

Post-election Analysis

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IRAN

Presidential elections 2021: What the numbers say

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Introduction

With the [final results](#) already published, and after all the controversies about the disqualification of many heavyweights and the low turnout predictions that were somehow fulfilled, it is time to analyze in detail what the electoral outcome means. The figures show that out of 59,310,307 registered voters, 28,989,529 took their presidential ballot papers at the polling stations and got their voting stamp, but only 28,750,736 cast their ballots (238,793 did not cast it for some reason). There were also 100,231 uncollected invalid ballots in the ballot boxes, reducing the number of collected votes to 28,650,505. Out of them, 3,740,688 were blank and invalid votes –for the Iranian electoral system belongs to the same category-, with a final count of valid votes of 24,909,817. Adding all the categories of non-valid votes considered, it reached 14.07%, the highest proportion ever in Iranian presidential elections. Considering the first figure –voters who went to the polling stations and took their presidential ballot paper- the participation rate was 48.88%. However, if it were considered that the several categories of invalid and blank votes represent an intentional message to the Iranian establishment regarding the lack of representative candidates and only valid votes are counted, this would represent just 42%, very close to the pre-electoral opinion polls conducted, mainly by [ISPA Polling](#).

The final votes obtained by the four candidates that run, after the withdrawal of three of them few days before the election, was as follows:

Candidate	Votes obtained	%
Ibrahim Raisi	18,021,945	62.16%
Mohsen Rezaei	3,440,835	11.86%
Abdolnaser Hemmati	2,443,387	8.42%
Hussein Ghazizadeh	1,003,650	3.46%

It is worth mentioning that the official percentage of votes attributed to every candidate was taken from the first figure –meaning the voters who attended the polling stations and took their ballot papers from the electoral officials, 28,989,529.

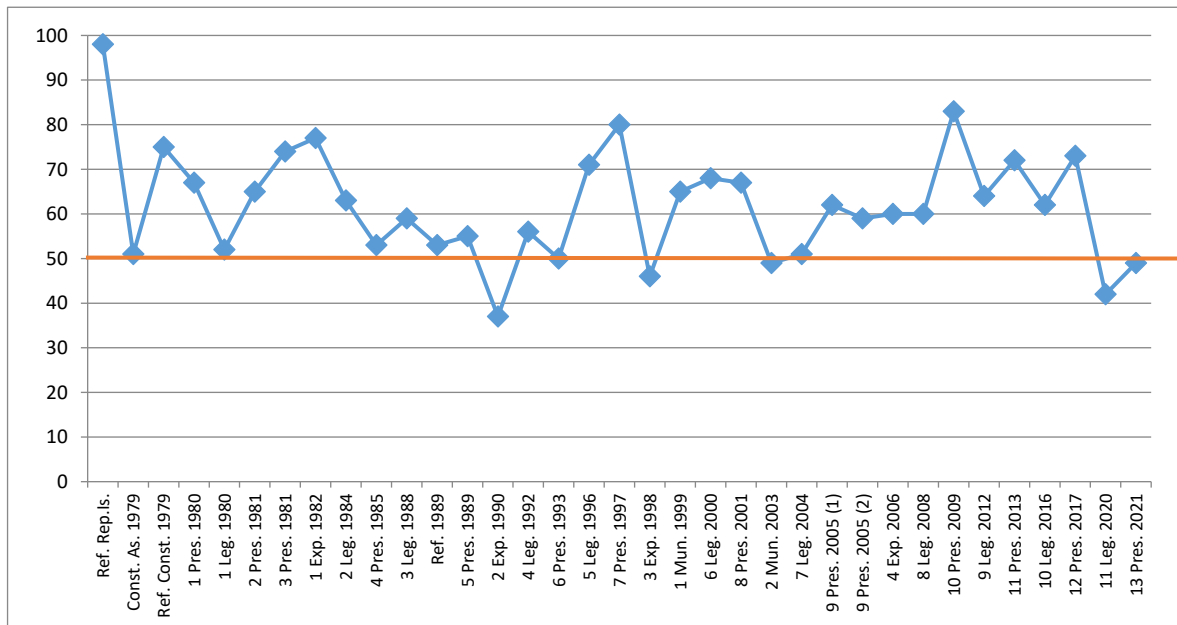
There are several important remarks that can be extracted from these figures.

What the numbers say

First, these were the presidential elections with the lowest turnout since 1980 -48.88%. However, it was not the lowest turnout registered in the Islamic Republic history. Three previous electoral processes had a lower participation rate. The Assembly of Experts elections of 1990 registered 37%, the lowest ever. In addition, the Assembly of Experts election of 1998 had 46%, and the Legislative elections of 2020, 42%. Besides, the Municipal elections of 2003 registered 49%, very similar to these last elections. While none of the previous Presidential elections registered turnout below 50%, several approached that symbolic threshold, with 1985 witnessing 53.9%, 1989, 55.9%, and 1993, 50.8%. Low turnout, therefore, has not been an uncommon feature in republican Iran electoral processes. Nonetheless, the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic, which

includes all these elective institutions –Presidency, Majlis, Assembly of Experts, and Municipal Councils- remained functional, and no implications were visible in terms of lack of legitimacy or authority of such institutions despite the low turnout. Most important, and despite the criticism expressed regarding the alleged illegitimate character of some Iranian electoral processes specifically, the governmental agencies resulting from the elections, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were equally recognized as interlocutors by other state actors and international organizations during, for instance, nuclear negotiations. The same will happen with the next minister appointed by president Raisi.

Iran, electoral turnout, all elections (1980-2021)



Source: Ministry of Interior, Iran

Second, the different categories of invalid votes abovementioned totaled 4,079,712 –238,793 that were not cast, 100,231 uncollected invalid ballots in the ballot boxes, and 3,740,688 blank and invalid votes. This figure, 14.07%, is even higher than the votes obtained by the second candidate in these elections –Rezaei, with 11.86%-. The previous highest proportion of invalid votes was in the first round of 2005 elections, with 1,224,882 nullified votes (4.17%). This unprecedented proportion of invalid ballots represents a direct message to the Iranian political establishment regarding the Iranians’ disappointment overall the political elite, including the incumbent Rouhani administration. On the one hand, even though Raisi did not compete with any serious candidate due to very controversial vetting process conducted by the Guardian Council, he could provoke neither a massive turnout nor a landslide victory –the average proportion obtained by the winning candidate in the previous twelve elections was 72.63%, while Raisi got, according to the official count, 62.16%. On the other hand, the candidate theoretically representing the current administration and some reformists groups could not attract those voters who wanted to avoid Raisi’s victory. Instead, they preferred their votes to be counted as invalid or abstain. While expectations existed that candidates such as Ali Larijani or Mostafa Tajzadeh could have been more

popular, it is arguable that they could have attracted more than 18 million votes to defeat Raisi.

Third, Reformist and Pragmatist factions lost grip of Iranian society in these elections, following the defeat in last year's legislative polls. The disqualification of most of their candidates in both processes left them without a clear alternative to voting for. Even if Larijani could have attracted many pro-Rouhani moderate conservative and pragmatists as well as some reformists, it could not be in any way be considered a candidate with a reformist ideology nor agenda, thus leaving reformist minded voters with a difficult decision to make at the ballot box. Consequently, the reformist/pragmatist vote drastically dropped from the times of Mohammad Khatami –the only self-proclaimed 'reformist' -. In 1997, 20.1 million voted for him, and 21.6 did it in 2001. Despite the defeat in 2005, the three reformist candidates –Mostafa Moin, Mehdi Karrubi, and Mohsen Mehralizadeh- obtained 10.5 million votes in the first round, 16.2 if we count those going to Hashemi Rafsanjani. In 2009, the two reformist candidates –Mir Hussein Mousavi and Karrubi- obtained 13.9 million votes. While not a reformist, Rouhani attracted as many as 18.6 million votes in 2013, and 23.6 in 2017. In these recent elections, Hemmati only got 2.4 million votes. This trend indeed represents a severe backlash against reformist and pragmatics options to retain a certain quota of power within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. Without the 'protection' of the demised Rafsanjani, the former Iranian president Khatami politically banned, Mousavi and Karrubi still under house arrest, and Rouhani and his allies losing their credit in front of the Iranian society, all the institutions are now controlled by conservative factions.

Fourth, from the historical data on presidential elections, two facts can be underscored. On the one hand, that the last three presidents –Hassan Rouhani in 2017, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, and Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and 2001- received more votes than Ibrahim Raisi, even though the registered voters were much fewer (36.2 million in 1997 vs. 59.3 million in 2021). On the other hand, the average percentage of votes obtained by the winner compared with the eligible voters in the previous elections was 48.9%, the lowest Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005 and Rouhani's in 2013, both with 36.8%. Raisi, in this last election, attracted only 30.38% of eligible voters, the lowest ever.

Conclusions

The abovementioned data depicts a picture in which the elected president may enjoy a relatively low popular support, conditioning his performance as president, moreover if Raisi, as many have pointed out, aspires to the next Leader of the Islamic Republic.

In addition, the control that now the conservative camp exerts on the overall political system, including elective and non-elective institutions, does not mean that factional competition –previously between conservative, pragmatists, and reformists- will disappear. On the contrary, the power struggle will now be transferred to the intra-conservative competition to control elective and non-elective institutions of the political system. However, this struggle might not rely heavily on electoral competition since the participation rates may not recover after two consecutive elections with historically low turnouts.