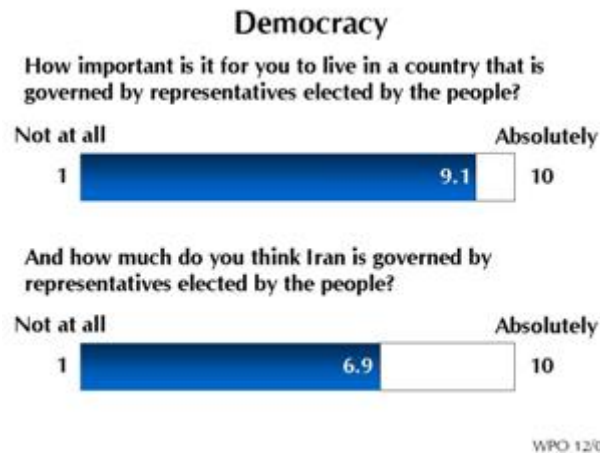


Iranians: Do They Say They Want a Revolution?

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Are the Iranian people deeply dissatisfied with their current system of government? Is the general public actually pro-American contrary to the position of their government?



These questions are not academic. The Bush Administration's policy of regime change in Iran appears to be based on the conviction that Iranians yearn for a Western-style democracy to replace the Islamic Republic that has ruled their nation since 1979. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice [asked Congress](#) in 2006 for \$75 million to "support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom in their own country."

The president of Terror Free Tomorrow, Ken Ballen, recently argued in the Wall Street Journal that his organization's new poll of the Iranian public provides "indisputable empirical proof" that the Iranian people are "pro-Western, indeed pro-American, while opposed to the largely-unelected clerical regime that rules them."

But surveys of Iran—including [Terror Free Tomorrow's](#)—do not actually support the idea that Iranians are profoundly unhappy with their system of government. Polls do find that majorities in Iran strongly value democracy. But majorities also believe, rightly or wrongly, that they already live in a fairly democratic country. And while Iranians would like to see an improvement in relations with the United States, polls show Iranians have a quite negative view of the United States.

In the fall of 2006, WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted a face-to-face [poll of the Iranian public](#) and found strong support for democracy. Respondents were asked, "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed by representatives elected by the people?" and told to answer on a 0-10 scale, where 10 signified the greatest importance and 0 the least. A large majority (68%) of Iranians chose the highest possible score of 10; on average the Iranian response was a 9.1

The survey also allowed Iranians to evaluate the level of democracy in their country, using the same scale. Asked to rate how much their own country was “governed by representatives elected by the people,” few Iranians (only 9%) gave their country a perfect 10, but a clear majority (61%) gave their country a score of 7 or higher. About a fourth (27%) chose middling scores of between 4 and 6 and fewer than one in 10 (7%) thought Iran rated less than a 3. Iranians on average gave their country a 6.9. This is about the same average rating as Americans gave their own country: 7.3.

The basis for Ken Ballen’s statement that Iranians oppose their system of government is a question in the Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT) poll that asked whether they supported a “political system where the ‘Supreme Leader’ rules according to religious principles, and cannot be chosen or replaced by a direct vote of the people.” Three out of five (61%) said they rejected such a system.

But the TFT poll did not establish whether this is how Iranians view their own system and there are reasons to doubt that it is. It is unlikely that many Iranians believe Khamenei simply “rules” Iran’s complex political environment given the significant roles played by President Ahmadinejad and others. Moreover, elections in Iran—unlike many Middle Eastern countries—are strongly contested and affect both leadership and policy. Iranians directly elect their president, parliament, city councils and the “Assembly of Experts,” which under the Iranian constitution selects and oversees the “Supreme Leader,” Ayatollah Khamenei. Thus, though the Supreme Leader is not chosen by a direct vote, Iranians may well feel that they play a part in his selection.

Other polls are consistent with WPO’s findings that a majority of Iranians both support democracy and feel that their government is at least somewhat democratic. In June 2005, a survey by the [Iranian Student Polling Agency](#) found that 65 percent of respondents said it was “absolutely important” to live in a democratically governed country and 90 percent believed that democracy was better than any other form of government. Smaller numbers—but still a majority—said that they believed Iran was “fairly democratic” (59%).

The [World Values Survey](#) in 2000 got similar results. Asked how they felt about “the way democracy is developing” in their country, 50 percent of Iranians said they were very or rather satisfied. Only 25 percent were not very satisfied or not at all satisfied. Though hardly an overwhelming endorsement, this does show that more Iranians approved than disapproved of their system of government by a 2:1 margin.

Why do Iranians give their country rather favorable marks on democracy? The explanation may lie in Iran’s unique history within a region characterized by authoritarian government. The polls did not ask Iranian respondents to compare their system of government to Western systems. Their evaluations of Iranian democracy are derived from a baseline of expectations relative to their history and to regional values or norms. Both in terms of Iranian history and Middle Eastern norms, Iran’s levels of democratic representation are relatively high.

It is possible that Iranians desire to participate more directly in the selection of their Supreme Leader. The TFT poll found that 79 percent endorsed a system in which the “ ‘Supreme Leader,’ along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people”. However, the question allowed respondents only to approve or disapprove of such a system. Whether they were expressing a specific desire for direct elections of the Supreme Leader or simply general support for the democratic process is not clear.

Many Iranian dissidents and international human rights activists argue that the Iranian election process is unfair because the Guardian Council—a constitutional watchdog, half of whose members are appointed by the parliament and half by Khamenei—can disqualify candidates they consider unfit. Dissidents called for a boycott of both the 2005 presidential elections and the 2004 parliamentary ballot, arguing that the council had rejected most reformist candidates. Their arguments were widely disseminated in Iran over radio broadcasts from abroad and through word of mouth.

Nonetheless, the 2005 runoff election drew 60 percent of the electorate and the 2004 parliamentary election drew 51 percent, according to [Iranian government figures](#). The 2006 poll to choose members of the Assembly of Experts attracted 61 percent. These levels are lower than voter participation rates in many European countries but higher than in the United States.

Respect for Human Rights

Iranians also give their country fairly positive ratings on human rights. The 2006 WPO survey asked Iranians how much respect there was for individual rights in their country: 70 percent said there was a lot (21%) or some (49%), while 27 percent said either that there was not much (20%) or no respect at all (7%). These percentages are essentially unchanged from 2000, when the World Values Survey asked the same question and found that 66 percent rated respect for individual rights as a lot (17%) or some (49%) and 25 percent gave ratings of not much (18%) and none (7%).

A May 2005 poll conducted by Zogby, however, suggests that Iranians do feel somewhat constrained from expressing their views. A narrow plurality of 42 percent (16% strongly) said they did not “feel free to express my opinions, both privately and publicly” while 37 percent said they did feel free (26% strongly), and 20 percent were neutral. The question did not distinguish between political opinions and cultural, ethnic or religious views. Nor does it necessarily imply that people fear legal consequences if they express the wrong opinion.

Views of the United States

Although polls find that Iranians would like to increase economic and political relations with the West, they do not support the idea that Iranians are pro-Western, much less pro-American.

The most recent TFT poll finds that a majority of Iranians (73%) believe “seeking trade and economic relations with Western countries” should be one of their government’s long-term goals. Two-thirds (68%) also endorse the idea that Iranian diplomats should seek “full United States recognition of Iran and normalized trade relations.”

While these results demonstrate a high-degree of pragmatism on the part of the Iranian public, they do not tell us whether Iranians look favorably on the United States or its people. The TFT poll did not ask any standard questions about attitudes toward the United States.

But numerous other polls have asked such questions and the results are decidedly negative. The 2006 WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted found that 76 percent of Iranians had an unfavorable opinion of the United States (65% very)—up from June 2002 when [Gallup](#) found that 63 percent expressed this negative view (54% very). A December 2005 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA poll](#) found that 65 percent of Iranians believed the United States had a mainly negative influence in the world. That’s considerably higher than the average with this negative view among all 33 countries included in the survey (41%). It’s also higher than the average of the four Middle Eastern countries polled (52%).

Moreover, Iranians perceive the United States as a threat, according to the [2006 WPO poll](#). Presented a list of possible threats, “US foreign policy” was seen as important by 77 percent of respondents, including 59 percent who considered it a “critical threat.” Asked specifically about the US military presence in the Middle East, 73 percent said US bases in the region were a threat to Iran, including 44 percent who called them a major threat.

These negative views extend to American culture (at least when asked about in general terms). More than three out of four Iranians (78%) expressed unfavorable attitudes toward US culture and 67 percent were very unfavorable.

But views of the American people are almost evenly divided. Forty-nine percent viewed Americans unfavorably and 45 percent favorably.