Reexamining Civilian Preferences in Civil War: A Survey in Afghanistan

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Abstract

How do civilians react to changing authority in civil war? We investigate this question in Afghanistan using survey data from The Asia Foundation following the end of U.S.-led combat operations in 2014. I demonstrate that there is clear evidence that civilian attitudes are indeed conditional on the following three-way interaction: territorial control, ethnicity, and survival. For instance, there is a notable and statistically significant distinction between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns under Taliban control in their approval of the Afghan Government. I bring largely unused country-wide individual-level data to bear on analyzing civilian wartime beliefs.

I. Introduction

How do civilians react to changing authority in civil war? "In existing accounts, civilians are viewed as rational individuals who are typically politically neutral and undecided about supporting an insurgency. Prewar ties, notably ethnic or ideological allegiances, are viewed as dissolving at the war's outset or, at the least, eroding steadily over time as wartime pressures mount. Civilians act on individualistic survival-maximizing imperatives, not group-based identification" (Lyall et. al 2013, 4). Many of these accounts are not adequately tested because they rely on individual-level data which is difficult to attain in the midst of civil wars. I challenge these accounts by arguing that civilian attitudes towards combatants in civil war are conditional on three factors: territorial control, ethnicity, and survival.

To test this claim, I use survey data from The Asia Foundation, a non-profit international development organization.[1] The size and scope of this survey offers a unique opportunity to test our claims countrywide. Individual-level data was collected from 9,586 Afghan civilians from all 34 provinces through face-to-face interviews. This survey is combined with an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model to measure civilian attitudes towards the Afghan Government and the Taliban.[2]

This research is important for several reasons. First, there is a unique opportunity to better understand the variation of popular support for the Afghan government and the Taliban with the end of U.S.-led combat operations. Second, since 2014 the Taliban have made significant territorial gains across the country (see image below). The intensity of the ongoing war and the increase in the Taliban's territorial control which largely coincides with the survey data provides an interesting opportunity to study cross country variation. Third, I bring largely unused country-wide individual-level data to bear on the question.

There are several key findings. First, there is clear evidence that civilian attitudes are indeed conditional on territorial control, ethnicity, and survival. There is a notable and sta-

[1] Every year since 2004, The Asia Foundation has randomly sampled over 9,000 Afghans in all 34 provinces in Afghanistan. For more information, visit: http://asiafoundation.org/country/overview/afghanistan

[2] The Taliban is a coalition of Islamist rebel groups that desire an Islamic Emirate. An Islamic Emirate is a political territory ruled by an Islamic ruler. For the Taliban, this territory encompasses all of Afghanistan. Aside from safe haven and some resources found in Pakistan, the Taliban derives a majority of its political support, members, resources, and territorial control from the Afghan countryside. An estimated 74% of the population lives in rural areas according to The World Bank (2014).

tistically significant distinction in the effect's direction between non-Pashtuns and Pashtuns under Taliban control in their approval of the Afghan Government. Second, among Pashtuns who never, rarely, and sometimes fear for their personal safety in Taliban controlled provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, they have higher government approval on average, after controlling for army violence, police violence, Taliban violence, ethnicity, and Taliban sympathy.

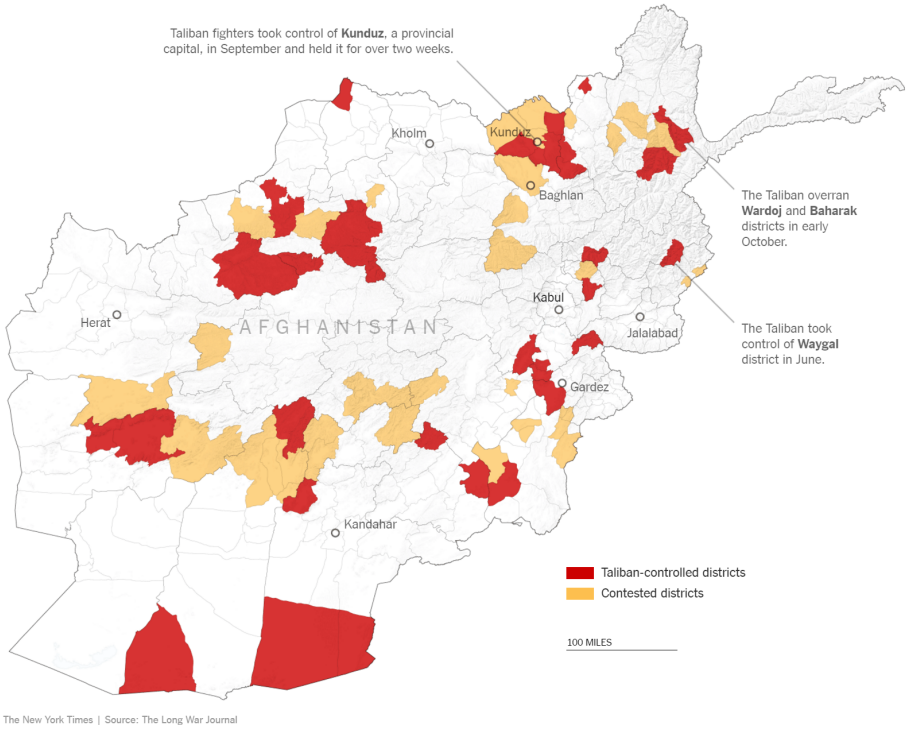


Figure 1: *Areas of Taliban Control and Contestation in late 2015 (Almukhtar and Yourish 2015)*

II. Theory

Civilian support is of central importance in determining a civil war's outcome. This section builds on this notion by laying out the theoretical underpinnings of popular support in civil war through the three dimensions described above: territorial control, survival, and ethnicity.

Civilian Support. For the incumbent and the rebels, cultivating and maintaining popular support is one of the most important factors associated with winning civil wars. "Hearts and minds", a term famously coined from the British experience in Malaya, was a central tenant of the then International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission from 2001 to 2014 (Stubbs 1989, 249). ISAF's canonical focus on this concept was for good reason, scholars and practitioners emphasized its importance in counterinsurgency operations for years (Mao 1961; Trinquier 1985, 16; Galula 1964; Taber 1965, 23; Sepp 2005, 9; Department of the Army, 2006). The literature on "hearts and minds" makes it clear: civilian support wins civil wars. "If the insurgent manages to dissociate the population from the counterinsurgent, to control it physically, to get its active support, he will win the war because the exercise of political power depends on the tactic or explicit agreement of the population, or at worst, on its submissive-

ness" (Galula 1964, 6).

Territorial Control. A robust empirical observation found in civil wars is that civilian collaboration with combatants is closely related to the extent of the combatant's control in the area and that collaboration and control are self-reinforcing (Kalyvas 2006, 111). Territorial control is one of the most important ways in which combatants cultivate popular support and it is also one of the most reliable predictors of a civilian's preferences in war. "People's political views would be highly contingent on the power arrayed around them" (Finnegan 1999, 50). Once in control of an area, combatants have at least two basic options at their disposal to generate civilian collaboration: loyalty and repression. Loyalty generates collaboration through selective and collective benefits (hearts and minds) (e.g., access to dispute resolution, security, markets, food, etc) while repression generates collaboration through violence and fear (Kalyvas 2006, 114). However, the use of violence often usurps the provision of benefits as it is a much easier and more effective tool, particularly amongst resource starved rebels (Kalyvas 2006, 115). Once faced with this situation, civilians collaborate with whomever is in control out of necessity and survival (Popkin 1980, 431).

Survival. Another robust empirical observation of civilian attitudes in civil wars is that civilians prioritize personal security and welfare over political preferences of combatants (Leites and Wolf 1970, 45; Kalyvas 2006, 117). Besides civilian heterogeneous preferences over outcomes, civil war dynamics such as violence, fear, coercion, sympathy, and revenge play a direct role in forging and shifting civilian attitudes (Kalyvas 2006, 93). "Politics was not nearly as much on their mind as staying out of harm's way" (Gall 2001, 25).

Ethnicity. Ethnicity is relevant in civil wars for several reasons. It facilitates collective action and it is uniquely visible and persistent, almost to the point of being inescapable (Kalyvas 2008, 1044). To the extent that civil wars shape ethnic identities, they do so by polarizing and hardening them (Kalyvas 2008; Sambanis and Shayo 2013). The existence of ethnic conflict suggests that individuals place the well-being of their group above themselves (Sambanis and Shayo 2013, 295). Robust empirical support for ingroup bias is found in experimental studies and naturally occurring data which documents the preferential treatment of members of one's group (Sambanis, Schulhofer-Wohl, Shayo 2012, 807). Intergroup bias - the systematic tendancy by individuals to evaluate one's own membership group (the "in-group") more favorably than a group one does not belong to (the "out-group") - follows this logic by shaping individual actions and attitudes in civil war (Lyall et. al 2013, 4).

Ethnic identification is not straightforward however, individuals might identify with their ethnic group or with their nation (Sambanis and Shayo 2013, 296). Despite that ethnic identification can be trumped by heterogeneous preferences (i.e., feuds) and that ethnic groups can be divided internally, a persistent bias aggregate towards coethnics should be observable (Lyall et. al 2013, 8). In Afghanistan, intergroup bias should be particularly salient amongst non-Pashtuns as they have already witnessed Taliban rule once and are likely keen to avoid a similar fate (Lyall et. al 2013, 21). "Ethnicity embodies an element of emotional intensity that can be readily aroused when the group's interests are thought to be at stake" (Horowitz 1985, 59).

Predictions. Territorial control predicts that in a zero-sum nature, Afghan civilians will be more favorable to whomever is in control of the area as compared to those who are not. Survival predicts that as Afghan civilians become increasingly worried about their personal safety, their approval of the combatant not in control of their area decreases (to avoid retribution). Ethnicity predicts that non-Pashtuns will be less favorable towards the Taliban as compared to Pashtuns.

Three Way Interaction. Territorial control, conditional on survival and ethnicity, predicts that non-Pashtuns will have *higher* government approval in Taliban controlled provinces as compared to Pashtuns.

One major problem facing empirical studies of civilian beliefs in civil war is that there is reason to believe that civilian preferences are manipulated or falsified (Kalyvas 2006, 91). Heterogeneous preferences as well as coercion, fear, violence, and revenge can all play a role in molding civilian beliefs in war. In other words, civilian attitudes as well as their behavior may not reflect their true preference ordering. Additionally, while survey data is valued for producing information that is often representative of populations, it too is mired in questions of accuracy and truthfulness (Parry and Crossley 1950). One limitation to this survey is that it did not employ an endorsement experiment which could have increased our confidence in our results.[3] Taken together, these concerns represent threats to the validity of the respondent's answers and our inferences.

III. Hypotheses

H_1: Non-Pashtuns in Taliban dominated provinces, as compared to Pashtuns in Government dominated provinces, have *higher* government approval as their concerns for personal safety increases.

H_2: Pashtuns in Taliban dominated provinces, as compared to Pashtuns in Government dominated provinces, have *lower* government approval as their concerns for personal safety increases.

IV. Data

The primary independent variable (territorial control) is an unordered categorical variable that represents each province in Afghanistan with a value ranging from 1 to 3. 1 represents a government-dominated province, 2 represents a contested province, and 3 represents a Taliban-dominated province. Afghan provinces are represented in this manner because it as a simplistic way of conceptualizing the divisions in territorial control in civil war (Kalyvas 2006, 87). Conflict mapping efforts from The Long War Journal as well as the Institute of the Study of War were combined with substantive knowledge of the country to code the Afghan provinces accordingly (Institute for the Study of War 2105; The Long War Journal 2015).

The dependent variable (government performance index) is an ordered categorical variable which sums four variables that measure the civilian's perception of the government's performance at the village, provincial, national, and city level on a scale from 1 to 4.[4] When combined, this variable assumes a scale from 1 to 12. A 1 means that the respondent believes the government is doing a very bad job at some levels of government while a 12 means that the respondent believes the government is doing a very good job at nearly every level of government.[5] The table below depicts the bivariate relationship between the primary independent variable and the dependent variable. It shows that civilians tend to approve of the government more in areas where the government is in control and the opposite in areas where the Taliban is in control.

[3] In an endorsement survey, randomly chosen respondents are assigned to treatment and control groups. In the treatment group, respondents are asked to respond to a policy endorsed by a specific actor (e.g., the Taliban, Americans, etc). The control group is given identical questions without an actor endorsement. The results are then compared and higher levels of support for a policy with an endorsement is viewed as evidence for support of that actor.

[4] A value of 1 represents a "very bad job", 2 represents a "somewhat bad job", 3 represents a "somewhat good job", and 4 represents a "very good job".

[5] A mixture of missing values that comprise "do not know" or "refused" answers as well as the geographic variation (civilians live in villages or cities) account for this government performance index's seemingly unusual scale.

Table 1: *Bivariate Relationship - Territorial Control and Government Performance Index*

Gov Index	Gov Dominated	Contested	TB Dominated
1	3	0	2
2	21	8	27
3	224	111	121
4	207	147	143
5	372	271	172
6	513	394	233
7	618	516	189
8	762	667	260
9	821	635	259
10	422	447	187
11	216	235	114
12	124	58	69

There are several reasons for the control variables in the model. First, these variables are representative of the leading factors associated with the dependent variable in the introduction and theory section above which reduces concerns of omitted variable bias. Second, the control variables all share a relationship with the dependent variable, the primary independent variable, and every other control variable. This is done to avoid a misspecified model which only uses controls that have a relationship with the dependent variable. The control variables are listed in the table below:

Table 2: *Control Variables*

Variable	N	Min	Max
Taliban Violence	9586	0	1
Army Violence	9586	0	1
Police Violence	9586	0	1
Ethnicity	9586	1	2
Fear Personal Safety	9556	1	5
Taliban Sympathy	9342	1	3

The first three controls are dummy variables (Taliban Violence, Army Violence, Police Violence) that measure whether or not the respondent or someone in the respondent's family experienced Taliban, Afghan National Army (ANA), or Afghan National Police (ANP) violence respectively in the past year.[6] The next variable (Ethnicity) is an unordered categorical variable which represents the language the

[6] A value of 0 represents that the respondent or their family was unaffected while 1 represents that they were affected by the identified combatant.

[7] This assumption is reasonable because Tajiks tend to speak Dari while Pashtuns tend to speak Pashto. Additionally, Afghan civilians tend to live in similar ethnic communities. If a respondent spoke Dari during the interview, then it is more likely than not that the local language used is Dari and that the area is Tajik vice Pashtun.

[8] Tajiks and Pashtuns are the two largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan and comprise 97% of the survey respondents.

[9] A value of 1 means that the respondent never fears for their or their family's safety while a 5 means that they always

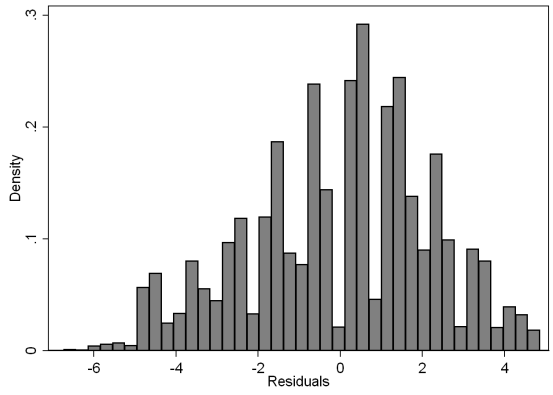
respondent used in the survey interview. Although imperfect, it is a reasonable measure for ethnicity as each language spoken is directly associated with a specific ethnicity in Afghanistan.[7] In this model, non-Pashtun ethnicities are pooled together where 1 represents Pashtuns while 2 represents Non-Pashtuns.[8] Next, Fear Personal Safety variable measures how often the respondent fears for their own or their family's personal safety.[9] Finally, Taliban Sympathy measures how sympathetic the respondent is to the Taliban after considering everything that the Taliban has done in the past year.[10] Collectively, these variables directly measure and test the stated hypotheses while also limiting omitted variable concerns.

V. Model

An OLS regression model with a three way interaction of the primary independent variable is used to test the hypotheses. The interacted variables are: territorial control, ethnicity, and fear personal safety. The interaction is necessary because as discussed in the theory section above, true measures of civilian attitudes is dependent on all three variables. This model requires no other variable transformations such as logarithmic transformations because there are no exponential variables and it is not necessary to discuss any findings in terms of percent changes. The model also does not require any curvilinear terms because I am treating my variable of interest as unordered categorical where its effect at each level is specific and compared to a base category.

Skeptics of the model, hypotheses, and results may posit that the primary independent variable and dependent variable suffer from endogeneity or reverse causation. The direction of this research's argument is: changes in territorial control effects civilian attitudes towards government performance. An argument for the reverse is: poor government approval caused changes in territorial control (no one supports the government and are fine to see it overthrown). While endogeneity concerns are important, I believe they are minimized in our theory and hypothesis. For instance, the theory and H_1 prescribes asymmetric results (non-Pashtuns are impacted differently from Pashtuns) while an argument for endogeneity does not.

Separately, there are no model misspecification concerns as the residual error terms seem to be distributed (mostly) normally. Additionally, hypothesis testing for heteroskedasticity further minimizes (p=0.000) concerns. Taking the data and model discussion collectively, the Gauss-Markov assumptions (i.e., endogeneity, errors normally distributed, and the independent variable matrix is full column rank) with this model and data are likely true.



fear for their safety.

[10] A value of 1 means that the respondent has "no sympathy" while a 3 means that they have "a lot of sympathy".

VI. Results

The three-way interaction and marginal effects tables depicted below (see image) contain several findings related to H_1 and H_2.

H_1. The most important finding is the interaction's positive slope (see right panel "Non-Pashtun") indicating: among non-Pashtuns who always fear for their personal safety in Taliban controlled provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, there is no difference in their level of government approval, on average, after controlling for army violence, police violence, Taliban violence, ethnicity, and Taliban sympathy. This interaction's slope is statistically significant at the .05 level meaning that we can reject the null hypothesis given the model, hypothesis, and data. However, each level of personal safety (e.g., rarely, sometimes, often, etc) is indistinguishable from each due to overlapping confidence intervals. What makes this finding notable is that two-way interactions between territorial control and ethnicity/fear personal safety show negative relationships (see images below) which lends more support to this paper's claims, theory, and model that a three-way interaction represents the truth more accurately. The interaction demonstrates clear support for H_1.

Separately, this interaction shows that: among non-Pashtuns at every level of fear for their personal safety (except "always") in government controlled provinces, as compared to Taliban controlled provinces, they have higher government approval on average, after controlling for all other control variables previously specified. Finally, among non-Pashtuns at every level of fear for their personal safety (except "often" and "always") in contested provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, they have higher government approval on average, after controlling for all other control variables previously specified.

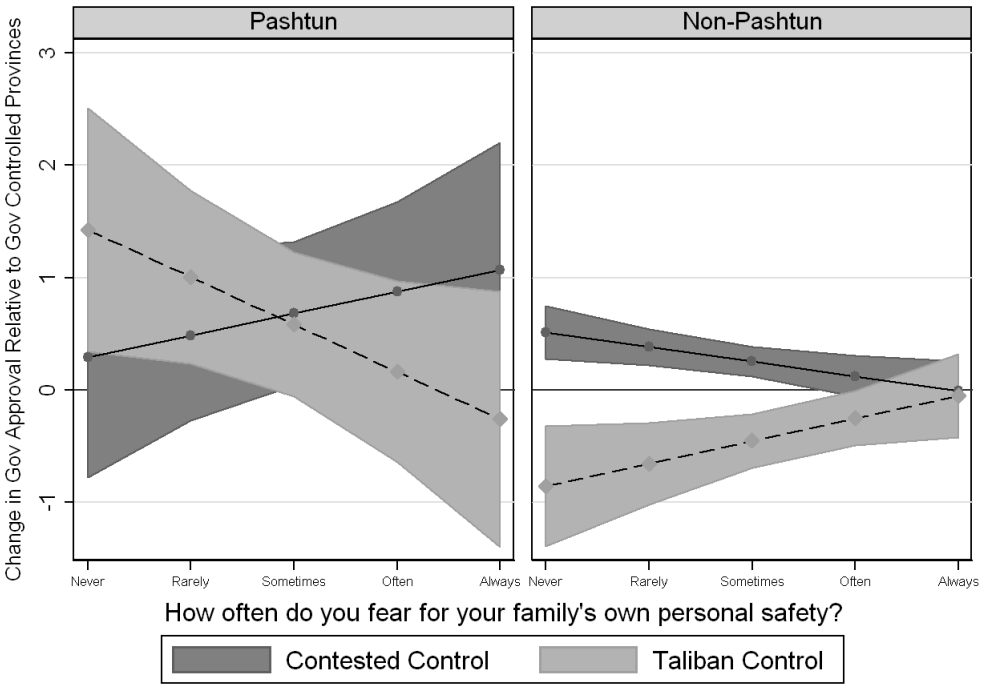


Figure 2: *H1 & H2: Three-way Interaction - Territorial Control, Ethnicity, and Fear Personal Safety*

Table 3: *H1: Marginal Effects - Non-Pashtuns*

Contested Control	Coefficient	95% CI
Never Fear	.51*	$[.27, .75]$
Rarely Fear	.38*	$[.22, .54]$
Sometimes Fear	.25*	$[.12, .38]$
Often Fear	.12	$[-.05, 2.1]$
Always Fear	0	$[-.27, .26]$

* $p < 0.05$

Table 4: *H1: Marginal Effects - Non-Pashtuns*

Taliban Control	Coefficient	95% CI
Never Fear	-.85*	$[-1.3, -.31]$
Rarely Fear	-.65*	$[-1.0, -.28]$
Sometimes Fear	-.45*	$[-.68, -.21]$
Often Fear	-.24*	$[-.48, -.00]$
Always Fear	-.04	$[-.41, .32]$

* $p < 0.05$

Table 5: *H2: Marginal Effects - Pashtuns*

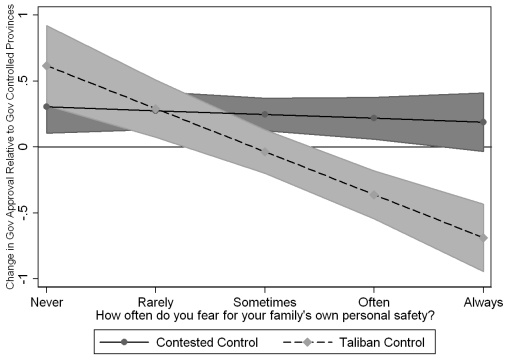
Contested Control	Coefficient	95% CI
Never Fear	.29	$[-.77, 1.3]$
Rarely Fear	.48	$[-.27, 1.2]$
Sometimes Fear	.68*	$[.04, 1.3]$
Often Fear	.87*	$[.07, 1.6]$
Always Fear	1.0	$[-.05, 2.1]$

* $p < 0.05$

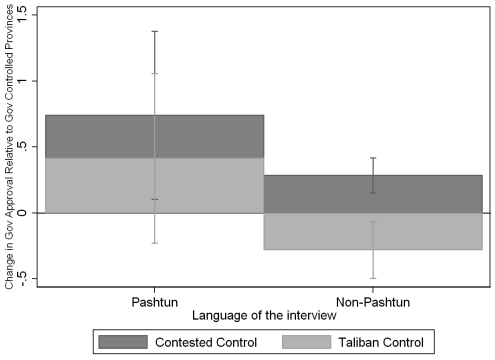
Table 6: *H2: Marginal Effects - Pashtuns*

Taliban Control	Coefficient	95% CI
Never Fear	1.4*	$[.34, 2.5]$
Rarely Fear	1.0*	$[.23, 1.7]$
Sometimes Fear	.58	$[-.05, 1.2]$
Often Fear	.16	$[-.64, .96]$
Always Fear	-.25	$[-1.3, .87]$

* $p < 0.05$



(a) *Two-way: Territorial Control and Fear Personal Safety*



(b) *Two-way: Territorial Control and Ethnicity*

H_2. The interaction depicted in the left panel in Figure 2 above demonstrates support for H_2 as its slope is negative and statistically significant at the .05 level. For instance: among Pashtuns who always fear for their personal safety in Taliban controlled provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, there is no difference in their level of government approval on average, after controlling for all other control variables previously specified.

Interestingly and unexpectedly: among Pashtuns who never, rarely, and sometimes fear for their personal safety in Taliban controlled provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, they have higher government approval on average, after controlling for

all other control variables previously specified. This is surprising because the theory predicts that Pashtuns would have lower government approval ratings at all fear levels under Taliban control as compared to government control.

Finally, the interaction shows that among Pashtuns who sometimes, often, and always fear for their safety in contested provinces, as compared to government controlled provinces, they have higher government approval on average, after controlling for all other control variables previously specified. Granular district-level data is necessary to parse out if the theory's predictions are holding here depending on which side is winning in their contest for control.

VII. Conclusion

How do civilians react to changing authority in civil war? Existing accounts argue that in civil war, political, ethnic, and ideological preferences dissolve as civilians act on a logic of survival. My findings suggest a more complicated understanding is necessary. Civilian attitudes in civil war is indeed conditional on: territorial control, ethnicity, and survival. The implications for the war in Afghanistan is that the ethnicity has become more salient. Tajiks (and perhaps all non-Pashtuns) may despise or fear Taliban rule again and as a result exhibit ingroup preferences which override individual survival concerns.

This research has shown that individual-level data is necessary to empirically test civilian attitudes in civil war despite its potential limitations. Taking into account this paper's three-way interaction, theory, and model, future research on civilian collaboration with combatants may provide additional important and counter-intuitive results that challenge existing theory.

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