

# Afghanistan's Robert Redford Moment

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“So, what do we do now?” This is the question newly elected senator Bill McKay, played by Robert Redford, asks his campaign manager in the last scene of the 1972 movie *The Candidate*. It is also the question we should be asking in Afghanistan today, now that the election — which took months of preparation, thousands of people doing everything from security to election administration to political party development, and millions of dollars in assistance — is over, and has been [judged a success](#).

The Afghan election was as much about state capacity and security as about choosing a president or national legislature, but there were no real surprises in any of these areas. As anticipated, the security situation was difficult, as the election occurred in an environment of some (but not devastating) violence. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has very likely been reelected, although by a somewhat smaller margin than was originally expected. The results of the legislative races are not yet known. None of this qualifies as unexpected.

Nonetheless, the election was important because all governments, including ones as weak and tenuous as Karzai's, need legitimacy; and this election offers that government continued legitimacy. It is less clear, however, what this election has changed or if it has been a source of progress for Afghanistan. Although a new government has been elected, or reelected, that government still faces enormous challenges in implementing any policies, or simply in governing. The future in Afghanistan is still precarious, with a threat of Taliban resurgence still a reality as significant parts of the country still remain outside the control of the central Afghan government. The U.S. mission in Afghanistan is no closer to being complete; The question of whether or not the U.S. should continue its efforts in Afghanistan is critical, but nothing that happened on Thursday has any real bearing on the answer.

The election itself will not be a turning point for anything in Afghanistan, and is better understood as one more chapter in the ongoing saga of post-Taliban Afghanistan and U.S. efforts to rebuild it. In this regard, these Afghan elections are not unique. Elections in post-conflict countries are rarely major turning points and are usually better understood as one of several types of events contributing to overall political development.

For Afghanistan, the answer to Bill McKay's question is that, unfortunately, the recent election doesn't change what it is we have to do. For the newly (re)elected Afghan government, the same overwhelming challenges that existed yesterday exist today. Stabilizing the country, consolidating the national government, delivering a modicum of services will not get any easier simply because there has been one more election. For those countries that poured resources into this election, the answer to McKay's question is that now we lower our expectations, recognize that the election was

just a small step, and realize that, though there may be good reasons to get out of Afghanistan, the recent election is not one of them.