

What Voters in a California Swing District Say About Afghanistan

In a battleground district, even some Trump voters said they were hesitant to hold President Biden accountable for the casualties and chaos in the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan.



By Jennifer Medina

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HACIENDA HEIGHTS, Calif. — Brenda and Leo Ortiz had paid enough attention to the news from Afghanistan that it was hardly a surprise when their 11-year-old son asked them a question: How could so many Americans be killed last week?

Ms. Ortiz, 41, tried her best to explain, giving their son a brief history lesson on Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and ISIS. But by Saturday, Ms. Ortiz was focused on more personally pressing matters. Her three children were completing their first month of in-person schooling since the start of the pandemic.

She said she was saddened by the deaths of Americans. But she wondered aloud how she could possibly focus on a crisis on the other side of the world when there was more than enough to worry about in the United States, in her own backyard.

“I don’t think it was ever going to be easy to leave,” Ms. Ortiz said while watching her children play soccer in their recently resumed league at a park in the Los Angeles County community of Hacienda Heights. “At the end of the day, our country is where we need to be focusing. We have our own issues: getting the kids to school, healing our communities. It’s not our war to fight anymore.”

At a time of deep partisan division, in a Southern California congressional district where Democrats narrowly outnumber Republicans, voters interviewed over the weekend were largely united on at least one issue: After a two-decade war, President Biden was right to pull American troops out of Afghanistan.

The bombing at the Kabul airport had done little to change their minds, the killing of 13 soldiers leaving them more numbed than saddened. Many said they were simply too overwhelmed to pay close attention to another overseas crisis. “We have a lot of mending here to do,” said Ms. Ortiz, who considers herself a political moderate and voted for Mr. Biden.

Amid a still-raging pandemic and a still-recovering economy, this was a time to be focused on problems at home rather than abroad, more than a dozen Republican, Democratic and independent voters said in conversations in and around Hacienda Heights, a community of 55,000 people about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles where first- and second-generation immigrants fill the subdivisions and strip malls.

Afghanistan could be ignored, they said, but the possibility of their too-young-to-be-vaccinated children getting sick could not. Leaders in Washington might worry about the threat of terrorism or America’s standing with allies, but voters in Hacienda Heights said they were far more concerned about issues affecting them directly: Covid-19, homelessness and climate change, to name a few.

They also seemed hesitant to hold Mr. Biden accountable for last week’s attacks, at least for now.

“When you have no good choice, you still have to pick one,” said Patrick Huang, a 65-year-old independent who has voted for both Republicans and Democrats. “They had plenty of time to prepare to get everybody out, and they totally messed it up. But I don’t blame President Biden for everything. This came after many, many presidents made mistakes.”

Less than a decade ago, California’s 39th Congressional District was reliably Republican. Encompassing the intersection of suburban Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside Counties, it is perhaps best known as Richard Nixon’s birthplace. Today, the district is about evenly divided among Asian American, Latino and white voters and is among the more competitive in the country: Although Mr. Biden won easily, a Republican captured the House seat from an incumbent Democrat in 2020.

Richard Yeung and Emily Chen, who both voted for Mr. Biden last fall, remember the unity that came after the Sept. 11 attacks, when they were teenagers. By the time they were in their mid-20s, they said, they began to question why the United States remained in Afghanistan.

Ms. Chen spoke of the human toll in Afghanistan, but quickly added: “There’s nothing we can do. My priorities are more domestic — health and climate, what is that going to look like?”





Emily Chen and Richard Yeung voted for Mr. Biden in 2020. Roger Kisby for The New York Times





Tonya and Andrew Chang did not criticize Mr. Biden directly. Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Even some Republicans who voted for Donald Trump last fall were reluctant to criticize Mr. Biden.

“They maybe exited more quickly than they should have, but I think it was right to be out,” said Andrew Chang, 40, as he shopped with his wife, Tonya Chang, in downtown Fullerton. “It was multiple presidents’ missteps. And we couldn’t have stayed there forever.”

Ms. Chang, 32, said she had largely paid attention to what was happening with Afghan women through forums on Reddit.

“Hearing what they go through is horrible, there’s no way around that,” she said. But she said her vote was highly unlikely to be swayed over international issues. “I’m much more concerned about what is happening here,” she said. Taxes remained the most important issue for her.

Even Representative Young Kim, a Republican who flipped the seat last year, was less critical of the president than many lawmakers in her party.

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“We don’t have the luxury to be sad about what is happening, but we have to be resolute, gather information and get people to safety,” Ms. Kim said in an interview. “This is not the time to point fingers, when people are desperate and people are dying.”

But Ms. Kim added that she has heard from constituents who “are not satisfied with what they are seeing and hearing from our commander in chief.”

Inja Yun, 76, who voted for Democrats for much of her life until Mr. Trump convinced her she had been “brainwashed” by liberals, said she did not support anything Mr. Biden has done.

“He left Americans behind,” Ms. Yun said. “He left how many people there. He led them to become sacrifices. He is old, and he allowed young people to die. The only thing that makes me optimistic is that Trump is willing to fight back.”





Inja Yun does not support any of Mr. Biden's actions. Roger Kisby for The New York Times





Miguel Ruiz Lopez served in Germany during the Vietnam War. Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Though many voters seemed to be disengaging emotionally from events in Afghanistan, they seemed inclined nonetheless to see the United States do more to take in Afghan refugees. This month, the Orange County Board of Supervisors voted to call on Mr. Biden to increase the cap on refugees and include an additional 100,000 people from Afghanistan.

Like many voters in the district, L. Quach is the daughter of immigrants. Her mother has frequently drawn parallels between America's exit from Afghanistan and Vietnam, which she left as a refugee not long after the fall of Saigon.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

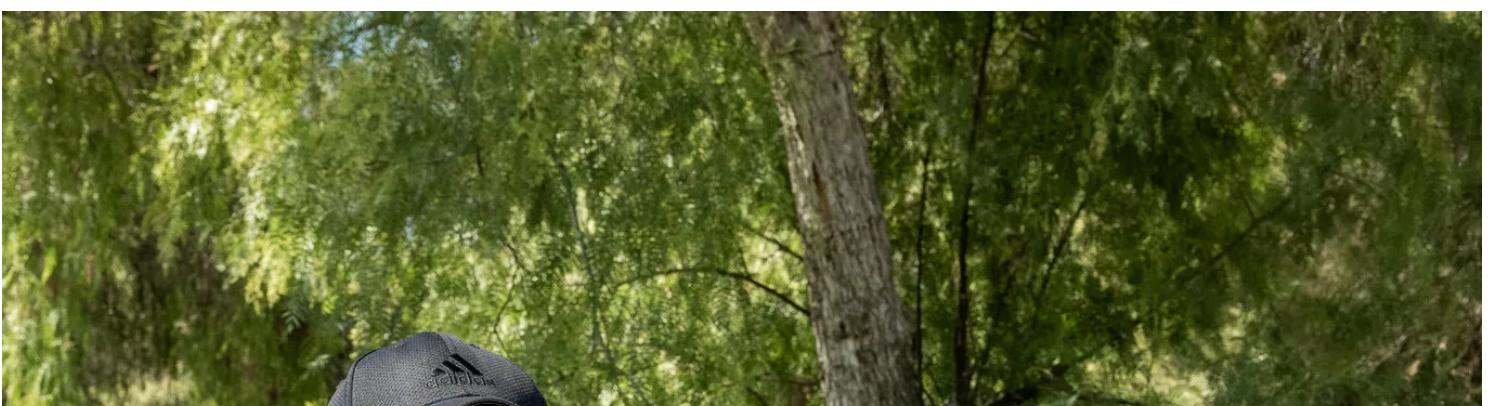
"President Biden was left with a dumpster fire," Ms. Quach, a Democrat, said of Afghanistan, adding that although she saw the bombing in Kabul as "tragic," the situation there was "not a top priority."

"Domestic policies are far more important and we have to focus on disparities we have here," she said. "I'm focused on being able to provide for my family."

Miguel Ruiz Lopez, an Army veteran who was stationed in Germany during Vietnam, said he, too, saw the historical analogy, and history repeating itself.

"It couldn't continue," Mr. Lopez said. "Somebody had to say it's done. What are we going to do: continue being there and losing people's lives? That's their country. You can't continue fighting a losing battle."

But one soccer field over from Mr. Lopez, a veteran who served in Afghanistan saw it differently.





Aaron Macareno served in Afghanistan in 2009. Roger Kisby for The New York Times







Kris Hallun said Mr. Biden was dealing with a “no-win situation.” Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Aaron Macareno, 34, who spent 2009 in Afghanistan as a Marine and who considers himself a moderate independent, said he never viewed his service through a political lens. Instead, he said, he thought of himself as there to help villagers who lacked access to clean water or an education.

“I wish we stayed, because there were so many lives lost and so much blood we gave,” he said. Still, he stopped short of criticizing Mr. Biden’s decision. “I don’t feel betrayed, just disappointed. I know I didn’t make a difference to an entire country. My unit didn’t make a difference to an entire country. But we helped people. There’s no regrets about that.”

Like others, Kris Hallun, a 34-year-old independent, said Mr. Biden was dealing with a “no-win situation.”

“Why should we stay in a no-win war and have another Vietnam indefinitely?” he said. “All the people who are literally having to run for their lives, it’s just sad. But there’s not much we can do. We need to help each other here, take care of our own.”

Greg O’Neal, 60, said he was a moderate who had voted for Republicans in the past. And on Saturday, he visited the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in nearby Yorba Linda, acting on an impulse that history had judged Nixon too harshly.

During the Trump administration, Mr. O’Neal and his wife, Kim, said they found themselves watching cable news around the clock, wrapped up in anxiety.



Kim and Greg O'Neal visited the Richard Nixon Presidential Library on Saturday. Roger Kisby for The New York Times

"I used to hold my breath every day," Ms. O'Neal said. "I don't feel that way anymore. There are adults in the room now. I don't think we know everything, and I am OK with that."

Besides, she said, it seems very likely that American troops will be forced to descend on the region again. Mr. O'Neal sighed.

"I want my elected officials to focus on us," he said. "I think we've been forgotten about for so long. It's time we really focus on the United States. We have fires everywhere. This is a moment we need the attention."