

The 2014 Election in Aiken County: Aiken Voters Support Ground Troops if Necessary to Combat the Islamic State

A Public Service Report
The USC Aiken Social Science and Business Research Lab
Robert E. Botsch, Director

All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South Carolina Aiken.

Questions about this report should be directed to Robert E. Botsch, who can be reached at bobb@usca.edu. Reports from previous surveys may be seen on-line at: <http://www.usca.edu/polisci/SSBRLab/>.

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In the weeks leading up to the November 2014 election, the self-proclaimed Islamic State forces, also known as ISIS or alternatively ISIL, were grabbing many headlines with online videos of bloody murders of any westerners they could capture. Until then, the American public had pretty much ignored ISIS, even though Islamic State forces were overrunning the western supported government in Iraq, winning some battles with Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, and defeating less extreme rebel forces in Syria who were also battling the brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad.

The American response was to pursue a bombing campaign against Islamic State fighters, which did not seem to be slowing them down very much at the time. Many Americans were asking whether the U.S. and their allies should introduce ground forces if necessary. Some national leaders such as Senator John McCain and S.C. Senator Lindsay Graham were calling for “boots on the ground.” On Fox News Sunday on 14 September 2014, Senator Graham said “There is no way in hell you can form an army on the ground to go into Syria, to destroy ISIL, without a substantial American component.” But President Obama stood firm in saying that we would provide air support, advice, training, and supplies, but the actual fighting on the ground was up to those in the region. As the unspeakable murders continued in the months following the

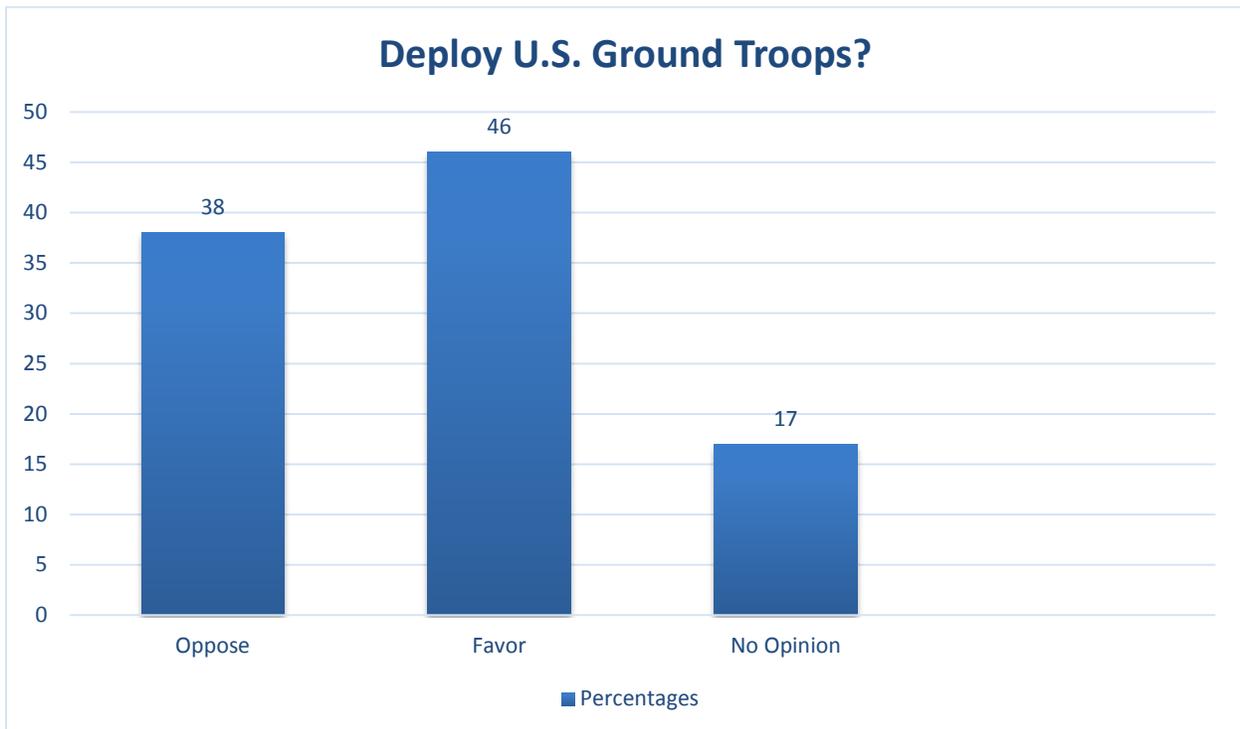
election, the question of employing American ground troops continued to be debated. In early 2015 President Obama requested authorization that would allow him to go beyond bombing in the fight against the Islamic State. How much support would leaders find if they actually placed ground troops in harm's way?

Opinions on Ground Troops if Bombing Did Not Stop the Islamic State

In the 2014 Aiken County Exit Poll, we asked voters about their views on whether the U.S. should use “boots on the ground” if the bombing campaign with fighters and drones did not stop the advances of the Islamic State forces. We asked: *If bombing is unable to defeat ISIS, the Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria, would you oppose or favor sending U.S. ground troops to fight them?*

Opinion significantly favored sending in ground troops. Almost half of all voters (46%) favored using ground troops, while somewhat over a third (38%) said they would oppose such action, and almost one in five (17%) had no opinion on this issue.

Table 1. Plurality Supports the Use of “Boots on the Ground”



National polls that asked about ground troops alone without making them contingent upon the failure of bombing showed less support for sending in ground troops. For example, a CNN/ORC Poll done in late October 2014 that simply asked whether citizens favored or opposed “sending ground troops into combat operations against ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq” found 55% opposed and 45% in favor, with 2% registering no opinion.

However, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll in mid-October asked a question that was more similar to ours: *Now, more specifically, should U.S. military action against ISIS be limited to only air strikes, should it include both air strikes and combat troops on the ground, or should U.S. military action not be taken at all?*

Opinion was divided, with 15% opposing any action, another 35% wanting action limited to just air strikes, 41% wanting ground troops added to military action, and the remaining 9% unsure or having no opinion. We might reasonably combine those wanting just “air strikes” and “action not be taken” to get 50% as opposing ground troops, versus 41% favoring ground troops. Ignoring those with no opinion, nationally the ratio would be about five to four opposing the introduction of ground troops. This compares to Aiken County voters who seemed to favor the introduction of ground troops by five to four, again ignoring those with no opinions. We might reasonably conclude that Aiken County voters were less opposed to ground troops than national opinion at about the same point in time.

Table 2. Nation and Aiken County Voters Disagree on Deploying Ground Troops

Use U.S. Ground Troops to Fight the Islamic State	Oppose	Support	No Opinion
Nation*	50%	41%	9%
Aiken County Voters	38%	46%	17%

Note: * Based on October 8-12, 2014 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll

Despite these differences, neither the opposition nor the support was overwhelming. Opinion was close enough and sufficient numbers had no opinion so that any dramatic

military action taken would almost certainly trigger the familiar “rally round the flag” phenomenon that would stimulate a majority support—at least in the short run.

Opinion among Aiken voters divided along lines of gender, ethnicity, age, regional identity, partisanship, and ideology.

Table 3. Support for Deploying U.S. Ground Troops Varies by Groups of Voters in 2014

Groups	Support	Oppose	Support - Oppose	No Opinion
All Aiken County Voters	46%	38%	+8	19%
Gender: Men	54%	32%	+22	15%
Women	38%	43%	-5	19%
Ethnicity: White	53%	34%	+19	13%
Black	19%	51%	-32	30%
Age: Older (>35)	49%	37%	+12	15%
Younger (<36)	29%	47%	-18	24%
Regional Identification:				
Non Southern	33%	49%	-16	18%
Converted Southern	41%	41%	0	18%
Native Southern	50%	36%	+14	15%
Party/Tea Party:				
Democrats	19%	57%	-38	25%
independents	48%	43%	+5	10%
Non Tea Party Rep	48%	34%	+14	17%
Tea Party	67%	25%	+42	8%
Ideology:				
Liberals	31%	56%	-25	13%
Moderates	36%	45%	-9	20%
Conservatives	59%	28%	+21	13%

Men were significantly more likely to support the introduction of ground troops than women. This reflects long standing differences in gender socialization.

A majority of whites supported using ground troops while a majority of African-American voters opposed such action. A variety of factors explain this difference, including a tendency for African-Americans to be more likely to feel that we should solve

problems here at home before making major sacrifices to save other people around the world. Of course, the relatively more severe problems faced by African-Americans play a role in this.

A generation divide existed between those over and under 35 years of age. A plurality of older voters favored “boots on the ground” while a plurality of younger voters voiced opposition. This generational divide held for even Republicans where older Republicans were significantly more likely to support ground troops than younger Republicans.

Regional self-identification also played a significant role. Native southerners supported ground troops, converted southerners (typically people who were born elsewhere but lived a long time in the South) were evenly divided, and non-southerners were opposed—the more southern the self-identification, the more likely the support of ground troops. Elements of southern culture that view violence as a first response to problem-solving seem to carry over to military policy. Nothing is new in this observation. The South was the last region to turn against the Vietnam War and see it as a “mistake.”

Partisan self-identification was the greatest divide. A clear majority of Democrats opposed the use of troops on the ground while a clear majority of Republicans supported using ground troops. The greatest support for ground troops came from self-identified Tea Party supporters, two-thirds of whom supported the idea. Independents were almost evenly divided. This position is consistent with the Republican and Tea Party view of President Obama as a weak leader, especially in dealing with enemies in foreign policy. Ironically, if President Obama does decide to introduce ground troops, he is more likely to find common cause with Republicans than with members of his own party.

Ideology, which is closely intertwined with partisanship in contemporary politics, also had a significant relationship with support for ground troops, though not as strong as

party. This is largely because while most Republicans share the same ideology, Democrats are more diverse in ideological self-identification. Almost 90% of Republicans consider themselves conservatives, but about a fourth of the Democrats consider themselves to be conservatives. This muddies the relationship with other variables like the central question in this report, the use of ground troops to fight the Islamic State if air power is insufficient.

Even those American leaders who support sending in ground troops to supplement the current bombing campaign against the Islamic State admit that no short term victory is possible. Even if maintaining public support for a longer term effort is possible, a realistic exit strategy is the harder question. Whether governments and groups that until now had been unwilling and/or unable to take on the Islamic State could take over and sustain the fight and then avoid fighting with each other is the key. History would not seem to provide many hopeful signs.