

Post-Election Poll in Iran Shows Little Change in Anti-Regime Minority

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Editor's Note:

This article analyzes the views of three different Iranian opinion groups - Conservatives, Moderates and Reformers - based on their responses to several measures of "regime support" contained in WPO's September 2009 survey. The three groups were initially identified on WPO's February 2008 Iran survey using Latent Class Analysis that was presented in an earlier article, ["Iranian Public is Not Monolithic ..."](#). The same three groups were recreated on WPO's September 2009 Iran survey, as well as its earlier 2008 survey, using an easily replicable 7-point scale applied to responses on the same three government support measures. All three of these measures tap the theoretical construct of "regime support," with Conservatives consistently supportive of the regime, Reformers consistently opposed, and Moderates having mixed views.

With the post-election crackdown in Iran, a key question is to what degree Iranians are being effectively intimidated from expressing views that are at odds with the regime. This question is relevant to the regime's prospects for success or failure in its efforts to suppress dissent. It is also an important indicator, along with other trend measures, of whether surveys of the Iranian public continue to be valid. Very briefly, the present article finds only a modest decline in readiness to express dissenting views.

Overview -- Comparison of the findings from the early 2008 and late 2009 Iran surveys conducted by World Public Opinion (WPO) shows that the number of Iranians who consistently express very critical views of their government associated with Reformers has fallen by just four percentage points amidst the current repressive climate (from 17% to 13%), and the number expressing moderately critical views has fallen by six points (from 46% to 40%). During this period, the number of Iranians who consistently express positive views of their political system associated with Conservatives has risen by 11 points (from 36% to 47%). About one-fifth of these Conservatives (10% of the public) take a militant position against U.S. influence, and can be termed "Hardline Conservatives." The views of these several groups continue to diverge considerably on most public issues, with the notable exception that all groups mainly eschew Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Demographically, WPO's 2009 survey shows that Reformers tend to be younger, better educated and more likely to live in urban areas than Moderates and Conservatives.

Regime support groups -- Three separate opinion groups within the Iranian public were initially identified in analyses of World Public Opinion's 1-2/2008 survey, using the statistical clustering technique Latent Class Analysis on three different measures of support for the Iranian government.¹ Consistent with much ongoing analytical discourse inside and outside Iran, these three groups were labeled as Conservatives, Moderates and Reformers. The three groups differ sharply in how they view Iran's system of government. The same three groups were recreated on WPO's latest Iran survey (8/27-9/10/09),² as well as its early 2008 survey, using a simplified 7-point scale based on responses to the same three government support measures. All three of these measures, discussed below, tap the theoretical construct of "regime support," with Conservatives identified as those consistently supportive of the regime, Reformers consistently opposed, and Moderates having mixed views.

Respondents who answered all three questions (89% of the 8-9/09 survey sample) were located on a 7-point scale, ranging from 0 for those definitely opposing Iran's government on all three questions to 6 points for those definitely supporting the government on all three questions. Three groups of respondents are identified based on these scores -- Conservatives (5-6 points), Moderates (2-4 points), and Reformers (0-1 point) -- and their divergent views mirror the diversity of opinion among Iran's political elites.³

Regime support measures -- The three major substantive groups within Iran's public are defined by their sharp and consistent divergence on these three WPO questions relating to support of the Iranian government ("regime support"): (1) Satisfaction with the Iranian election process ("very satisfied" given 2 scale points, "somewhat satisfied" -- 1 scale point, and "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" -- 0

points); (2) Support for the government's right to censor destabilizing news (2 scale points) versus support for a free press (0 points); and (3) Trust in Iran's national government (trust "most of the time" - 2 scale points, trust "some of the time" -- 1 point, and trust "rarely" or "never" -- 0 points). (See Table 1 for the exact wording and findings for each of these questions.) On each of these questions support for the regime declines sharply and progressively from the highest regime support (Conservatives) to the least regime support (Reformers). For example, the vast majority of Conservatives (91%) trust the Iranian government "most of the time," most Moderates (58%) trust it "some of the time," and most Reformers (65%) trust it "rarely" or "never" (see Table 1A).

The three groups show naturally sharp contrast on the question containing only two choices -- having either media freedom or government censorship. All Conservatives favor the government's right to censor potentially destabilizing news and all Reformers favor media freedom. Moderates favor media freedom over government's right to censor media by a 61-39 percent majority (Table 1B).

The three groups also differ considerably in their assessment of the process by which authorities generally are elected in Iran. Most Conservatives (64%) are "very satisfied" with the Iranian election process, most Moderates (61%) are "somewhat satisfied" with it, while the vast majority of Reformers (87%) are "not very" or "not at all" satisfied with the Iranian election process (Table 1C). The 11-point increase since 2008 in the number of Conservatives identified by our regime support scale is due mainly to changes in response on this question. The number of respondents saying they were "very satisfied" with the Iranian election process doubled between the 2008 (20%) and 2009 (42%) surveys.⁴ In contrast, the number of respondents who said they trust the Iranian government "most of the time" rose only 1 percentage point (from 55% to 56%), and the number who expressed support for government's right to censor the media rose 3 percentage points (from 60% to 63%) between the 2008 and 2009 surveys.⁵ Employed together these three regime support measures should gauge the size and positions of different Iranian factions over time more reliably than would a single measure.

Additional issues, besides the regime support measures, on which Iranian Conservatives, Moderates and Reformers diverge are discussed in the text below. These include other questions relating to Iran's domestic institutions (e.g., opinions regarding President Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader) and perceptions of the U.S. government. Several instances of "partial divergence" will also be examined, in which two of the groups share fairly similar views on an issue, but these views differ sharply from those of the third group. An example of partial divergence is opinion of the American people, in which Conservatives and Moderates are both closely divided, while a large majority of Reformers have a favorable opinion. Then, several issues are examined in which the views of the three groups converge, including minority support within all groups for Iran's developing nuclear weapons and the widespread belief within all groups that a U.S. objective is to maintain control over Middle East oil resources.

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¹Latent Class Analysis (LCA) segmented the sample statistically into relatively homogeneous groups based on respondents' answers to the three questions relating to support for the Iranian government. Additional information about this analytical approach is contained in an earlier article co-authored with David B. Nolle and Elaine El Assal, "Iranian Public Is Not Monolithic: Iranians Divide Over Their Government But Unite on Forgoing Nuclear Weapons," World Public Opinion.org., 5/18/09.

²This survey is based on telephone interviews with a sample of 1,003 Iranians. More than four-fifths of Iranians have landline telephones in their households. About half of the households contacted (52%) refused to be interviewed.

³A number of scholars have written about the major political factions among the Iranian elites (see, for example, the works of Shahram Chubin, Akbar Ganji, Ray Takeyh, and Sanam Vakil), but comparable empirical analyses of the major political divisions in representative national surveys of the Iranian public are rare.

⁴This increase between the 2008 and 2009 surveys is due to the increased percentage of Conservatives (from 38% to 64%) and Moderates (from 12% to 28%) who said they were "very satisfied" with the Iranian election process. None of the Reformers were "very satisfied" on either survey; in fact, about nine-tenths of Reformers expressed dissatisfaction on both surveys.

⁵Reference to the number of respondents here refers to the 89% of the sample who responded to all three regime support questions on the 2009 survey, and to the 70% who did so on the 2008 survey, and thus who could be scaled and categorized as either Conservative, Moderate or Reformer. Five other questions, besides the three regime support measures, were asked on both the 2008 and 2009 surveys. Two of these show distinct shifts, although not nearly as great as the 22-point change in very satisfied with the election process noted above: Favorable opinion of the U.S. government rose nine percentage points between 2008 and 2009 (from 8% to 17%). Also, perception that a U.S. goal is to maintain control over Middle East oil resources fell eight points (from 87% in 2008 to 79% in 2009). However, on three other trend questions, as well as two of the three regime support measures discussed above, changes in response between the 2008 and 2009 surveys were only three percentage points or less.