

# Iran's Presidential Elections

May 5, 2017 (IN10699)

---

## Related Author

---

- [Kenneth Katzman](#)
- 

Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs ([kkatzman@crs.loc.gov](mailto:kkatzman@crs.loc.gov), 7-7612)

---

## Policy Context

Iranian voters go to the polls on May 19, 2017, to vote for president and municipal officials countrywide amid tensions between Iran and the United States. On April 19, the Trump Administration certified to Congress, pursuant to the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, [P.L. 114-17](#)), that Iran is complying with the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA).

[Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated](#), however, that the JCPOA "only delays [Iran's] goal of becoming a nuclear state" and has failed to curb Iran's objectionable regional behavior. He announced that the United States' Iran policy—including the JCPOA—is under review. In recent weeks, the Trump Administration has imposed sanctions on additional entities allegedly supporting Iran's missile program and has launched strikes on Iran's key regional ally, Syria, for its use of chemical weapons. The Administration [reportedly is also contemplating increased support](#) for an effort by a Saudi-led Arab coalition battling Iran-backed [Houthi rebels](#) in Yemen.

## Election Field Finalized

Iran holds presidential elections every four years. The post of president is subordinate to that of "Supreme Leader," but Iran's president has significant influence on economic policy and government operations. Iran's elections are [characterized by the State Department](#) as "[falling short of international standards for free, fair elections](#)," primarily because a 12-member appointed body called the Council of Guardians is empowered to vet all election candidates. Approximately 1,600 persons filed to run, including incumbent President Hassan Rouhani. On April 27, the Council of Guardians approved Rouhani and five other candidates to run—a winnowing of the field that was consistent with past elections. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, a run-off is to be held about three weeks later.

The other five candidates are Ibrahim Raisi, a purported close ally of the Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i; Mohammad Baqr Qalibaf, Tehran mayor and a stalwart of the hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); Mostafa Mirsalim, the centrist former culture minister; and two moderate candidates, Rouhani's first Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and Mostafa Hashemitaba. To improve Rouhani's chances of achieving a first-round victory, one main competitor for moderate votes, [Jahangiri, is widely expected to drop out before the voting](#).

Rouhani emphasizes to his mainly urban, young, and intellectual supporters that he delivered sanctions relief under the JCPOA and ended Iran's international isolation. But, according to a substantial number of reports, many Iranians are not benefitting significantly from sanctions relief, perhaps adversely affecting Rouhani's election prospects. In 2013, Rouhani received 50.7% of the votes, narrowly avoiding a run-off in a divided field that included several hardline candidates. There are only two hardliners in the 2017 race. One is mid-ranking cleric Ibrahim Raisi, who is said to be [Khamenei's favorite to succeed him as Supreme Leader](#). In mid-2016, Khamene'i appointed Raisi, a longtime state prosecutor and judicial official, as head of the large economic conglomerate (Astan-e-Qods Razavi Foundation) centered on the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. Raisi's fate in the election might determine his chances to eventually succeed Khamene'i.

Raisi is basing his campaign on an appeal to rural and working class voters, many of whom benefit from regime largesse such as that provided by state-linked foundations such as Astan-e-Qods Razavi and support the Supreme Leader. Khamene'i's recent speeches have [criticized Rouhani for failing to advance the "resistance economy"](#)—the hardline concept of building up Iran's domestic industries and reducing reliance on imports. On April 30, 2017, Khamene'i, referring to the JCPOA, stated that "it is not correct" when Rouhani says that since he took office, "[the shadow of war has been faded away](#)." Despite Khamene'i's apparent backing, Raisi's long prior service in the judiciary could harm his prospects—candidates who come from the judiciary and the security apparatus, including the IRGC, have tended to fare poorly in elections. Raisi was part of the judiciary apparatus that allegedly approved the 1988 execution of a significant number of Iranian prisoners. The other hardliner in the race, Qalibaf, has previously run twice and lost, although he generally receives praise for his performance as Tehran's mayor.

### Prospects and Implications

The probable outcome of the election, including whether Rouhani can again garner enough votes to avoid a run-off, is unclear. Also unclear is the degree to which three televised candidate debates will affect voter preferences. One Iranian poll in early May indicated that if the election proceeds to a runoff, [Rouhani would likely defeat either Raisi or Qalibaf](#). However, polling in Iran is widely considered to be unreliable. There is also the potential for the Supreme Leader and his allies to put the state apparatus to work on behalf of Rouhani's challenger, including tasking the IRGC and its Basij militia to distribute pro-Raisi leaflets and transport his likely supporters to the polls, and intimidate voters in cities where Rouhani voters are prevalent. Some of these steps were widely reported to have been taken by the regime in the 2005 and 2009 elections.

Any outcome will have significant implications for U.S. policy. Even though all the candidates have described the JCPOA as an established fixture and would be likely to continue implementing it, a more hardline president might discontinue Rouhani's efforts to promote diplomatic engagement with the West. A hardline president might also try to remove even those few restraints Rouhani has managed to impose on actions that U.S. officials characterize as provocative. Further provocative actions, which include missile tests and support for regional allies that act against U.S. interests or allies, could put Iran on a collision course with the Trump Administration, which has already taken several steps against Iran, as discussed above. The Trump Administration and Congress are considering imposing new sanctions on Iran's missile program and on the IRGC, but [have refrained from announcing decisions](#) on any possible actions, reportedly to avoid harming Rouhani's reelection prospects.