Iran’s 2017 Presidential Election: What to Watch For

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Introduction

As Iran’s presidential campaign heads into the homestretch before Election Day on May 19, most attention is focused on the candidates. Will the incumbent Hassan Rouhani win a second term? Or will his conservative challenger – Ebrahim Raisi – make him the Islamic Republic’s first one-term president? However, trying to predict Iranian politics can be a humbling experience. Many presidential elections in the past produced surprises and upsets: 1997 (Mohammad Khatami), 2005 (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad), 2009 (pandemonium) and 2013 (Rouhani). Precisely because anything can happen, it’s more effective to focus on trends rather than candidates. Many factors influence voter behavior. Five will likely go a long way toward determining the outcome of this election.

1) Elections Can Impact Policy

While it’s no secret that candidate disqualifications deeply narrow the field of permitted presidential contenders and reduces reformist influence, the election results are far from a given. Competition amongst political elites – albeit within a more limited ideological range – continues to intensify, and this election is serving as a catalyst for evolving relations between key stakeholders and factions. Many Iranian officials and voters agree: Preventing a repeat of the colossal damage caused by Ahmadinejad’s presidency requires new ways of sharing political and economic power, as well as recalibrating the balance of power within the establishment.

To that end, voter intrigue in 2017 seems within the range of Iran’s 2009 and 2013 elections. This demonstrates a sophisticated self-awareness among Iranian voters – an attribute not often appreciated in Washington – of the obstacles and opportunities they face. I was in Iran during its 2005 election, and when I asked friends and family whom they planned on voting for, most responses were automatic: “Nobody” or “It doesn’t make any difference.” After Ahmadinejad quickly slashed many political, economic and social freedoms, it didn’t take long for them to admit that the elections do impact policies directly affecting their wellbeing.

The president is one of the most powerful men in Iran for a variety of important reasons, including but not limited to: his ability to make personnel changes in the cabinet as well as leadership positions inside government ministries, which in turn helps facilitate his role as a
catalyst for many of Iran’s economic and foreign policies. And precisely because these key policy decisions are made by consensus rather than decree, the election of a new president changes the range of views sitting at the decision-making table. When the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani are compared in this regard, it’s clear to see why Iranian presidential elections matter: not because they change the political system, but rather because they facilitate important changes in political coalitions and animosities – and thus critical changes in personnel and policy direction. Elections therefore reaffirm Lesson 1 in Iranian politics: Iran has politics.

2) State and Society, Evolution vs. Revolution

The core slogans of Iran’s 1979 revolution were independence, freedom, and social justice. Historically, no administration has managed to successfully implement all three. Thus, many voters continue to push the Islamic Republic to live up to its own promises via changes that reflect a more pragmatic and democratic political process. To that end, this election cycle suggests a significant segment of society is trying to force changes to its relationship with Iran’s government. Whereas some Iranian officials disregard elections, the 2017 campaign shows that most take them very seriously. Knowing the importance of the presidency, stakeholders across the political spectrum have shaped aspects of their campaign strategies around society’s core aspirations. Deliverance, of course, is another matter.

Neither the Iranian electorate nor the Iranian government is monolithic, and for that reason, there is a give-and-take – or perhaps more accurately, a push-and-pull – dynamic between the two. On the one hand, a diverse set of political elites seek to utilize elections as a means of re-socializing society into the Islamic Republic every few years, with campaigns and debates providing a unique airing of grievances that paradoxically helps breathe new life into the system – so long as they stop short of protests à la 2009. On the other hand, an equally diverse electorate – with different political, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds – demands that their interests be addressed in return for electoral participation that legitimizes the system.

Increasingly, the establishment goes all out during presidential elections less because they can shape society, and more because society requires it of them. With voter turnout above 60% in each Iranian presidential election since 1997 – a higher percentage than each of the past 13 U.S. presidential elections – this begs the question: why do Iranians continue to participate in elections that they know are imperfect? Perhaps the biggest reason is a deep-seated aversion to unrest. A diverse socioeconomic swath of Iranian society wants reform, but they equally want to avoid the instability and insecurity that they’ve experienced through revolution, its aftermath, an eight-year war with Iraq, Ahmadinejad’s presidency, and the most draconian sanctions regime in the history of the world.
One preference should now be clear for all to see: Iranians do not consider U.S. military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen to be attractive models for change. Instead, their common denominator when seeking change is doing so indigenously – without bloodshed. For that reason, the crisis resulting from Iran's 2009 presidential election still festers, as evidenced by chants for former presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi at Rouhani's campaign rallies in 2013 and 2017. A growing number of voters and political elites continue pushing for reforms through gradual evolution within the existing system, while a powerful hardline minority condemns such changes – sometimes violently. No one, however, is calling for regime change or revolution. Iranians know they deserve better, but understandably fear the evident consequences of instability surrounding them across the Middle East.

3) Voter Turnout

The commonly understood trend in Iranian presidential elections is that higher voter turnout increases the most reform-minded candidate's chances of winning. The numbers speak for themselves: Khatami won in 1997 and 2001 with 79.9% and 66.8% voter turnout, respectively. Rouhani won four years ago with 72.9% turnout. Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, won in 2005 with 62.8% turnout – the lowest percentage since Hashemi Rafsanjani’s re-election in 1993. Low turnout seemingly benefits hardliners, who have a reliable base of “true believer” voters – often believed to be approximately 20% of the electorate. This is particularly true with no apparent divisions amongst reformists and pragmatists to capitalize on, and stealing the election outright remaining extremely costly (but not impossible).

This election cycle, both sides appear concerned by the prospect of voter apathy: Rouhani’s campaign because it knows high turnout is the best defense against electoral malfeasance, and Raisi’s campaign as evidenced by his use of populist rhetoric and policy proposals. With three presidential debates in the books and campaign rallies wrapping up, attention now turns to the unpredictable: How voters will respond on Election Day. If past is prologue, there are key trends worth noting. For starters, Raisi has taken a page from Ahmadinejad’s 2005 playbook, promising to increase cash handouts in an effort to attract voters to the polls. Several voters may simultaneously perceive a lie and an opportunity – maybe it won’t happen, but maybe it will, and given the poor economic conditions some face, they could see little to lose by voting accordingly.

Presidential candidates are not the only ones pushing for high turnout. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has also repeatedly pleaded with the public to vote in large numbers. The calculus is straightforward. His top priority is to cement the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy through voter turnout. Thus, the systemic priority above all else is high turnout. A close second: ensuring that after high turnout, voters perceive the electoral process as legitimate, thereby facilitating a peaceful post-election atmosphere within (and between) state and society.
Demographic factors also traditionally play a role in voter turnout. Iran has a fairly large youth population – 29% of the electorate is between the age of 18 and 29 – that tends to be more enthusiastic about voting. Combined with 1.35 million new voters during this election cycle, mobilized young Iranians could help tip the scales on Election Day. To that end, some young Iranians (as well as older demographics) are compelled to vote due to concerns that not having their ID papers stamped showing participation in national elections could adversely affect their ability to secure jobs, loans, and other significant services controlled by the state.

With over 56 million Iranians eligible to vote on May 19, a quick bit of math shows the importance of voter turnout. While it’s impossible to predict the level of mobilization on Election Day, it’s reasonable to assume that turnout will reach 65-75% – beating the 62.8% in 2005, and remaining under the 79.9% in 1997. Rouhani’s 18.6 million votes in 2013 came with 76.2% voter turnout, likely requiring this year’s winner at the polls to garner 17-19 million votes for a first round victory. To put these numbers in perspective, Ahmadinejad won the 2005 election with 5.6 million votes in the first round, 17.2 million votes in the second round run-off, a divided reformist faction, and low voter turnout. With that in mind, unless the “true believers” come out in droves for Raisi and other voters stay home, it remains to be seen if hardliners can surpass 18.6 million votes – an electoral feat they’ve yet to accomplish.

4) The Economy

Perhaps the number one issue for voters of all ages is economic dignity. Iranian society is not happy with the state of the economy – but there are differences of opinion regarding where to place the blame. To hear hardliners tell it, Rouhani has failed to deliver on his economic promises, and there’s no reason to believe he’ll do so in a second term. Conversely, Rouhani and his supporters argue that some promises have been achieved, he’s been prevented from achieving others, and he’s still working to dig Iran out of the hole created by Ahmadinejad.

To that end, there’s a clear division in discourse. Rouhani’s team wants investment, job creation, and managerial development to boost the middle class and promote equality – all of which requires improved foreign relations. This was a popular economic platform in 2013, and it remains so today. It’s therefore not surprising that Rouhani said he’d work to lift all non-nuclear sanctions in a second term. Raisi, on the other hand, is offering wealth transfers via increased monthly cash handouts, and a heavy dose of populist rhetoric. Raisi has promised to triple the payments if elected.

If this sounds familiar, that’s because it is unabashed Ahmadinejad rehash. Thus, a make-or-break question is: Will voters double down on Rouhani’s four-year economic track record, or will Ahmadinejad’s 2005 campaign strategy succeed in 2017? A variety of outcomes are possible – enlarging the Raisi voting bloc; destroying his support among “true believer” voters; mobilizing voters to cast anti-Raisi ballots for Rouhani; or a combination of the latter two scenarios.
Notably, prominent political elites have spoken out against the proposed cash handouts, saying it's not possible because the government can't afford it.

However, downplaying the appeal of Ahmadinejad’s populist platform would be a mistake: It worked once before, and parts of it retain allure during tough economic times. Like Raisi today, Ahmadinejad’s 2005 campaign criticized political elites for corruption that monopolized wealth and power; emphasized his modest background; promised greater economic opportunities for the average Iranian; and focused on economic justice to alleviate poverty. His message resonated with many who have long grappled with financial struggles – and hardliners are banking on a similar phenomenon when voters go to the polls this year.

Given Iran's long-standing economic underperformance, it’s not unreasonable that a growing number of voters might prioritize subsidies, jobs, affordable housing, and financial stability over other policy issues, both foreign and domestic. As renowned economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani notes: “Voters are maturing and are likely to pay more attention to economic programs of the presidential candidates than how they would deal with social freedoms.” Rouhani knows this, and that's why he has pushed back against Raisi’s populist onslaught by being direct about his own economic achievements – as well as the scope and source of remaining challenges.

Looking ahead, fleshing out Raisi’s use of Ahmadinejad's economic playbook requires noting two distinct differences between 12 years ago and today. First, in addition to hardline and economically disillusioned voters, Ahmadinejad also benefited from anti-Rafsanjani votes. Before his spirited defense of Green Movement protesters in 2009, reformists spent years attacking Rafsanjani as the source of their ills – and thus could not justify in a single week between rounds one and two of the 2005 election why their supporters should suddenly support him. This time around, there's no Rafsanjani scapegoat (or division among reformists and pragmatists) for hardliners to capitalize on.

No less important is the fact that Raisi is running the same Ahmadinejad-style anti-corruption, anti-establishment campaign that rails against the political elite – despite being widely known as a bonded practitioner of the corrupt establishment. Ahmadinejad's only prominent government post before the presidency was a two-year stint as mayor of Tehran. By contrast, Raisi is the chairman of Astan Qods Razavi and an Assembly of Experts member. He was also Attorney General of Iran, Deputy Chief Justice, and Tehran prosecutor. Raisi may sound like a populist, but it's not clear if he can overcome this basic contradiction in the eyes of most voters.

5) Is the Alternative to Rouhani Viable?

As Raisi tries to unseat Rouhani, there is a potential downside to plagiarizing Ahmadinejad: being seen as too closely associated with him. The former president and his cohort – some of whom are now advising Raisi’s campaigns – have made a lot of enemies inside and outside
government. A sizable portion of state and society share Rouhani’s view that it was impossible to fix in four years the economic and foreign policy damage caused by Ahmadinejad – and a relapse could dig the hole deeper. While the erstwhile president still has supporters among lower income voters for all the aforementioned reasons, most middle and upper class voters abhor his extremist political, economic, and social policies.

With that in mind, Rouhani has repeatedly reminded Iranians of how bad things got during the Ahmadinejad years, and it has turned into one of his most cogent campaign tactics. To that end, he rarely misses an opportunity to send a clear message to voters: If you don’t like me, go vote for the other guys. We’ve seen how far that gets you. It’s a compelling message, and it highlights the hardliners unsophisticated formula: 1) Blunder into quagmires; 2) Lose the presidency; 3) Blame quagmires on your successor; 4) Try to regain presidency; 5) Repeat.

If I can spot out this formula from Washington DC, it’s safe to say tens of millions of Iranian voters inside Iran have also caught on since they live through it. Hardliners had four years to develop a strategy for taking the presidency from Rouhani’s coalition, and what they’ve come up with is more of the same: Cash handouts and “Death to America.” Time will tell if the former is enough to make voters ignore the well-known foreign (and domestic) policy consequences of the latter.

Conclusion

The resiliency and dignity of Iranian society cannot be denied. Voters have been under tough conditions for so long that they’ve learned to improvise, adapt, and move forward as best they can. Past elections have proven that anything can happen when ballots are casted, which makes focusing on trends that affect voter behavior – such as how elections impact policy; the relationship between state, society, evolution and revolution; voter turnout; the economy; and whether there’s a viable alternative to Rouhani – more effective than predicting winners. One thing is certain: Iranian elections absolutely matter. At this point, even Iran’s hardliners admit that reformists and pragmatists influence policy – thereby demonstrating the importance of elections.