

EUROPEAN MIDDLE EAST RESEARCH GROUP **EMERG** 

# VOTER BEHAVIOR AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN IRAN: **FINDINGS FROM THE IRAN SOCIAL SURVEY**

.....  
**KEVAN HARRIS AND DANIEL TAVANA**

# EUROPEAN MIDDLE EAST RESEARCH GROUP

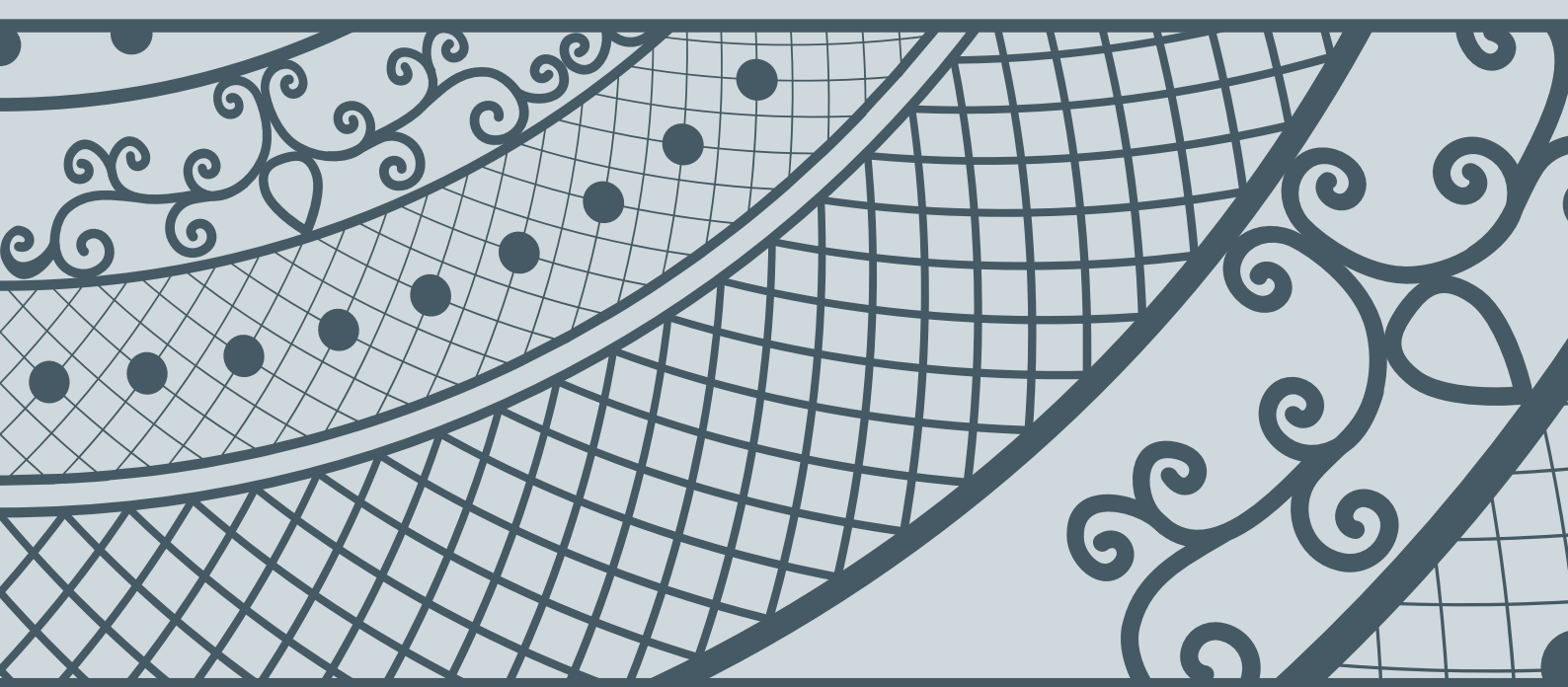


## HOW TO CITE THIS BRIEF



Kevan Harris and Daniel Tavana. **Voter Behavior and Political Mobilization in Iran: Findings from the Iran Social Survey.** European Middle East Research Group, Lund, Sweden. January 2018.  
**DOI** <https://doi.org/10.26369/RE.2018.001>

**EMERG** is a politically unaffiliated non-profit association registered in Sweden bringing together experts and policy makers with a professional interest in the Middle East. Through research, exchanges, and facilitation, **EMERG** aims to promote greater understanding and interaction between Middle Eastern and European countries. Find out more about our work at [www.emerg.expert](http://www.emerg.expert)



# SUMMARY OF **FINDINGS**



## MEDIA

Domestic television remains the primary source of political news for most Iranians.

- **Over a third of Iranians follow political news daily** through domestic television, compared to 12.4% of Iranians who follow political news daily through social media.
- Over half of Iranians follow political news through domestic television at least once a week, and **15.3% of Iranians read the daily press** for political news at least once a week.

## INTEREST IN POLITICS

**Most Iranians are interested in politics**, and those who are more interested were more likely to vote in the 2013 Presidential election and the 2016 Majles (Parliament) and Assembly of Experts elections.

- **Men**, those with a university degree or higher, and those from higher income households **are more interested in political life**.
- **Most Iranians follow election campaigns closely**. The month-long endorsement period, as well as the week-long campaign period, lead most Iranians to decide who they will vote for during the week prior to the election.

## PARTISANSHIP

The idiosyncrasies of the Iranian electoral system complicate efforts to link electoral behavior at the individual level to factional divides at the national level.

- Roughly **13% of Iranians identify with a national political faction** (Reformist, Moderate, or Principlist). This figure is consistent with findings from other countries with similar constraints on political and electoral life.
- Given the **personalistic character of Iranian campaigns** at the district level, this figure is unsurprising. Citizens were more likely to base their 2016 vote(s) on their perceptions of individual candidates, rather than candidate ties to these national factions.

## VOTER MOBILIZATION

**Forms of voter mobilization vary**, as do the strategies used by factions and candidates to mobilize voters during the campaign.

- **Younger voters and women are less likely to attend campaign events.** However, more educated Iranians and those from higher income households are more likely to be contacted by a candidate or faction representative during the campaign period.
- Men, those with a **university degree or higher**, and those from **higher income households** were **more likely to vote in the 2016 Majles (Parliament) election.**

## VOTER LOYALTY AND ELECTORAL VOLATILITY

There was a **substantial degree of vote switching** between the 2013 Presidential election and the 2016 Majles (Parliament) and Assembly of Experts elections.

- Of those respondents who voted for a Reformist or Moderate Majles (Parliament) candidate(s) in 2016, **74% voted for Rouhani in 2013.**
- Of those who voted for a Principlist candidate in 2016, **32% voted for Rouhani in 2013.**

## TURNOUT

Turnout rates in the 2016 Majles (Parliament) and Assembly of Experts elections are consistent with those produced by Islamic Republic's Ministry of Interior.

- Overall, **66% of eligible Iranians in the ISS sample voted in the Majles election**, and 62% voted in the Assembly of Experts election.





# PREFACE





Over the past decade, there has been a considerable rise in survey research in Iran. These polls have been conducted by commercial and market research firms, think tanks, and, to a lesser extent, social scientists. For the most part, existing social and political surveys have focused on attitudes towards international political events such as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or domestic trends in social and cultural values, such as gender relations. The sensitivity of these questions in the Iranian context has made it difficult for foreign polling organizations to operate inside Iran.

As a result, social scientists have been equally reluctant to develop reliable survey research programs that can be implemented inside the country. Very few scholars have taken an interest in exploring citizens' political behavior and assessing citizens' attitudes towards domestic political events. This is the case with elections in Iran in particular. Limited government data and the challenges associated with conducting research inside Iran have discouraged social scientists from understanding Iranian politics from the ground up. Previous research has focused almost exclusively on elite, or factional, competition at the national level.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has held over 35 national elections: these include referenda and Majles (parliamentary), presidential, Assembly of Experts, and municipal elections. Despite their frequency, we know very little about citizen participation and voter behavior in these elections. Among the Iranian electorate, differences in political interest, electoral mobilization, and voting patterns are poorly understood. More importantly, accounts that tend to cleave the population into stable ideological blocs—a prevalent assumption in scholarship on elite and factional competition in Iran—have never been empirically assessed.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

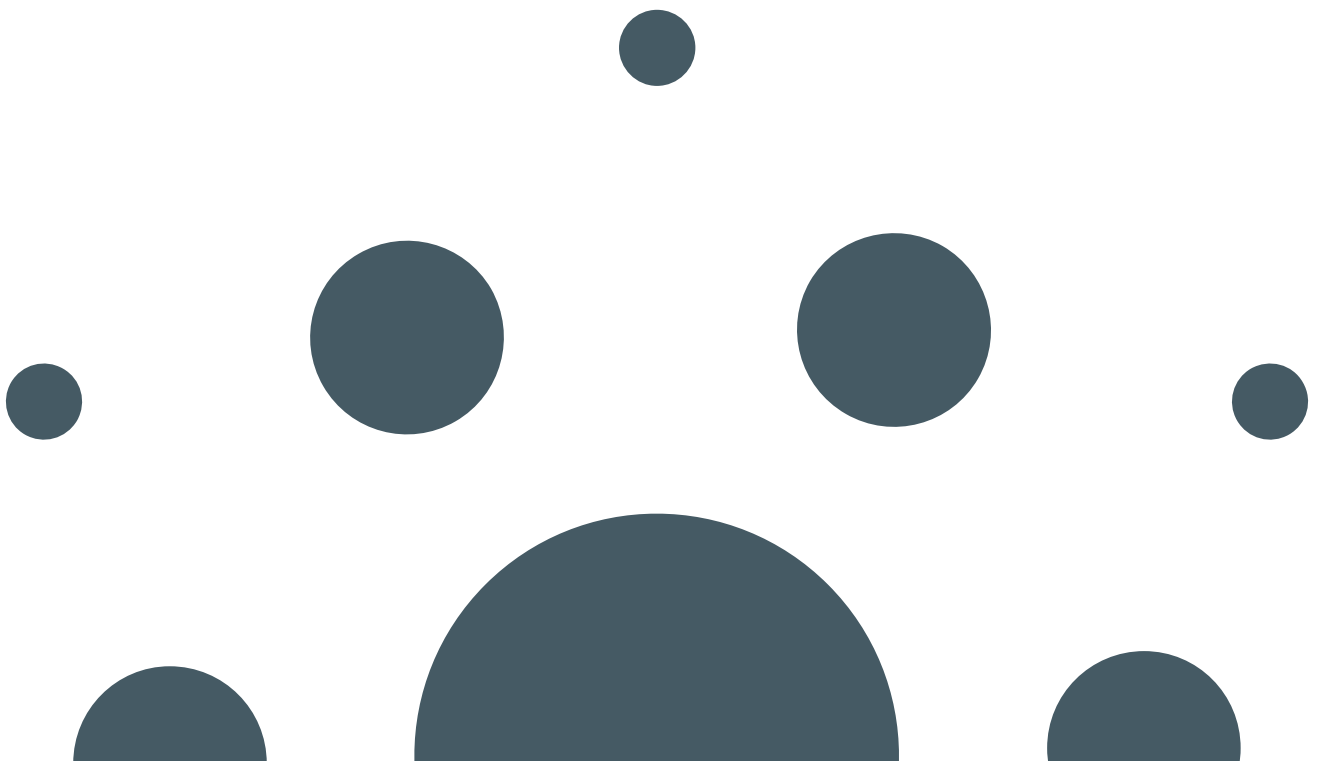
The authors are grateful to the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Princeton University for their generous support of the Iran Social Survey. We wish to thank Dr. Rouzbeh Parsi with the European Middle East Research Group (**EMERG**) and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (**CMES**) at Lund University and Dr. John Haldon and Reagan Maraghy at the Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Princeton University.

This report would not have been possible without the assistance of Mona Rahmani, Arash Pourebrahimi and Leila Ben Halim.

The authors also wish to thank Dr. Chris Achen and Dr. Amaney Jamal in the Department of Politics at Princeton University for their support and feedback.

# STRUCTURE OF THE BRIEF

- 1.** Methodology of the Iran Social Survey
- 2.** Political life in comparative perspective
- 3.** Voter turnout
- 4.** Voter behavior
- 5.** Electoral mobilization and campaign dynamics



## METHODOLOGY OF THE IRAN SOCIAL SURVEY

**The Iran Social Survey (ISS) is a multi-year, telephone survey research project focused on the political behavior and socio-economic relations of residents of the Islamic Republic of Iran.** The ISS intends to collect data from a nationally-representative probability sample of Iranians every four years, following Majles (Parliament) elections. The ISS is designed to create a novel and methodologically sound mapping of the country's complex social and political life that will generate useful knowledge about Iran and produce information comparable with other rapidly changing developing countries.

**No such project has existed in Iran for several decades.** The ISS is an interdisciplinary collaborative project between Kevan Harris, Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California-Los Angeles, and Daniel Tavana, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Politics at Princeton University.

**The first wave of the ISS was fielded by IranPoll from November 6, 2016, to December 29, 2016.**

The overall sample size is  $N=5,005$ , with a sampling margin of error of  $\pm 1.4\%$ . A Random Digit Dialing (RDD) sample was stratified first by Iranian provinces and then by settlement size. After the sample was allocated to all 31 Iranian provinces in accordance to their population size (as calculated from the 2011/1390 census), settlements within each province were categorized into five population groups: one for all rural settlements and four for the remaining urban settlements. <sup>(1)</sup>

Each provincial sample was distributed among each of these five groups in within-province proportions equal to those identified in the census. One settlement within each of these groups was then selected randomly: interviews allocated to that group were conducted in the randomly selected settlement. Households were reached via RDD after fixing a list of area codes and telephone exchanges for landline telephones in each of the randomly selected settlements.

**According to the Statistical Center of Iran, 96% of Iranian households have a fixed telephone line.** All calls were made from within Iran. When a residence was reached, enumerators asked respondents to list

**(1)** Urban settlement types were grouped into four categories: cities with over 1,000,000 residents, between 500,000 and 1,000,000 residents, between 100,000 and 500,000 residents, and under 100,000 residents.

## POLITICAL LIFE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

### INTEREST IN POLITICS

the ages of all household members. Names were not requested to ensure respondent privacy. An adult was then randomly selected from within that household using the random table technique. An initial attempt and three callbacks were made in an effort to complete an interview with the randomly selected respondent.

#### **The survey response rate, excluding partial interviews, was 64.0%.<sup>(2)</sup>**

Interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) techniques in a centralized call center. Interviews were continuously monitored in real-time by call-center supervisors. ISS interviews were conducted in Persian/Farsi (95%), Azerbaijani Turkish (4%), and Kurdish (1%).<sup>(3)</sup>

Over a third of the interviews were subject to direct supervision during the interview (24.2%) or back-checking conducted by re-interviewing respondents (9.8%). 65.7% of completed interviews were conducted by female enumerators.<sup>(4)</sup>

#### **Respondents in the ISS sample were asked a range of questions about the extent of their participation and interest in political and electoral life.**

Generally, much of what social scientists have learned about electoral behavior in Iran has come from top-down accounts of elite and factional politics in the Islamic Republic. The ISS plans to document multi-year variation in citizen interest in politics, political awareness, and the consumption of political news, particularly in electoral contexts.

In general, a majority of Iranians are very (21.1%) or somewhat (34.9%) interested in politics. **(Figure 1)** Unsurprisingly, Iranians who are more interested in politics were more likely to vote in both the 2013 Presidential election and the 2016 Majles election. 72.0% of those who are very or somewhat interested in politics reported voting in the 2016 election, compared to 60% of those who are slightly or not interested in politics.

Men (61.8%) also report a slightly higher level of interest in politics compared to women (49.9%). Respondents from higher socio-economic status households, defined as those who are more educated and report higher levels of monthly household income, are also more likely to be interested in politics.

#### **(2)**

The following outcome rates were calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Ninth Edition of Standard Definitions. Contact Rate 1, defined as the proportion of respondents who were reached and ultimately agreed to be interviewed relative to the number of respondents attempted, was 74.6%. Response Rate 1, defined as the number of complete interviews divided by the number of interviews (complete plus partial) plus the number of non-interviews (refusal and break-off plus non-contacts plus others) plus all cases of unknown eligibility was 44.3%. Response Rate 4, which excludes partial interviews, was 64.0%. The refusal rate (Refusal Rate 3) was 10.5%.

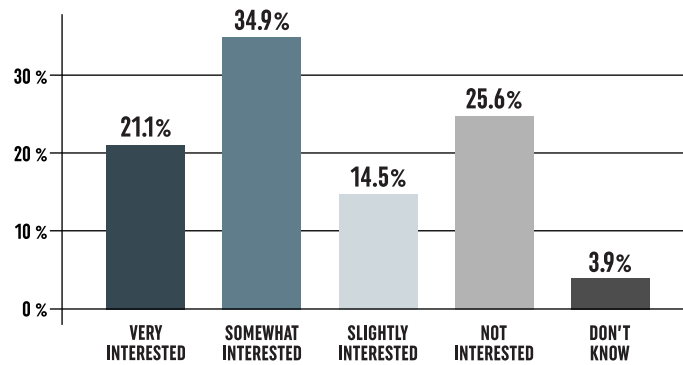
#### **(3)**

IranPoll's call center is staffed with interviewers native in the following languages and dialects of Iran: Persian/Farsi, Azerbaijani, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Kurdish, Lori, Arabic, Baluchi, Turkmen, and Tat.

#### **(4)**

Enumerator and staff training at IranPoll covers two major codes of conduct and quality: the ESOMAR/WAPOR Guideline on Opinion Polls and Published Surveys and the ICC/ESOMAR ethics code on social research. Human subjects training is also included and is based on the method used by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program at the University of Miami for their Human Subjects Research (HSR) training. Implementation of the ISS was conducted in accordance with regulations set forth by the Office of Foreign Assets Control, Department of the Treasury (License No. IA-2015-318278-1), as well as the Institutional Review Boards at the University of California-Los Angeles (IRB#16-000961) and Princeton University (IRB#7741).

**FIGURE 1**  
INTEREST IN  
POLITICS AMONG  
IRANIANS



“In general, to what extent are you interested in politics?”



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

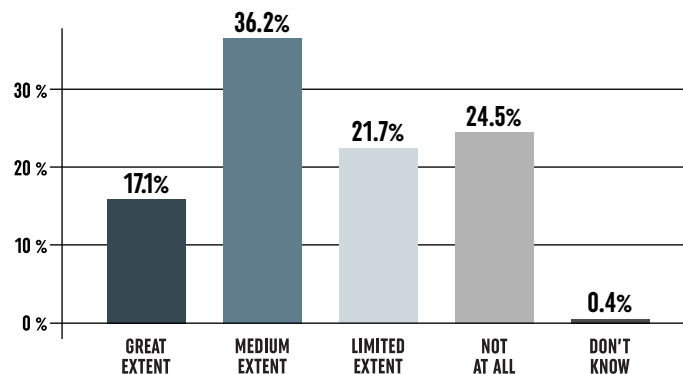
**This level of Iranians' interest in politics is comparable with other Middle Eastern countries.** In the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer survey, conducted in 2016 and 2017 in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia, 66.6% of respondents are highly interested, interested, or somewhat interested in politics.<sup>(5)</sup>

(5)  
Arab Barometer Survey (2017).

**POLITICAL NEWS CONSUMPTION**

ISS respondents were also asked about the extent to which they follow political news in Iran. **(Figure 2)** Overall, a majority (53.3%) of Iranians follow political news to a great or medium extent. Here again, men and those from higher socio-economic status households report following political news to a greater extent.

**FIGURE 2**  
INTEREST IN  
POLITICAL NEWS  
AMONG IRANIANS



“To what extent do you follow political news in our country?”



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

Respondents were asked how often they use a range of media sources. Over a third of Iranians (35.6%) follow political news daily through domestic television, compared to 12.4% who use social media applications, such as Telegram. Over half of Iranians follow political

news through domestic television at least once a week. 18.0% of Iranians use a social media application at least once a week, but 15.3% also read the daily press at least once a week. (Table 1)

**Though much scholarship on Iran has focused on consumption of political news through social media, our findings indicate that domestic television is a more popular medium of news consumption.**

**TABLE 1**  
FREQUENCY OF POLITICAL  
NEWS CONSUMPTION  
IN IRAN  
(ISS SAMPLE)

	DAILY	A FEW TIMES A WEEK	A FEW TIMES A MONTH	RARELY	NOT AT ALL
DOMESTIC TELEVISION	35.6%	21.5%	3.6%	11%	28.2%
SATELLITE TELEVISION	5.3%	8.2%	3.5%	8.9%	74.1%
DAILY PRESS	5.8%	9.5%	5.8%	12.2%	66.8%
WEEKLY PRESS	1.1%	5.3%	3.7%	12.6%	77.3%
RADIO	8.4%	6.2%	2.7%	10.9%	71.8%
INTERNET	9.2%	8.1%	3.3%	8.9%	70.4%
SOCIAL MEDIA	12.4%	5.6%	5.1%	8.5%	68.3%

Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

**Levels of different media usage in Iran for political news are comparable, again, to those found in the Arab Barometer survey (Table 2).** Citizens in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia report using television and newspapers at similar rates.

**TABLE 2**  
FREQUENCY OF POLITICAL  
NEWS CONSUMPTION IN  
THE ARAB WORLD  
(ARAB BAROMETER SAMPLE)

	DAILY	A FEW TIMES A WEEK	A FEW TIMES A MONTH	RARELY	NOT AT ALL
TELEVISION	39.0%	23.8%	6.9%	15.8%	14.4%
DAILY NEWSPAPER	5.8%	7.4%	6.7%	19%	60.3%

Source: Arab Barometer Survey (2017)

## MEASURING POLITICAL PREFERENCES

**ISS respondents were also asked about the extent to which they support different political factions, as well as their ratings of prominent Iranian political leaders.** Formal political parties have been inactive since the dissolution of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) in 1987. In addition, many opposition parties were banned earlier, soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Following the IRP's dissolution, national elites coalesce into what are colloquially referred to as "factions" during elections. These factions are comprised of networks of politicians and a small number of members of different civic and clerical associations. Factional competition intensifies during elections, but the extent of sustained citizen support for national-level factions has been difficult to assess.

**In a sense, elections are the moments where factions, and the associations supporting them, function as "party" organizations.** In the weeks prior to the 2016 Majles elections, these factions coalesced into several, often overlapping, lists for the purpose of supporting candidates for parliament. List-e Omid, or Hope List, was backed by leaders from the "Reformist" and "Moderate" factions, including incumbent President Hassan Rouhani. Etelaf-e Bozorg-e Osulgarayan, or Grand Principlist Coalition, was backed by Principlist (Conservative) leaders.

**The fluidity of these groups, as well as the constantly evolving boundaries of elite competition, complicate efforts to measure what those who study political behavior refer to as partisanship.**

The ISS aims to measure the evolution in citizen preferences for changing Iranian factions over time.

Respondents were asked: "Do you usually think of yourself as close [nazdik] to any particular political faction?" Those who responded negatively were asked,

“Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political factions?” Those who did were asked: “Which faction do you feel yourself closest to?” **Overall, 6.0% of Iranians identify as Reformist, 4.5% as Principlist, 1.1% as Moderate, and 1.1% with other factions.**

## **Just over 10% of Iranians report thinking of themselves close to either the Reformist, Principlist, or Moderate factions.**

These figures are not surprising. Low citizen support for these factions is affected by the fluidity of each faction’s ideological boundaries, the absence of recurring faction and candidate labels during elections, and frequent changes to the roster of national elites who participate in national politics. At the local level, Majles and Assembly of Experts elections are personalistic, and citizen support is driven more by perceptions of individual candidates than stable, enduring attachments to national factions or clear ideological, programmatic preferences.

**Factional preference levels in Iran are similar to those found in the Arab Barometer, in other countries with similar constraints on political and electoral life.** Overall, 87.1% of Iranians do not closely identify with a national faction. Across the Arab Barometer, 73.5% of respondents do not feel that an existing party comes close to representing their “political, economic, and social aspirations.” These figures are particularly high in Jordan (97.8%), Egypt (93.3%), and Algeria (83.0%).<sup>(6)</sup>

(6)  
Arab Barometer Survey  
(2017).

## VOTER TURNOUT

### 2016 IRANIAN MAJLES AND ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTIONS

**On February 26, 2016, a nationwide general election was held to elect a 290-member legislature, the Islamic Republic's tenth Majles-e Shura-ye Islami, or Majles.** 285 Members of Parliament are elected from 202 electoral districts. Each district elects anywhere from one to six members, though Tehran elects 30 members. There are 167 single-member districts, and 35 multi-member districts; 5 additional single-member districts are reserved for "minorities" (Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and one seat each for Northern and Southern Armenians).

The Majles electoral system utilizes block voting (multiple non-transferable voting), where citizens can select as many candidates as there are seats allocated to the electoral district. Voting is qualified at 25% (one-fourth): in single-member districts, candidates must receive at least a fourth of valid votes in the first round. If this threshold is not reached, a second round is held between the two candidates who received the most votes. In multi-member districts, candidates must reach the same threshold: twice the number of candidates as there are seats unfilled participate in a run-off, for each unfilled seat. In 2016, 55 districts held run-off elections on April 29, 2016. These districts included 36 single-member districts and 19 multi-member districts.

**For the first time in the Islamic Republic's history, the 2016 Majles elections were held concurrently with the fifth Majles-e Khobregan-e Rahbari (Assembly of Experts) elections.** The Assembly of Experts is an 88-member deliberative body elected to designate and dismiss the Leader and Supreme Jurist of the Islamic Republic. These 88 members are elected to eight-year terms from across multi-member districts that correspond with the provincial boundaries of the country's 31 provinces.

The Assembly of Experts electoral system also utilizes block voting (multiple non-transferable voting), where citizens can select as many candidates as there are seats allocated to the provincial electoral district. Each province elects anywhere from one to six members, though Tehran elects 16 members of the Assembly of Experts. Following the fourth Assembly of Experts election held in 2007, the government announced its

## VERIFYING OFFICIAL TURNOUT RATES

intent to extend the Assembly's mandate by two years (from 2014 to 2016) in order to aggregate the country's election schedule and hold elections to both bodies concurrently. No run-off elections were held for the Assembly of Experts in 2016.

**ISS interviews began in November 2016, six months after the conclusion of the 2016 Majles and Assembly of Experts elections.** According to the Ministry of Interior, of the 54,915,024 Iranians eligible to participate in the election, 33,480,548 (61.0%) voted in the Majles election, and 33,847,117 (61.6%) voted in the Assembly of Experts election. Of the 17,625,046 Iranians eligible to participate in run-off elections, after having voted in the first round, 5,901,297 (33.5%) participated a second time.

**Reported turnout rates among ISS respondents are consistent with those produced by Islamic Republic's Ministry of Interior.** In the ISS sample, 66.5% of eligible respondents voted in the Majles election. Of the respondents who were eligible to vote in a run-off, 49.5% voted in the second round. For the Assembly of Experts election, 61.7% voted.<sup>(7)</sup>

**These figures also align with previous, pre-election surveys of vote intention in Iran.** Two months before the election, in January 2016, a survey conducted by the Center for International and Security Studies (CISSM) at the University of Maryland found that 66.9% of Iranians were very likely to vote in the election, compared to 20.3% who were somewhat likely to vote.<sup>(8)</sup>

Respondents were also asked about their participation in the 2013/1392 Presidential election, which resulted in the narrow election of Hassan Rouhani as President. According to the Ministry of Interior, of the 50,483,192 Iranians eligible to participate in the 2013 Presidential election, 36,821,538 (72.9%) voted. In the ISS sample, 76.3% of respondents voted. Individuals who could not recall whether or not they voted in the Presidential election (N=122; 2.4% of the sample) were excluded from this figure.

The remainder of this section compares voter turnout in both elections: the 2016/1394 Majles election and

### (7)

Other post-election studies find similar patterns of turnout over-reporting due to response bias. In particular, respondents often wish to present themselves to enumerators in admirable ways (social desirability bias). In studies of American political behavior, for example, response bias has led to as much as a 10% over-estimation of turnout. Drawing from Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) post-election studies, the ISS aimed to reduce this response bias, using the following prompt: "In talking to people about elections, we sometimes find that people were not able to vote because they were sick or they did not have the opportunity or ability. We want to ask you whether or not you voted in the Majles and Assembly of Experts elections on 7 Esfand 1394." Respondents were then asked: "For the first round of the Majles elections, which of the following statements best describes you?" Options included: "I was not eligible to vote because of my age"; "I did not vote in the election"; "I thought about voting this time, but did not"; "I usually vote, but did not this time"; "I did vote."

### (8)

Iranian Attitudes in Advance of the Parliamentary Elections: Economics, Politics, and Foreign Affairs. Ebrahim Mohseni, Nancy Gallagher & Clay Ramsay. Accessed 5 November 2017. Retrieved from: <https://goo.gl/STCLTE>

## DISAGGREGATING VOTER TURNOUT

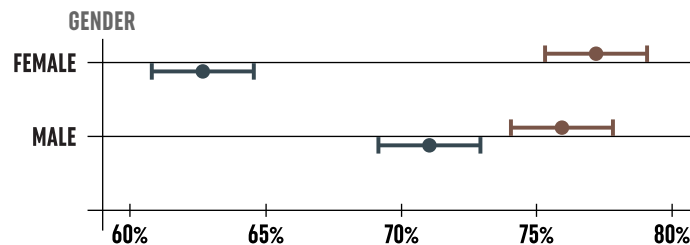
the 2013/1392 Presidential election. With few exceptions, turnout is consistent across a range of demographic categories: gender, age, household income, education, and settlement type.<sup>(9)</sup>

**Evidence from the ISS sample (Figure 3) indicates that rates of lower turnout in the 2016 Majles election may be due in part to the decline in turnout among women.** In 2013, men (75.8%) and women (76.9%) voted at equal rates. In the 2016 Majles election, turnout among women declined: 62.5% voted, compared to 70.9% of men.

(9)

For ease of interpretation, this brief focuses primarily on turnout in the 2016 Majles election. Only 10.56% of respondents who voted in the Majles election did not vote in the Assembly of Experts election. Similarly, only 3.62% of respondents who voted in the Assembly of Experts election did not vote in the Majles election. Turnout figures do not vary significantly between the 2016 Majles and Assembly of Experts elections.

**FIGURE 3**  
VOTER TURNOUT FOR  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
AND 2016 MAJLES  
ELECTIONS IN IRAN  
SEPARATED BY  
GENDER



**2013 / 1392**  
**2016 / 1394**

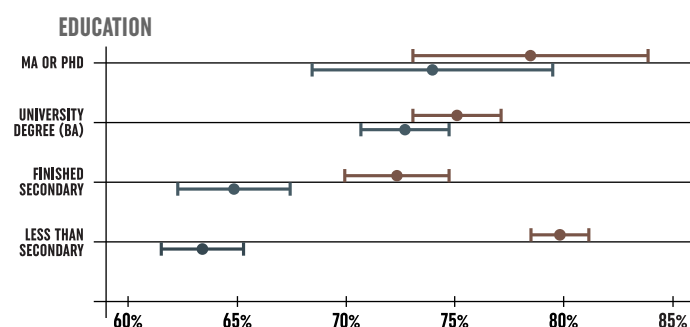
Lines represent 95% confidence intervals



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

Respondents with a university degree or higher voted in similar rates across both the 2013 and 2016 elections (Figure 4). In 2013, turnout did not differ markedly across these groups. **However, turnout among those without a university degree declined between the 2013 and 2016 election.** In 2016, only 63.1% of respondents who completed high school and 64.4% of respondents who did not complete high school voted.

**FIGURE 4**  
VOTER TURNOUT FOR  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
AND 2016 MAJLES  
ELECTIONS IN IRAN  
SEPARATED BY  
EDUCATION



**2013 / 1392**  
**2016 / 1394**

Lines represent 95% confidence intervals



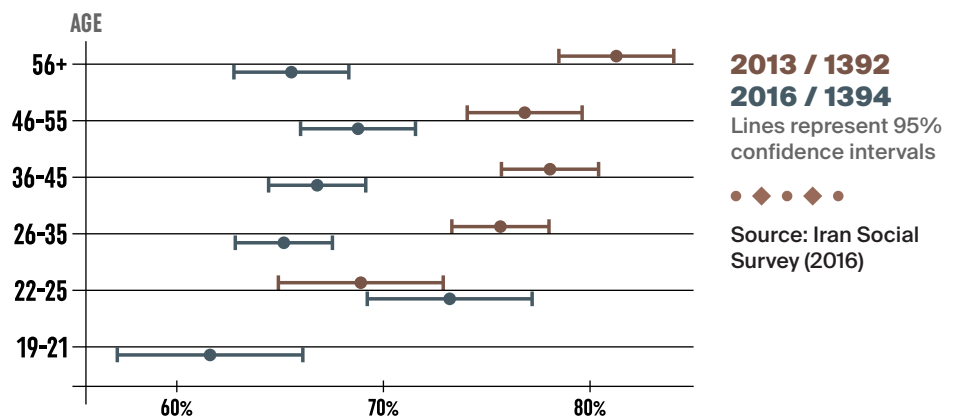
Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

ISS data suggests a possible explanation for this decline in turnout among lesser educated respondents. Of those in the ISS sample who voted for Rouhani in 2013, 69.9% had less than a university degree. Of all 2013 voters without a university degree, 63.8% voted for Rouhani. Turnout decline in 2016 may be due to the fact that, after voting for Rouhani in 2013, many lesser educated respondents did not wish to vote for Reformist- or Moderate-backed candidates in 2016.

**Among older respondents, turnout is consistent across the two elections, but younger voters turned out with higher levels in 2016 (Figure 5).**

Those able to vote for the first time in 2013 (those between 22 and 25 years of age) were slightly less likely to vote (69.1%) than older age cohorts in the 2013 Presidential election. However, in 2016, turnout among voters aged 22-25 increased to 73.2%.

**FIGURE 5**  
VOTER TURNOUT FOR  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
AND 2016 MAJLES  
ELECTIONS IN IRAN  
SEPARATED BY  
AGE GROUP



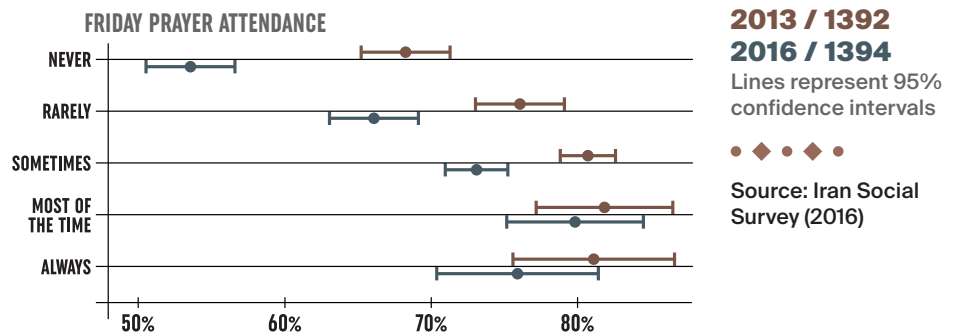
The rise in youth turnout may in part be due to the participation of Reformists in the 2016 Majles election (following more limited participation in 2012). Among the 22-25 age cohort, voters showed a preference for particular factions. 32.0% voted for Reformists and Moderates, compared to 23.7% who voted for Principlists.

**Respondents were also asked how often they attended Friday prayers (or Sunday services).**

Turnout rates between the 2013 and 2016 elections differ among those who do and do not attend Friday prayers (Figure 6).

More frequent attendees voted at higher rates in both elections, especially when compared to those who report never attending Friday prayers. Among those who report never attending, turnout declined in the 2016 Majles election, from 68.2% in 2013, to 53.4% in 2016.

**FIGURE 6**  
VOTER TURNOUT FOR  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
AND 2016 MAJLES  
ELECTIONS IN IRAN  
SEPARATED BY  
FREQUENCY OF  
FRIDAY PRAYER  
ATTENDANCE



## VOTER BEHAVIOR

### IDIOSYNCRASIES OF IRANIAN POLITICS

The Iranian system of presidential and parliamentary elections has remained largely unchanged since its adoption after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Despite this stability, the electoral system may be confusing even to those who follow and participate in national elections, for several reasons.

**First, formal political parties do not exist.** Local and national candidates must be vetted and qualified to participate by the Shura-ye Negahban-e Qanun-e Asasi, or Guardian Council, an appointed 12-member body responsible for supervising elections and ensuring the compatibility of laws passed by the Majles with Islam and the Constitution. Once candidates are formally approved by the Council, national level “factions” driven by prominent elites develop electoral slates, or lists, that endorse qualified candidates. Elites affiliated with particular political tendencies—Reformists, Principlists (Conservatives), and more recently, Moderates—often preside over the endorsement of candidates for these lists.

Prominent candidates sometimes appear on several lists simultaneously, or they may choose to run without the backing of these national lists altogether—these candidates are referred to as Independents. Other candidates, such as newcomers or political upstarts, are not able to secure the backing of a list.

**Fluctuations between and within national-level factional cleavages, as well as the amorphous character of elite competition over time, may explain why few ISS respondents report feeling close to any single faction.**

**Second, citizen preferences vary widely.** While some citizens vote for a particular list (and take that list with them to a polling station to recall particular candi-

dates), others vote for individuals irrespective of their political affiliation(s). This means that some citizens are not able to recall the individual candidate or candidates they vote for. Others, still, may vote for a candidate who was endorsed by a list: but they are not aware of, or do not care for, the candidate's national political affiliations. In some cases, different lists endorse the same candidates, and citizens may not know that a "rival" faction has also endorsed the candidate they voted for.

**Third, citizens may vote for as many candidates as there are seats allocated to the district they vote in.** Iran does not have a formal voter registration system, and eligible voters may vote at any polling station they choose anywhere in the country. This means that some citizens may vote for just one candidate, even if they are eligible to vote for more in their chosen district. Citizens may also choose candidates from a variety of different lists, or tendencies: they may also combine independents, or other candidates, with those on a list.

These idiosyncrasies complicate the ability of survey researchers to measure vote choice along national-level factional divides, particularly in Majles and Assembly of Experts elections.

## **Many of the tried and tested survey strategies for measuring electoral behavior in other countries do not work in the Iranian context.**

### **VOTE CHOICE IN THE 2016 MAJLES ELECTION**

**To assess vote choice, ISS respondents were asked separately about their participation in each of the three elections that took place in 2016:** the first and second rounds of the Majles election, and the Assembly of Experts election.

Respondents were first asked: "Did you vote for a single candidate or multiple candidates?" They were then asked: "Which political group did [most of the candi-

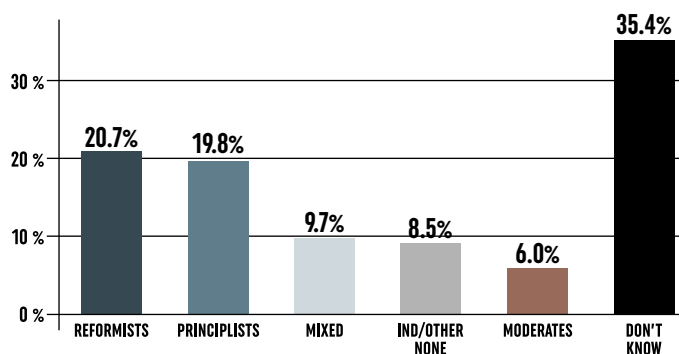
dates/the candidate] you voted for in the [first/second] round belong?" Those who participated in the Assembly of Experts election were asked: "To which of the political groups would you say [most of the candidates/the candidate] you voted for [is/are] closest?"

**In each of these elections, respondents were read the following list: Principlists, Reformists, Moderates, Independents, Mixed, Other, and None.**

Among those who voted in the first round Majles elections, 26.7% voted for Reformists and Moderates, 19.8% voted for Principlists, and 9.7% voted for a combination of candidates. 8.5% of respondents voted for Independent, "none," or "other" candidates (Figure 7).

Over a third of the respondents (35.4%) did not know the political affiliation of the candidate or candidates they voted for. This may be because the respondent did not know the affiliation of the candidate(s), or because they did not vote for the candidate(s) because of their affiliation.

**FIGURE 7**  
VOTE CHOICE FOR  
FACTION DURING  
2016 MAJLES  
ELECTION IN IRAN  
FIRST ROUND



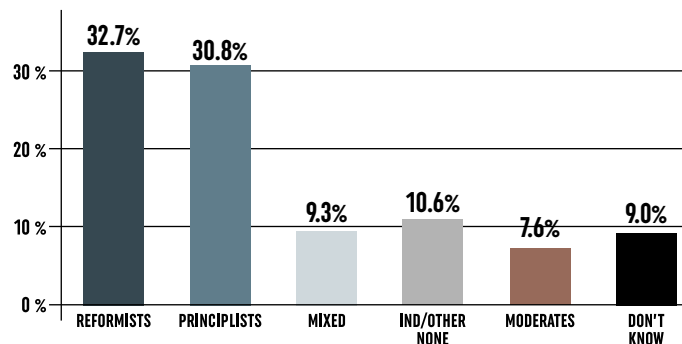
Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

In the ISS sample, 15.0% of respondents voted in a second round Majles election. Vote choice in the second round mirrors the first, with a few exceptions. Although turnout, as a percentage of those eligible to vote, has historically decreased in run-offs, faction-based voting is more common in these elections.

This distinction is evident in the ISS sample: 32.7% of second-round respondents voted for a Reformist candidate or candidates, and 30.8% voted for a Principlist candidate or candidates. The percentage of respondents who did not know the political affiliation of the candidate they voted for declined to 9.0% (Figure 8).

## FIGURE 8

### VOTE CHOICE FOR FACTION DURING 2016 MAJLES ELECTION IN IRAN SECOND ROUND



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

**Several factors may explain this decline in the percentage of voters who do not identify the candidate they voted for with a particular faction in the second round run-off elections.**

Fewer unaffiliated candidates participate in run-offs, by the very nature of the electoral system. Following the release of results from the first-round election, national-level factions were more active in endorsing candidates for lists in an effort to win greater representation in the Majles. Several lists endorsed candidates in run-off elections who had not been endorsed in the first round. These factors may have encouraged individuals more interested and knowledgeable about political life to vote in run-off elections.

**As the ISS sample shows, those who voted in a run-off are more partisan, followed the election more closely, and are more politically aware than those who chose not to vote in the second round despite their eligibility.**

### VOTE CHOICE IN THE 2016 ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTION

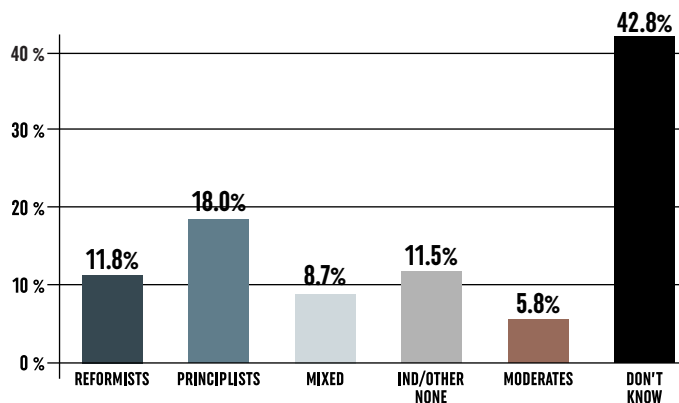
**Trends in vote choice differed between the Majles and Assembly of Experts elections.** The nature of the list selection process varies significantly across these elections. Candidates qualified to run for

a seat in the Assembly of Experts must be mujtahids, or religious jurists. These candidates often possess broad, independent, and national appeal.

Many of these jurists avoid the factional politics practiced by those who compete for seats in the Majles. Far more of these Assembly candidates are known by voters not for their political affiliations, but for their stature and reputations as jurists.

Though 42.8% of respondents did not identify the Assembly of Experts candidate they voted for with a political affiliation, Iranians voted for Reformists/Moderates and Principlists in roughly equal numbers. 17.6% of respondents voted for a Reformist or Moderate candidate, while 18.0% voted for a Principlist candidate (**Figure 9**).

**FIGURE 9**  
VOTE CHOICE FOR  
FACTION DURING  
2016 ASSEMBLY OF  
EXPERTS ELECTION  
IN IRAN



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

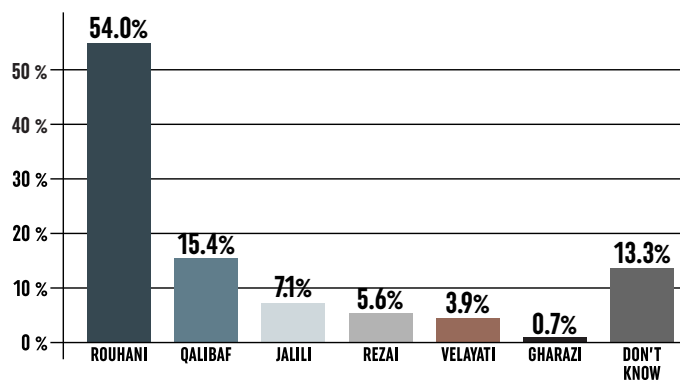
**It is difficult to validate candidate and faction-specific findings from the Majles and Assembly of Experts elections against electoral returns released by the Ministry of Interior.** Informally, Iranian researchers, journalists, and political leaders have collected data linking successfully elected MPs with the political factions that endorsed them during the campaign. But the Ministry of Interior does not publish data regarding candidate affiliations, making it difficult to discern from electoral returns the extent of overall electoral support for each individual faction.

## VOTE CHOICE IN THE 2013 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

At the conclusion of the vote choice section of the Iran Social Survey, voters were also asked about their participation in the 2013 Presidential election. Those who voted in the 2013 election were asked: “For which candidate did you vote in the 1392 Presidential election?” The names of each of the six candidates who participated in the election were read to the respondents in a randomly assigned order.

Unlike results from the recent Majles and Assembly of Experts elections, it is easier to measure the validity of vote choice in the 2013 Presidential election (Figure 10).

**FIGURE 10**  
VOTE CHOICE FOR  
CANDIDATE DURING  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION IN IRAN



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

According to the Ministry of Interior, Hassan Rouhani received 50.6% of valid votes, compared with 54.0% of respondents in the ISS sample. Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the first runner-up, received 16.6% of valid votes, compared to 15.4% in the ISS sample.

The remaining four lesser known runners-up, Said Jalili (11.3%), Mohsen Rezai (10.5%), Ali Akbar Velayati (6.1%), and Mohammad Gharazi (1.2%) are slightly underrepresented in the ISS sample. This may be due to the large percentage of respondents (13.3%) who could not recall who they voted for in 2013.

Survey research in other contexts has also uncovered a pro-incumbent respondent bias. Survey-based election studies often over-report voting for the incumbent and under-report voting for unsuccessful candidates.

## VOTE SWITCHING ACROSS ELECTIONS

**A comparison of vote choice across in the ISS the 2013 Presidential and 2016 Majles elections sheds additional light on how citizen preferences have evolved over the past three years.** Figure 11 compares those who voted in 2013 and 2016. For ease of interpretation, Qalibaf, Jalili, Rezai, Velayati, and Gharazi are collapsed into a “Principlist” category.

Of those respondents who voted for a Reformist or Moderate in 2016, 74.1% voted for Rouhani in 2013, with the remainder voting for a Principlist candidate.

Of those who voted for a Principlist candidate in 2016, 32.5% voted for Rouhani in 2013.

Sample consists of respondents who voted in both elections and provided information about the candidates and factions they voted for.

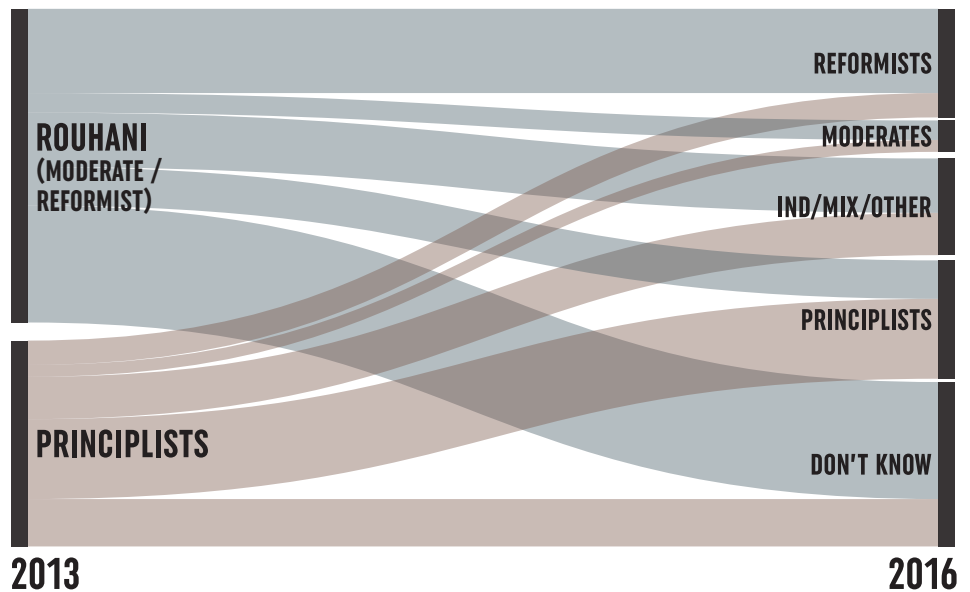
Nodes link respondents who voted for President Rouhani or a Principlist candidate in 2013 with the faction they voted for in 2016.

**There is considerable heterogeneity, and a substantial degree of vote switching, across Presidential and Majles elections.**



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

**FIGURE 11**  
VOTE CHOICE IN THE  
2013 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION (LEFT)  
AND THE 2016  
MAJLES ELECTION  
(RIGHT)



## ELECTORAL MOBILIZATION AND CAMPAIGN DYNAMICS

### DECIDING ON CANDIDATES

**Campaigns in the Islamic Republic of Iran are short, but volatile and unpredictable.** Both citizens and national factions do not know who will be qualified to participate until just over a month before elections are held. Once the eligible candidates are announced, national factions begin the process of endorsing candidates and creating electoral lists, or slates, as campaigns are prepared throughout the country.

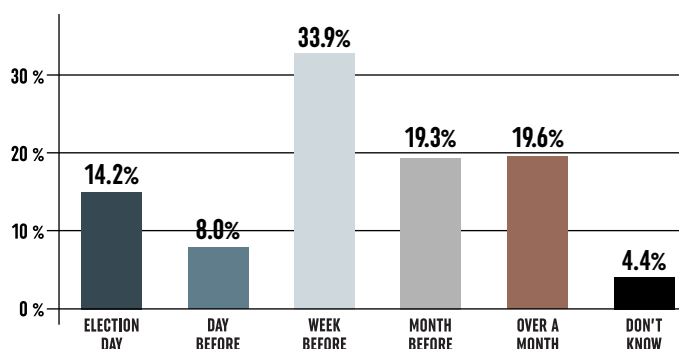
Five weeks before the Majles and Assembly of Experts elections, on January 17, the Guardian Council released the names of those qualified to stand as candidates. A week-long campaign period was held from February 18 to February 24, with a mandated pause in all campaign related activity on February 25.

**The intensity and volatility of these campaign periods generate considerable citizen interest in the electoral process.** Over 50% of respondents in the ISS sample reported following the election very closely (21.7%) or fairly closely (38.7%).

**Despite stable citizen interest in the electoral process and high turnout, most Iranians decide who they will vote for during the campaign period.** For the first round Majles election, over a fifth of voters, or 22.2%, decided on election day or the day before. An additional 33.9% decided a week before, while campaigns were active (**Figure 12**). These trends hold for the Assembly of Experts election, as well.

Respondents who report voting for Reformists, Principlists, Moderates, and others do not differ markedly with respect to when they decide who to vote for. However, respondents who were not able to link a political affiliation to the candidate they voted for (35.4% of respondents, shown in **Figure 7**) were even more likely to decide who they voted in the week prior to the election (72.0%).

**FIGURE 12**  
DECIDING ON  
CANDIDATES BEFORE  
THE 2016 MAJLES  
ELECTION IN IRAN



“When did you decide which candidate(s) you wanted to vote for in the first round Majles election?”



Source: Iran Social Survey (2016)

## CONTACTING VOTERS

The 2016 Majles elections featured a wider spectrum of candidates than those held in the past. For the first time since 2008, Reformist candidates participated, after having largely boycotted or been prevented from running in the 2012 Majles election following the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in 2009.

**Candidates across this political spectrum used a variety of forms of political communication, including print, on- and off-line, and in-person tools to mobilize voters.** ISS respondents were asked several questions related to their participation in campaign events and the frequency and type of their contact with factions and candidates.

Overall, 20.4% of respondents reported attending a meeting or activity related to an electoral campaign. Attendance rates reported in the ISS are similar with attendance rates at campaign events reported for other Middle Eastern countries in Arab Barometer surveys.<sup>(10)</sup>

Most of our knowledge of Iranian campaign rallies—often held in stadiums, meeting halls, or candidate headquarters located throughout the country—comes from journalist accounts and campaign videos. The ISS sample can tell us more about who attends these events.

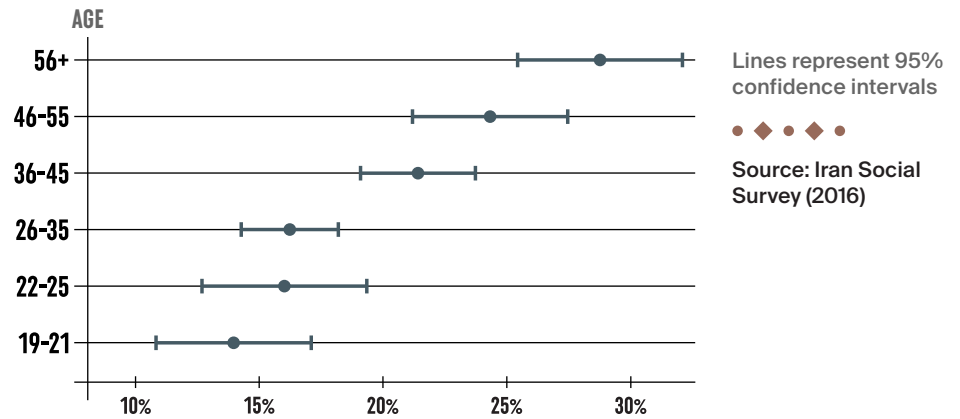
(10)  
Arab Barometer Survey  
(2017, 2014).

**Contrary to many of the images we see of mostly young Iranians at Reformist rallies, those under the age of 35 were slightly less likely to attend a campaign event in 2016 when compared to older age cohorts.**

In particular, only 13.7% of first-time voters aged 19-21 reported attending a campaign event during the Majles and Assembly of Experts elections (Figure 13).

**Attendance of campaign events differs along other lines as well.** Men are almost twice as likely (26.7%) as women (14.7%) to report attendance at a campaign event.

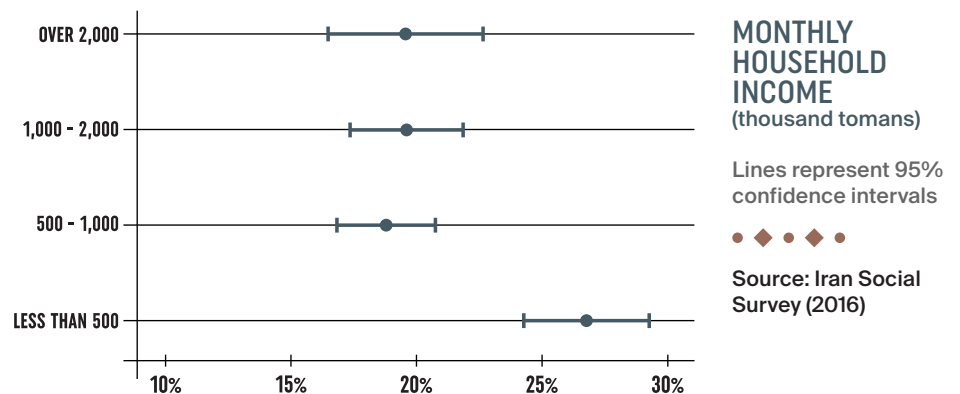
**FIGURE 13**  
ATTENDING A  
CAMPAIGN EVENT  
BEFORE THE 2016  
MAJLES ELECTION IN  
IRAN SEPARATED BY  
AGE GROUP



Respondents from lower socio-economic status households are more likely to attend campaign events. 25.7% of respondents who did not complete secondary education attended a campaign event, compared to 15.0% of respondents who completed secondary education, but do not have a university degree. 18.0% of respondents with a university degree attended a campaign event.

Similarly, respondents with a monthly household income of less than 500,000 tomans were more likely to have attended a campaign event than those in other income groups (Figure 14).

**FIGURE 14**  
ATTENDING A  
CAMPAIGN EVENT  
BEFORE THE 2016  
MAJLES ELECTION IN  
IRAN SEPARATED BY  
HOUSEHOLD INCOME



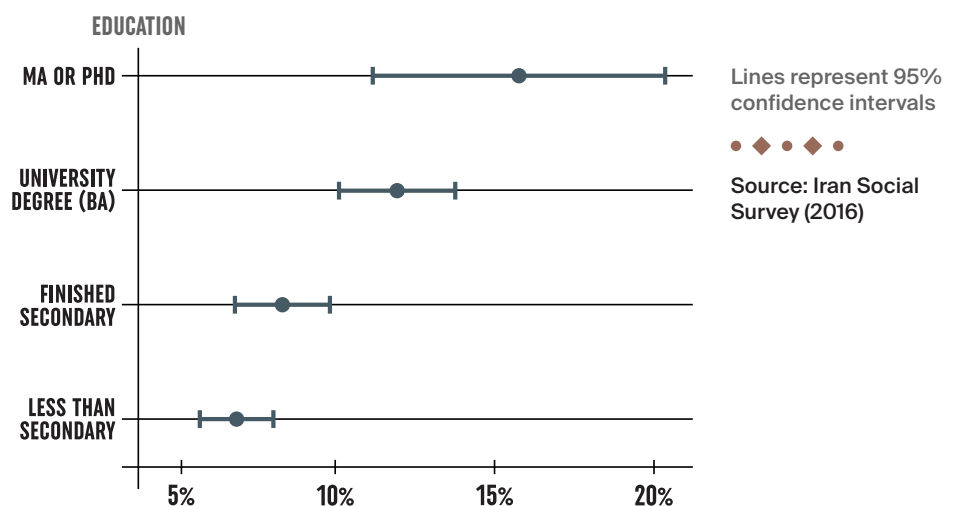
Though campaign events are well-attended during the campaign period, candidates and faction representatives also invest significant resources in encouraging citizens through other channels to vote.

**To measure variation in candidate- or faction-initiated contact, ISS respondents were asked whether or not a representative of any faction or candidate contacted them in person or by other means.** Overall, 8.8% of respondents were contacted during the 2016 campaign. Despite the reported widespread use of platforms like Telegram to mobilize citizens before the election, face-to-face contact (5.2%) with campaign representatives was as common as contact via SMS (4.4%) and social media (3.2%).

**Though respondents from lower socio-economic status households attended campaign events with greater frequency, those from higher status households were more likely to be contacted by a campaign representative.**

As shown in **Figure 15**, those with a university degree were more likely to be contacted (11.5%) than those who did not receive a secondary education (6.5%).

**FIGURE 15**  
CONTACTED BY  
CANDIDATE OR  
FACTION BEFORE  
2016 MAJLES  
ELECTION IN IRAN  
SEPARATED BY LEVEL  
OF EDUCATION



Similarly, those with a monthly household income of over two million tomans (15.5%) were nearly twice as likely to be contacted by a faction or candidate representative as those from households making less than 500,000 tomans (7.7%).

**Forms of mobilization vary, as do the strategies factions and candidates use to mobilize voters during the campaign.** Overall, ISS data suggests that citizens were far more likely to attend a campaign event than they were to be contacted by a faction or candidate representative during the campaign.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

**Given the limited extent of survey research in Iran before the ISS, it is appropriate to ask whether the aggregate data collected and presented here can be trusted by scholars and the general public.** Recent technological advances have afforded social scientists new opportunities to monitor the design and implementation of survey questions, participate in fieldwork, and improve various quality control mechanisms, such as listening to a sample of recorded interviews.

These advances complement the Iranian government's increasing and welcome willingness to permit Iranian survey researchers to operate inside the country. Where possible, the ISS has validated the data with other data collected from government ministries and journalists.

**Importantly, self-reported demographic and turnout data, as described above, match figures found in the Iranian census and released by the Ministry of Interior.** Falsification techniques, such as calculating the percentage of matching interviews, were applied to the data as an additional check after the survey data was initially collected.

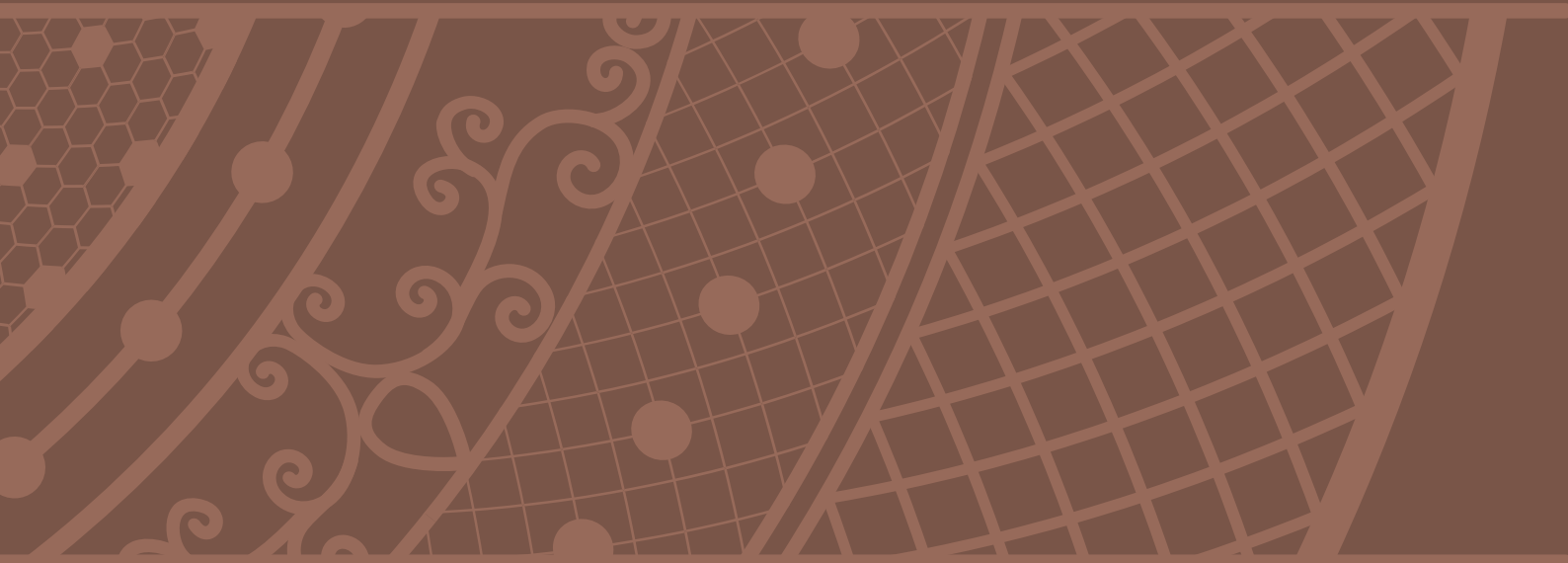
Notably, recent surveys conducted in Iran, including the ISS, have resulted in high response rates. Excluding partial interviews, 64% of respondents agreed to participate in the ISS survey. In the United States, for example, telephone surveys usually record response rates of around 10%.

**While high response rates are likely a product of low levels of polling saturation among the Iranian population, they also suggest that many outside Iran share flawed assumptions about what constitutes sensitivity in Iranian social and political discourse.**

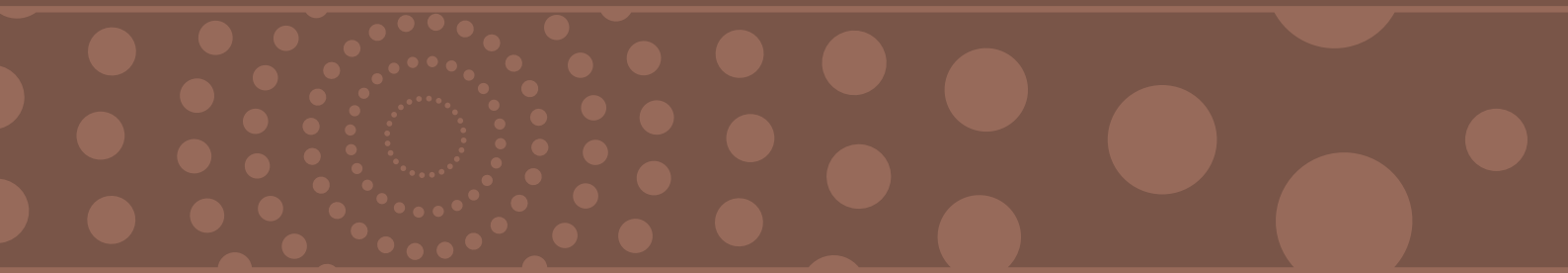
**New openings in spaces for public debate provide a promising opportunity for social scientists to gather new data and subject much of our existing knowledge of Iran to empirical tests.**



Future briefs using ISS data will continue to highlight examples where surveys can provide useful assessments of our current assumptions about everyday life and social change in the Islamic Republic of Iran.



EUROPEAN MIDDLE EAST RESEARCH GROUP



EUROPEAN MIDDLE EAST  
RESEARCH GROUP

