

Iran's 2021 Presidential Election

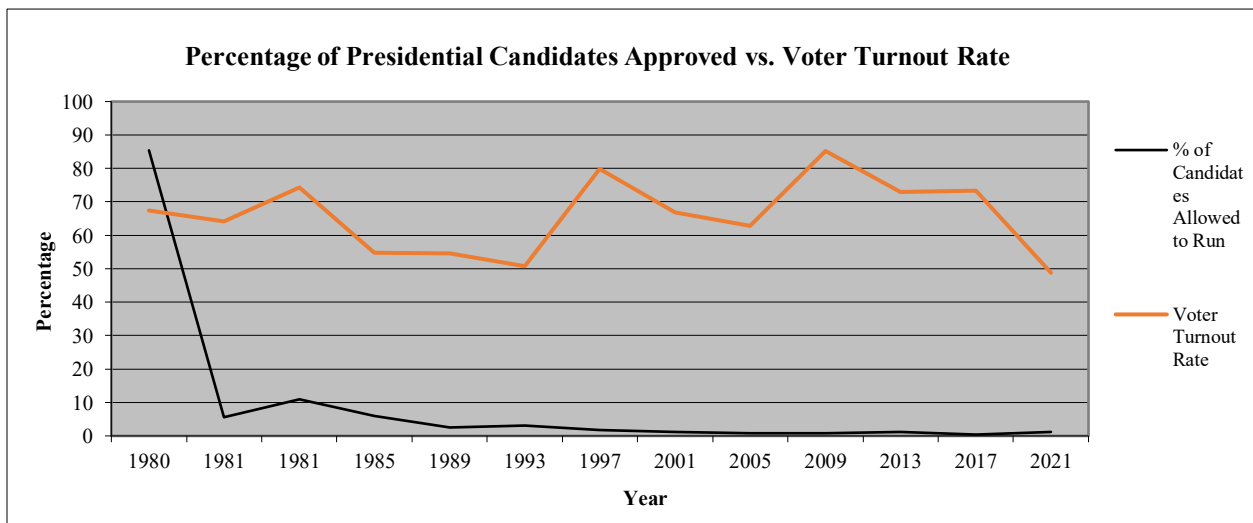
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How did the elections play out?

The election played out the way its political engineers had planned. Having been surprised by the outcomes in 1997, 2013, and 2017, the conservative establishment left nothing to chance. A week before candidate registration, the Guardian Council announced new qualifying criteria, including an age range of 40 to 75, and then proceeded to approve only 1.2% of the those who had applied. This decision to make sure that no significant reformist or moderate personality was on the final roster caught most analysts by surprise and signaled a return to the non-competitive presidential elections of the 1980s when there was a clear favorite in the race alongside a number of hopeless candidates. Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi's margin of victory over the runner-up was 50%. The last time Iran saw such a non-competitive election was 2001 when President Mohammad Khatami cruised to a second-term victory with a 61% margin.

What was the turnout like in comparison to previous elections?

The average participation rate in the last 12 presidential elections was 67%. The Interior Ministry officially announced that 28.9 million people cast votes which puts the voter turnout rate at 48.8%. Of these votes, 3.7 million (12.8%) have been declared blank ballots, and some 440,000 ballots are unaccounted for. This means that more than half of Iran's 59.3 million eligible voters could not be persuaded to vote despite the fact that the presidential election took place concurrently with municipal elections that have been popular historically and where some 287,382 candidates had registered to run.



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The lower-than-average turnout rate can be attributed to a whole host of factors including the discontent of the citizenry about their worsening economic conditions, the Rouhani government's mishandling of the pandemic, and the weak quality of the seven approved candidates. These factors led many Iranians inside and outside of the country to call for boycotting the elections as protest.² The absence of any populist or imaginative candidate and the poor quality of presidential debates ensured that unlike 1997, 2005, 2013 or 2017, no voter tsunami materialized approaching election day on June 18.

Anticipating the low turnout rate, the spokesman for the Guardian Council had stated that a low participation rate would not negate the legitimacy of the state, remarks that ran counter to the regime's traditional propaganda over the last four decades. Once the 48% rate was announced, the state propaganda apparatuses trumpeted it as a "huge victory."

Was the process fair and transparent? Were there any difficulties?

It is hard to describe the Iranian election as fair considering that 592 individuals (including forty females) registered, yet only 7 men, all long-time insiders, were allowed to compete. Leading personalities like Ali Larijani, who had finished serving a twelve-year term as the speaker of the Parliament, was disqualified, along with the sitting Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri. Requests from Larijani and other candidates that the Guardian Council publicly explain the grounds for their disqualification amounted to nothing. A member of the Expediency Council and Experts Assembly, Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Movahhedi-Kermani, even warned the seven candidates that what they said on the campaign trail could be ground for disqualification before the actual election day.³ It was also not considered problematic that the Society of Qom Seminary Scholars (*Jame'eh-ye Modarresin-e Howzeh-ye Elmiyyeh-ye Qom*), of which the six clerical jurists of the Guardian Council are members, officially endorsed Mr. Raisi.⁴

Did the presumptive favorite candidate win the elections? What factors contributed to his ultimate victory?

Yes, Mr. Raisi, the presumptive favorite, won the election. This victory caps his meteoric rise over the last two decades, which includes being named the first deputy to the chief justice (2004-2014), member of the Assembly of Experts (2007-present), prosecutor general of the Special Court for Clergy (2012), prosecutor general (2014), guardian of Astan-e Qods-e Razavi [Iran's most important religious shrine] (2016), member of the Expediency Council (2017), Chief Justice (2019), presidential candidate (2017), and now president (2021).

² Two popular jokes in Iran attest to the voter apathy. The first states that Iranians were more interested in the 2020 American presidential election than their own. The second sarcastically says that Iran's political system is superior to the American system since a month after their election the Americans still did not know who their president would be, whereas Iranians knew who theirs would be a month before the election.

³ <https://khabarban.com/a/32195177>

⁴ <https://bit.ly/2TVBi9B>

In addition to the voter apathy mentioned above, at least two other factors contributed to the ultimate victory of Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi who is a former student of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:

1. The conservative establishment threw its considerable weight behind him. Signaling from the top had made it clear that he was the establishment's chosen horse in the race. While there were other conservative candidates, very few people were under the impression that any of them had a chance to outperform Mr. Raisi.
2. The disqualifications created massive confusion among the reformist camp about what to do. While some leaders like former Prime Minister Mir-Hoseyn Musavi called the whole election illegitimate, his fellow dissident Mehdi Karrubi, who like Musavi has been under house arrest for more than a decade, encouraged people to vote. The election further revealed the rift between the reformists and the centrists. While the Iran Reform Front, an umbrella organization for reformist groups, refused to back any candidates, the secretary-general of the centrist Servants of Construction Party announced that his group endorsed Mr. Abdolnaser Hemmati.⁵

How would you characterize his style of policymaking to come?

It is hard to say what Raisi's style of policymaking will be considering that the nature of decision-making as a president is vastly different from when he was a prosecutor/judge. As a person with almost no experience in foreign policy or economic management, he will be forced to rely on more experienced advisors in these areas. I expect more power will be vested in the National Security Council and the Supreme Leader's representative in that body in planning important policies. Iran's regional policy will remain the provenance of the powerful Revolutionary Guards who will have stronger relations with the new president.

What will be his priorities, and his possible or potential challenges?

The economy will be by far Mr. Raisi's most important challenge and priority. The conservatives have gone through a learning curve after experiencing the economic crises of the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Considering that Iran's economy today is even more fragile than it was then, I don't expect to see a recalcitrant posturing from the new administration. If a nuclear deal is reached with the 5+1, even by the outgoing Rouhani administration, Mr. Raisi stands to benefit from the potential economic windfall, assuming the leadership finally resolves the stalemate of the last two years over whether to approve the FATF legislation. During the third presidential debate, Mr. Raisi stated that he was not opposed to the nuclear deal (JCPOA) but wanted Iran to adopt a more robust negotiating position vis-à-vis its interlocutors.

It is a fact that Raisi's administration will face a torrent of economic, social, and foreign policy challenges. A revived JCPOA may give his administration some breathing room but will it be sufficient to tackle the formidable problems of a country facing high unemployment, inflation,

⁵ <https://bit.ly/3iGjcml>. The other centrist candidate, Mohsen Mehr-Alizadeh, did not get the official backing of any group.

grave environmental challenges, increasing class polarization, and social discontent? I think the answer is negative.

Raisi's political honeymoon will not last long. Any compromises on the nuclear issue, missiles, or regional policy will open him to criticism from within the friction-ridden hardliners camp. Being in charge of all three branches of government means that the conservatives can't just blame centrists and reformists for their problems much longer. Furthermore, taking action against the vested interests of the powerful Revolutionary Guards is not politically expedient. Nor will implementing any other serious economic reform be easy at a time when state coffers are at historic lows. Hence, the economy will be Raisi's top priority but also his Achilles heel.

Does Raisi's election to the presidency of the country change the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in any way? Why so, or why not?

Unlike the elections in 1997 or 2005, Iran's domestic, regional, and international policies in 2021 will not be fundamentally altered simply as a result of who has won the presidency. Unlike 1997, the reformists are in a state of absolute confusion and organizational disarray, and therefore can't force the new administration to embrace a new path. Consider that they ultimately threw their support behind the former central bank governor Mr. Abdolnaser Hemmati and he only received 8.4% of the vote. Unlike 2005 to 2013, the conservatives have now learned that ignoring UN resolutions and adopting populist theatrics in the manner of President Ahmadinejad are not good politics. While the new administration may not go to extremes, I do expect it to become more intransigent in dealing with both its domestic and international interlocutors. The first sign of this new posture may come when Mr. Raisi announces his cabinet choices. Appointing real hardliners to important ministries (interior, defense, foreign affairs and intelligence) could be a sign of troubling years ahead. Such an administration will not be willing to enter into negotiations on such topics as Iran's regional activities or the range and quantity of its missiles. It would also be skeptical of rapprochements with neighboring Arab states and would want to further strengthen ties with allied militias in the MENA region. Furthermore, with the rising levels of domestic disenchantment and protests, one can expect a government that will more easily resort to crackdowns and imprisonment as its preferred style of resolving conflicts.

This election may prove consequential not only in terms of Iran's immediate nuclear and regional policies but also with respect to the jockeying for who will eventually replace Ayatollah Khamenei who is now 82 years old. Many maintain that Raisi becoming the president is the first step in anointing him as the next Supreme Leader, considering that Khamenei views him as a suitable successor who is trustworthy. Others maintain that the presidency of Iran is a thankless job that only hurts the reputation and political fortunes of the transient office holder. By encountering crisis after crisis and failing to handle them adequately, Raisi's reputation will take a hit and enable Khamenei's own son, Mojtaba, to emerge as the frontrunner to succeed his father. While the latter scenario may be a little far-fetched considering that the 1979 revolution was a renunciation of the notion of bloodline nobility, it cannot be completely ruled out.

Another speculative claim is that this may be the last time Iran holds a presidential election if the political elite decide to bring back the political system of the 1980s where a prime minister was the head of government, rather than a president. This scheme could be desirable considering that

a popularly-elected president could pose a potential challenge to either Raisi or Mojtaba Khamenei as they were to begin a tenacious attempt to maintain power as the new supreme leader.⁶ However, such a drastic alteration of the political system requires approval in a referendum and if the 2020 parliament election and the 2021 presidential elections are any indicators, the regime will have a tough job persuading people to come out and vote for such a proposition.

<https://trendsresearch.org/insight/irans-2021-presidential-election/>

⁶ I have described Khamenei's own process of power consolidation in Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, "[The Office of the Supreme Leader: Epicenter of a Theocracy](#)," in Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, eds., *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, pp. 135-65 (Indiana University Press, 2016).