

Iraq Poll Illuminates Sunni-Shia Divide

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Sunni Dissatisfaction Widespread

[Full Report](#)

[Questionnaire/Methodology](#)

The welling up of violent incidents that followed the bombing of one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines last week in Iraq have raised questions about the roots of the frustration and anger that are playing out. A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 1,150 Iraqis conducted in January shows that among the Sunni community there is widespread unhappiness with how things are going in Iraq, but that the Shia (who recently won the majority of seats in the new Iraqi Parliament) and the Kurds (who have crafted a substantial amount of autonomy) express relative satisfaction.

Sunnis, who were a privileged group during Saddam Hussein's long rule of Iraq, diverge sharply from other ethnic groups when asked about whether Iraq is headed in the right direction, whether December's parliamentary elections were free and fair, whether the government that will result from those elections will be the legitimate representative of Iraqis, whether overthrowing Saddam was worthwhile and whether they approve of attacks on US-led forces.

Sunnis overwhelmingly feel that Iraq is not headed in the right direction, the opposite of how most of their compatriots feel. Ninety-three percent of Sunnis said the country is going in the wrong direction, compared to 16 percent of Shia and 23 percent of Kurds who felt that way. Only 6 percent of Sunnis believe Iraq is headed in the right direction.

Sunnis participated in Iraq's Dec. 15 parliamentary elections in significant numbers after boycotting the previous post-Saddam election in January 2005. Yet an overwhelming majority of Sunnis polled after the elections--94 percent--felt they were not free and fair, compared to 19 percent of Kurds and 11 percent of Shia who felt that way. Sunni allegations of election irregularities were investigated, and as a result, 227 ballot boxes were thrown out, less than 1 percent of the total vote.

Is Iraq Going in the Right Direction?

Do you think that Iraq today is generally headed in the right direction or the wrong direction?

Right Direction



Wrong Direction



Perhaps most significant, 92 percent of Sunnis said they do not believe the new Parliament will be the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people. This is in sharp contrast to 90 percent of Shia and 81 percent of Kurds who said that the new Parliament will be legitimate.

A very large majority even express regret that Saddam Hussein was removed. Asked whether the ousting of Saddam was worth the hardships suffered as a result, 83 percent of Sunnis said it was not worth it. This is in stark contrast to the mere 2 percent of Shia and 8 percent of Kurds who said they feel that way.

A large majority of Sunnis--88 percent--approve of attacks on US-led forces (77 percent strongly, 11 percent somewhat) compared to a minority of Shia (41 percent) and Kurds (16 percent). Sunnis are also the only group that had a substantial minority expressing approval for attacks on Iraqi government security forces. One-fourth (24 percent) said they approve of such attacks somewhat, while only 4 percent of Shia and less than 1 percent of Kurds approved.

The deep dissatisfaction of Sunnis and the enormous gulf between Sunni public opinion and that of other Iraqis illustrates the enormous challenges inherent in forming a coalition government, which is still underway, and the importance of considering Sunni public opinion to achieve consensus.