

# Five Questions for Iran's Elections

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## The vote is more interesting for its long-term implications than its immediate results.

Iran's facade of empty elections is on full display again this week—as detailed in [a previous Washington Institute article \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/elections-expose-irans-fading-democratic-pretensions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/elections-expose-irans-fading-democratic-pretensions), the campaign for the Majlis and Assembly of Experts has been marked by the usual spate of aggressive candidate disqualifications and public apathy. Even so, this cycle may shape regime political dynamics for the next few years, so it bears watching. Below are five questions that foreign policymakers and other observers should ask when reading reports from election day.

## How Low Will Turnout Go?

The regime has extra incentive to show evidence of high voter turnout this year, since the March 1 national polls are the first since Mahsa Amini's murder sparked mass protests in 2022-3. Yet hitting that mark is a tall order—the previous parliamentary election cycle saw the lowest turnout since the 1979 revolution (42%), and the regime's Guardian Council has doubled down on its pattern of [mass candidate disqualifications \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/2024-election-cycle-starts-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/2024-election-cycle-starts-iran).

To energize voters, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [spoke out on February 28 \(http://english.khamenei.ir/news/10585/Highlights-of-Leader-s-meeting-with-a-number-of-first-time-voters\)](http://english.khamenei.ir/news/10585/Highlights-of-Leader-s-meeting-with-a-number-of-first-time-voters), calling for “strong and passionate” elections and arguing that apathy and boycotts will not solve the country's problems. “Everyone who loves Iran, the nation, and its security must know that if weak elections are held, no one will benefit, and everyone will be hurt,” he warned. Similarly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [claimed \(https://x.com/IRNA\\_1313/status/1762400241968451969?s=20\)](https://x.com/IRNA_1313/status/1762400241968451969?s=20) that higher turnout would affect “the enemy's calculus” about continuing “the strategy of threats, sanctions, and maximum pressure.” Cleric Alireza Panahian, a Khamenei confidant, took a spiritual angle, [asserting \(https://x.com/Entekhab\\_News/status/1762357168362102912?s=20\)](https://x.com/Entekhab_News/status/1762357168362102912?s=20) that voting is a “religious duty” rather than just a political right.

Although it is unclear if these efforts will have the desired effect, current turnout predictions have risen somewhat over the abysmal estimates seen in late January. According to <https://ispa.ir/Default/Details/fa/3438/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AC%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C> published by the semiofficial Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), 38.5% of voters say they will definitely participate and 7.6% say they will likely participate. Elsewhere, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) [predicted](https://x.com/FarsNews_Agency/status/1762408533667037641?s=20) that 41.5% would definitely vote and 29.5% might participate; the numbers issued by the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency were [47% and 9%](https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/12/08/3045987/), respectively

## Who Will Be Chosen as Majlis Speaker?

**A**lthough the parliament’s prominence in Iranian politics has declined over the years, the speaker post still holds importance within the regime. In addition to sitting on the Supreme National Security Council, the speaker can have significant sway in promoting or hindering presidential agendas. For example, Ali Larijani was instrumental in supporting former president Hassan Rouhani’s 2015 nuclear deal, while his successor—Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, an IRGC general—challenged Rouhani by promoting a bill that required the government to take substantial nuclear steps (e.g., increased uranium enrichment) if international sanctions were not lifted. Rouhani blamed this legislation for hindering his attempts to revive the nuclear deal.

Today, Qalibaf looks like a favorite for another term. Despite media allegations of corruption, he has been endorsed by the Coalition Council of Islamic Revolution Forces, a prominent conservative group. Still, he may face some challenges from hardliners, who have composed a unified list of like-minded groups (e.g., the notorious Jebheh-ye Paydari) focusing on his constituency in Tehran.

## Where Will the Reformist Vote Go?

**W**ith most of their candidates disqualified, reformist parties have taken an indifferent approach to these elections, which may discourage many reformist voters from turning out. Yet some may decide to vote for “pragmatist” candidates as another way of protesting the status quo. Rouhani himself encouraged this approach after being barred from running for the Experts Assembly. In a [February 28 video message](https://x.com/rouhanooffice/status/1762745957312065830?s=20), he lamented the mass disqualifications but urged Iranians to vote for candidates who are dissatisfied with the nation’s current situation and aspire to change it.

One list that may attract such voters is Ali Motahhari’s Seda-ye Melat (“Voice of the Nation”). The son of a Khomeini deputy, Motahhari was disqualified from running for president in 2021 and has since become a staunch critic of President Ebrahim Raisi. In a [February 27 press conference](https://twitter.com/jamaranews/status/1762481383346229519/photo/1), he called on the next Majlis to become more proactive about influencing government policies, criticizing Raisi’s team for relying on “third- and fourth-tier experts.” He also lambasted the president for failing to achieve a better nuclear deal, [arguing](https://twitter.com/Tasnimnews_Fa/status/1762461863650967575/photo/1) that sanctions are the main root of Iran’s problems and must be lifted without delay. Motahhari is running for election in the Tehran district and has

garnered support ([https://x.com/Tasnimnews\\_Fa/status/1761790018467586494?s=20](https://x.com/Tasnimnews_Fa/status/1761790018467586494?s=20)) from the reformist Neda-ye Iranian faction.

Reformist voters might also opt for ex-officials from Rouhani's former government. For example, Mohammad Bagher Nobakht served on Rouhani's cabinet and has been endorsed ([https://x.com/FarsNews\\_Agency/status/1762146715388264477?s=20](https://x.com/FarsNews_Agency/status/1762146715388264477?s=20)) by Larijani.

## Will the Results Shape Khamenei's Succession?

The Majlis election attracts the most media attention, but the Experts Assembly vote will likely have more significant implications for Iran's future. This body is constitutionally charged with appointing the next Supreme Leader, and regime officials have been discussing succession more often in recent weeks, even hinting that the next assembly may be the one to name Khamenei's heir during its eight-year term. For example, current assembly member Mahmoud Mohammadi Araki admitted on February 28 (<https://www.ilna.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/1453089-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C>), "There is no doubt that this tenure will have greater importance and heavier responsibility." And earlier today, Sadegh Mohammadi, the deputy chair for the association of Qom seminary teachers, noted (<https://www.didbaniran.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/180579-%D9%86%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%85%DA%A9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%88-%DA%AF%D8%B2%DB%8C%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A2%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>) that Khamenei's successor is still unknown and that the decision depends solely on the Experts Assembly. (Though it should be pointed out that much of the work of determining the next Supreme Leader will almost certainly be done by other power centers behind the scenes, with the assembly used to legitimize the selection.)

Composed of eighty-eight members—all male, and all but one of them clerics—the current assembly has been criticized as too old. In the 2016 election, more than 90 percent of the winning candidates were older than fifty. The regime is seemingly changing the guard this time around—many assembly members did not stand for reelection, perhaps in an attempt to revitalize the body's image ahead of future succession developments.

Among the clerics who will step down is ninety-seven-year-old chairman Ahmad Jannati. Speculation about his

replacement as head of the assembly is centering on prominent ayatollahs such as Hashem Hussein Bushehri, Ahmad Khatami, and Sadegh Amoli Larijani.

Yet the most interesting candidate may be President Raisi. He is currently the assembly's first deputy chair, and many believe Khamenei is grooming him to be the next Supreme Leader. In 2021, Khamenei and the Guardian Council barred prominent presidential contenders from running to make sure Raisi won; this year, the council disqualified Rouhani from running for the assembly, a move that many believe is related to succession maneuvers given that the former president was a presumed lock to win.

As a result, Raisi faces no real opposition for the seat he is contending this week in Razavi Khorasan province. The Guardian Council disqualified most rival candidates, and the lone remaining competitor (Hassan Rouhbakhsh) is a little-known cleric who [publicly admitted \(https://www.jamran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-12/1623728-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%A3%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF\)](https://www.jamran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-12/1623728-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%A3%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF) he has no chance of winning. Any result other than a landslide win would therefore be seen as a protest vote against the president and a bad sign for his alleged aspirations to become Supreme Leader.

## How Will Outsiders React?

The international community often focuses on raw numbers when examining Iranian election cycles—in particular, low turnout (as an indicator of public indifference toward the regime) and mass candidate disqualifications (as proof of the regime's blatant human rights violations). That said, one would expect the focus to shift somewhat this year given Iran's growing succession debate and the significant changes being made to the composition of the Experts Assembly. U.S. and European officials may take a deeper dive into the results to identify that body's potential powerbrokers and kingmakers. Indeed, many Iranians expect the West to take this perspective, with Ayatollah Araki and other prominent figures arguing that the "enemy's sensitivity" about this year's assembly election is directly tied to Western predictions of an approaching succession.

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