This paper is based on Shervin Malekzadeh's presentation at the Wilson Center on July 22, 2013.

You came here to do *what?*

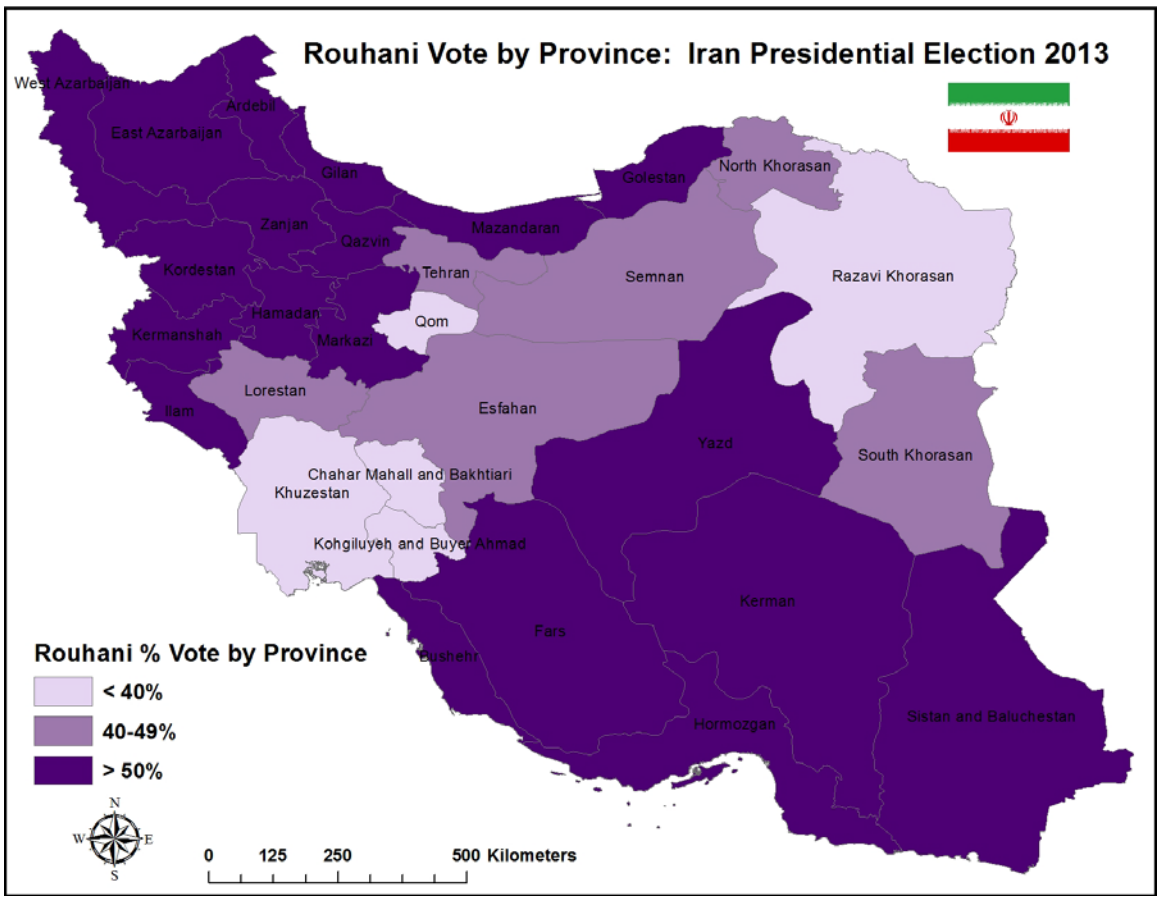
Asked why I had come back to Tehran, my steady answer—that I had come to see family, to do research, and yes, to observe and to vote in the upcoming presidential election—was a constant source of bewilderment if not entertainment for those around me. Friends and cousins as well familiar faces in my middle-class neighborhood of Aryashahr wanted to know why I would come back to participate in such a useless election. In that inimitable Persian style, the corner grocer, the local barber, the kiosk vendor all said without saying that perhaps, just maybe, I had lost my mind.

You came here to vote? I had encountered the same sort of disbelief four years earlier during the 2009 election. The question was only half-serious back then; the incredulity mostly feigned. We forget it now, but before the Green Movement there was the Green Wave, a two- or three-week period marked by daily and unscripted rallies as partisans of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karubi, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took to the streets to advocate for their candidates. There was little question that they would vote: nearly 39 million Iranians, some 85 percent of the voting-age population, turned up at the ballot box in 2009.

Won't vote, won't matter. The mood was nearly the opposite this time around. People had not forgotten what had happened in 2009. "Where is my vote?" had become "Why should I bother to vote? How will I know that my vote will be counted?" At best, only two weeks out from the election, many Iranians were torn between a desire to boycott the vote and the realization that not voting was unlikely to make things better, and in fact, could make things worse.

As it turned out, the electoral wave that would carry Hassan Rouhani to victory was already forming in early June, moving ahead those of us whose job it was to identify and analyze such shifts in the voting public. With a win of over 18 million votes spread evenly across the entire country, Rouhani carried nearly every one of Iran's 31 provinces, losing only Khuzestan and parts of Khorasan, the home regions of Mohsen Rezaei and Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, respectively.[1]

[1] http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/iran/iran-presidential-election-2013.html



Source: IRI Ministry of the Interior figures

How did this happen? How did Rouhani manage to win so decisively, in the first round no less, and against a field of eight candidates, given the general mood of the country? Expert opinion offered afterward drew from the usual analytical toolkit: the lack of real and stable political parties made Rouhani's surprise win possible by creating a fluid electorate and a presidential political scene driven by personalities. Rouhani, to mix metaphors, caught fire in the final days by demonstrating that he would be an agent of change and, perhaps more importantly, was acceptable to the leadership of the country, especially the Supreme Leader.

These are all true factors that shaped the outcome of the 2013 presidential campaign. There were, however, particular reasons that led to Rouhani's victory, reasons unique to this year's process, to Rouhani himself, and to his opponents in the election. Taking a closer look at the idiosyncrasies of 2013 gives us a chance to better understand not only why Iran elected its first coalition candidate since the 1979 Revolution, but also presents an opportunity to observe the complicated relationship Iranians have with their electoral system.

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Iran's version of democracy, in at least one way, turns its American counterpart inside out. If elections in the United States combine high visibility with low turnout, driven by politicians who, tied to a never-ending succession of listening tours, exploratory committees, and fundraisers, live in a mode of permanent campaigning and an electoral system that tolerates low rates of voter participation, then turnout is all that matters for the Iranian *nezam*, or system. Iranian voters only learn who is on the ballot days before the election but must endure months and weeks of exhortations to vote on state-sponsored billboards, television, and radio—exhortations made on behalf of unnamed and unknown candidates.

Turnout matters because it corresponds to national strength, a demonstration of the insoluble bonds between state and society. Each vote is a witness to the enduring faith of Iranians in their religion and their revolution. Just as importantly, every election strikes a blow against the Enemy: the United States, and her allies. For weeks and months after the election, state media will show scenes of citizens waiting in long lines to vote as a way to remind viewers that for all of the efforts of the Americans to undermine and diminish Islamic democracy, the Iranian people, the *mellat*, once again came to the defense of their country.

Photo: Shervin Malekzadeh
"Just as elections are a holy duty, choosing well is also a holy duty."

Shows of strength and loyalty to the Islamic regime held little appeal for Iranians this year, particularly among members of the country's middle class. Exhausted by inflation, sanctions, and eight years of domestic and international conflict, absence at the ballot box represented a form of protest, one of the few ways that citizens could safely express their displeasure with their government.

This defiance began to erode with the series of three debates between the eight candidates running for office. Unscripted and lasting over four grueling hours each, the debates exposed the profound differences between the six conservative, or *oosoolgaran*, candidates who took every opportunity to attack each other, as well as their more moderate opponents.

The final debate took place on June 7, just one week before the vote. It proved to be a catastrophe for Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran and putative frontrunner. Already reeling from revelations that he had played a major role in the infamous crackdown on student protests in the summer of 1999, Qalibaf put in a particularly poor performance that night, unable to respond to withering attacks from his opponents, and in particular, from Rouhani.

The first indication that the debates had changed the course of the elections came the following day. The Rouhani campaign organized a late afternoon rally to kick off the final week of campaigning. Held in an old wrestling arena across from the former U.S. embassy, the rally drew an enormous and unexpected crowd.

Here were echoes of 2009. Some 12,000 people had gathered inside, with over 1,000 more waiting outside. The arena soon became a sweaty, packed, and chaotic affair as the chanting crowd entered into a sort of call-and-response with their candidate. By the time Rouhani took to the podium, it was unclear who was leading whom. Staying within the framework of acceptable discourse, and adopting the basic principle that Iran must always remain on defense against her enemies, Rouhani began the process of reinventing and reshaping decades of revolutionary rhetoric: "We must not [any longer] take advantage of the names of the martyrs and their families. Those days were a duty…" There were better ways of preserving the country from invasion and decline than the aggression of the Ahmadinejad administration: "We kept the country far from war, we kept it away from the Security Council…" As he had throughout his campaign, Rouhani bolstered his centrist credentials by appealing for national unity, declaring that "Men and women are equal! Turk, Baluch, and Lor are equal! I need the help of all [political] parties!"

With his campaign now on a roll, events accelerated in Rouhani's favor during the remainder of that final week of campaigning. Two days after the rally at Shiroodi, Rouhani's only rival in the reformist camp, Mohammad Reza Aref, withdrew from the race. The next day, June 11, brought news that former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani were officially endorsing Rouhani for the presidency.

The endorsements proved decisive. By the afternoon on June 15, it became clear that Rouhani would become the next president of Iran. Unwilling to endure a repeat of 2009, Iranians waited until early evening for the minister of the interior to confirm the results, a confirmation that produced celebrations in the capital and across the country. Streets filled with people cheering, chanting, and dancing well into the next morning. Everyone seemed to know what to do, where to stand, and what to sing. “Ahmadi bye-bye! Ahmadi bye-bye! Ahmadi bye-bye! Ahmadi bye-bye!” It was as if people had been practicing for this night for years.

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The outcome of the eleventh presidential election caught many American and European analysts off guard. To be fair, this occurred in Iran as well, among experts and ordinary citizens alike. While I was getting a haircut two days after Rouhani was announced the winner, my barber assured me that this was all “a game of chess.” “You and I are the pawns,” he said, “and Khamanei the master, moving the pieces around so that they could bring a cleric back to the presidency.” That same day, a driver assured me that Rouhani was nothing but a “scarecrow,” a stuffed figurehead for the real powers controlling Iran, “*amrikaiha va inglisiha*,” the Americans and the British.

Didn’t vote, didn’t matter. The same defiance that existed before the election remained afterward, but now the defiance came with expressions of doubt, a non-voter’s remorse: *But if I had voted, it would have been for Rouhani.*

Of course, those who claim that this last election was either rigged or irrelevant actively overlook the fact that 37 million Iranians turned out to vote on June 14—18 million of whom voted for Rouhani. Rather than assume that ordinary Iranians were duped or manipulated by unseen forces, a more interesting exercise is to ask why it was that, against so much cynicism and negativity, did Iranians bother to vote?

The reality is that most Iranians recognized that the elections gave them their best chance at producing change. Despondency gave way to what sociologist Kevan Harris has described as “ruthless pragmatism.” For all their announced skepticism, people made a reasoned decision that voting for Rouhani as an agent of change, however imperfect, was better than not voting at all. In other words, bad was better than worse.

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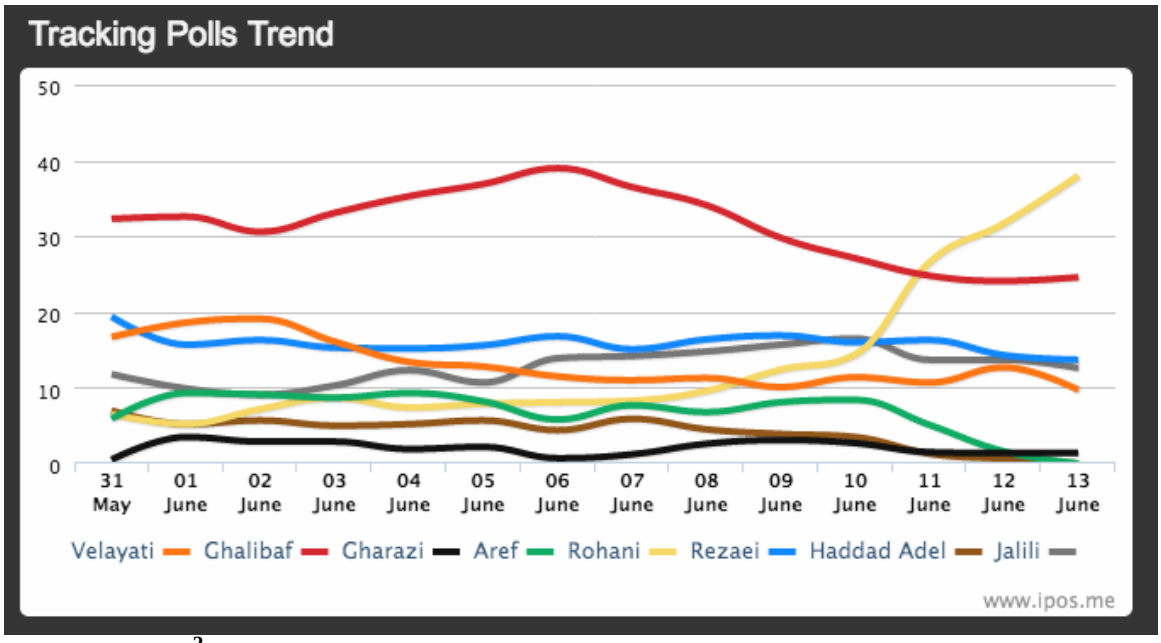
There are at least three takeaways from the 2013 presidential election. The first of these is just how unpredictable the final outcome was. The election did not have to turn out this way, and indeed, up until the final days of the campaign, did not appear that it would end with a Rouhani win. On May 26, Qalibaf led among likely voters with a comfortable margin, at 30 percent of the vote compared to Rouhani’s 3 percent. On June 4, with little over a week left in the campaign, the numbers were hardly better for Rouhani, with 35 percent of respondents saying that they were going to vote for Qalibaf to 7 percent for Rouhani.



Source: IPOS[2]

That there were real differences between the candidates provides the second takeaway from the election. Rouhani's victory became more likely in the final days of the campaign, but not inevitable. He had to earn his votes. He did so by basing his campaign on three basic and overlapping themes: fixing the economy, restoring Iran's name and position in the world, and ending eight years of Ahmadinejad-style politics.

Just as Rouhani had to earn his votes, his opponents had to lose theirs. Political performance mattered, and here the Qalibaf campaign, for all of its resources and discipline, faltered. A war hero and a successful mayor with a proven record of administering Iran's largest and most chaotic city, Qalibaf chose instead to run against his reputation as a competent technocrat and to appeal to a perceived social and political base by emphasizing his religious, military, and law and order credentials. This decision proved to be a major miscalculation of the country's mood.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of these elections, however, is how it demonstrated the continuity between 2009 and 2013. Against reports of its demise and failure, a majority of Iranians made the decision, many of them apparently at the last moment, to continue the Green Movement struggle by voting, not for the system or even for Rouhani but as a vindication of the movement's victims. The through-line between the 2009 and 2013 elections was evident during the victory celebrations. Most of the slogans honored the "losers" of the last election, not the winner of the most recent: "Mousavi! Karubi! They must be set free!" "Mousavi! Karubi! We got your vote back!"

[2] http://ipos.me/en/

If 2013 marked the conclusion of the 2009 elections, then it also drew out the lessons learned from that awful experience. Since the 1997 election of Khatami and the rise of the reform movement in Iran, state and society have been engaged in a highly contentious and iterative learning process. The recognition by ordinary and elite Iranians that change needed to occur in the domestic and international politics of Iran (and the implicit decision to allow it to occur through the electoral process) to prevent Iran from disintegrating into another Syria or Egypt, indicates that this learning process will continue for the foreseeable future.