and donor agency experience. While male leaders are preferred over female leaders, the effect is smaller than education and ethnicity. Finally, respondents did not place much importance on the leaders place of birth, suggesting that ethnic identities are more salient than regional identities in determining

leadership preferences. Pre-treatment vignettes on insecurity and corruption had trivial effects on shifting these preferences, suggesting that leadership preferences may be either unaffected by these particular factors or relatively fixed.

There are a number of caveats to the findings above. They are limited to a particular region of Afghanistan, and it is possible that leadership preferences elsewhere in the country are considerably different. The candidate experiment also tests for leadership characteristics as expressed through hypothetical candidate profiles. However, it is possible that hypothetical preferences may not align with voter behavior in practice: for example, people may not prefer warlord candidates in general, but may be supportive of *their* warlord. This may indeed be the case with Governor Atta in Balkh, who is generally considered to be quite popular both inside and outside of the province. The results imply nothing about the relative effectiveness or capacity of educated leaders to implement their programs, or imply that they are untainted by corruption. Still, the results do challenge assumptions about the degree to which strongmen enjoy legitimacy amongst the population, and given the association of higher education with programmatic agendas, suggests that people may be driven by more programmatic agendas. Similarly, despite the esteemed position of religion in Afghan society, the results suggests that religious education is not as high status as often assumed, and that religious education in fact carries a penalty in terms of providing opportunities for socio-economic advancement. This may explain, at least in part, why madrassas are such a lucrative source of recruits for insurgent groups, given the lack of alternative opportunities provided by education (HRW, 2016).

Future projects should focus on expanding research throughout the rest of the country to test the extent to which these findings hold in different regions. In particular, researchers may consider experimenting with different types of treatments to further explore the relationship between corruption, insecurity, and leadership preferences. Additionally, more complex experiments could explore whether different types of candidates are preferred for different types of leadership roles. For instance, it is possible different types of candidates would be preferred at local and national levels.

In terms of policy relevance, the results could be applied in the selection of local officials and candidates in the next round of elections. The results also suggest that in-group preferences with regards to ethnicity become weaker as incomes and education grow, implying that improvements in these areas may have future payoffs in reducing ethnic tensions. Additionally, given that Afghanistan has specific quotas for female leadership, public resistance to women in leadership positions could potentially be mitigated by investing in higher education for female leaders and selecting female leaders with strong ethnic ties to their respective communities. It is important to note that the experiment only measures public preferences for hypothetical leaders, not their likelihood of success; nonetheless, selecting leaders with characteristics more in line with these preferences is likely to have positive effects in terms of legitimacy and stability in the long run.

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