



The Middle East Institute

Policy Brief

No. 30

November 2010

Electoral Politics in Iran: Rules of the Arena, Popular Participation, and the Limits of Elastic in the Islamic Republic

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This Policy Brief examines constitutional provisions for elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) which provide four tiers of political arena: parliamentary, presidential, politico-clerical, and local. Interpretation of the rules of the arena plus elite mobilization and state intervention limit the extent to which poll outcomes can reflect the popular will. However, elections evolved after 1989 into mechanisms accommodating ideological pluralism and a degree of socio-political change, lending the republic a measure of political elasticity. Claims of decisive fraud, substantial political protest, and harsh repression following the disputed presidential poll in 2009 suggest that the IRI's electoral elastic may have reached its limit.

In light of the pre-poll vetting of candidates and absent a fully-fledged party system or international standards of transparency, elections in the IRI have been described as “events as ceremonial as a changing of the guard.”¹ Limitations notwithstanding, IRI elections evolved over two decades after 1989 to become somewhat more meaningful than that, lending the republic an ability to stretch “without permanent alteration of size or shape.”² To illustrate, while the contrasts in policy, style, and constituency between former president Muhammad Khatami and incumbent Mahmud Ahmadinejad are considerable, they share at least three things in common. First, both secured original mandates — in 1997 and 2005, respectively — that did not accord directly with the *status quo* conservative preference. Second, both prevailed in vote counts that, if not free of irregularities, appeared to elude decisive fraud. Third, both came to power through polls that at least partially articulated social-structural development: Muhammad Khatami rode middle class aspirations, while Ahmadinejad deployed cross-class populism.³ The point is that both polls were informed by tangible, if conflicting, sociological roots. Therefore, in each case, Khatami and Ahmadinejad could lay claim to a measure of real electoral legitimacy. The departure from this trend occurs with Ahmadinejad’s election to a second term in 2009, an outcome perceived to be fraudulent by a significant proportion of the Iranian public.⁴ Deemed to be Ahmadinejad’s spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi has opined that “the legitimacy of the government has always been dependent on God’s determination and does not depend on the people.”⁵ However, four tiers of elections render voting in Iran an almost annual socializing event; the legitimacy afforded the Republic might not be so easily discounted.

The following analysis examines contests for each directly-elected institution in the IRI: the Presidency, *Majlis*, Assembly of Experts, and local councils. It includes data from the late-1980s watershed, which was marked by the dissolution of the hegemonic Islamic Republican Party (1987), the end of the war with Iraq (1988), the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and constitutional revision (1989). This is what Ehteshami termed the “second republic.”⁶ For electoral purposes, it marks an era in which, as



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1. H. Moghissi, “Islamic Cultural Nationalism and Gender Politics in Iran,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2008), p. 548.

2. *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 792. Use of metaphor departs from the economic focus of H. Werlin, *The Mysteries of Development: Studies Using Political Elasticity Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998).

3. M. Dorraj and M. Dodson, “Neopopulism in Comparative Perspective: Iran and Venezuela,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia and the Middle East*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2009), pp. 137–151. For a critique of the populist model, see K. Alamdari, “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 8 (2005), pp. 1285–1301.

4. The case for election fraud is summarized by E. Sahliyah, “The Presidential Election in Iran,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2010), pp. 182–185. For details, see A. Ansari, ed., with D. Berman and T. Rintoul, “Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran’s 2009 Presidential Election,” Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews, June 21, 2009, http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/14234_iranelection0609.pdf. For a contrasting view, see “Analysis of Multiple Polls Finds Little Evidence Iranian Public Sees Government as Illegitimate,” February 3, 2010, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafrica/652.php>.

5. M. Mokfi and C. Recknagel, “Could Ahmadinejad’s Mix of Mysticism and Politics Lead to a Power Grab?,” *Iran Report*, August 5, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Could_Ahmadinejads_Mix_Of_Mysticism_And_Politics_Lead_To_A_Power_Grab/1793312.html.

6. A. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: the Iranian Second Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); on the 1989 amendments, see pp. 34–41.

Anoushiravan Boroumand notes, “the clerical oligarchy began turning to elections to help settle its internal conflicts.”⁷

RULES OF THE POLITICAL ARENA

The fundamental boundaries of the political arena are set by the concept of *Vilayat-i Faqih* enshrined in the constitution since 1979, wherein key positions of leadership are reserved for Islamic jurists. For electoral purposes, this principle is inherent in the Council of Guardians’ exercise of supervision, interpreted as “approbatory supervision,” wherein the Council (or delegated subordinates) have the right, indeed responsibility, to vet candidates for elected office.⁸ Article 99 of the revised constitution awards the Council “responsibility of supervising the elections of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, the President of the Republic, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the direct recourse to popular opinion and referenda.”⁹

PRESIDENCY

Article 115 of the constitution stipulates that the president must be of Iranian origin and nationality, possess administrative capacity and resourcefulness and a good past record, be endowed with trustworthiness and piety, be a convinced believer in the fundamental principles of the IRI, and subscribe to the official religion of the country. These criteria are sufficiently vague for the Council to consistently reject the vast majority of aspiring candidates.¹⁰

Prior to the 2001 presidential election, Council secretary Ayatullah Jannati shed some light on the process whereby individual candidacies are rejected:

Is there any place in the world where all sorts of people are allowed to register with a simple identity card, an application form and four photographs? ... You don’t even have to be able to read and write ... There are also individuals who only cause problems ... They are hopeless ... The law is faulty and should be changed. It is not right. I cannot say but some 1,000 people may register. This causes so many problems ... Should everyone be allowed to register?¹¹

In 1989, the Council approved former Speaker of Parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani and one other candidate, lining him up again in 1993 against three makeweights: in each case the electorate were allowed to express support for an approved candidate rather than contemplate a serious choice. In 1997, the same routine appeared likely with conservative Speaker of Parliament ‘Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri anointed by the regime. The majority of applicants were rejected, among them the secularists and all four women.¹² Former wartime prime minister and eventual Ahmadinejad challenger Mir Hossein Moussavi withdrew when his candidacy seemed unlikely to receive approval. However, Khatami was permitted to stand in, a move now interpreted as a mistake. Former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander and erstwhile presidential candidate Mohsen Rezai was candid:

In 1989, the Council approved former Speaker of Parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani and one other candidate, lining him up again in 1993 against three makeweights: in each case the electorate were allowed to express support for an approved candidate rather than contemplate a serious choice.

7. L. Boroumand, “The Role of Ideology,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2005), p. 53.

8. See A.W. Samii, “Iran’s Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2001), pp 643-662.

9. References to IRI constitution from International Constitutional Law, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir00000_.html.

10. Issues with uneven quantitative data are noted in A.W. Samii, “Dissent in Iranian Elections: Reasons and Implications,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2004), note 1, p. 403. Figures in this paper prioritize official sources as available, including the Council of Guardians (typically for vetting) and the Interior Ministry (turnout). Figures might be taken as indicative rather than absolutely precise in every case.

11. Agence France-Presse, May 13, 2001 and A.W. Samii, “Iran’s Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy,” p. 650. The 2001 increase was attributed to a rumour that candidates would be eligible for bank loans. A.W. Samii, “Too Many Candidates?,” *Iran Report* (May 14, 2001), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342830.html>.

12. “News Digest for May 1997,” *Keesing’s Record of World Events*, Vol. 43 (Cambridge: Keesing’s, 1997), p. 41661.

Table 1: Presidential Screening by Council of Guardians

Year	No. Candidates Registered	No. Rejected of Withdrawn	No. Candidates Remaining
1989	79	77	2
1993	128	124	4
1997	238	234	4
2001	814	804	10
2005	1014	1006	8
2009	475	471	4

Sources: **1989:** A. W. Samii, “Iran’s Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2001), pp. 643–662; **1993:** registered from Samii; remaining from “*News Digest for June 1993*,” Keesing’s Record of World Events, Vol. 39 (Cambridge: Keesing’s, 1993), p. 39534; **1997:** “*News Digest for May 1997*,” Keesing’s Record of World Events, Vol. 43, p. 41661; **2001:** “*News Digest for June 2001*,” Keesing’s Record of World Events, Vol. 47, p. 44242; **2005:** A.W. Samii, “Reformist Campaigning Could Yield an Upset,” *Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Vol. 8, No. 22 (June 6, 2005), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342640.html>; **2009:** G. Esfandiari, “Four Candidates Approved to Run in Iran’s Presidential Vote,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 20, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Four_Candidates_Approved_To_Run_In_Irans_Presidential_Vote/1735949.html.

In earlier elections, we had a different policy. We would agree on one main candidate who was accepted by all groups, and also let a few others run who had no chance of winning. We knew who would win the election, and so would the people ... But in the recent election we adopted a different policy ... We hadn’t practised the new circumstances ...¹³

In 2001, Khatami stood for a second term against nine opponents, a reversion to previous norms in that none of them were serious contenders. However, this owed less to Council manipulation and more to conservative unwillingness to subject a major figure to inevitable defeat.

Stiff competition in the two polls secured by Ahmadinejad alludes to the growing importance of elections in the Republic. The 2005 poll was the most competitive election to date; it included an unprecedented second-round runoff. Over 1,000 applicants left Jannati unimpressed, the conservative stalwart remarking that, “Many of those people had mistaken the Interior Ministry for the job center.”¹⁴ The disqualification of liberal nationalist Ibrahim Yazdi was predictable but less so than that of former ministers Mustafa Moin and Mohsen Mehralizadeh, both of whom were eventually reinstated due to popular pressure. But they could not present a serious challenge to Ahmadinejad. Nor, significantly, could *status quo* conservative candidate Ali Larijani, despite a CV that included a decade as head of the state broadcaster IRIB and two years as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (during which he held the nuclear portfolio), plus the official backing of a 15 group alliance, the Council for Coordinating the Forces of Islamic Revolution, chaired by Nateq Nuri.¹⁵ The runoff pitched Ahmadinejad against a rebranded Rafsanjani, the former emerging triumphant and becoming the first non-cleric to hold the presidency since 1981. Radical, conservative, and with a modest home in the Tehran suburb of Narmak, Ahmadinejad enjoyed substantial working-class and lower-middle class support, a real electoral mandate, and a paramilitary delivery vehicle in the IRGC and their militia counterpart, the *Basij*. Incumbent in 2009, Ahmadinejad re-fought Rezai and the reformist Mehdi Karrubi, with the addition of Moussavi. The latter secured Khatami’s blessing and emerged a serious challenger in a campaign that for the first time extended to TV debate. However, the outcome seemed to underline the limitations of the IRI’s electoral components.

13. *Iran Focus* (October 1997), p. 9.

14. A.W. Samii, “Guardians Council Wants Election Law Rewritten,” *Iran Report* (June 6, 2005), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342640.html>.

15. *Iran Daily* (April 23, 2005), <http://www.iran-daily.com/1384/2256/html/index.htm>.

MAJLIS

Parliamentary elections are stipulated in Articles 6, 58, and 62 of the constitution. Unlike the presidency, the criteria for candidacy to the now 290-seat parliament are not specified in the constitution, but rather by the *Majlis* Election Law of 1984. Candidates are assessed as individuals. According to Article 28, criteria include a “practical belief in the Islamic faith and the sacred order,” citizenship, loyalty to the concept of *Vilayat-i Faqih*, a high-school diploma, “absence of ill repute in the election district,” physical health, and an age of 30–75 years.¹⁶ As noted earlier, Article 99 of the constitution assigns responsibility for ensuring the requirements are met to the Council of Guardians, a point acknowledged in article 3 of the election law.

After 1992, limited formal restrictions were subject to political manipulation, with technical conformity to the regulations proving insufficient to keep an applicant in the race. L. Boroumand and R. Boroumand described the process of vetting in 2000:

Once a potential candidate is approved by the Ministry of Information and the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Council of Guardians subjects his opinions and behavior to a meticulous evaluation. In each province, the morality militia (*Basij*), the Revolutionary Guard, and the Friday Imams have to fill out questionnaires on specific candidates, responding to questions such as: Do women in the candidate’s family wear the chador? Does the candidate vote regularly in elections? Does he attend the Friday sermons and participate in demonstrations of support for the regime? Has he ever criticized the Islamic Republic or the absolute power of the Supreme Leader? Does he observe all his religious duties? Disqualified candidates have the right to appeal, but the Council of Guardian [sic] itself judges these appeals.¹⁷

By 2004, procedures had evolved. Flush with a grant from the Expediency Council, the Council of Guardians established supervisory offices to enhance provincial vetting capacity. Indicative of the wider institutional struggle that pertained while reformists held the Interior Ministry, the latter “issued a circular stating that the provincial supervisory offices were illegal, but the Administrative Justice Organization annulled the circular.”¹⁸ Henceforth, the Interior Ministry’s local, provincial, and central executive boards were joined by the Council of Guardian’s new supervision offices, answering to a central Supervision Office in the capital. To paraphrase Human Rights Watch, the flow of information ran thus: gathering data from various branches of government, the Interior Ministry served as a conduit for the executive boards, the remit of which was to make recommendations for the supervisory offices to consider. But newly resourced supervisory offices could gather their own material and make informed decisions that led through district to province and on to the central supervisory office in Tehran before finally reaching the Council. In this way the reformist-controlled Interior Ministry’s central Executive Board, and the entire pre-election apparatus of which it is part, are outflanked by the Council of Guardians.¹⁹

In 1992, the Council rejected some 1,100 candidates, specifically targeting the clerical left in the *Majma-i Ruhaniyun-i Mobarez* (MRM)

Opposition groups such as the Freedom Movement on the right, or the communist Tudeh or the *Mujahidin-i Khalq* on the left, were excluded automatically through non-compliance with *Vilayat-i Faqih*. But vetting as set out in Table 2 extended further. In 1992, the Council rejected some 1,100 candidates, specifically targeting the clerical left in the *Majma-i Ruhaniyun-i Mobarez* (MRM), usually translated as the Association of Combatant Clerics. More than 40 parliamentarians were culled, some having held office since 1980 and including former Speaker Mehdi Karrubi and several ministers. The result was domination by the MRM’s traditional right counterpart, the highly conserva-

16. A. Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 86. Human Rights Watch, “Access Denied: Iran’s Exclusionary Elections” (2005), p. 8, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/06/12/access-denied-iran-s-exclusionary-elections>.

17. L. Boroumand and R. Boroumand, “Reform at an Impasse,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2000), p 119.

18. Samii, 2004, p. 410.

19. Human Rights Watch, p. 9.

tive *Jama-i Ruhaniyat-i Mobarez* (JRM), of which the MRM had once been part in the era of the IRP. Emboldened, the Council rejected over 2,000 candidates for the fifth *Majlis*, incumbents included, although the remainder still provided representatives for two distinct lists, the dominant JRM, and a new technocratic offshoot, the *Kargozaran-i Sazandegi* [Executives of Construction]. The latter formed in direct response to economic liberalization and orbited then-President Rafsanjani.²⁰ By the sixth *Majlis* parties such as the Freedom Movement were declining to submit candidates in anticipation of rejection. Exclusions continued, yet 6,000-plus were left to compete for *Majlis* elections in 2000. A comparison of previous and forthcoming polls, not to mention the results, suggested an effective, if temporary, liberalization of vetting. The legislature emerged with a reformist stamp, focused on the Second of Khordad Coalition, an umbrella named after the date of Khatami's 1997 triumph and led by *Jebha-i Mosharakat-i Iran-i Islami*, the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF). Codification of factional politics was evident in that the coalition included both MRM and *Kargozaran*. Restrained vetting can be attributed in part to cognizance of the public mood: it was observed that for the first time "parties and some of the more affluent candidates set up campaign headquarters and branch offices," while campaign rallies were held in stadiums, on university campuses and in mosques.²¹ This led to a heated public debate over the specifics of "supervision," which seemingly prompted caution. Moreover, the experience of the 1999 local elections in Tehran showed that the Interior Ministry might simply ignore conservative obstruction.

Responsiveness to pressure seemed evident again during a by-election held simultaneously with the presidential ballot in 2001. The Council's Supervision Office rejected 145 out of 356 candidates on the basis of "drug and alcohol trafficking, connections with the *Mujahedin Khalq* Organization, or the pre-1979 monarchy, and graft of various sorts ..." But fierce criticism from the Interior Ministry, which only barred 34 candidates, led to tactical retreat and the announcement "that 42 more people would be allowed to compete."²² In hindsight, this may have been the high-water mark of electoral-legislative reformism.

Reflecting infrastructural evolution, the pre-poll contest for the seventh *Majlis* percolated up from the provinces. Extensively funded, the Council of Guardians supervisory committees rejected some 300 nominees for executive boards put forward by governors aligned with the Interior Ministry. This, it was alleged, would remove reformists from positions of authority and discourage turnout, as had just happened in the second local elections. Some 80 incumbents were then excluded, including leading reformists. The reformist Interior Ministry considered a delay in polling, while antagonized deputies staged a walk-out and a sit-in, resigned, debated about engaging in a boycott, and questioned the integrity of the Supreme Leader and Council of Guardians. By way of hasty conciliation, over 1,100 candidates were reinstated, but only three incumbents were among them.²³ Final exclusions, limited proportionally to 29%, were targeted so as to render the competition in many constituencies a moot point; up to 202 constituencies may have been uncompetitive.²⁴ The upshot was abject reformist defeat. Explicable in part due to vetting, Gasiorowski also points to disillusionment with the timidity of the Khatami-led project and a measure of popular readiness to give the conservative "China model" of development the benefit of the doubt.²⁵

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Competition for the eighth *Majlis* was marked by a sharp reduction in friction between the Council of Guardians

20. S. Fairbanks, "Theocracy versus Democracy: Iran Considers Political Parties," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (1998), pp. 17–31.

21. H. Esfandiari, "Is Iran Democratizing? Observations on Election Day," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2000), p. 111.

22. Interior Minister Abdolvahed Moussavi-Lari condemned the "unprincipled disqualification" and noted that the Council "had approved 58 of the now-disqualified candidates for the February 2000 parliamentary election, 16 of the rejected candidates had served in previous parliaments, and other rejected candidates were veterans of the Iran-Iraq war." A.W. Samii, "Controversy about Parliamentary By-election," *Iran Report* (May 7, 2001), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342829.html>.

23. Samii, 2004, pp. 411–412.

24. A.W. Samii, "Iranians to Vote in Seventh Parliamentary Elections," *Iran Report* (February 16, 2004), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342675.html>.

25. M. Gasiorowski, "Iranian Politics after the 2004 Parliamentary Election," *Strategic Insights III*, No. 6 (June 2004), Center for Contemporary Conflict, <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2004/jun/gasiorowskiJun04.pdf>.

Table 2: Majlis Screening by Council of Guardians

Majlis	Year	No. Candidates Registered	No. Candidates Rejected	No. Candidates Remaining
3 rd	1988	2,001	386	1,615
4 th	1992	3,150	1,110	2,040
5 th	1996	5,365	2,089	3,276
6 th	2000	6,849	766	6,083
7 th	2004	8,145	2,373	5,772
8 th	2008	7,597	2,098	5,499

Sources: **1988–1996:** B. Baktiari, “The Impact of Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2001), p. 37; **2000:** Registered from Baktiari; remaining from A. W. Samii, “And Guardian’s Council Speaks Out,” *Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (February 21, 2000), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342867.html>. Rejected, extrapolated; **2004:** A. W. Samii, “Two Iranian Presidential Candidates Reinstated,” *Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Vol. 8, No. 20 (May 24, 2005), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342638.html>; **2008,** *E’temad 21 Bahman 1386/2008*. Remaining, extrapolated.

and the Interior Ministry because Ahmadinejad facilitated the Ministry’s realignment with conservatism. Protest at the cull of some 3,000 aspirants arose primarily from the victims rather than institutions aligned with the Ministry. Based on Articles 28 and 29 of the election law, technical grounds for exclusion included a lack of belief in Islam, lack of belief in the constitution, failure to provide appropriate proof of education, lack of experience in public administration, or failure to resign from public sector employment.²⁶ The political goal seems to have been the pre-election annihilation of the more ambitious strands of reformism, specifically the IIPF and the Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution Organization (MIRO). Similar to 2004, reinstatements put some thousand candidates back in the race, but the target reformist coalition (which included the MRM) was able to contest just 102 out of 290 constituencies. The conservative newspaper *Kayhan* labelled the excluded candidates as “traitors” and “enemy agents,” while deputy speaker Muhammad Reza Bahonar let it be known that “reformists are only alive because of the regime’s leniency.”²⁷ Of the candidate pool that remained, around 600 were women and — indicative of Ahmadinejad’s profile — over 30% were veterans of the Iran-Iraq war.²⁸ In the Parliament that emerged, of “152 new members ... 91 had IRGC backgrounds, and a further 34 former IRGC officers now [held] senior-level posts in the government.”²⁹

ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS

Provided for by Article 107 of the constitution, the Assembly was first elected in 1982 to choose a successor to Khomeini; it retains the technical authority to remove the *Rahbar* [ranking cleric]. The criteria for candidacy have steadily narrowed. Article 108 of the constitution stipulated that:

The law setting out the number and qualifications of the experts, the mode of their election, and the code of procedure regulating the sessions during the first term must be drawn up by the religious men on the first Guardian Council, passed by a majority of votes and then finally approved by the Leader of the Revolution. The power to make any subsequent change or a review of this law or approval of all the provisions concerning the duties of the experts is vested in themselves.

Starting in July 1990, the Council of Guardians required that candidates “be acquainted with the basis of *ijtihad* (a seminary degree) and educated at a prominent *howzeh* (center of religious study) to the degree of being able to dis-

26. *E’temad* 28 Bahman and 20 Esfand 1386/2008.

27. *Kayhan* 11 Bahman 1386/2008 and *E’temad* 20 Bahman 1386/2008.

28. *E’temad* 20 Esfand 1386/2008. Mehr News 12 January 2008, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=620039>.

29. F. Wehrey, J.D. Green, B. Nichiporuk, A. Nader, L. Hansell, R. Nafisi, and S.R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), p. 77, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG821/>.

cern the competency of candidates for the *marja'iyat* (the highest clerical rank) and leadership.” Eligibility is further discerned “through the attestation of three well-known teachers in the *howzeh*.” It was also ruled that candidates be subjected to ‘a competency test for their knowledge of *fiqh*, graded by the Council.³⁰ The terms were codified in the Law on Elections to the Assembly of Experts which, Buchta notes, the Assembly itself composed. An excerpt reads:

(1) be faithful, trustworthy, and possess moral integrity; (2) possess enough knowledge of *feqh* [sic] to recognize those Islamic jurisprudents who fulfill the necessary conditions for assuming the office of leader; (3) possess social and political skills and be familiar with the problems of the day; (4) be loyal to the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and (5) not have declared himself politically or socially opposed to the existing order at any time in the past.³¹

By the time of the second ballot in October 1990, the Council was in full vetting-mode and an estimated 60 candidates were obliged to take the written test to establish their credentials as *mujtahids*. Some eminent figures refused, others failed, leaving voters with a list of 106 candidates for 76 seats and seven constituencies without any candidates at all. Presaging the parliamentary poll of 1992, exclusions targeted the left and the results strengthened incumbent President Rafsanjani.³² The 1998 poll told a similar story, the Council approving 146 candidates, for the now enlarged 86-member Assembly. The right secured another comfortable majority, leaving reformists with an estimated 10% toehold.³³ The 2006 race unfolded simultaneously with parliamentary mid-term and local elections. The Council announced approval of 163 candidates, somewhat less than the Assembly’s own guidelines recommended, and purged reformists to the extent that the MRM, MIRO, and the Union of Seminary Religious Teachers of Qum declined to participate. Those still willing to have a go included the IIPF, a new list headed by the redoubtable Karrubi, and the *Kargozaran*, the latter forging a list with allies to contest Tehran. Conservatives bifurcated into a *status quo* camp that included the JRM against radical conservatives (*osulgarayi*) led by Mesbah-Yazdi. Interestingly, many of the latter’s followers were excluded, apparently for having failed the oral component of the examination.³⁴

LOCAL COUNCILS

Articles 6 and 100 of the constitution provide for elected local councils, provisions that were suspended during the war with Iraq. Article 100 stipulates elections for “Village, Division, City, Municipality, or Provincial” councils, and notes that “Qualifications for the eligibility of electors and candidates for these councils ... will be determined by law ...” The constitution does not grant responsibility for supervision to the Council of Guardians — in itself a good

Table 3: Assembly of Experts Screening by Council of Guardians

Assembly	Year	No. Candidates Registered	No. Candidates Rejected	No. Candidates Remaining
1 st	1982	168	22	146
2 nd	1990	183	77	106
3 rd	1998	396	250	146
4 th	2006	492	329	163

Sources: **1982–1998:** W. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2000), p. 60; **2006:** A.W. Samii, “Reformist, Fundamentalist Candidates Ruled Out of Assembly Election,” *Iran Report*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Vol. 9, No. 45 (December 4, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342616.html>.

30. M. Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 156–157.

31. W. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2000), pp. 60–61.

32. “News Digest for October 1990,” *Keesing’s*, Vol. 36, pp. 37793–4.

33. W.B. Fisher, “Iran,” *The Middle East and North Africa 2000* (London: Europa, 1999), p. 488.

34. A.W. Samii, “Reformist, Fundamentalist Candidates Ruled Out of Assembly Election,” *Iran Report* (December 4, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342616.html>.

reason for reformists to pursue them. Rather, the 1996 “Structure, Organization, Duties, and Elections of the Nation’s Islamic Councils, and Election of Mayors Act” granted supervision to the Interior Ministry, this to be exercised through supervision boards composed of parliamentary deputies acting on information from “the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, local Justice departments, registry offices, and the police.”³⁵ The criteria for candidacy are unremarkable: support for the system and regime, no history of monarchism, literacy, a minimum age of 25 years, and no criminal record or drug habit. Civil servants must relinquish their posts. Early tensions between the reformist Interior Ministry and conservative parliamentarians resulted in a compromise whereby rejected candidates were reinstated provided that they publicly declared support for *Vilayat-i Faqih* and the rule of the supreme leader.³⁶

Local elections were first held on February 26, 1999 under a Central Supervisory Board chaired by a conservative deputy for Tehran. Many reformists had been disqualified on grounds ranging from insufficient commitment to *Vilayat-i Faqih* to failing to prove they had resigned from public office. Casualties included the high-profile former Interior Minister Abdullah Nuri and around 50 others.³⁷ However, reformist Interior Minister Abdolvahed Moussavi-Lari simply rejected the ruling and published ballot papers that included the disputed names, “judging (correctly in this instance) that it would be almost impossible to disqualify candidates once they had received popular endorsement.”³⁸ An estimated 334,000 applicants put themselves forward, including several thousand women; proportionally, a modest 36,000 candidates were rejected, and from a menu of choice, reformists triumphed.³⁹ For the second local elections in 2003, disqualifications were minimal, well below the 10% mark, to the extent that even the Freedom Movement secured a few candidates as independents. However, public enthusiasm had waned, particularly in large urban centres: lack of power, poor governance, and related perceptions of reformist impotence led to a sharp drop in applicants, still well over 200,000, but for some 168,000 seats. Many constituencies were uncontested, and elections held in only 21 of 28 provinces.⁴⁰ The reformist initiative sagged. However, when the third local elections were brought forward to December 2006, the results were broadly consistent with the simultaneous Assembly of Experts and parliamentary by-elections. Restrained vetting seemed unlikely when it was reported that conservatives counted for almost all 90 monitors appointed by the Central Committee for Monitoring Council Elections.⁴¹ However, select moderation, coupled with a much higher turnout, allowed for a modest reformist revival. In Tehran, 1,243 candidates were reported qualified, just 191 disqualified, with a handful having withdrawn. Restrained vetting in the capital was alleged to have distracted attention away from draconian measures in the participating provinces, but reformists ultimately declared themselves reinvigorated.⁴²

Early tensions between the reformist Interior Ministry and conservative parliamentarians resulted in a compromise whereby rejected candidates were reinstated provided that they publicly declared support for *Vilayat-i Faqih* and the rule of the supreme leader.

35. A.W. Samii, “Candidates and Eligibility,” *Iran Report* (February 24, 2003), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342722.html>.

36. Agence France Presse, January 4, 1999; BBC, February 10, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/276816.stm>.

37. *Iran Focus* (March 1999).

38. E. Herzig, “Iran; Internal Developments and International Implications,” in R. Hollis, ed., *Managing New Developments in the Gulf* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), p. 56.

39. A. Schirazi, “A Survey of the Development of Local Councils,” *Iran Nameh*, No. 4 (1999).

40. A.W. Samii, “Campaigning Begins in 2003 Municipal-Council Elections,” *Iran Report* (February 24, 2003), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342722.html>. The competition extended to “905 city councils and 34,205 village councils,” R. Takeyh, “Iran’s Municipal Elections: A Turning Point for Reform?,” *Policy Watch*, No. 721, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (March 6, 2003), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1599>.

41. A.W. Samii, “Executive Branch Seeks to Extend Control as Local Elections Near,” *Iran Report* (October 23, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342610.html>.

42. A.W. Samii, “Reformists Reportedly Disqualified from Local Elections,” *Iran Report* (December 4, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342616.html>.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Participation in an IRI election requires no more than presentation of a national identity booklet or passport, and yet turnout levels vary considerably. This section compares voter turnout over time and between institutions to identify the “political logic of political participation” in Iran.⁴³ Pérez-Liñán notes that scholarship has “increasingly turned to institutional factors as possible sources of incentives for voters,” with analysis bifurcating along “neo-institutional” lines. The first argument considers “political arenas, [the] rules and procedures that structure voter choices,” to be the institutional factors at play — such as the IRI’s four-tiered system. The second considers the institutional factors to be those agents capable of mobilizing the vote; Pérez-Liñán concluded that the role of “mobilization agents” is central to voter turnout.⁴⁴ In the IRI this points to state bureaucracy, the IRGC and *Basij* militia, clerical associations, foundations such as the Imam Charity Committee,⁴⁵ and parties.

Can the intervention of strategic actors help explain variation in IRI presidential election turnout? Beginning with the Rafsanjani victories of 1989 and 1993, both were achieved with modest but declining participation. The first reflected a post-war, post-Khomeini moment in which the promise of a “decade of reconstruction” resonated with the public and a lack of competition delivered the office.⁴⁶ The second witnessed diminished interest, but with no prospective challenger there was little need for decisive mobilization. Khatami’s 1997 victory stands in contrast; elevated participation reflected a well-fought campaign that demarcated a clear choice and struck a chord with women and youth. A comparatively low voting age (15, raised to 18 in 2007), amplified the youth voice. Return to the norm in 2001 reflected reformist confidence and conservative reluctance to invest in defeat. Participation fell marginally in 2005, but not by as much as anticipated, with reformist frustration seemingly offset by paramilitary mobilization.⁴⁷

Table 4: Presidential Election Turnout since 1989

Poll	Year	Turnout	Votes Cast (million)	Winner's Mandate	Eligible Voters
5 th	1989	56%	16.4	95%	29.4
6 th	1993	51%	16.8	63%	33.0
7 th	1997	80%	29.1	69%	36.2
8 th	2001	67%	28.1	78%	41.9
9 th	2005	63%	29.4	21%/19%	46.8
Runoff		60%	28.0	62%	46.8
10 th	2009	84%	39.1	64%	46.2

Sources: **1989–1997:** W. Buchta, pp. 36–37; **2001:** “News Digest for June 2001,” Keesing’s Record of World Events, Vol. 47, p. 44242, *Electorate extrapolated*; **2005:** A.W. Samii, “As Winners Head for Runoff, Losers Complain of Fraud,” Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vol. 8, No. 24 (June 20, 2005), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342642.html>; “How Did He Win?,” Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vol. 8, No. 25 (June 27, 2005), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342643.html>; **2009:** E. Sahliyah, “The Presidential Election in Iran,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2010), pp. 183–184. *Votes cast extrapolated.*

Participation in parliamentary elections peaked in consecutive polls from 1996, triggered by public excitement over the debut of the *Kargozaran* and the prospect of real competition:

43. Rosenstone and Hansen, p. 229, cited in A. Pérez-Liñán, “Neoinstitutional Accounts of Voter Turnout: Moving Beyond Industrial Democracies,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2001), p. 288.

44. Pérez-Liñán, “Neoinstitutional Accounts of Voter Turnout: Moving Beyond Industrial Democracies,” p. 288.

45. Alamdari, pp. 1293, 1297.

46. D. Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London and Portland, OR.: Frank Cass, 2001), pp 64–65.

47. On the IRGC pre-election, see A. Gheissari and V. Nasr, “The Conservative Consolidation in Iran,” *Survival*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2005), pp. 175–190.

factional disputes that led up to the first round of voting ... created considerable excitement among the electorate and encouraged many new voters to participate, foreshadowing in important ways the 1997 presidential election ... The importance of the youth and women's vote became apparent.⁴⁸

Table 5: First Round Parliamentary Election Turnout since 1988

Majlis	Year	Turnout	Votes (million)	Eligible Voters
3 rd	1988	59%	17.0	28.8
4 th	1992	59%	18.8	31.9
5 th	1996	71%	24.7	34.8
6 th	2000	69%	26.8	38.7
7 th	2004	51%	23.4	46.4
8 th	2008	60%	26.4	44.0

Sources: **1988–1992:** turnout from S. Namazi, "Iran's Upcoming Parliamentary Elections Up for Grabs," Middle East Report Online (November 23, 2003), <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero112303.html>; votes cast from W.B. Fisher, "Iran," *The Middle East and North Africa 2000*, p. 481 and "News Digest for March 1996," Keesing's Record of World Events, Vol. 42, p. 41023, eligible voters extrapolated; **2000:** A.W. Samii, "Election Results and Violations," Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vol. 3, No. 9 (February 28, 2000), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342868.html>; **2004:** A.W. Samii, "Preliminary Election Results Start to Come In," Iran Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vol. 7, No. 8 (February 23, 2004), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342676.html>. The Council of Guardians reported 43 million eligible voters, cited by A.W. Samii, "Tehran Ramps Up Voter Participation.," **2008:** Turnout and eligible voters from "Iran: President's Allies Win Largest Bloc in Parliament, But Face Challenges," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 16, 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079646.html>. Votes cast extrapolated.

Participation peaked in 2000, with the Second of Khordad Coalition leveraging Khatami and the successful first local elections. The acute drop in 2004 reflects disenchantment induced by severe vetting and calls for a boycott, as well as a background of legislative obstruction: two years of enervating struggle drew to a close in 2004 as conservative rearguard action roundly defeated Khatami's "twin bills" aimed at reining in the Council of Guardians and augmenting the powers of the President.⁴⁹ The revival in turnout in 2008 at least partly reflects further paramilitary mobilisation.⁵⁰

Polls for the Assembly of Experts show two good turnouts (in 1982 and 2006). The two lines of neo-institutionalism gained traction. The rules of the political arena stipulate 86 very large constituencies (increased from 83 for 1998), and restrictive criteria narrowed candidate choice. Mobilization agents such as parties or lists were therefore less active. *In camera* sessions held biannually further undermined public interest. However, in 2006 simultaneous polling for three electoral tiers (including local and parliamentary) prompted proactive campaigning; in Tehran, this centered on the durable Rafsanjani. In effect, a shift in the rules of the arena prompted elite mobilization to effect increased participation.

The 1999 local election generated an impressive turnout; this could be attributed to reformist agency in their eagerness to legitimize the initiative and secure control of the new electoral tier. The precipitous drop in 2003 cannot

48. Fairbanks, p. 24.

49. "Iran's Parliament Agrees to Withdraw Khatami's Twin Bills" (April 18, 2004), <http://payvand.com/news/04/apr/1120.html>. For context, see B. Khajehpour, "Protest and Regime Resilience in Iran," *Middle East Report Online* (December 11, 2002); and V. Nasr, "The Conservative Wave Rolls On," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2005), p 11.

50. H. Aryan, "Iran's Basij Force: The Mainstay of Domestic Security," *Iran Report* (December 7, 2008), http://www.rferl.org/content/Irans_Basij_Force_Mainstay_Of_Domestic_Security/1357081.html.

Table 6: Assembly of Experts Election Turnout

Poll	Year	Turnout	Votes (million)	Eligible Voters
1st	1982	78%	18.1	23.2
2nd	1990	37%	11.6	31.2
3rd	1998	46%	17.8	38.6
4th	2006	62%	28.1	45.3

Sources: **1982–1998:** W. Buchta, p. 60; **2006:** V. Sepehri, “Three Elections Held in One Day,” Iran Report, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Vol. 9, No. 47 (December 21, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342618.html>.

readily be attributed to lack of choice, which remained comparably wide. Rather, the 21–province limit notwithstanding, the urban electorate seemed disillusioned.⁵¹ Moreover, reformists erred in taking success for granted: a chastened campaigner acknowledged that “we thought people would participate and reformists would get votes. Since we were very confident of this, we did not ... invest in the election in the way that was necessary.”⁵² Turnout for 2006 benefited from the same multiplier effect as the Assembly of Experts poll.

CONCLUSION

Constitutional provisions for elections in the IRI are structured in a four-tier set of arenas within which legitimate but limited political competition for office can unfold. Since the late-1980s in particular, these arenas have done more than simply legitimize the *status quo*; elections accommodate limited ideological pluralism and a measure of social evolution. Electoral imperatives also compel elements within the ruling oligarchy to prepare for and lead electoral competition, generating a discernable political spectrum with nascent party structures, electoral lists, and aligned media outlets.

Election rules and the politicized interpretation thereof variously seal competition from portions of the popular will, primarily through candidate vetting, but also through the annulment of the results, legislative obstruction, and, sometimes, physical violence. However, readiness to cull candidates may be constrained by public opinion, and for a while, by spirited resistance from the Interior Ministry. The tussle over election supervision at one point seemed as likely to generate a committee as a demonstration.

Popular participation is subject to intervention by mobilization agents with a stake in regime legitimization as well as access to institutional power. Voting is regular and turnout often substantial, with participation rates responsive to rules of the arena, the scale of vetting, and corresponding perceptions of choice. Election options and outcomes can also reflect socio-structural development. For example, economic liberalization generated the technocrats of the *Kargozaran*. The *Kargozaran* then secured a parliamentary foothold that shaped the forthcoming presidential competition. Informed by demographic change, reformism then captured the presidency in two polls bracketing additional parliamentary and local success. Further economic liberalization helped generate social stratification that in turn expanded constituencies sympathetic to the statist-populism of Ahmadinejad. Even the much remarked upon rise of the IRGC took place in part through careful attention to electoral dynamics and opportunities. In short, accommodating limited ideological diversity and social-structural change, elections have provided a measure of political elasticity to the Islamic Republic. Two questions arise from the events of 2009: Did the elastic snap, and if so, with what implications?

The facts surrounding the 2009 presidential election remain in dispute. However, it is clear that intrusive elec-

51. A.W. Samii, “Lower Voter Turnout Fulfills Expectations,” *Iran Report* (March 3, 2003), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342728.html>.

52. S. Namazi, “Iran’s Upcoming Elections Up for Grabs,” (November 25, 2003), <http://usa.mediamonitors.net/Headlines/Iran-s-Upcoming-Elections-Up-for-Grabs>.

tion management and a lack of transparency, coupled with the hasty announcement of improbable returns, generated widespread suspicion. The tension between managing the arena on one hand and generating popular participation on the other reached a critical level. The brutal crackdown that followed underlined the point: the IRI's electoral elasticity seemed to have reached its legitimating and ideological limits. The question then arises as to whether those limits are set by elements in the regime or by the system itself. The rules of the arena, while narrow in some respects, are subject to interpretation and interpretations can change. The arenas themselves have acquired a measure of robustness. Popular participation has become routine and responsive to complex stimuli. Elections, for all of their limitations, have legitimized and renewed parts of the IRI as they have enfranchised and socialized Iranian society. It is common and understandable in Iranian politics to find a rhetorical emphasis on external enemies. But if elections have indeed provided the elasticity that helped keep the republic flexible, it may be that the real danger lies closer to home.