

THE IRAN PROJECT

# The 2016 Iranian Parliamentary Elections

## And the Future of Domestic Politics under the JCPOA

Payam Mohseni



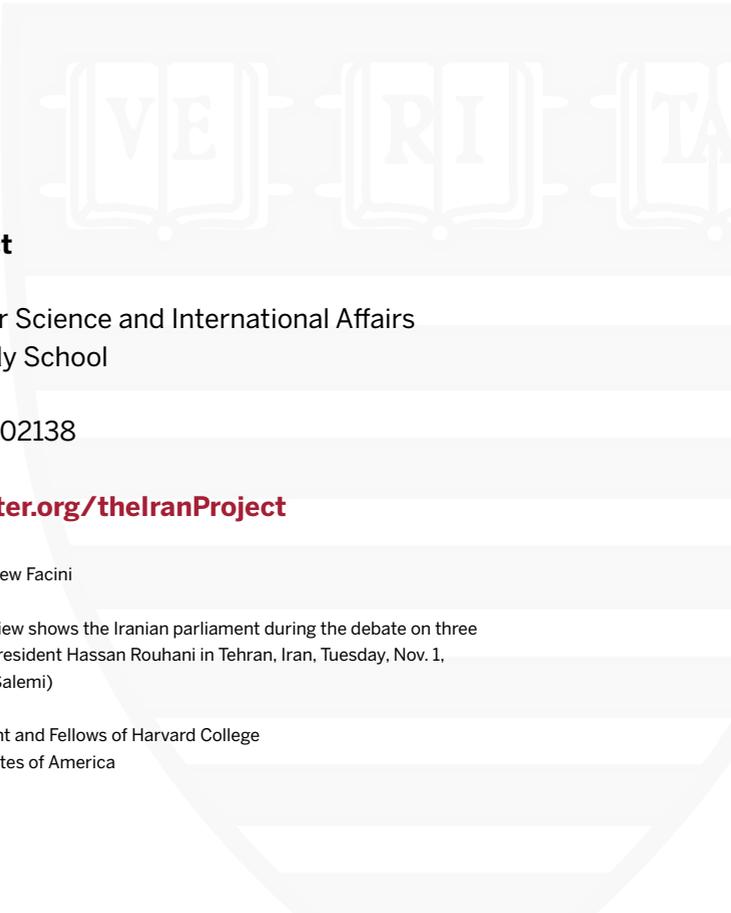
HARVARD Kennedy School

**BELFER CENTER**

for Science and International Affairs

**REPORT**

DECEMBER 2016



## **The Iran Project**

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Cover photo: A general view shows the Iranian parliament during the debate on three proposed ministers by President Hassan Rouhani in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2016. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

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## About the Author

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A general view shows the Iranian parliament during the debate on three proposed ministers by President Hassan Rouhani in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2016. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

# Introduction

Elections in Iran often catch outsiders, and perhaps equally as often insiders, by surprise. From Mohammad Khatami's shock win in 1997, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's unexpected sweep in 2005, and Hassan Rouhani's 2013 marginal victory, elections have generally confounded and caught observers off guard. In addition to indicating the competitive and fierce nature of electoral competition within Iran, the shock of election results also point to endemic misunderstandings of the factional structures driving Iranian domestic politics and electoral voting patterns. These factors are not just limited to the presidential elections but are equally true for the country's parliamentary contests, as witnessed in the 2016 elections.

Coming at a crucial juncture following the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1, Iran's 10<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections are significant for several reasons. The elections determine the makeup of the legislative branch for the next four years—four crucial years that will impact Rouhani's ability to implement his domestic policies and his likelihood to win re-election in 2017. Significantly, these elections are the first Iran experienced since the signing of the JCPOA agreement and as such reflect the early impact of the nuclear agreement on domestic political change inside Iran.

Additionally, the new parliament will have a role in dealing with a reinvigorated cold war with Saudi Arabia, ever-increasing threats of regional sectarianism, and uncertain relations with the United States and the new Trump administration. As endemic uncertainty looms over the horizon, one thing is for sure: Iranian factionalism will continue to dominate the country's political scene and could threaten the basic tenets of the nuclear deal and Rouhani's hope to reintegrate Iran into the global economy.

While conservative forces (the theocrats) faced a humbling defeat in the elections, the disparity of seats won in parliament by the moderates and reformists (the republicans) do not represent an electoral sweep either. Only in Tehran were the moderates and reformists able to achieve a crushing victory—in the rest of the country the picture is much more balanced and nuanced, reflecting a more even division of power between other major groups. Overall, the republicans stand at a modest plurality of 34.6% of seats, and the Majles is balanced between an additional three main camps: theocrats (29.7%); independents (25.2%); and modern theocrats (8.7%). Interestingly, outside Tehran, the theocrats did the best in the largest urban cities of the country, while independents were very strong in the less urban areas and provinces. The 2016 parliamentary elections thus did not result in a clear electoral victory for republicans but rather a symbolic one—signaling that the republicans are not only back to stay, but now enjoy the mainstream support of the political establishment. This bodes well for the re-election of Rouhani next May.

The broader factional divisions in parliament, however, present Rouhani with their own particular challenges, especially in light of the potential ramifications the nuclear agreement may have on Iran's domestic politics. Despite finding more allies in the Majles, the composition of the current parliament does not necessarily make Rouhani's job any easier. Instead, it presents him with a set of dilemmas that could seriously undermine his ability to implement his domestic political agenda and to devise a winning electoral strategy for re-election in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The successful signing of the nuclear agreement by Rouhani provided him a significant internal boost which undoubtedly helped him and his allies in the parliamentary elections—increasing the presence of reformist and moderate voices in the parliament. But the internal politicking which led to the passage of the nuclear agreement

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1 Payam Mohseni, "How Rouhani could lose even if reformists win Iran's election," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2016.

also included significant conservative voices that Rouhani managed to include within his larger ruling coalition, and Rouhani will need to make sure his conservative allies are rewarded.

To understand the future of Iranian domestic politics and the impact of the JCPOA on Iranian politics, it is critical to assess the evolution and trends of this cross-factional coalition comprising of reformists, conservatives, and moderates. Will Rouhani be able to keep the coalition together? If so, how? And if not, and the coalition begins to fray, how will this process transpire and what implications will it hold for the president and the Supreme Leader? Currently, Rouhani's coalition is under threat for four reasons: 1) its *raison d'être*—the lifting of sanctions—has been achieved, thus opening the way for policy divergences to come to the fore; 2) the moderates' electoral campaigning methods for the 2016 parliamentary elections were politically polarizing; 3) the economic benefits of the nuclear agreement have yet to be realized—creating the space for greater political disillusionment; and, finally 4) the election of Donald Trump as the next U.S. president bolsters the more hardline Iranian factions and raises serious questions about the future viability of the nuclear agreement. If the Trump administration takes a hardline approach with Iran over the terms of the nuclear agreement or tries to re-negotiate the treaty, Rouhani will likely be forced to retreat into the conservative camp due to massive elite and popular antagonism against America over its perceived ill-will to abide by the spirit of the deal.

Rouhani's rivals, the Iranian hardliners are playing a nuanced game. For them, Rouhani is useful—as long as he is constrained—since he can act as an asset that allows Iran an amiable global diplomatic face that enables the country to gain access to global markets, to increase its ability to sell oil, and to better reap the soft diplomatic benefits of the nuclear agreement, all while key tenets of Iranian foreign and revolutionary policy remain in place. The

hardliners have not decreased their support for the Syrian government or involvement in Iraq but have rather used the opportunity to strengthen their position and forge a trans-regional alliance with an increasing number of partners, including Russia. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, thus, is not necessarily opposed to the president's reelection as Rouhani can provide a managed opening with the West while taking the blame for a faltering economy and poor governance. Indeed, the leader's disapproval of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—Iran's prior hardline president—running in the election is reflective of this position.

Nevertheless, Rouhani and his allies will become deeply embarrassed if the Trump administration undermines the JCPOA, and they will likely be forced to move closer to the conservative camp to ensure their political survival in the face of elite and popular backlash against perceived American ill-will towards the nuclear agreement and Iran.

The conservatives will thus continue to retain their control over the important security-foreign policy levers of power and preserve their economic interests as well. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati's election as head of the Assembly of Experts, the body that chooses the next Supreme Leader, therefore, served a signal to Iranian moderates and reformists that their influence is limited and must stay within a set of political boundaries—especially when it comes to core positions and ideals of the revolution, particularly that of the Supreme Leader. Nevertheless, in this tug of war between Rouhani and his conservative opponents, the strength of Rouhani's hand and his ability to deliver economically will be the most fundamental determinant of how the future politics of the coalition proceeds.

While the Belfer Center's previous reports have focused on the details of the nuclear agreement,<sup>2</sup> and the ramifications of the deal on the Arab world<sup>3</sup> and Israel,<sup>4</sup> this report focuses on the JCPOA's impact on domestic Iranian politics and the 2016 parliamentary elections. To analyze these issues, it begins by looking at the earlier trends in Iranian politics and the impact of sanctions and the nuclear negotiations on the domestic factional balance of power. It discusses and identifies the main Iranian factions and the re-alignment of factional politics that occurred prior to the electoral victory of Rouhani. The report then proceeds to discuss the impact of the implementation of the JCPOA on Iranian politics through an analysis of the parliamentary elections, including election campaigning as well as the elections results nationally and by province and city. Next, it analyzes the Assembly of Experts elections and concludes with the implications of the elections and the JCPOA on the future of domestic Iranian politics for the short to medium terms.

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- 2 Gary Samore, ed., *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide*, Cambridge, Mass.: Report for Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 2015.
  - 3 Payam Mohseni, ed., *Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era*, Cambridge, Mass.: Report for Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 2015.
  - 4 Payam Mohseni, ed., *Tipping the Balance? Implications of the Iran Nuclear Deal on Israeli Security*, Cambridge, Mass.: Report for Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, December 2015.

# Iranian Politics before the JCPOA

To understand the impact of the JCPOA on domestic Iranian politics and the parliamentary elections of 2016, a background discussion of the context and major trends of Iranian politics prior to the nuclear agreement is necessary. As Iranian politics is dominated by weakly institutionalized factions rather than strong political parties, the political scene is striking in its fluidity and the numerous shifts in balance of power that occur between elite factions. A significant re-alignment of factional power relations took place with the fragmentation of the conservative bloc as a consequence of the disputed 2009 presidential elections—a division that was further exacerbated by the sanctions regime of 2012 and that paved the way for a Rouhani victory in the 2013 presidential elections. A new and broad coalition of disparate voices supported the president's mandate to reach an agreement with the international community on its nuclear program and remove sanctions. With the agreement finalized, a new chapter in Iranian politics has begun. The future of Iranian politics will be driven by recalibrations of elite political coalitions depending on how the economic and political impact of the JCPOA unfolds, including whether the new American administration will abide by the agreement or reverse course and become more confrontational towards Iran.

## Iranian factions

Political factions are networks of individuals, associations, and parties loosely affiliated with one another, and they serve as the main political vehicle by which the Iranian elite compete over state and non-state institutions through both electoral and

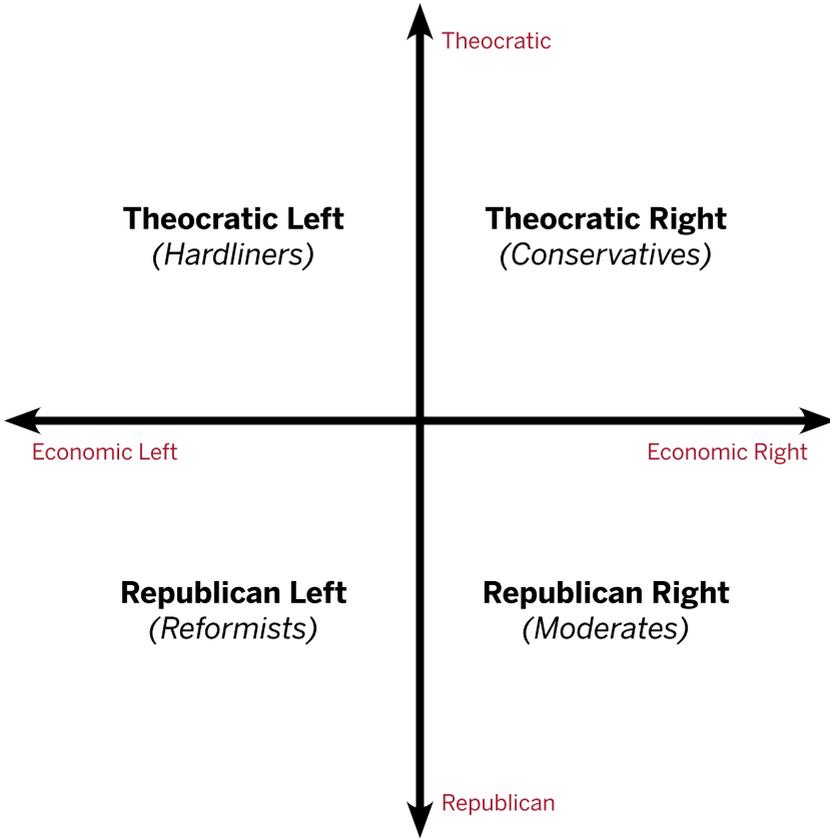
non-electoral means. While factional identification of actors within Iran is commonly viewed as a dichotomy between reformist and conservative forces, or hardliners and softliners, such an understanding betrays the intricacy of true factional complexity within Iran. A nuanced approach that can more fully demonstrate the major contours of Iranian factional politics can be captured by a classificatory system which I have developed elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

As Figure 1 demonstrates, factional dynamics can be mapped on two central axes: the republican-theocratic continuum on the y-axis and the economic continuum on the x-axis. The former captures positions regarding the ideological legitimacy of the regime—whether a more predominant position is given to the divine legitimacy of the state or to its popular legitimacy, both representing the twin pillars of state legitimacy. The x-axis concerns the economic dimension in which those on the left are supportive of state economic redistribution and intervention, while those on the right favor a smaller state and a more laissez-faire capitalist model of state-economy relations. This two-by-two matrix creates the conceptual space to identify the four main Iranian political factions since the revolution: the theocratic left, the theocratic right, the republican left, and the republican right. The labels in the parenthesis (i.e. reformists, hardliners, etc.) in Figure 1 allude to identity markers used by the media to label factions but are not consistent or systematic. As such, they do not clearly map on to the main classification used below (i.e. the theocratic-republican and economic left-right matrix) but rather provide a roadmap of comparison between colloquial markers and this more systematic classification.

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5 This classification is discussed in further detail in Payam Mohseni, “Economic Privatization, Factional Politics, and Regime Transformation,” in *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, eds. Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (Indiana University Press, 2016), 36-79.

Figure 1  
**Classification of Iranian Political Factions**



## The republican left

The republican left quadrant represents the core conceptual space where the reformist forces belong. Reformist ideas have given primacy to the republican ideals of the state including popular sovereignty and a prominent role to the state in the economy, resulting in their positioning on the left of the economic spectrum. In the 1980s, these forces were amongst the most radical revolutionary groups and were known for their economic and political fervor. Over time however, many but not all reformist elites have slowly abandoned or changed their positions, including on the economy, as they have largely shifted to the right.<sup>6</sup> Key figures on the republican left are the green movement leaders Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Mohammad Khatami is also associated with the republican left, although he has shifted his economic positions substantially.

## The republican right

The republican right quadrant represents the ideals of much of the technocratic class of the Islamic Republic—the camp from which the current President Hassan Rouhani hails. As republicans, they give greater weight to the popular roots of the Islamic Republic than its divine sacredness, and economically espouse views more similar to economic neoliberalism more in line with a China-model of development. Another key figure in this camp besides the president includes Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the Kargozaran party is one of the main parties within this faction.

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6 For more details on the factional shift of the republican left in Iran, see: Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, (Chicago: University of Chicago University Press, 2001).

## The theocratic right

The theocratic right quadrant comprises the traditional core power base of the Islamic Republic of the clergy and the bazaari merchants. The divine legitimacy of the regime is paramount, and economically they prefer less state regulation of the economy—though not necessarily neoliberal policies as they prefer state protectionism too for certain import mercantile arenas. Key figures include Ali Akbar Velayati, Ali Larijani, and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. More recently, as will be discussed later in this report, a “modern” sub-faction of the theocrats has emerged, spearheaded by Ali Larijani. The “modern theocrats” are more pragmatic in their ideals of how to interact with the world and structure the regime’s relations with society—breaking with more hardliner forces within the theocratic right camp, including staunchly backing the nuclear agreement. Technically, however, individuals considered “hardliners” represent elements that span across both the theocratic right and left factions.

## The theocratic left

The theocratic left quadrant represents the populist Islamic factions where many of the core believers of the Islamic Republic are situated, hailing namely from the Basij and IRGC. They place greater credence upon the divine basis of the regime and are supportive of state intervention and redistribution in the economy. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a key personality of the theocratic left camp. While many of the values and ideals claimed by the Supreme Leader also lean toward this camp, Ayatollah Khamenei tends to balance and shift between the two theocratic camps depending on the political circumstances of the time.

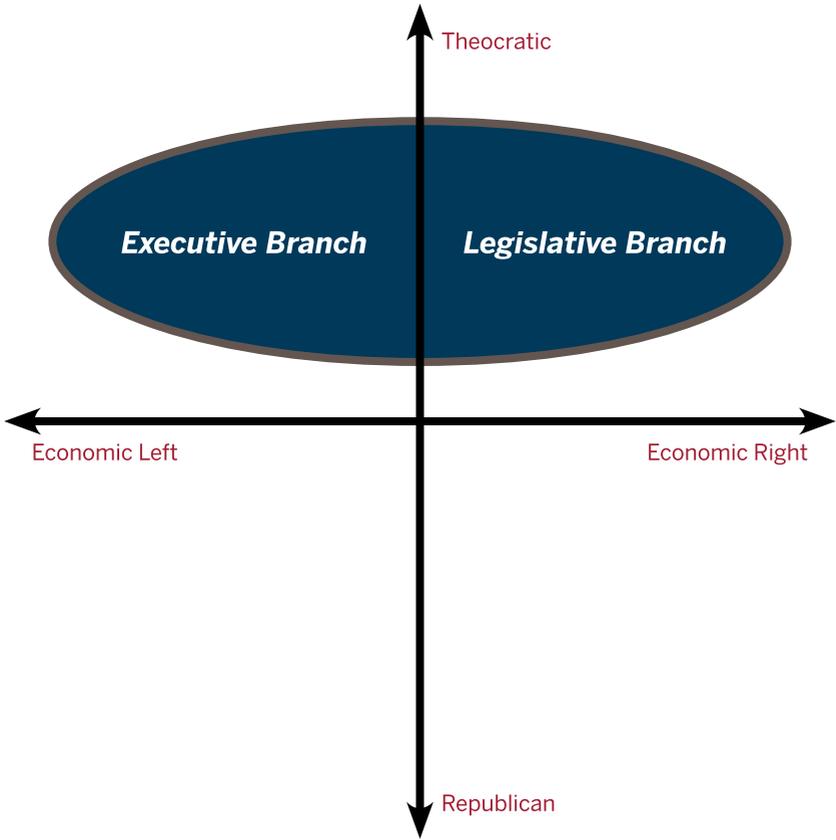
## Political trends prior to the 2016 elections

As any one individual faction has proven too weak to assume full control of the state, Iranian politics has been characterized by tactical political alliances between different factions at any one time. These alliances largely depend on the uncertain outcome of competitive elections for the presidency and the parliament. During the period from 2005 to the summer of 2013, the Ahmadinejad administration was marked by the alliance of the theocratic factions (see Figure 2), one that replaced the alliance of the republicans between 1997 and 2004. As an outsider to the elite powerholders of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's populist economic policies and idiosyncratic management style created a divide within the theocratic forces, particularly with his alienation of the theocratic right, which manifested itself in the victory of the theocratic right in the parliamentary elections of 2008.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Ali Larijani, who had served as a former nuclear negotiator as the head of the Supreme National Security Council, replaced Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel on the theocratic left as the new parliamentary speaker.

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7 On the fragmentation of the theocrats in the 2008 Majles elections, see Farideh Farhi, "Iran's 2008 Majles Elections: The Game of Elite Competition," *Middle East Brief*, no. 29. Brandeis University: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, May 2008.

Figure 2  
**The Alliance of the Theocrats: Ahmadinejad, 2005–2013**



The fragmentation of the theocrats and significant shifts in factional relations were exacerbated in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections. With the contested election and the rise of the green movement, the victory of the theocratic left caused important segments of the theocratic right to shift towards the republican right to contain and counteract the theocratic left. This phenomenon was reflected by the effective defection of some former theocratic figureheads such as Ali Motahhari, who later joined the republican dominated List of Hope for the 2016 parliamentary elections. This was a very interesting counter-balance moment that did not necessarily have to take place if it were not for the increasingly exclusionary approach of Ahmadinejad who restricted rather than enlarged his coalition of power.

## The role of sanctions in the recalibration of elite power

The imposition of increased international sanctions, particularly with a punishing oil embargo and the denial of Iranian access to the SWIFT messaging service in 2012,<sup>8</sup> perpetuated the divide between the theocratic left and theocratic right camps, and further bolstered the growing alliance and similarity in positions between the theocratic and republican right. In particular, it highlighted a convergence on foreign policy positions—centered on criticisms of the country’s handling of the nuclear negotiations—as well as a convergence on economic positions and the necessity and value of re-integrating and normalizing ties with the global financial markets and international banking system.

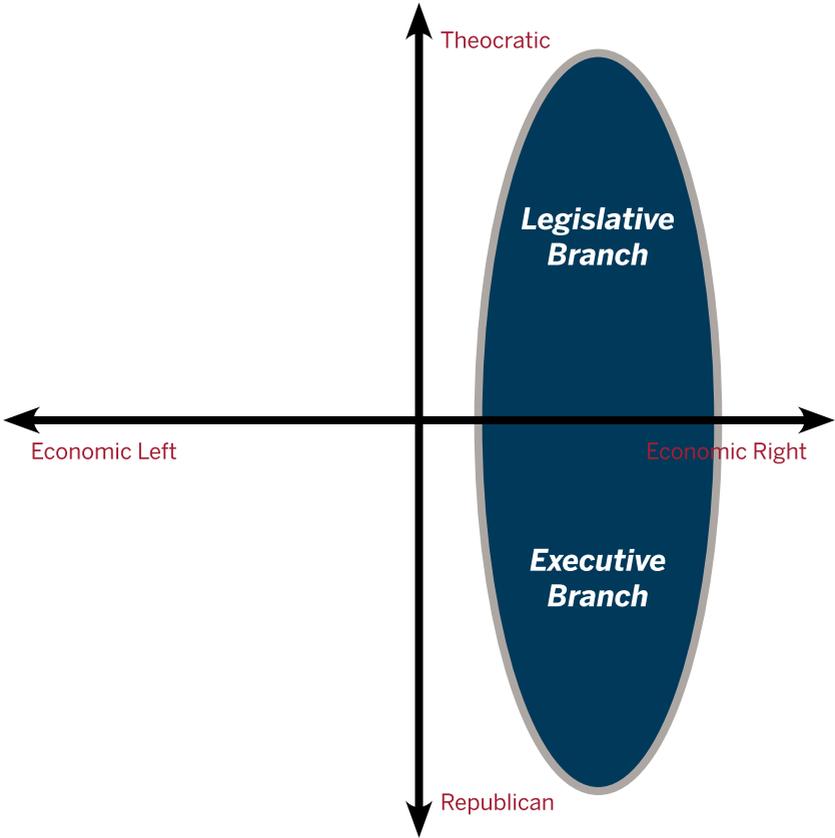
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8 For a detailed account of the history of international sanctions against Iran, see: Gary Samore, ed. *Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables*. Cambridge, Mass.: Report for Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June, 2015.

The theocratic right represents many traditional *bazaari* and mercantile interests, and the republican right largely reflects modern capitalist and industrial producers—both of which favor a private sector approach that enables Iran to trade and interact with the global economy, an objective undermined by sanctions. In contrast, other theocrats, particularly the theocratic left, did not believe that the sanctions had hurt the country and spoke of continuing political and economic resistance. The theocratic left saw in the sanctions an opportunity to form new economic projects and focus on boosting domestic economic strength. Certain elite groups within the theocratic left are sheltered through domestic patronage networks of foundations and para-statal organizations, some of which have links to the Revolutionary Guards. These groups saw economic isolation as a blessing in disguise and opportunity rather than a vulnerability that had to be addressed, with some elements benefiting greatly from the black market and the isolation.

Sanctions thus contributed to a re-calibration of political forces within the Iranian political system so critical for Rouhani's election to power, as key segments of the conservative factions shifted towards Rouhani. The election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency in June 2013 formally marked the ascension of the alliance of the right to power as depicted in Figure 3—an alliance that developed as a consequence of Iranian domestic politics in reaction to the rise of Ahmadinejad and that was further strengthened by international sanctions. The presidential election was key to enabling the shift of Iran in foreign policy and nuclear negotiations that we so strikingly see today.

Figure 3  
The Alliance of the Right: June 2013–February 2016



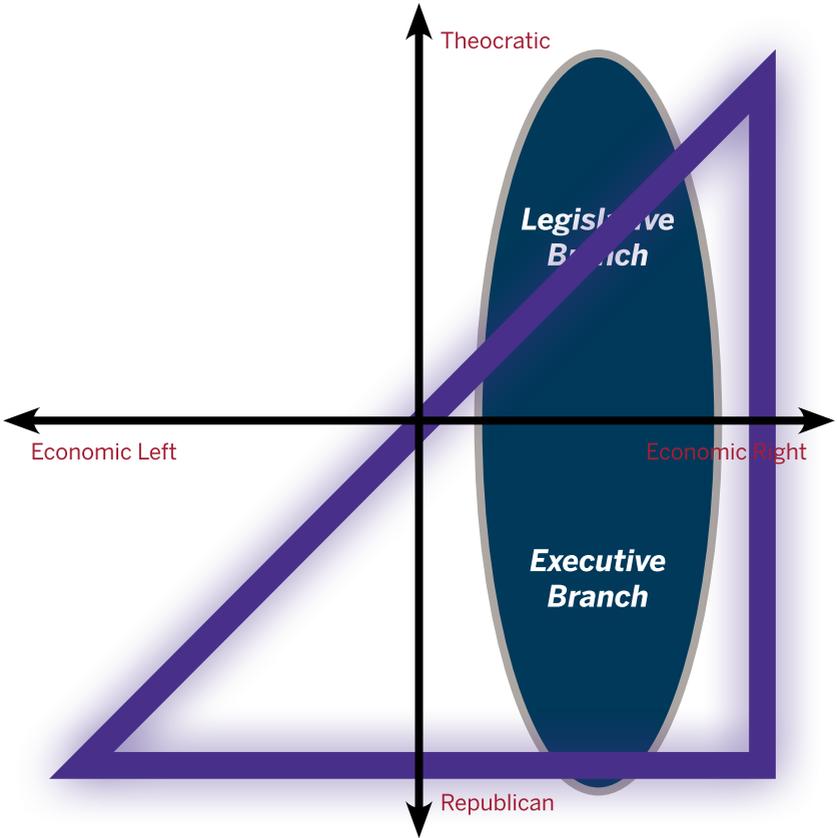
If the theocratic left's candidate Saeed Jalili had won, a similar shift would not have occurred despite the economic pressure imposed on Iran or the fact that Iran had already begun secret negotiations prior to the elections. The reason is that a change in domestic balance of power is critical in shaping the Supreme Leader's calculations. The ascension of Jalili would have empowered the hardliner factions of the theocrats and relatively weakened a segment of theocrat right forces who persuaded Ayatollah Khamenei to begin secret negotiations due to economic pressures and who would later support Rouhani in the presidential elections. Consequently, there would have been a marked difference in Khamenei's preferences and strategic decision making should Jalili have become president rather than Rouhani. Hardliner voices that were critical of the negotiations could have at a minimum driven up the price for the agreement, as much of my fieldwork has demonstrated,<sup>9</sup> something that the US would not have likely accepted.

With the election of Rouhani, however, a larger recalibration of political forces occurred, as depicted with the elite power triangle in Figure 4. The impact of sanctions should accordingly be viewed through the lens of electoral turnover and the domestic shifts of power that produced a Rouhani victory on the republican right. The power triangle that emerged in support of the new administration, however, is much broader as it encompasses not only the two rights but also the republican left faction that had been instrumental in backing Rouhani in the presidential elections. Much of the popular support Rouhani gathered was from reformist-minded Iranians, with formal reformist backing materializing through Mohammad Reza Aref's withdrawal from the election in favor of Rouhani. Moreover, former President Mohammad Khatami lent his support for his candidacy via a strong social media campaign.

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9 For example, see: Payam Mohseni, "The Iranian elite and the nuclear negotiations: My reflections from Iran," *Iran Matters*, August 19, 2014.

Figure 4  
**Power Triangle of the Rouhani Coalition: June 2013–February 2016**



Based on the configuration of power at the time of his presidential victory, and in an attempt to strengthen his position and social base of support within the system, Rouhani faced two key political objectives that were—and are—at tension with one another. The first was to prevent the defection of theocratic right forces and to thus retain and even increase their support for his administration. He critically needed the cooperation of the theocratic right to govern the country and to implement his programs and policies; otherwise, the faction could act as a roadblock and constantly veto any moves the president makes and undermine the administration. The second was to further the re-incorporation of the republican left within the halls of power and to expand his power base among republican forces. This was necessary to help strengthen his hand in relation to theocrats and to achieve his electoral campaign promise to decrease the security environment and allow for greater political liberalization.<sup>10</sup> The closer Rouhani moves towards the reformists, however, the more he risks alienating the conservatives who will look to undermine his power and, if necessary, turn to a more suitable candidate in the next presidential elections to support their interests.

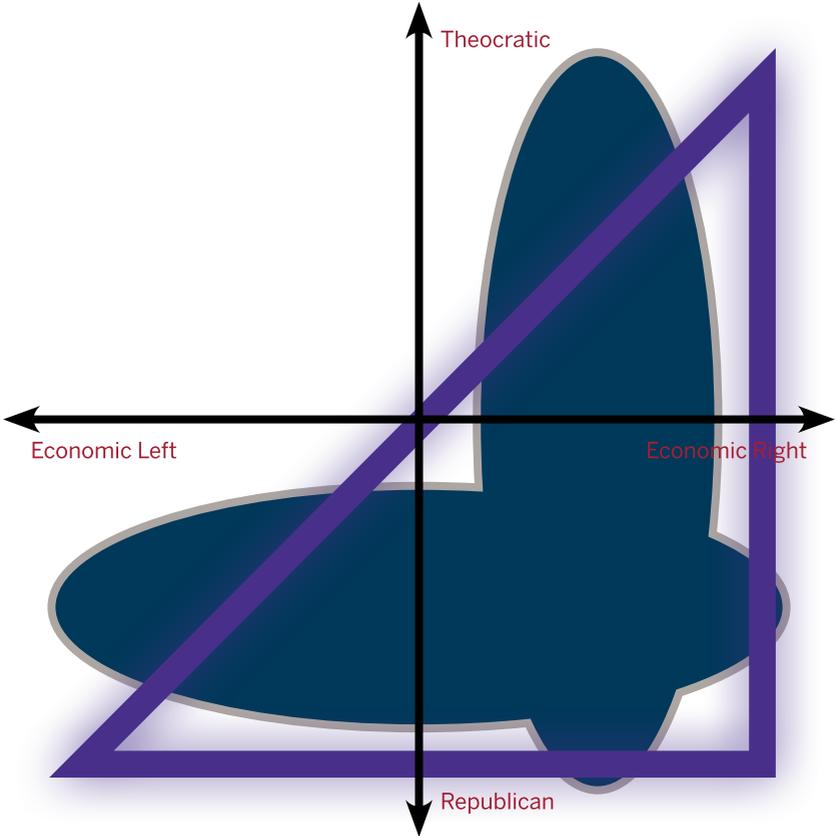
## The JCPOA and the 2016 election campaign

How Rouhani will incorporate and sustain both the republican left and the theocratic right within his coalition is the main narrative which has and will shape Iranian domestic politics—both demonstrated in the 2016 parliamentary elections as well as into the future for his re-election campaign in 2017. Within the power triangle of the administration, there is a tension between a republican alliance (the republican right and republican left) and a right alliance (the theocratic right and republican right), as represented in Figure 5. The JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions

<sup>10</sup> For a greater discussion of these dynamics, see Farideh Farhi, “Understanding Iran Ahead of Geneva Talks Round II,” *LobeLog*, Nov. 5, 2013.

extenuate factional divisions underpinning the coalition since the main driver for its formation (the goal to lift international sanctions) has been achieved through the resolution of the nuclear stalemate. Thus, the factional divergences over the economy, domestic politics, and foreign policy that had become secondary can potentially become all the more divisive and come to the fore.

Figure 5  
**Tension of Right Alliance vs. Republican Alliance,  
2016 Parliamentary Elections**



The lifting of international sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program was a major victory for Rouhani but has created serious challenges to his elite base of support and future political strategy. The nuclear agreement initially boosted the president's popularity<sup>11</sup> and gave his government access to much sought after capital, but it also carries the potential of splitting the elite coalition which included significant segments of the theocratic right that had gathered behind him in the presidential elections supporting his promise to solve the nuclear agenda. These short term victories must translate into substantive economic betterment for both the elite and regular Iranian citizens, or else Rouhani's coalition will likely fragment and his popular support will plummet.

While many reformist candidates had been originally disqualified for the 2016 parliamentary elections, the reversal of the disqualifications of reformist candidates and their entry into the Majles accentuates Rouhani's dilemma as the factional scene becomes more polarized and less congenial for attempts to bridge the differences between the various power centers. With more like-minded republican candidates reinstated by the Guardian Council, Rouhani's moderate faction ran joint lists with reformists in large cities, notably in the capital Tehran.<sup>12</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, various theocratic actors formed the Principlist Coalition Council in an attempt to forge an electoral political alliance.<sup>13</sup> The two main electoral lists, therefore, as represented in Figure 6, represent a polarization across the theocratic and republican positions, rather than between the right and left, or right and republican.

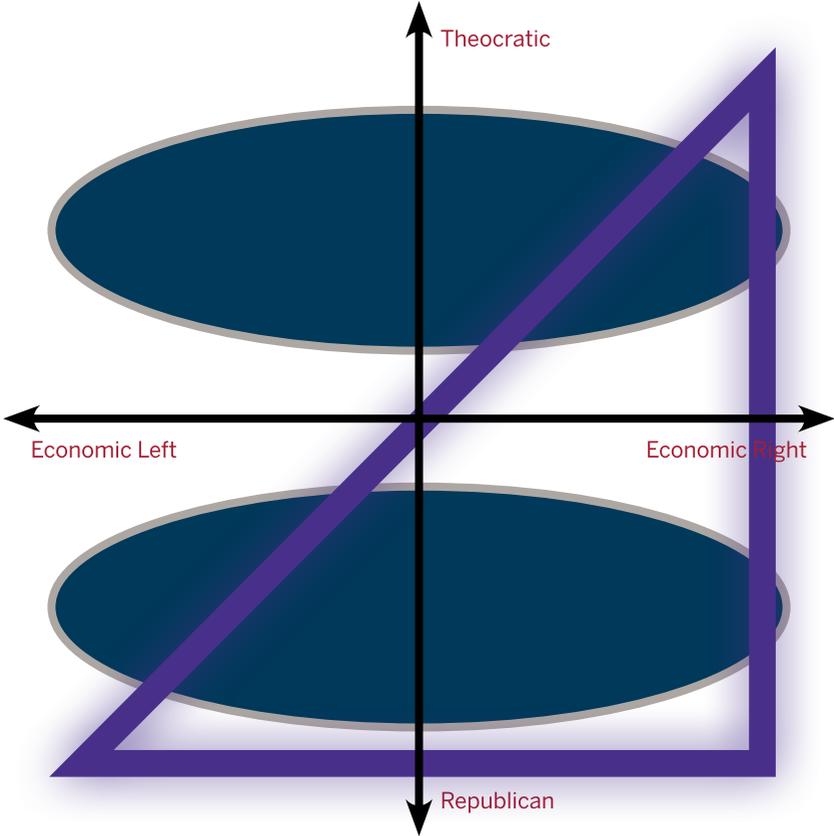
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11 Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, and Clay Ramsey, "Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Agreement," *Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland*, September 2015.

12 "The Reformist and Supporters of the Government Coalition List for Tehran has been Finalized," *Fars News*, Feb. 16, 2016.

13 "The Finalized List of the Greater Principlist Coalition in the Entire Country," *Fars News*, Feb. 19, 2016

Figure 6  
**Republican Alliance vs. Theocratic Alliance:**  
**2016 Iranian Parliamentary Lists**



Rouhani's supporters in the republican right chose to ally with the republican left as a key pillar of his strategy to garner popular reformist votes. As a result of the polarized lists, however, Rouhani missed a unique opportunity to develop a strong and unique faction on the republican right following his victory with the nuclear agreement. Rouhani risked this alliance by taking a hardline stance against the theocratic base and Supreme Leader in the run-up to the elections and publicly running joint lists with the reformists. Rouhani's options, however, were not limited. His supporters could have positioned themselves as neither conservatives nor reformists—thus overcoming the inherent polarization that had been taking place in the Iranian political scene. In other words, instead of allying with the reformists and republican left, he could have run his own list of republican right candidates and preserved his coalition with moderate theocrats. This way, Rouhani would have created a stronger third force in Iranian politics. But the moderates' heavy reliance on the discourse of the reformists on the republican left have greatly hampered such an effort and have created lasting suspicions within the theocratic forces of Rouhani.

By adopting a polarization strategy, Rouhani has narrowed his maneuverability as he must now strike a balance between opposing forces and risk the very political formula which ensured his internal political success in the first place. Moreover, as it becomes increasingly clear that the economic boon promised to the Iranian people by Rouhani is not delivering results, Rouhani and the republicans will be even further weakened. In such a circumstance, even the republicans may be forced to take a more hardline stance on the West and re-assess their decision to engage the international community and strike a nuclear agreement. Rouhani's decision to order research on nuclear propulsion for the Iranian navy in response to the extension of the Iran Sanctions Act in December 2016 by the U.S. Congress demonstrates this line of calculation. In this way, the lack of support by the international

community to provide Iran with economic investment will only further empower the theocrats. More importantly, the West will lose the trust and positive outlooks of ordinary Iranians. Already, a near inverse in economic expectations regarding the nuclear agreement has taken place for Iranians in the span of a year: according to a University of Maryland poll, when the nuclear deal was signed, 63% of Iranians expected “tangible economic improvements within a year. However, a year later, three quarters (74%) of Iranians say there has been no improvement at all.”<sup>14</sup>

Ayatollah Khamenei has employed a clever strategy to distance himself from the nuclear agreement in order to allow the people to be the judge and to put the ball within the U.S. court. The public voted for Rouhani and trusted that as a result of the nuclear negotiations, the Iranian economy would benefit. Arguments that put the blame on the Iranian economy for a lack of foreign investment will not be convincing to Iranians irrespective of political orientation unless there is a visible economic benefit seen from the JCPOA. If economic conditions do not become better, many will begin to think that the Supreme Leader—and even the prior president Ahmadinejad—had been right all along to distrust the West. This experience will greatly shape the mindset of the young generation of Iran as their first bitter experience with the United States.

Speaking on the need for economic self-reliance and the necessity to encourage domestic production, the Supreme Leader stated:

Our own officials in the diplomatic corps, the very same ones who were present in the [nuclear] negotiations from the beginning to the end are saying that America has broken its promise. Under the calm façade and attractive

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<sup>14</sup> See: “New poll of the Iranian people on the anniversary of nuclear deal (JCPOA),” *Iran Poll*, July 7, 2016.

rhetoric of its officials and the Secretary of State and others, America is being destructive behind the scenes, restricting the country's economic relations with other countries of the world—this is what the very same officials who negotiated the JCPOA are saying. I have been repeatedly saying these statements, for about a year or year and a half: the Americans cannot be trusted.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Rouhani explicitly criticized the U.S. Congress, Republicans, Israel, and other regional countries for trying to undercut the nuclear agreement. The president stated that if the Americans had acted with good intentions regarding the JCPOA, they would have prevented the current obstructionism, in which case he was ready to enter negotiations on another unnamed “issue” beneficial for the region and for the U.S.<sup>16</sup>

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15 “Statements in a meeting with different segments of the people,” *Office for the Preservation and Publication of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei*, August 1, 2016.

16 “The President in a Televised Dialogue with the People,” *Communications Center of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 25, 2016.

# The Parliamentary Election Results

## National results

The parliamentary elections occurred over two rounds and resulted in a symbolic victory for the republicans. In the city of Tehran—the most significant win for the republicans—the List of Hope won all thirty seats in the first round in what was a humiliating defeat to the theocratic forces. Nationally, however, the results were more mixed, although the republicans fared better than the theocrats in the second round of the elections. Rather than a decisive victory for the republicans, the elections represent the comeback of republican forces in the Majles that will surely impact the future of Iranian politics.

Table 1 depicts the national seat distribution of the 10<sup>th</sup> Iranian parliament in the first round, second round, and overall results. The chart lists the electoral results according to four factional categories: theocrats, republicans, independents, and modern theocrats. Both the theocratic left and theocratic right factions are classified as “theocrats” and the republican left and republican right factions are classified as “republicans.” These categories largely reflect how the parliamentary lists were forged, with the main fault line separating republican and theocratic factional lists. Independents either did not run on party lists in the first round of elections or they were largely perceived to have no clear factional identification. The “modern theocrats” refers to the newer shift and grouping within the theocratic forces, exemplified by Ali Larijani, who have moved closer towards the republican right quadrant and have been supportive of President Rouhani, as explained at length earlier in this report.

Accordingly, my methodology for factional classification is based on two elements: 1) the electoral party lists, and 2) cross-factional perceptions of the factional affinity of each candidate. I initially identify candidate factions based on the party list they choose to run on or whether they run independently, if such reliable information is extant. I then compare and verify this information with the factional classifications provided by other major mainstream Iranian news outlets that reflect a representative range of ideological positions within Iran—including *ISNA*, *Fars News*, *Tabnak*, and *Khabar Online*. Due to the vague nature of Iranian factions and party lists, factional identification is quite a very challenging enterprise. This is particularly the case with independents and modern theocrats where adequate information is lacking. Undertaking this endeavor, however, is still significant in that—while not exact—it can still provide us with overarching patterns and insights on the nature and trend lines of Iranian politics.

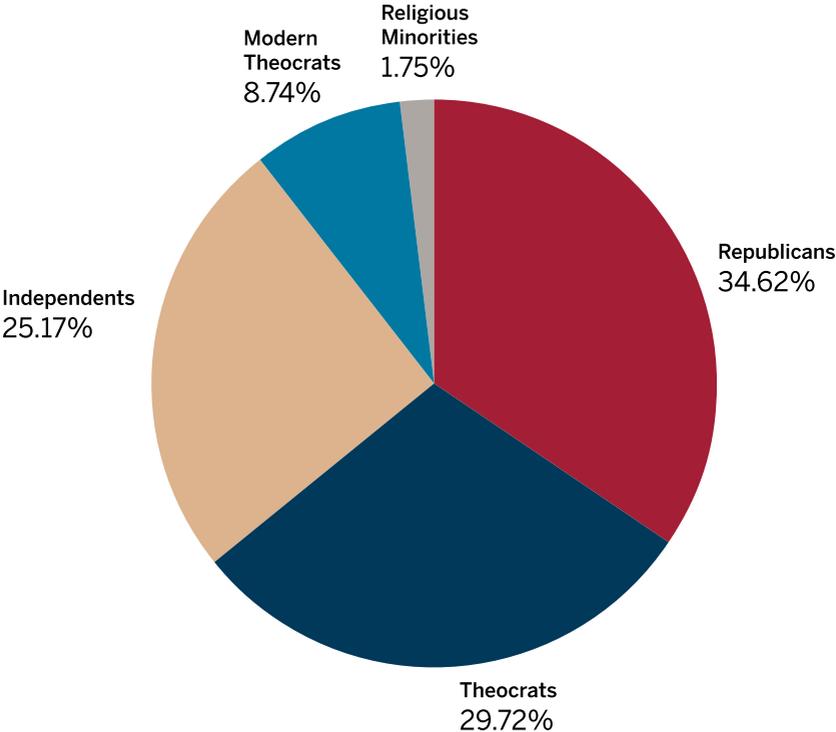
Table 1  
**National Factional Seat Shares (%) by Election Rounds in the 10th Iranian Parliament**

Election	Theocrats	Modern Theocrats	Republicans	Independents	Religious Minorities
Round 1 National Elections*	32.58	8.60	35.75	20.81	2.26
Round 2 National Elections	20.00	9.23	30.77	40.00	–
Final National Results	29.72	8.74	34.62	25.17	1.75

\* Result percentages represent all final seat victories that do not go to a second round

As depicted in Figure 7, the overall results show that republicans won a plurality of the parliament with 34.6% of the seats, edging out the theocrats, standing at 29.7%, by 4.9%. The modern theocrats are much smaller, with an 8.7% seat share of the parliament. Given that neither of the two camps have attained a majority of the parliament, the role of the independents will be significant as well. Independents captured a 25.2% control of the Majles. The supporters of the administration, however, reflective of Rouhani's power triangle (the republicans plus the modern theocrats), have received the largest share of any of the groups, winning 43.4% of seats in the national legislature. This represents a significant boost for President Rouhani.

Figure 7  
**Total Factional Seat Shares (%)**



## Round one

The first round of the elections occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 2016. Of the seats secured in the elections, the theocrats won 32.6% of the seats, approximately 3% less than the 35.8% share won by the republicans. The modern theocrats, in contrast, won 8.6%, and the independents won 20.8% of the seats. Nevertheless, approximately 24% or nearly one-fourth of the Majles was left undecided and went to a second round of voting, as a result of candidates not being able to garner at least 25% of the votes in their given district.

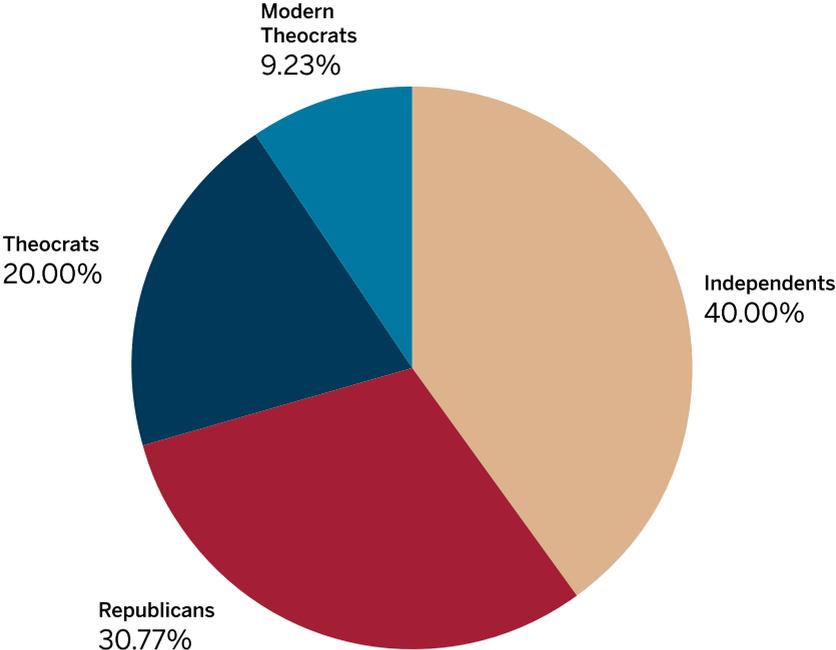
## Round two

The second round of the parliamentary election occurred on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April. As depicted in Figure 8, independents made the most striking gains, winning 40% of contested seats.<sup>17</sup> The results are in part because a greater share of the provinces and rural areas went to a second round, and, as will be explained later in the reports independents were stronger outside the major urban centers where local politics are more significant. Republicans won 30.8% of the second rounds of seats, far ahead of the theocrats at 20%. The stronger showing for the republicans is a direct consequence of the psychological victory that republicans scored in the first round of the elections shaping electoral preferences and candidate campaigning strategies. The modern theocrats attained a marginally larger seat share in this round winning 9.2% of seats.

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17 My calculations give greater weight to factional classifications as understood in the first round of the elections rather than the second round. For example, many independent candidates joined the List Hope due in the second round to the psychological victory achieved by the republicans in the first round. I argue that these individuals should not necessarily be considered republicans due to the uncertain motivations for joining the republican list.

Figure 8  
**Round Two Factional Seat Shares (%)**



## Analysis and implications

The overall small seat share of the modern theocrats is particularly interesting. It may be in part a consequence of the polarized electoral lists that were drawn, as discussed in the previous section (see Figure 6). In this context, the modern theocrats have less room for maneuver as they may have been less likely to attract a larger roster of important candidates from the republican right and theocratic right camps. This is because forces polarized between the theocratic and republican axis rather than the left-right axis. In particular, significant movements away from the theocratic right camp towards Rouhani did not occur as may have been expected—again likely a consequence of the polarization.

Nevertheless, as electoral lists clearly distinguishing the modern theocratic base were weakly developed and advertised, it is very likely that segments of the theocratic, republican, and independent seat shares also belong to the modern theocratic faction. In other words, among all the political factions, the distribution of seats for the modern theocrats is the most undercounted, and candidates with political leanings toward the modern theocratic camp ran on the theocratic or republican lists, or on no lists at all as independents. This is an important point to consider given that the power and leverage of the modern theocratic camp will be an important indicator of the state of factional politics in the coming years in Iran. In other words, their real numbers are undercounted and are absorbed and covered by the other factional titles.

Given that Rouhani is caught between a tug of war between the theocratic and republican factions over the locus of power in his larger elite coalition, the actions and fate of the modern theocrats will reveal much about future political trends. It is likely that the modern theocrats can secure a sizable base within the independent and theocratic blocs to provide support for

Rouhani and the policies he initiates in the executive branch. While this will be conducive to Rouhani's security and success, it also reflects theocrats' ability to retain influence and leverage over Rouhani through the normal process of politics, i.e. without necessitating the intervention of other Iranian power centers outside of the parliament to check and shape Rouhani's choice of policies—whether it be the Guardian Council, IRGC, or the Supreme Leader. In turn, Rouhani can use his theocratic backers to put leverage over the hardliners and quiet criticisms of his policies. As seen in Figure 5, this coalition reflects the shared incentives between the moderates and theocrats to share the spoils of power by excluding the hardliners on the theocratic left.

This may be an important reason why General Qasem Soleimani publicly demonstrated his support for Ali Larijani, the leader of the modern theocrats. The goal is not to oppose Rouhani but to work with him, at least on larger goals such as national economic development. As such, Larijani's re-election as speaker of parliament serves as a bridge between the theocrats and republicans at the republican right quadrant as the nexus of the two camps, as depicted in Figure 5. Rouhani, in this scenario, would be more cooperative and cordial with the theocrats, while the theocrats exert greater leverage on matters of high importance and in the safeguarding of red lines, especially on issues of national security. Rouhani would work with the theocrats in order to undertake a gradual approach to political and economic reform and to secure his own political survival.

The dilemma, however, occurs with how much Rouhani moves away from the modern theocrats—and the theocrats more broadly—toward the republicans, especially the republican left. Rouhani is pressed to show his support for reformists who helped vote him in power and who will be critical for his re-election campaign in 2017. It is important to note in this regard how a

couple weeks after the parliamentary elections Rouhani signaled his position in support of former Iranian President Khatami. Rouhani criticized Khatami's ban from media appearances and in a confrontational speech in Khatami's home city of Yazd, stated that "no one can silence those who served the nation."<sup>18</sup>

If such behavior is replicated, it will indicate Rouhani's larger strategy set out prior to the elections of electoral polarization. The coming to power of a republican speaker of parliament, such as Aref, would have further signaled this polarization path, but was not ultimately pursued. While this strategy may have possibly been used to increase voter support for Rouhani in the 2017 presidential election, it also raises alarm bells within the theocratic camps, and would inhibit Larijani's ability to gather a larger base in support of Rouhani as theocrats would pull farther back from Rouhani, placing Larijani in an awkward position as a broker between the groups. Thus, the closer Rouhani moves towards the more radical republicans, voicing reformist aspirations, the more he risks alienating the theocratic camps who will look to undermine his power and, if necessary, turn to a more suitable candidate and faction to support their interests. Larijani would then have to make a decision of fully joining the theocratic fold again or of joining the republican right faction to which Rouhani and Rafsanjani belong. It would be much more difficult for him to lead a modern theocratic group that straddles both camps. Nevertheless, with the economic benefits of the nuclear deal looking less probable and the election of Trump as president of the United States, it is more likely that Rouhani will take a more conservative and less confrontational posture.

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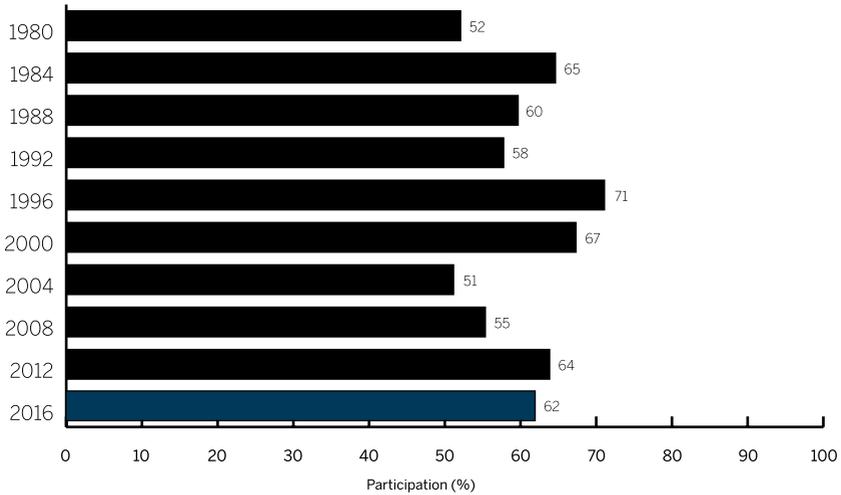
18 In response, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, the spokesman for the judiciary, stated to *Fars News* that "Rouhani is either too busy to remember the details of the case [regarding Khatami's ban] or he is joking." See: Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran's president praises ex-leader Khatami, defying media ban," *Reuters*, March. 7, 2016.

## Voter turnout

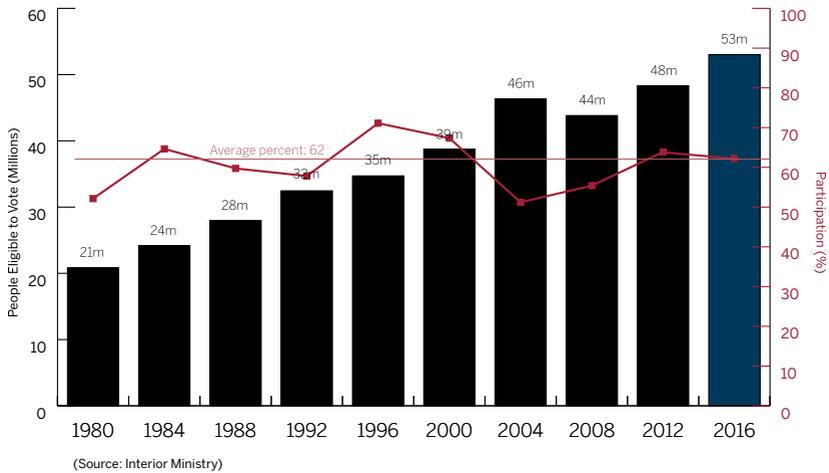
Approximately 34 million Iranians, or 62% of the voting age population, participated in the elections—slightly higher than Iran’s historical average turnout for its parliamentary elections which stands at 60.5%. Figure 9 depicts the rate of voter turnout in all of the 10 parliamentary elections held in Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Given that reformists did not call for a boycott of the elections as they had done in the 2012 parliamentary elections and the importance of the nuclear agreement, one would have expected a much higher turnout. One reason for this outcome could possibly be from the economic pain of sanctions. While the assertion must be verified, many in the conservative press claimed there was lower voter turnout in more traditional and working class neighborhoods due to economic disgruntlement.

Nevertheless, there still was a significant voter turnout, higher than turnout figures for the parliamentary elections in the 2000s. It is a significant indicator that society participates in Iranian elections and that electoral boycotts are not an effective strategy for the Iranian opposition. High participation reflects the competitive nature of elections in Iran and the very real implications that different electoral outcomes embody for the populace. Moreover, participation remains high despite the significant rise in the voter population, depicted in Figure 10, although there was a decline in the 2000s.

**Figure 9**  
**Participation Rate**



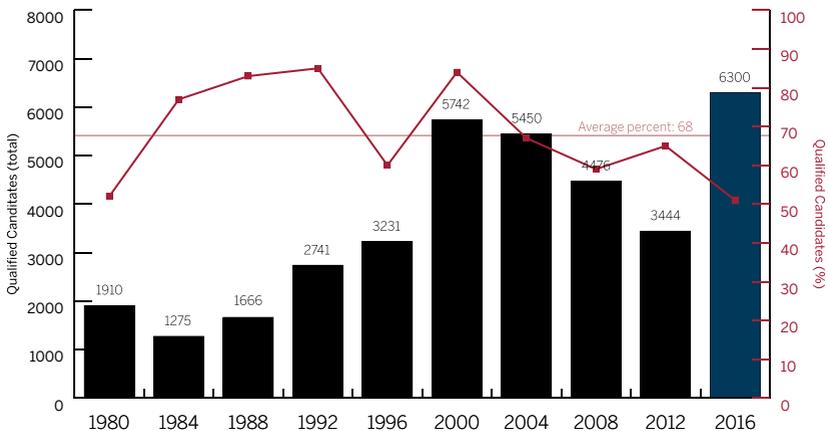
**Figure 10**  
**Voting Population**



# Disqualification rate

The disqualification rate was significantly higher this year than the last parliamentary election four years ago. Compared to the 68% average qualification rate in Iranian parliamentary elections, only 50% of the potential 12,600 candidates were qualified to run in elections in 2016. However, this number distorts the fact that the *total* number of candidates were approved in the 2016 elections was the highest number in the history of parliamentary elections in the Islamic Republic at 6,300 individuals. Indeed, there were almost twice as many candidates approved in 2016 compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2012. In comparison, the average number of candidates approved for parliamentary elections since the revolution is approximately 3,600 candidates. As depicted in Figure 11, we generally see a trend of decreased qualification of candidates together with an increase in the number of candidate permitted to run in the elections. Importantly, there does not seem to be a relationship between the disqualification rate and voter turnout.

Figure 11  
**Qualified Candidates**



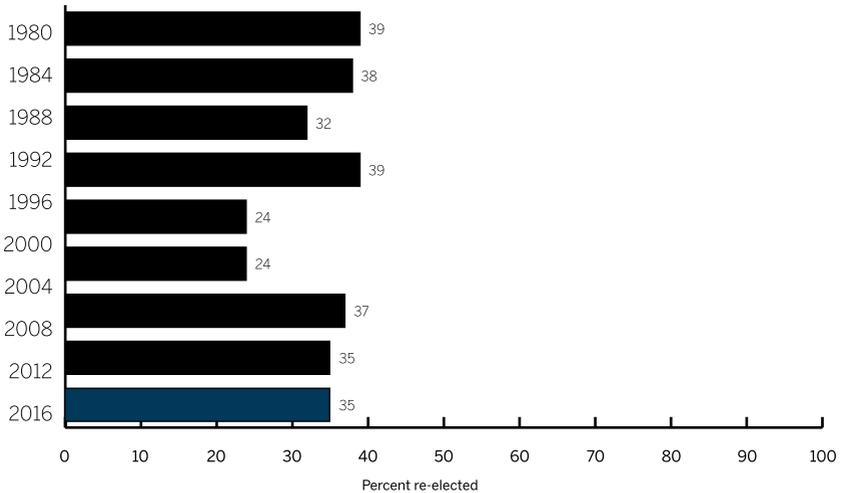
(Source: Interior Ministry)

One reason why the disqualification rate was so high was that reformists attempted to employ a mass-registration strategy in order to flood the elections and gain access to the parliament. The logic was to increase the number of candidates competing with conservatives as well as to avoid detection for disqualification and to increase the costs for the Guardian Council to undertake mass disqualifications. The Guardian Council, however, clearly was not worried about the costs and blocked their move through the use of their power of candidate approval. The overall disqualification rate for the election was 50%, while the average disqualification rate of Iranian parliamentary elections since the revolution has been 32%. Nevertheless, as stated, the Guardian Council did still allow the entry of the highest number of candidates in the history of their elections. As the numbers were so high, many candidates decided to withdraw before election day. In the end, of the 6,300 candidates allowed to participate in the elections, 4,800 chose to actually run.

## Incumbency rate

Given Iran's weakly institutionalized political parties, and the uncertain nature of candidacy and entry into the electoral scene, we see a very low incumbency rate in Iranian parliamentary elections. The average incumbency rate is 33.7%, as Figure 12 reveals. The incumbency rate for the 2016 elections was 35%, which was equal to the rate of the 2012 parliamentary elections. Despite the larger disqualifications that occurred this year, as well as the divisive issue of the nuclear agreement debated in parliament, the overall incumbency level was not impacted in a significant manner compared to previous elections. In other words, the high parliamentary turnaround was not unique and is emblematic of the fluidity of Iranian domestic politics.

Figure 12  
**Incumbency Rate for the Iranian Parliament**



(Source: Interior Ministry)

# Local results

## Tehran

Tehran experienced the most stunning results of the parliamentary elections as all 30 seats were won by the republican list: the List of Hope. None of the candidates of the theocratic list, including the accomplished and well-known head of the theocratic list, Gholam Ali Haddad Adel of the theocratic left, won a single seat in Tehran. The results were significant for several reasons. First, the victory in Tehran was a symbolic victory for the republicans and a source of humiliation for the theocrats. The extent of the victory was shocking and has important psychological ramifications nationally. This was especially relevant for the second round of parliamentary elections as it provided a significant boost for the List of Hope—both in winning votes and attracting independent and moderate candidates to join their platform. Second, Tehran has generally been a bellwether for elite sentiment in Iran and as the most important political and economic center of the country plays an outsized role in shaping politics nationally. The republican victory, therefore, even if not replicated in other cities and provinces, as will be discussed below, will still have significant political ramifications for the style and content of politics over the next four years. Third, the number of seats in Tehran at 30 is very significant—the largest in the country— and, as such, gives an immediate boost to the republican presence in parliament overall.

For example, just excluding the city of Tehran from the parliamentary results presents a substantively different outcome for the elections. Whereas republicans won 34.6% of the legislative seats in the country, removing the city of Tehran from the overall results reduces republican gains by 7% to 27.7% of parliament. In contrast, theocrats would

have the largest seat share out of all groups with 33.2% of the Majles, 5.5% more than the republicans but only 3.5% more than they would otherwise have won. Excluding Tehran, independents would have a slightly higher seat share with 28.1% of the seats in comparison to 25.2% currently, while the share for the modern theocrats remains mostly unchanged at approximately 9% of the seats. In other words, republicans are disproportionately buoyed by their Tehran victory, while they only achieved approximately a 27% win in the rest of the country. The national seat share by faction in the parliament excluding the city of Tehran can be seen in Figure 14 further below.

The republicans were able to score a major victory in Tehran due to a confluence of social, political, and economic factors. As some theocratic commentators have pointed out, deep social changes and greater cultural liberalization in the capital city have contributed to Tehran favoring the republicans. These analyses point to a strong middle class leading liberal-modern lifestyles voting within reformist networks in order to differentiate and accentuate their identities. In many ways, the political competition is thus seen as secondary to larger social identity formation and lifestyle choices (*sabk-i zendegi*).<sup>19</sup>

The provinces and other large cities are also undergoing cultural changes but not to the degree of Tehran. Economic factors also figure prominent in why Tehran voted republican: Tehran is most connected to the international economy as the capital of the country and stands to benefit most from the lifting of sanctions. The finalization of the JCPOA and the economic benefits based on better relations with the world, in other words, was more likely to be important for residents of Tehran than other cities. Finally, Tehran had been the epicenter of the green movement in 2009, and there existed a lingering disaffection with theocrats in Tehran especially given the ensuing crackdown. These elections provided an opportunity to these disgruntled voters on the heels

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<sup>19</sup> Vahid Yaminpour, "What led to the defeat of the Principlists?" *Farda News*, Feb. 28, 2016.

of the JCPOA. Further studies and research must be conducted, but it is possible that this increased voter participation by reformists and the worsening economic conditions from sanctions depressed voter participation from the theocratic base in Tehran.

## Iranian provinces

Across Iran, we see that voter turnout ranges from a high of 81% in the province of Golestan to a low of 50% in Tehran, depicted in Table 2. Higher turnout appeared to be more common in less developed provinces or those with higher populations of ethnic minorities. On the other hand, Table 3 presents the top provinces by the main political factional categories. We see that Kermanshah, South Khorasan, Hormuzgan, and Qom provinces had the largest theocratic victories, while Tehran, Qazvin, Yazd, and Golestan had the largest republican victories. Independents fared the best in Ilam and Alborz as well as provinces like Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan—provinces that tended to comprise larger ethnic minorities. Considering the relationship between voter participation rates and the distribution of seats, provinces with the highest voter turnout rates tended to result in more victories for the republicans and independents, while provinces with turnout rates which stayed at around the national average of 62% had stronger showings for the theocrats. This may signify the importance of domestic political factors in driving voting behaviors in the less developed and more ethnic minority based provinces—particularly for independent candidate support. The overall factional seat share by each province in addition to the number of seats per province can be found in Table 4.<sup>20</sup>

20 It must be noted that a reformist victory in Isfahan was annulled after the victor, Mino Khaleghi, was reportedly shown to have flaunted Islamic moral regulations when traveling abroad. The seat remains vacant until filled in the next election. Also, a recount in Tabriz determined a theocratic candidate to have one extra seat, whereas in the first count the seat had gone to an independent candidate. Two other seats are also vacant: one resulting from the death of a theocratic MP-elect and another from an election annulment in East Azerbaijan which was a republican victory. This brings the total amount of seats to 286 instead of 290 in the calculations for this analysis.

Table 2  
**Iranian Provinces by Voter Turnout (%)**

Province	Voter Turnout
Golestan	81
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	80
Ilam	75.1
Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	75
Yazd	74
Mazandaran	72.3
Khorasan, South	72.11
Khorasan, North	71
Khuzestan	70
Bushehr	68
Khorasan, Razavi	68
Hormuzgan	67
Zanjan	67
Sistan and Baluchistan	66.14
Semnan	66
Azerbaijan, West	65.5
Gilan	65
Fars	64.85
Lorestan	64
Azerbaijan, East	62
Ardabil	61.5
Kerman	61
Qazvin	61
Markazi	60.4
Kermanshah	60
Qom	60
Hamedan	58.1
Isfahan	56.6
Alborz	54
Kurdistan	53.3
Tehran	50

(Source: Interior Ministry)

Table 3  
**Top Provinces by the Three Main Faction**

Theocrats		Republicans		Independents	
Province	Seat Share (%)	Province	Seat Share (%)	Province	Seat Share (%)
Kermanshah	75.00	Tehran	88.57	Ilam	66.67
Khorasan, South	75.00	Qazvin	75.00	Alborz	66.67
Hormuzgan	60.00	Yazd	75.00	Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	50.00
Qom	66.67	Golestan	57.14	Azerbaijan, West	50.00
Hamedan	55.56	Bushehr	50.00	Semnan	50.00
Isfahan	55.56	Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	50.00	Kurdistan	50.00
Sistan and Baluchistan	50.00	Kerman	50.00	Golestan	42.86
Azerbaijan, East	47.06	Khorasan, North	50.00	Ardabil	42.86
Gilan	46.15	Fars	44.44	Markazi	42.86

Table 4  
Iranian Provinces by Factional Seat Share (%)

Provinces	Theocrats	Modern Theocrats	Republicans	Independents	Seats
Alborz	33.33	0.00	0.00	66.67	3
Ardabil	14.29	0.00	42.86	42.86	7
Azerbaijan, East	47.06	5.88	11.76	35.29	17
Azerbaijan, West	16.67	0.00	33.33	50.00	12
Bushehr	25.00	25.00	50.00	0.00	4
Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	4
Fars	22.22	11.11	44.44	22.22	18
Gilan	46.15	7.69	30.77	15.38	13
Golestan	0.00	0.00	57.14	42.86	7
Hamedan	55.56	22.22	22.22	0.00	9
Hormuzgan	75.00	0.00	25.00	0.00	4
Ilam	0.00	0.00	33.33	66.67	3
Isfahan	55.56	0.00	16.67	27.78	18
Kerman	20.00	10.00	50.00	20.00	10
Kermanshah	75.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	8
Khorasan, North	0.00	25.00	50.00	25.00	4
Khorasan, Razavi	44.44	11.11	27.78	16.67	18
Khorasan, South	75.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	4
Khuzestan	38.89	11.11	11.11	38.89	18
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	0.00	33.33	33.33	33.33	3
Kurdistan	0.00	33.33	16.67	50.00	6
Lorestan	44.44	11.11	11.11	33.33	9
Markazi	28.57	0.00	28.57	42.86	7
Mazandaran	16.67	8.33	41.67	33.33	12
Qazvin	0.00	25.00	75.00	0.00	4
Qom	66.67	33.33	0.00	0.00	3
Semnan	25.00	0.00	25.00	50.00	4
Sistan and Baluchistan	50.00	12.50	12.50	25.00	8
Tehran	5.71	5.71	88.57	0.00	35
Yazd	0.00	0.00	75.00	25.00	4
Zanjan	1.00	0.00	0.00	4.00	5
Religious Minorities	--	--	--	--	5
<b>Total*</b>	<b>29.72</b>	<b>8.74</b>	<b>34.62</b>	<b>25.17</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>Total (Excluding Tehran Prov.)*</b>	<b>33.07</b>	<b>9.16</b>	<b>27.09</b>	<b>28.69</b>	<b>251</b>

\* Total factional seat shares (%) do not include percentage of religious minorities

## Major Iranian cities

To assess the common assumption that theocrats have a stronger control over the rural countryside and republicans having a stronger presence in major urban centers, we turn to factional seat distribution according to the top 10 largest Iranian cities in terms of population, as depicted in Table 5. The average population of these top 10 cities are approximately 2 million (or 1.3 million excluding Tehran), and they range from approximately 8.2 million in Tehran to 670 thousand in Orumieh.<sup>21</sup> Out of these cities, we see that Mashhad, Qom, and Kermanshah saw the most significant theocratic victories. The republicans dominated in Tehran, Shiraz, and Ahvaz. Interestingly, independents had a very low seat share within the major cities. Indeed, they received zero seats in eight of the top ten cities and only gained seats in Karaj and Orumieh. Independents, in other words, did not do well in major cities and have a stronger showing in the smaller urban and rural settings.

Table 5  
**Top 10 Largest Cities by Factional Seat Share (%)**

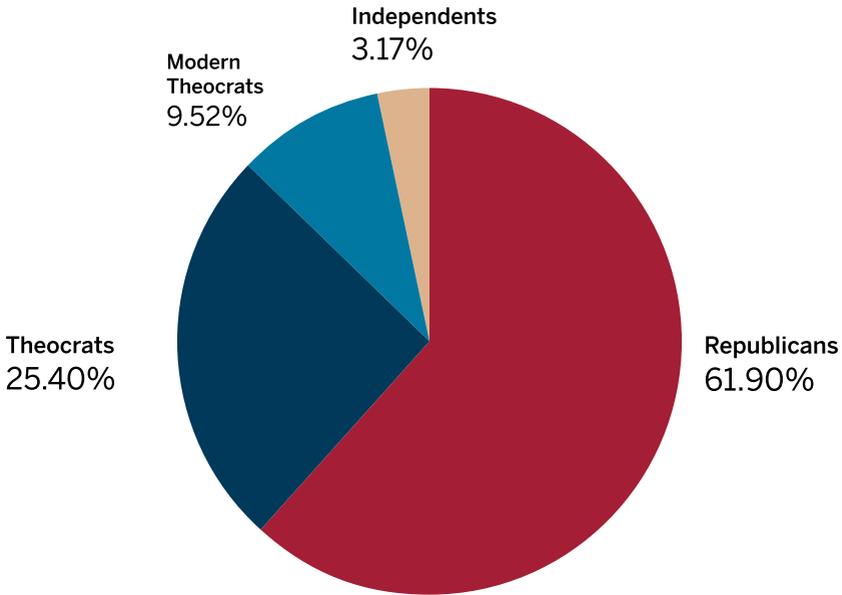
Top 10 Cities (by order of population)	Theocrats	Modern Theocrats	Republicans	Independents
Tehran	0.00	6.67	93.33	0.00
Mashhad	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Isfahan	50.00	0.00	50.00	0.00
Karaj	50.00	0.00	0.00	50.00
Tabriz	50.00	16.67	33.33	0.00
Shiraz	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00
Ahvaz	0.00	33.33	66.67	0.00
Qom	66.67	33.33	0.00	0.00
Kermanshah	66.67	33.33	0.00	0.00
Orumieh	33.33	0.00	33.33	33.33
Total Top 10 Cities	25.40	9.52	61.90	3.17
Total Top 10 Cities (Excluding City of Tehran)	48.48	12.12	33.33	6.06
Total Nationwide*	29.72	8.74	34.62	25.17
Nationwide (Excluding City of Tehran)*	33.20	8.98	27.73	28.13

\* Total factional seat shares (%) do not include percentage of religious minorities

<sup>21</sup> Interior Ministry of Iran, 1391.

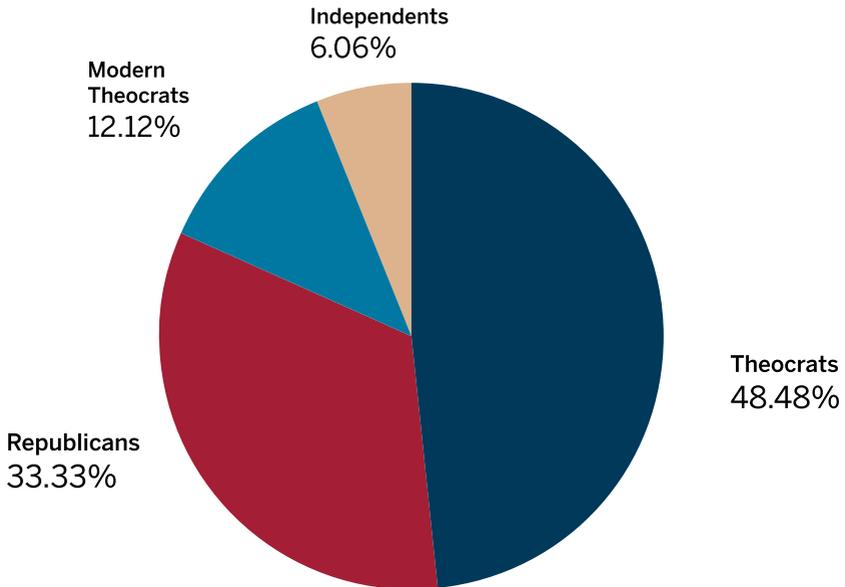
Looking at the overall seat shares of the top 10 largest cities, republicans amazingly won 61.9% of the seats, significantly larger than their 34.6% seat share nationally. Theocrats received 25.4% seat share in the largest cities, which in contrast is lower than their national average of 29.7%. Another significant difference is reflected in independents only winning a 3.2% share of the legislative seats of the top 10 cities, while nationally independents secured 25.2% of the Majles. As this analysis indicates, voters in major urban centers are more likely to vote for candidates on factional electoral lists than voters outside of these largest cities. Factional capacities are stronger and more well-developed in the largest cities and their electoral brand campaigning is much more significant. The effectiveness of large lists in cities like Tehran, where voters had to vote for 30 candidates, highlights the advantage of list-centered strategies for a large range of candidates endorsed by more well-known central figures such as former president Mohammad Khatami. In contrast, it is likely that local politics and awareness of individual candidates matters much more in smaller contexts where instead of having to vote for a list of 30 candidates whose individual identification would be cumbersome, voters choose from a much shorter list, or just a few candidates in most cases.

Figure 13  
**Total Top-10 Cities by Factional Seat Share (%)**



By excluding Tehran from the top 10 largest Iranian cities, however, we see another very drastic finding and an important pattern that has been largely overlooked, as seen in the results in Table 5 and depicted in Figure 14. Theocrats displayed a much stronger presence in the largest urban centers in Iran than the republicans in the current parliamentary elections. Theocrats won a 48.5% parliamentary seat share of the largest Iranian cities not including Tehran. This number compares to a much smaller win for the republicans at 33.3%. The strong theocratic showing in the largest cities is also greater than their national results, where they won 29.7% of the Majles. The overall electoral standing of the republicans when including Tehran shows the degree of seat disproportionality in favor of Tehran versus the other largest cities: the city of Tehran almost has the same number of seats as all the other 9 largest cities combined, even though in terms of voting population the other cities combined are larger than Tehran.

Figure 14  
**Total Top-10 Cities by Factional Seat Share (%)**  
**Excluding City of Tehran**



Excluding Tehran, republicans do better in the top ten urban centers (33.3%), compared to their overall national average of 28.1% in the rest of the country outside of the top ten cities, reflecting more conducive voter preference and electoral strategies of the republicans in more populated areas. Theocrats, on the other hand, do better in the top ten urban centers excluding Tehran (48.5%) compared to their national average (29.7%), gaining more seat shares in major urban centers excluding Tehran than the less urban centers. Interestingly, in contrast to common perceptions, the theocrats do better in the largest and most urban cities than in the rest of the country.

On the other hand, independents are the least successful electorally inside of major urban centers, gaining only 3.2% of the national seats in the top ten cities including

Tehran and 6.1% in the top ten urban centers excluding Tehran. Outside of these top urban cities, however, independents gained an impressive 31.7% of the national seat share—the largest disparity among political groups between national seat share and most urban center seat shares.

Thus, looking at the overall results, we gain a better image of larger national patterns with the following insights: First, in comparison to their strength in large major urban cities, theocrats do worse in less populated regions and towns in the country. Theocrats gained 33.2% of national seats in the entire country excluding Tehran, whereas they gained approximately 48.5% of the seats of the 10 largest cities excluding Tehran. Second, republicans also perform less well outside of the largest urban centers in Iran as in other less populated areas overall as a group, but with a smaller difference than the theocrats (6 points compared to 15), receiving 27.7% of the national seats excluding Tehran and 33.3% of the seats in the largest cities excluding Tehran. Third, independents do much better in the national results overall rather than in the largest cities (25.2% compared to 3.2%). These findings mean that outside of Tehran, theocrats are the most successful in the largest cities, whereas outside the largest cities votes are roughly split between theocrats, republicans, and independents—with independents making the largest gain as a vote share in the provinces. Calculating the national results by excluding all top 10 largest Iranian cities, we find that theocrats win 30.9%, republicans 26.9%, modern theocrats 8.5% and independents 31.4% of parliamentary seats.

These findings call for much greater research and more nuanced understanding of factional standing in different regions and urban centers of Iran. Simple narratives that caricature cities as republican and rural areas as theocratic build on preconceived notions of political affiliations that do not necessarily map on to reality.

# The Assembly of Experts Elections

Parallel with the parliamentary elections, Iran also held elections for the Assembly of Experts—an 88-member body of clerics responsible for monitoring the Supreme Leader and choosing his successor. This was one of the most important elections for the Assembly as the likelihood of picking a successor to Ayatollah Khamenei is relatively higher than previous elections: the Assembly members serve an eight-year term, and Khamenei is 77 years old. Control over the body would also impact the larger political balance of forces within Iranian domestic politics.

Initially 801 candidates registered to run, but after either voluntary withdrawals, incomplete portfolios, failure to take the written exam, and lack of minimal credentials, only 373 candidates took the required religious exam to run. Of those 373 candidates, only 166, or 45%, were deemed qualified to run in the elections by the Guardian Council.<sup>22</sup> In the previous election, in comparison, 146 candidates were qualified and 219 were rejected. The elections occurred in one round on February 26, simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, and the voter participation was also reported at 62 percent.

Like the parliamentary elections, the Assembly of Experts election was a symbolic victory for the republicans as key hardliner clerics, such as Ayatollahs Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Mohammad Yazdi, were defeated. Nevertheless, theocrats still won a clear majority of seats. 62 of the winning candidates belonged to both the Combatant Clergy Association and the Society of Seminary Teachers of Qum—two important conservative clerical associations. Only

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<sup>22</sup> “45% of candidates deemed qualified for the [Assembly of] Experts,” *ISNA News*, Jan. 26, 2016.

14 candidates who won belonged to the List of Hope but were not members of those conservative associations.

The defeat of key hardliners in Tehran, more importantly, was a result of the electoral strategy of the republicans who had called on their supporters to vote for their list of recommended candidates, which included both moderates and conservative clerics. This shrewd strategy was aimed at excluding the staunchest enemies of reform and the moderate factions by adding more amiable conservative theocratic candidates to the republican electoral lists for the Assembly. As a result of this recommended list drawn without the support or consent of many of the conservative candidates added, some conservatives received both the reformist vote and conservative vote, whereas hardliners like Mesbah Yazdi failed to make the cut as they only won conservative votes. In this manner, the republicans were able to successfully squeeze out some of their opponents from the Assembly, especially in Tehran.

Yet, as the selection of an important hardliner leader and head of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, to the new Assembly demonstrates, the body will remain in conservative hands and will not likely significantly alter the balance of power regarding the Supreme Leader's position or his succession. The issue of succession, however, is a larger issue requiring further specialized analysis which is beyond the scope of this current study.

# Conclusion:

## The Future of Iranian Politics under the JCPOA

The JCPOA reached between Iran and world powers is not only significant for larger international geopolitics but has very real domestic political implications within the Islamic Republic. Iran's nuclear program, negotiations, international foreign policy, and sanctions comprised the primary battle zone that split conservative forces and propelled Rouhani into the presidency in 2013. This was clearly visible in the presidential debates when Ali Akbar Velayati, a well-known Principlist, attacked Saeed Jalili for running a rejectionist and illogical negotiation strategy and not showing flexibility with the international community. With theocratic forces split over the key foreign policy issue defining Iran's relations with the international community, Rouhani was able to barely edge to victory in the first round of elections, trumping five other rivals.

The fractures generated within the Iranian elite are still salient until today and have contributed to the formation of a new faction of "modern theocrats" who have allied themselves with Rouhani in order to regain their lucrative access to global markets. The next presidential elections, in 2017, will therefore reflect the ability of Rouhani to preserve and manage the power triangle between the republicans and the modern theocrats to hold on to the government and Majles. If economic gains are substantive enough and Rouhani can continue to act as a balance between the two opposing factional poles of his coalition, he will likely remain Iran's president. If, however, Rouhani antagonizes either the modern theocrats or reformists too much and his economic policy does not produce tangible gains to the Iranian people, the theocratic left will certainly attempt to capitalize on these shortcomings and form an alliance with the theocratic right to once again challenge

the republicans and push them out of the corridors of power, as was the case during the Ahmadinejad years. Additionally, Rouhani's domestic and foreign policy narrative will very likely be challenged with the election of Trump. If the U.S. unilaterally undertakes antagonistic actions against Iran, the entire political platform of Rouhani's coalition will collapse and a reconfiguration aimed at reintegrating the theocratic left will likely emerge.

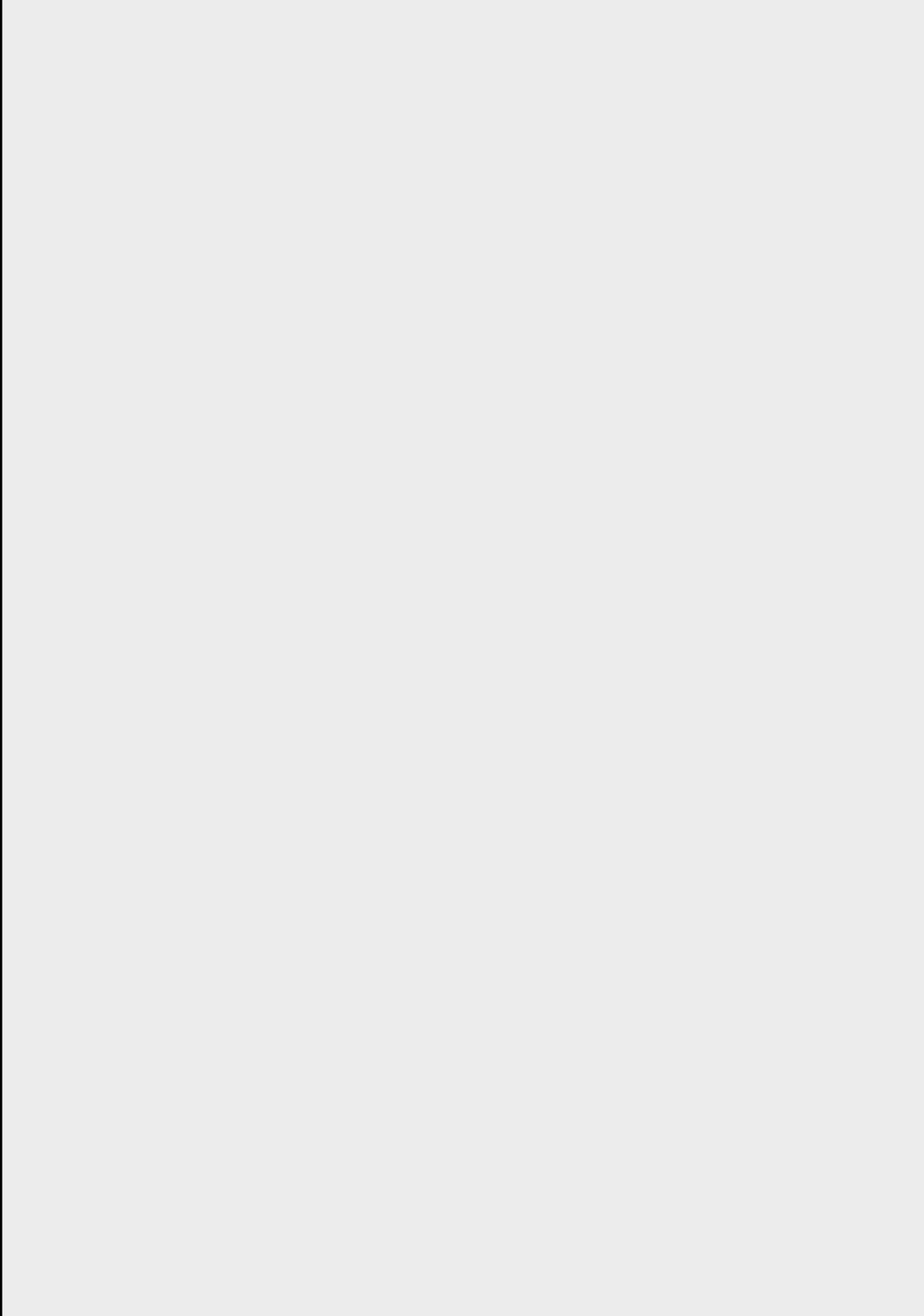
The summer corruption and pay scandal against Rouhani<sup>23</sup> was in part a theocratic left strategy to isolate the republican right and drive a wedge between it and the republican left, on one hand, and the theocratic right, on the other. At a minimum, together with the unrealized economic benefits expected to follow the JCPOA, the theocrats will gain a stronger bargaining position with Rouhani. However, it could also be an electoral strategy to highlight economic inequality under Rouhani with an eye to the 2017 presidential elections. Either way, the re-election of a weak Rouhani or a theocratic victory is a win-win scenario for the Supreme Leader. A lame-duck president cannot threaten the conservative establishment or the Supreme Leader, especially one who is blamed for the economy but will also improve Iran's image globally. Further, a theocratic victory will bring the moderate discourse and pathway offered by Rouhani to an end and revive the revolutionary pathway the Supreme Leader had supported previously during the presidency of Ahmadinejad. Yet, with Khamenei's disapproval of Ahmadinejad running and the threat of greater national polarization—in a context in which republicans made strong gains in the parliamentary elections—the leader has signaled his lack of opposition if not favorability to Rouhani's re-election despite the strong ideological differences between the two men. This, however, by no means will necessarily result in Rouhani's victory as the field of electoral competition and factional politics will continue to be fought over until election day.

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23 Ladane Nasseri, "Iran to Cap Government Pay as Salaries Scandal Sparks Furor," *Bloomberg News*, July 26, 2016.









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