

# Iran's Election Procedures

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**An in-depth look at the unique and often-controversial procedures that will govern Iran's latest elections.**

**A**s Iranians head to the ballot box on February 26 to elect a new Majlis (parliament) and Assembly of Experts, the country's procedures for campaigning, registering, voting, and determining winners merit a closer look.

## CONSTITUENCIES

Iran's 207 electoral districts are distributed among 31 provinces and elect 290 Majlis representatives. Voters cast the same number of votes as there are seats allocated to the electoral district. The district with the largest number of seats is in Tehran province; it has 30 seats. Tabriz has 6 seats; Mashhad and Isfahan each have 5; Shiraz has 4. Seven other districts have 3 seats, and several have 2, but most districts across the country have 1 seat.

The allocation of seats among provinces is such that each province has at least 3 seats; the largest, Tehran, has 35, and nine provinces have 12 or more. The number of eligible voters per seat varies considerably from province to province (see table 1 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/Iran-Majlis-Elections-Schmidt-Table1.pdf>)). According to official statistics, Ardabil has the lowest average (142,643 voters for each of its 7 seats) while Alborz has the highest (493,377 voters for each of its 3 seats). The distribution of seats is not biased against large provinces; for instance, East Azerbaijan has 153,116 voters for each of its 19 seats and Tehran has 242,145 voters for each of its 35 seats. The national average is 195,305 voters per seat.

Five Majlis seats are reserved for religious minorities: one each to the Jewish, Zoroastrian, Northern Armenian Christian, Southern Armenian Christian, and combined Assyrian/Chaldean Christian communities. Those wishing to participate in electing their minority representative are not allowed to cast separate votes for their Majlis electoral district, but they are able to vote for the Experts Assembly (the body tasked with choosing the next Supreme Leader in the event of a succession).

# CAMPAIGNING

**D**etailed regulations govern campaign periods for Majlis and Experts Assembly candidates. Majlis candidates were announced on February 15, and their official campaign period runs from February 18 until 8 a.m. on February 25. Assembly candidates were announced on February 10; their campaign period began on February 11 and ends at the same time. While some officials warned about the consequences of disobeying these restrictions, some candidates -- or at least their supporters -- were appealing for votes before the campaign period began.

Candidates typically plaster public places with posters and hand out placards. State radio, television, and newspapers are required to allot equal advertising periods to each candidate, though there are many complaints about how this process is managed. Online channels are actively used as well -- former president Mohammad Khatami's video message about the elections was viewed more than 3 million times in one day on Telegram, a messaging service widely used because it is seen as difficult for the regime to block. Outside Tehran, most candidates have local power bases and are well known to their constituencies through business and family relations, patronage, and reputation.

While Iran has no formal political parties, prominent politicians and movements often publish candidate lists. Candidates are not necessarily consulted about their inclusion on these lists, and the same candidate can appear on several. Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli warned against fraudulent lists (i.e., those purporting to come from an individual or group but not actually authorized by them), noting that large-scale irregularities or violations could cause the Guardian Council to reject an entire district's voting results.

# REGISTRATION AND VOTING PROCEDURES

**V**oters are not required to register prior to an election. All citizens who are eighteen years old on election day and not mentally ill are eligible to vote at any polling station of their choice anywhere in the country.

According to national law, election day is a holiday in Iran. Polling stations are open for a minimum of ten hours; the Interior Ministry has the option to extend these hours if necessary, and often does so.

In prior elections, voters had to present their "identity document" (*shenasnameh*) -- which is issued at birth and looks like a passport -- at the polling station to verify their citizenship. Although these documents are stamped after individuals place their votes to prevent double dipping, the process nevertheless provides considerable incentive to commit fraud. There is no central registry of these paper documents and no way to cancel a lost or stolen *shenasnameh*, and they are required for any citizen seeking to take part in welfare programs. Iran is transitioning to a new documentation system known as the "National Card" (*kart-i milli*), which is similar in size to a credit card and fully computerized. Initially, Deputy Interior Minister Alireza Avai emphasized that voters would be required to present National Cards for this election, and that the census bureau was working to facilitate the process of obtaining and registering them. Yet this requirement, along with wider implementation of electronic voting, appears to have been scuttled during recent Majlis and Guardian Council deliberations. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, 1,395 polling stations used digital mechanisms instead of paper. For comparison's sake, this figure would constitute only a small fraction of the estimated 53,000 total stations that will be open for the current elections; it is unknown how many of them have gone digital since 2012.

Indeed, fraud prevention is at the forefront of many public discussions about the voting process. Fazli noted that paramilitary and police forces will be present at all polling stations, as will representatives from local governments, the Guardian Council, and individual campaigns -- all with the stated aim of preempting complaints and excuses from "the enemy and foreign press." Despite such assurances, accusations of unfair or opaque electioneering practices are commonplace.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance noted that 241 journalists from twenty-nine foreign countries (including the United States) will be present on election day. Some of these reporters were already residing in Iran, while others have traveled there to cover these elections. While Iran issues higher quantities of visas to foreign journalists interested in covering elections, they are still accompanied by mandatory fixers and translators. These local guides are connected to state media organs and usually bring their charges to a specific "model" polling station; for example, much of the television footage from the 2013 presidential election originated from a single Tehran polling station located at a mosque on Pasdaran Avenue.

Separate ballots are created for the Majlis and Assembly elections. Both have three sections: one for the voter's selections, one for the supervisory council's election stamp, and one for the voter's fingerprint. According to Deputy Interior Minister Hossein Ali Amiri, ballots will now come in different colors denoting what province they may be used in.

As seen in previous campaigns, thousands of "mobile polling stations" are also expected to appear throughout the country. During the 2009 presidential election, such stations collected one-third of the total votes, a fact that contributed to numerous and credible allegations of voting irregularities. These roving stations will now have set routes and timetables to increase voter turnout and minimize the risk of fraud. Yet while Section 6 of the election laws provides detailed requirements to ensure transparent and reliable voting, including the aforementioned presence of various monitors at polling stations, it is not apparent how these measures are enforced for mobile stations.

In 2009, voting results were reported within a few hours or less after the polls closed, which raised suspicions about how so many paper ballots could be counted so quickly. This year, Fazli has stated that the government will try to provide same-day results in most districts, but larger ones would take longer. Tehran, he specified, would require at least three days.

## RULES FOR WINNING

**T**he election laws specify that in order to win in a single round of voting, Majlis candidates must receive at least one-fourth of the votes in their constituency. If not enough candidates in a given district achieve this minimum, a second round is held in which a relative majority is required for victory. The 2012 parliamentary elections required a second round of voting for a fifth of the Majlis seats; round two was held on May 4 of that year, two months after round one. Citizens with the stamp of one district in their *shenasnameh* are ineligible to vote in a different district in the second round; citizens who lack a stamp altogether are eligible to vote in any district in round two. Turnout in second-round voting is typically lower than in the first round.

In past Majlis elections, government-reported participation ranged from a low of 51 percent for the seventh Majlis in 2004 to a high of 71 percent for the fifth Majlis in 1996; the rate was 63.9 percent for the ninth Majlis in 2012 ([see table 2 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/Iran-Majlis-Elections-Schmidt-Table2.pdf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/Iran-Majlis-Elections-Schmidt-Table2.pdf)). Credible allegations have been made that these official participation rates are exaggerated. For comparison, during the 2013 presidential election, 36,821,538 votes were reportedly cast out of 50,483,192 eligible voters, for a turnout of 73 percent. This year, nearly 56 million Iranians are eligible to vote.

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