**[Iran’s Faustian 2024 elections: statistics tell the story](https://www.stimson.org/2024/irans-faustian-2024-elections-statistics-tell-the-story/)**

*By Mehrzad Boroujerdi*

The late German playwright Bertolt Brecht once famously remarked that East Germany could remedy dissatisfaction with its Communist government by electing a new populace. In Iran, the ruling clerical regime has managed a similar feat by [depressing turnout in the March 1](https://apnews.com/article/iran-parliamentary-election-results-low-turnout-845fabad51eb26bf7fef8087c030f8f8) vote to a historic low.

Against the backdrop of the resonating echoes of the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, [resounding calls for electoral boycotts](https://www.stimson.org/2024/how-low-can-it-go-turnout-is-the-only-unknown-in-iranian-elections/), and apprehension regarding the eventual replacement of the country’s top leader, the Islamic Republic opted to hold its twelfth parliamentary elections concurrently with choosing a sixth Assembly of Experts, the body nominally charged with choosing the successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It was evident long in advance that the decision was a Faustian pact, entailing the consolidation of power by conservative forces at the expense of popular legitimacy. Still, a plethora of intriguing developments worthy of scrutiny were unveiled.

The initial hurdle centered on voter participation. Iran has more than [60 million](https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1879416/%D9%BE%D8%B2%D8%B4%DA%A9%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%B9%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%84%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA) eligible voters—40 million more than voted in favor of an Islamic Republic in 1979. In a country where substantial voter turnout has long been viewed as a validation of revolutionary principles, the challenge lay in mobilizing the 30.9 million eligible men and 30.2 million eligible women to cast their votes.

Table 1. Count of Eligible Voters

Conversely, drawing from past experiences, Iranians are acutely aware that a politician is one who clasps your hand before elections but betrays your confidence afterwards. This sentiment was palpable in the participation rate in parliamentary elections, which has been on a downward spiral since 2012.

The government reported a participation rate of 41% in the 2024 parliamentary vote, for estimated 25 million people casting votes. However, due to press and media censorship, as well as the absence of independent observers, it is challenging to verify the authenticity of these statistics, as was the case in previous elections. Nevertheless, even a reported 41% participation rate, inclusive of spoiled ballots, marks the lowest level of participation by the Iranian people in the 12 rounds of parliamentary elections since 1979.

Table 2. Parliamentary Election Voter Turnout Rate

To combat rising political apathy, the state took proactive measures by directly engaging potential candidates through targeted text messages, urging them to register for candidacy. Significantly, election officials introduced a compulsory pre-registration protocol for candidates, a historical first. This endeavor bore fruit, and an unprecedented [24,829](https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-62/4014255-%D9%85%D9%87%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85-%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%A8%D9%87-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1) individuals, including nearly 3,000 female candidates came forward to compete for the 290 available seats.

Table 3. Comparing Registered Candidates to Allowable Contestants in Majles Elections

The Guardian Council, a regime body controlled by the Supreme Leader that is charged with vetting candidates for elected office, approved [15,200](https://www.isna.ir/news/1402113021811/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%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%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%DB%B1%DB%B5%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88-%DB%B2%DB%B0%DB%B0-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1) contenders, the most favorable candidates-to-seats ratio to date. However, this 61% approval rate warrants careful consideration. Even if one accepts government statistics at face value, the voter turnout to eligible candidate ratio plummeted below 43%, a historic nadir. This contrasts with 58%, the average observed over the past eleven election cycles.

Disqualifications notably impacted prominent incumbents, including [26](https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1858687/%DB%B2%DB%B6-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82%D9%87-%DA%86%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86) sitting members of the 11th parliament. Moreover, the majority of those approved exhibited conservative leanings. A published list of purportedly moderate candidates featured [165](https://www.moniban.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/203296-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%88%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%AF) individuals, of whom only [40](https://www.sharghdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-6/921429-%DA%86%D9%86%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%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%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF) secured victory in the initial round, with 4 advancing to runoff elections. The decision of former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to abstain from voting symbolized the prevailing disenchantment within many segments of the reformist camp, which feel marginalized and neglected.

Table 4. Comparing Voter Turnout Rate with Candidate Approval Rate in Majles Elections

Reflecting voting patterns observed in recent elections, the highest participation rates (ranging from 55 to 64%) occurred in less populated and less developed provinces such as Kohkiluyeh va Boyer-Ahmad, South Khorasan, Hormozgan, and North Khorasan. In contrast, heavily populated provinces such as Tehran, Isfahan, East Azerbaijan, and Khuzestan reported participation rates ranging from 34 to 43 percent, according to official statistics.

Tehran, boasting over 10 million eligible voters and accounting for 13% of all parliament seats, witnessed a significant development as an outspoken conservative and [conspiracy monger](https://twitter.com/websterkaroon/status/1764133308739289571) Hojjatoleslam [Seyyed Mamhud Nabavian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Nabavian) emerged as the leading vote-getter with only 600,000 votes (8% of eligible voters). This victory came amid a historic low in voter turnout, with reportedly only 34% of the capital's eligible voters participating. Nabavian's triumph signaled a notable departure from the voting trends of the past 28 years, when clerics seldom emerged as the top vote-getters. Furthermore, all thirteen Tehran MPs elected alongside him in the first round share conservative leanings. With 45 candidates -- a record number – [failing to get](https://apnews.com/article/iran-parliamentary-election-results-low-turnout-845fabad51eb26bf7fef8087c030f8f8) the required minimum of 20% of votes cast, there will need to be runoff elections in April or May to determine the fate of their seats. There will be runoffs in 14 of Iran’s 31 provinces including in Tehran, where 53% of the MPs must be elected through runoff elections. Over [half](https://tinyurl.com/mr2wpk5e) of the current members of the parliament will not retain their seats in the next term.

**Assembly of Experts elections**

Following embarrassingly low turnout rates of 37% and 46% in the 1990 and 1998 Assembly of Experts solo elections respectively, the Islamic Republic implemented a strategy of holding these elections concurrently with municipal or parliamentary elections to enhance voter participation. This approach was once again adopted this year. The concurrent Assembly of Experts elections revealed additional intriguing developments.

Of 510 clerics vying for 88 seats, only 144 (28%) were deemed qualified, resulting in an average candidates-to-seats ratio of 1.6:1. This marked the second highest disqualification rate of candidates in Assembly of Experts elections since 2016, when the rate was 20%.

Table 5. Comparison of Registered Candidates vs. Active Participants in Assembly of Experts Elections

Disqualifications extended to prominent figures, including two former intelligence ministers, and even former President Hasan Rouhani, whose public appeals to the Guardian Council for an explanation remained unanswered. Meanwhile, Ayatollah [Sadeq Larijani](https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/767744/%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A3%DB%8C-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B5-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%DB%B5-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%BE%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%AF), the former chief justice and current chair of the Council for the Expediency of the State, another of the Islamic Republic’s myriad clerical bodies, faced a humiliating defeat, finishing last among five candidates competing for four available seats in the province of Mazandaran.

In this sixth round of the Assembly of Experts, the incumbency rate, compared to the fifth round, stood at 60% (53 out of 88), surpassing the average rate of 51% observed in the previous five rounds. Notably, many of the incumbents and newly elected deputies were former or current appointees of Supreme Leader Khamenei. For instance, Ayatollah [Alireza Arafi](https://arafi.ir/) who emerged as Tehran's [top](https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1880290/%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A3%DB%8C-%DB%B1%DB%B6-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%AF) vote-getter, enjoys Khamenei's favor, having been appointed coordinator of all religious seminaries across the country. Similarly, the second top vote-getter, Ayatollah [Mohsen Qomi](https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1879731/%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A3%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%DA%A9%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA), holds the position of deputy for international communication in Khamenei’s office.

Voter turnout in the past three nationwide elections in Iran - the 2019 and 2024 parliamentary elections, and the 2021 presidential and municipal council elections - has fluctuated between 41 and 49 percent. Compounding this, spoiled votes ranked second in the 2021 presidential election and there were at least 553,000 [spoiled votes](https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1880168/%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%88-%D8%A2%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%B0%D9%87) uncovered in Tehran's ballot boxes on March 1, according to a conservative newspaper. This trend signals an escalating crisis of legitimacy for the ruling elite.

The combination of widespread citizen boycotts and apathy, coupled with the biased disqualification practices of the Guardian Council, has paved the way for the conservatives' ascendancy. Leveraging their entrenched voter base of perhaps a quarter of the population, conservative factions have not only dominated Iran's two elected assemblies but also control the executive branch. From their perspective, the Faustian bargain they've struck has yielded substantial dividends.

Critical questions emerge for the future: Will the regime recognize the opportunity costs of its ongoing bargain? Will the opposition persist in their resolve to abstain from the ballot box, even in light of the regime's enduring presence? And will the conservative factions find themselves at odds, either in navigating the succession of the Supreme Leader or amid escalating tensions in Iran's international relations? These uncertainties underscore the complexity of Iran's political landscape and the nation’s uncertain trajectory in the years to come.

*Mehrzad Boroujerdi is the Dean of College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Missouri University of Science and Technology, and the author of* [*Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*](https://irandataportal.syr.edu/postrevolutionary-iran)*, from which much of the data for this commentary is drawn.*