



Synthesized Analysis: Public Opinion Polling on Iran

Introduction

The polling analysis that follows is based on a review of 13 publicly available polls by 10 polling firms, conducted between September 2013 and February 2014. For a long-term picture of public opinion on foreign policy toward Iran, please refer to our May 2013 analysis.

Following our established methodology, we examine these polls in aggregate to sketch a picture of American public opinion, taking into account each poll's variations in phrasing, question order, and other content. It is our belief that polls analyzed in the aggregate are more valuable than any single isolated poll.

The Executive Summary below is followed by a detailed examination of the polls a set of recommendations for advocates in relation to work on Capitol Hill and/or media engagement.

Executive Summary

- Before the interim agreement in late November 2013, Americans backed renewed diplomacy with Iran. Many thought President Obama should personally negotiate.
- Partisan differences on Iran are most prominent with respect to perceptions of the threat and the “best” approach, and less prominent when it comes to support for diplomacy.
- Most polls show that a majority or plurality of Americans approve of the interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1. The multilateral nature of the deal is crucial for public support.
- Few Americans are following the negotiations closely. Pollsters do not emphasize the verification processes built in to the agreement, and often try to force opinions from an uninformed public—all contributing to a strong partisan effect.
- But the public is skeptical of Iran and worries that its leaders are not negotiating in good faith. While the public continues to largely support the diplomatic effort, they are also doubtful that it will be successful or make any difference. It appears that many people may be resigned to the perspective that Iran will pursue and acquire nuclear weapons regardless of US or international efforts. Should the final choice be between containment and war, this may prove a critical sentiment.

1. **Pre-Agreement: The vast majority of Americans supported renewed diplomacy with Iran. Many thought President Obama should personally negotiate.**

Avaaz/Zogby released a poll on September 23 showing that there was strong support for American diplomacy with Iran, despite uncertainty about Rouhani and low trust in Iran. 36% said the election of the moderate Rouhani gave them hope that relations between Iran and the outside world could be improved, 38% said it didn't, and a full 25% said they didn't know. About 44% said they trusted neither President Rouhani nor the Iranian people (with 32% unsure). Yet there was solid support for President Obama to engage in “renewed direct diplomacy with Iran” (59–21%); and a plurality agreed that direct negotiation by Obama would make him look strong

(38% strong vs. 24% neither strong nor weak vs. 16% weak). The Avaaz/Zogby poll revealed a high level of uncertainty and/or disinterest amongst Americans, with each question about Iran yielding at least 15% and up to 30% “don’t know” responses.

CNN/ORC International found a whopping 76% favored direct diplomacy at the end of September, versus 21% who opposed.¹

The Economist/YouGov poll from October 2 similarly found that 64% thought President Obama should personally negotiate with Iran over the nuclear program. In addition, the poll introduced a problematic question, repeated in later polls, asking, “What strategy should the US employ to get Iran to limit its nuclear program? Threaten Iran with the possible use of military force; Threaten Iran with harsher economic sanctions; Reward Iran with easing of economic sanctions; Reward Iran with a guarantee of no use of military force; Reward Iran with resumption of diplomatic relations.” The phrasing here is highly problematic: framing policy options as rewards and threats not only puts them in opposition to one another, it also may deter a respondent from choosing a policy s/he supports based on a reluctance to either “punish” or “reward” Iran.²

Six weeks later, they asked the same series of questions and found the public was tilting more toward “threats.” “Not sure” answers remained high—30% in early October, 32% in late November. Over half thought President Obama should personally negotiate with the leaders of Iran (54–46%). Other questions in this poll indicate the source of these negative responses: as we have seen in previous polls, Americans are distrustful of Iran’s nuclear intentions and feel Iran is a threat.³

In mid-November, an ABC/Washington Post poll found 64% of the public supported lifting some sanctions against Iran in exchange for the restriction of their nuclear program, with 30% opposed. But, like the Avaaz/Zogby poll, this one showed uncertainty about the success of such a deal—only 36% were confident that such a deal could prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, while 61% expressed little or no confidence.

The CNN/ORC International poll released on November 21 asked only one question about Iran.⁴ It found 56–39% in favor of a deal restricting (but not ending) Iran’s nuclear program and greater international inspections in exchange for easing some of the economic sanctions imposed by the US and others.

2. Partisan differences on Iran were most prominent with respect to perceptions of the threat and the “best” approach, but less prominent when it came to support for diplomacy.

Democrats favor a more conciliatory approach to Iran while Republicans favor a more threatening approach—self-described Independents fall in the middle but lean toward hawkishness. Before an interim deal was reached, partisans tended to disagree most strongly on the “best” approach to foreign policy with Iran, and on how serious a threat the country posed to the U.S.

For example, the September Economist/YouGov poll found that Republicans strongly favored either threatening Iran with military intervention (25%) or increased sanctions (34%) in order to stop it from building a nuclear weapon, while Democrats favored rewarding Iran with reduced sanctions (36%) or promises of no military intervention (21%). But relatively large numbers from each party chose “reward Iran with resumption of diplomatic relations”—20% of Republicans, 25% of Democrats. And while few in September considered Iran an immediate,

serious threat, Republicans were much more likely to choose that answer (19% versus 11%) or consider Iran a somewhat serious threat (53%), while both Democrats and Independents were evenly split between perceiving a “somewhat serious” or “minor” threat (about 32% each). The November Economist/YouGov poll shows similar partisan attitudes.

When it comes to support for diplomacy or support for a hypothetical agreement between Iran and world powers, partisan differences are less pronounced. The CNN/ORC International poll from September shows a 19-point divide between Dems and Reps on favoring direct diplomatic relations between the US and Iran, but it’s between 87% (D) and 68% (R)—a very strong level of support even amongst Republicans. Similarly, the Economist/YouGov poll in September found 56% of Republicans favoring direct negotiations between President Obama and Iranian leaders, well below the 71% of Democrats in favor but still a majority. The ABC News/Washington Post poll released the week before the deal was announced showed 72% of Democrats supported a diplomatic agreement versus 63 and 57% of Independents and Republicans, respectively.

3. Post-Agreement: Most polls show that a majority or plurality of Americans approve of the interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1. The multilateral nature of the deal is crucial for public support.

The first poll to come out after the agreement was conducted by Reuters/Ipsos in the two days following the announcement.⁵ The poll showed that, while many Americans weren’t ready to offer an opinion on the deal (34%), the ones who were ready to do so leaned toward approval by a 2-to-1 margin (44–22%).

But in the first week of December, Pew found that a plurality disapproved of the interim agreement, 43–32%, with 25% unsure. Again, a large number had heard nothing at all about the agreement (28%) and even more had heard only “a little” (48%).

In the same week, Quinnipiac University conducted a national poll and found Americans evenly split on the deal, 46–44%.

Fox News, asking about the interim agreement three weeks after it was reached, found that 54% “don’t know enough about it to say” whether they approved or disapproved. About twice as many people disapproved as approved, 30–16%, but, as with previous polls, the high number of uninformed respondents suggests that opinion was still up in the air.⁶

The AP and GfK conducted two national polls with questions on Iran in mid-December and mid-January. The two polls showed very little variation over that month, with more Americans approving than disapproving of the interim agreement with Iran (32–19% in December, 33–19% in January). In both cases, almost half of respondents initially declined to give an opinion. When pushed, 28% said they leaned toward approval, while 19 and 17% (respectively) leaned toward disapproval. Incorporating the “lean” numbers into the totals, the AP-GfK polls show 59–38% approval in December, 60–36% in January.

Finally, an Economist/YouGov poll released on January 22 began with the familiar “threats” and “rewards” series (see above), then moved to a few specific questions about the interim agreement. Like the Pew poll six weeks before, this poll showed few people following the news of the current round of negotiations with Iran closely (49% very or somewhat vs. 51% not very or not at all). But a clear majority (58–25%) approved of the agreement, described in semi-hypothetical terms (discussed below).⁷

Poll	+	–	DK/No Opinion	
Reuters/Ipsos (Nov 28)	44	22	34	
Pew (Dec 9)	32	44	25	
Quinnipiac (Dec 10)	44	46	--	
Fox News (Dec 18)	16	30	54	
AP-GfK (Dec 18)	32	19	48	28 lean + 19 lean –
AP-GfK (Jan 28)	33	19	47	28 lean + 17 lean –
Economist/YouGov (Jan 22)	58	25	18	

As we show in the table above, four of the post-deal public polls show public approval of the interim agreement, two show disapproval, and one shows an even split. The deciding factor appears to be the parties involved in the deal: polls describing the agreement as *multilateral* show approval, while polls framing the deal as *bilateral* between Iran and the US show disapproval.

4. Few Americans are following the negotiations closely. Pollsters do not emphasize the verification processes built in to the agreement, and often try to force opinions from an uninformed public—all contributing to a strong partisan effect.

Question phrasing is important in any polling, but it is particularly important when many respondents lack independent information about the subject at hand. In the first months after the interim agreement was reached, questions about the deal between Iran and the P5+1 varied significantly and critical details about the agreement were often ignored:

- Reuters/Ipsos: “The United States and other world powers have reached an interim deal with Iran to freeze the nation's nuclear program in exchange for lifting some sanctions on the country. Do you support or oppose this deal?” This phrasing describes the deal in multilateral terms and the poll allowed an “unsure” response but did not elicit it.
- Quinnipiac: “As you may know, Iran has agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for lighter economic sanctions. Do you support or oppose this nuclear deal reached with Iran?” This gives no hint about the precise nature of the agreement, nor the other parties involved. But it also leaves uninformed respondents to base their answers entirely on their opinions about the few details included here—Iran, limits on their nuclear program, and lighter economic sanctions—and doesn’t encourage them to express no opinion. No surprise that we see a strong partisan effect: Democrats supported the deal 63–25% while Republicans opposed it 68–24%. Independents fell squarely in the middle, 45–45%.
- Fox News: “Based on what you know about the recent deal the United States struck with Iran on its nuclear enrichment program, would you say you approve of the deal, disapprove of the deal, or don't you know enough about it to say?” This question does the best job of giving respondents an “out” if they don’t know much—indeed, 54% took that option. It also does not describe the terms of the deal, however broadly—only the

subject (Iran's nuclear enrichment program). On the other hand, the question portrays the agreement as bilateral, not multilateral, and we see opinion swing negative. The partisan effects here are strong amongst those comfortable giving an opinion: Democrats supported the deal 26–12% (62% DK), Republicans opposed it 49–5% (46% DK), and Independents opposed it 32–16% (52% DK).

- Pew: “From what you know, do you approve or disapprove of the agreement between the United States and Iran on Iran’s nuclear program?” Like Quinnipiac, the Pew poll accepted “don’t know/no opinion” responses, but only if they were volunteered. Their previous question asked how informed the respondent was about the recent deal, so Pew’s analysis included crosstabs of information level with approval rates. But again, like Fox News, the question skips the international nature of the agreement and portrays it as bilateral; and, like Fox News, Pew shows a negative tilt in opinion. Like Quinnipiac, Pew found that partisanship had everything to do with how Americans felt about the deal, with the Republican-Democrat approval spanning 36 points (14–50%, respectively).
- AP-GfK: “Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the interim agreement reached between Iran and six world powers that is designed to curb Iran’s nuclear program?” This question does the best job of representing the multilateral nature of the interim deal, rather than describing it as a bilateral agreement between Iran and the US. But both AP-GfK polls (December and January) pushed respondents to give a “lean” opinion if they initially balked: “If you had to choose, do you lean more toward approving or disapproving of the interim agreement...?” Nearly half of respondents did, and we would prefer to see a “don’t know enough to say” option. Both those with strong opinions and weak (“lean”) ones leaned toward approval, in the AP-GfK polls.
- Economist/YouGov: “Do you approve or disapprove of an international agreement which requires Iran to temporarily freeze parts of its nuclear program and participate in international negotiations to limit its nuclear program permanently in exchange for a temporary easing of economic sanctions?” This poll allows a “no opinion” response and phrases the question in a loose way that could be taken as a hypothetical—if a respondent is unaware of the real agreement, s/he could still express an opinion on such an agreement based on the description here. It also has a multilateral emphasis. However, the wording implies more favorable terms to the deal for the P5+1 (permanent changes on Iran’s part, temporary changes by the US and allies) than the actual deal specifies. Partisanship is important here, but does not overcome general approval: while Democrats more strongly favor the deal (28 vs. 16%), Republicans approve by 51–34% and Democrats approve by 65–12%.

Taken together, these polls clearly demonstrate the phenomenon of partisanship acting as a proxy for real knowledge of an issue. We know from many of these polls that about half of Americans have heard very little or nothing about the deal, and aren’t following the negotiations. Yet the poll from Quinnipiac, for example, gives respondents almost no details and no option for expressing no opinion—sure enough, in the face of no independent knowledge, people “vote” along party lines. The Economist/YouGov poll in late January shows how small changes in wording can supersede partisanship: while the poll shows 51% still following the negotiations “not very closely” or “not at all,” an agreement described as multilateral and in advantageous terms for the P5+1 negotiators produces majority support *across partisan groups*.

It is critical to note that none of these questions includes one of the most important aspects of the agreement: international inspections. Arguably one of the security measures most likely to reassure distrustful citizens, the inspections of nuclear sites are designed to verify Iran's adherence to the terms of the interim deal.

One poll did address verification, although we treat it separately here: Hart Research Associates conducted a survey on behalf of Americans United for Change directly following the agreement. Because the survey consists mostly of message-testing rather than public opinion polling, it is not precisely comparable to the polls we discuss herein. Hart began with a knowledge question to gauge how much voters had heard about the agreement and found, similar to the polls above, about 37% had heard little or nothing. Among those who had heard at least a little, opinion tilted toward approval, 34–22% (the question portrayed the agreement as multilateral).

Hart then tested the effect of a detailed description of the agreement on approval.⁸ This description explicitly included the provision for inspections: "Iran will submit to international inspections to verify that it is living up to the terms of the agreement." Following the description, 63% said they favored the agreement (29% strongly), while 24% opposed (15% strongly).

- 5. But the public is skeptical of Iran and worries that its leaders are not negotiating in good faith. While the public continues to largely support the diplomatic effort, they are also doubtful that it will be successful or make any difference. It appears that many people may be resigned to the perspective that Iran will pursue and acquire nuclear weapons regardless of US or international efforts. Should the final choice be between containment and war, this may prove a critical sentiment.**

In its early December poll, Quinnipiac also asked respondents about the security implications of the agreement, for both the US—45–37% said it would make us less safe—and for Israel—52–29% said less safe. In mid-December, Fox found that 84% of Americans thought the US cannot "trust what Iran says on the issue of nuclear weapons."⁹ This broad measurement of trust in Iran aligns with past Fox News measures in 2009, 2007, and 2006, all in the 80+ percent range.

Pew chose to ask only those who had heard at least a little about the dispute over Iran's nuclear program (79% of those surveyed). This early December poll found that by 62–29% informed Americans thought Iranian leaders were not serious "about addressing international concerns about their country's nuclear enrichment program," despite the recent deal.

AP-GfK found a slight increase in skepticism of success between December and January—44 vs. 51% thought "these initial steps toward curbing Iran's nuclear program" were not likely to "stop Iran from building its own nuclear weapon," while 41 vs. 39% thought they were somewhat likely to be successful and 11 vs. 8% thought success was likely.

The late-January Economist/YouGov poll indicates that a solid majority of Americans still distrust Iran "to adhere to any agreement which limits Iran's ability to produce a nuclear weapon"—70% not much or not at all versus 20% some or a great deal.¹⁰ But by 55–45%, the public still thinks President Obama should personally negotiate with the leaders of Iran. Moreover, by 45–39%, a plurality disapproves (24% strongly) of the US using military force against Iran if negotiations fail. The public is more supportive of Israel taking military action, 48–35%. Many previous polls have shown that Americans perceive Iran as more threatening toward Israel than the US.

Recommendations

For recommendations based on this polling analysis, [please contact us](#).

Polls Cited

[Avaaz/Zogby](#), released 9/23/13

[CNN/ORC International](#), released 9/30/13

[Economist/YouGov](#), released 10/2/13

[ABC/Washington Post](#), released 11/19/13

[Economist/YouGov](#), released 11/20/13

[CNN/ORC International](#), released 11/21/13

[Reuters/Ipsos](#), released 11/28/13

[Pew Research Center](#), released 12/9/13

[Quinnipiac University](#), released 12/10/13

[Fox News](#), released 12/18/13

[AP-GfK](#), released 12/18/13 and 1/28/14

[Economist/YouGov](#), released 1/22/14

[Hart Research Associates/Americans United for Change](#), conducted 11/26–12/1/13

¹ “Would you favor or oppose direct diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and Iran in an attempt to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons?”—CNN/ORC International, Sep 27–29, 2013

² “What strategy should the US employ to get Iran to limit its nuclear program? Threaten Iran with the possible use of military force (19%); Threaten Iran with harsher economic sanctions (25%); Reward Iran with easing of economic sanctions (28%); Reward Iran with a guarantee of no use of military force (13%); Reward Iran with resumption of diplomatic relations (24%); Something else (6%); Not sure (30%).”—Economist/YouGov, Sep 28–30, 2013

³ “How serious a threat do you think Iran poses to the United States? An immediate and serious threat to the US (16%); A somewhat serious threat to the US (37%); A minor threat to the US (23%); Not a threat to the US (10%); Not sure (14%)” and “Why do you think that Iran is enriching uranium? Probably for peaceful purposes alone (9%); Probably to build a nuclear weapon as well (65%); Don’t know (26%).”—Economist/YouGov, Nov 16–18, 2013

⁴ “As you may know, the U.S. and other countries have imposed strict economic sanctions against Iran while that country has nuclear facilities which could eventually allow it to produce its own nuclear weapons. Would you favor or oppose an interim deal that would ease some of those economic sanctions and in exchange require Iran to accept major restrictions on its nuclear program but not end it completely and submit to greater international inspection of its nuclear facilities?”—CNN/ORC International, Nov 18–20, 2013.

⁵ Note that this has the smallest sample size of the polls included here—591 respondents—probably owing to the very fast turnaround (the two days immediately following the announcement of an interim agreement).

⁶ In fact, given that poll respondents are more likely to offer an opinion than to admit they are uninformed (similar to overreporting of voting), it’s likely that the dis/approval rates here are even less indicative than they appear.

⁷ “Do you approve or disapprove of an international agreement which requires Iran to temporarily freeze parts of its nuclear program and participate in international negotiations to limit its nuclear program permanently in exchange for a temporary easing of economic sanctions?”—Economist/YouGov, Jan 18–20, 2014

⁸ “Under this agreement, Iran will freeze its nuclear development program and will neutralize its entire stockpile of uranium that has already been enriched at a level that is close to what is needed to make a nuclear weapon. Iran will submit to international inspections to verify that it is living up to the terms of the agreement. In return, the United States and other countries will reduce some economic sanctions on Iran, while leaving most economic sanctions in place, and agree not to place any new sanctions on Iran while the agreement is in force.

This agreement is for six months, during which time there will be negotiations to reach a long-term, comprehensive solution that would ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful. If a permanent deal is not achieved during this period, sanctions could be reinstated and toughened.”—Hart Research Associates, Nov 26–Dec 1, 2013

⁹ “Do you think the United States can trust what Iran says on the issue of nuclear weapons?”—Fox News, Dec 14–16, 2013

¹⁰ Note the somewhat negative, leading wording here.