

# Renewal of Allegiance: Presidential Elections in Iran

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## Brief Analysis

Large voter turnout for Iran's June 12 presidential election would be a double-edged sword for the country's hardline leader, Ali Khamenei. Although Khamenei would like to maximize participation in Iran's elections, which he sees as an affirmation of the regime's legitimacy, higher turnout would likely lead to a smaller share of support for hardliners. Such was the case with Mohammad Khatami's 1997 landslide victory over Khamenei's favored candidate, a result due primarily to a larger than expected voter turnout that caught the regime off guard.

### Participation as a Source of Legitimacy

Although Iran's constitution allows for the direct election of the president and members of other government bodies such as the parliament, the Assembly of Experts, and local councils, the sovereignty of the people is significantly diminished by a number of factors. The constitution's concentration of power in the hands of the leader, unelected parallel institutions such as the Guardian Council, and distortions in the election process all undermine the primacy of the voters.

In such a political context, participation in elections serves as a ritual renewal of allegiance to the leader of the revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and, since his death in 1989, the current leader Ali Khamenei. The Islamic Republic leadership equates the act of electoral participation with public endorsement of the regime; voter participation is seen as a source of legitimacy. On June 4, Khamenei stated that the regime is under constant attack from "enemies" trying to "spread apathy in people and deprive the regime of its strong backing, which means popular votes." According to Khamenei, participation in elections is "the religious and rational obligation . . . of anyone who is interested in strengthening the regime, Islam, and the Iranian nation."

### Election Turnout

The Islamic Republic's first election was a referendum held on March 30 and 31, 1979, after the monarchy had been abrogated, in which the voters were asked, "Are you in favor of an Islamic Republic?" According to official statistics, 98 percent of eligible voters participated in the referendum, and 93 percent voted "yes." Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan called the election result "unprecedented . . . in any democratic country." Indeed, official Islamic Republic statistics have recorded significantly lower voter participation ever since.

The presidential elections break down as follows:

- January 25, 1980: 14,152,887 people voted (67.4 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the eight candidates being Abol Hassan Bani Sadr with 76 percent of the votes cast.
- July 24, 1981: 14,573,803 people voted (64.2 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the four candidates being Mohammad-Ali Rajai with 87.6 percent of the votes cast.
- October 2, 1981: 16,847,717 people voted (74.3 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the four candidates being Ali Khamenei with 94.4 percent of the votes cast.
- August 16, 1985: 14,238,587 people voted (54.8 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the three candidates being Ali Khamenei with 85.7 percent of the votes cast.
- July 28, 1989: 16,452,677 people voted (54.6 percent of eligible voters), with the winner between the two candidates being Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani with 94.5 percent of the votes cast.
- June 11, 1993: 16,796,787 people voted (50.7 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the four candidates being Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani with 62.9 percent of the votes cast.
- May 23, 1997: 29,145,754 people voted (79.9 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the four candidates being Mohammad Khatami with 69.1 percent of the votes cast.
- June 8, 2001: 28,081,930 people voted (66.6 percent of eligible voters), with the winner among the ten candidates being Mohammad Khatami with 77.1 percent of the votes cast.
- June 24, 2005: 27,958,931 people voted (59.8 percent of eligible voters), with the winner between the two candidates being Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad with 61.8 percent of the votes cast.

Other than the first referendum mentioned above, turnout has been at times even lower in elections for the Assembly of Experts, parliamentary elections, and referenda:

- August 3, 1979, election of the Assembly of Experts to finalize the draft constitution: 10,784,932 people voted (51.7 percent of eligible voters).
- December 2-3, 1979, referendum on the constitution: 15,690,142 people voted (75.2 percent of eligible voters).
- March 14, 1980, first parliamentary election: 10,875,969 people voted (52.1 percent of eligible voters).
- September 10, 1982, election of the Assembly of Experts: 18,013,061 people voted (77.4 percent of eligible voters).
- April 15, 1984, second parliamentary election: 15,607,306 people voted (64.6 percent of eligible voters).
- April 8, 1988, third parliamentary election: 16,714,281 people voted (59.7 percent of eligible voters).
- July 28, 1989, referendum on revising the constitution: 16,428,976 people voted (54.5 percent of eligible voters).
- October 8, 1990, election of the Assembly of Experts: 11,602,613 people voters (37.1 percent of eligible voters).
- April 10, 1992, fourth parliamentary election: 18,767,042 people voted (57.8 of the eligible voters).
- March 8, 1996, fifth parliamentary election: 24,682,386 people voted (71.1 percent of eligible voters).
- October 23, 1998, election of the Assembly of Experts: 17,857,869 people voted (46.3 percent of eligible voters).
- February 26, 1999, election of the local councils: 23,668,739 people voted (64.4 percent of eligible voters).
- February 18, 2000, sixth parliamentary election: 26,082,157 people voted (67.4 percent of eligible voters).
- February 28, 2003, election of the Islamic Council: 20,235,898 people voted (49.2 percent of eligible voters).
- February 20, 2004, seventh parliamentary election: 23,734,677 people voted (51.2 percent of eligible voters).

- March 14, 2008, eighth parliamentary election: 24,279,717 people voted (55.4 percent of eligible voters).

## Prospects for the 2009 Election

This year's June 12 presidential election provides Iran's 46,199,997 eligible voters with a choice between only four out of the 476 presidential aspirants: incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, former speaker of the parliament Mehdi Karrubi, former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and former Revolutionary Guards commander in chief and current Expediency Council secretary Mohsen Rezai. The Guardian Council disqualified the remainder.

Khamenei could probably guarantee Ahmadinezhad's reelection through a tightly controlled election, particularly if the public evinces little enthusiasm and voter turnout is low. A less-controlled election or higher popular participation is likely to benefit Mousavi. While a close vote is likely to lead to four more years of Ahmadinezhad due to vote rigging and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij intervention, a Khatami-style landslide for Mousavi would be more difficult for the regime to manipulate. Regardless of who prevails, Khamenei will still remain Iran's ultimate authority and decisionmaker.

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