

# The Iraqi Political System's Legitimacy Problem: Low Expected Turnout for Provincial Elections

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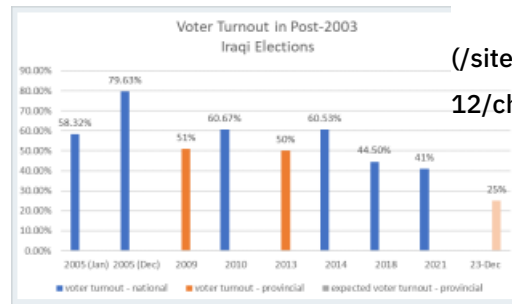
Brief Analysis

## Predicted low voter turnout for Iraq's first provincial elections in a decade signals the lack of popular trust in Iraq for the country's political system.

Iraqis are preparing to take part in provincial elections slated for December 18. These elections can in theory have a major impact on Iraqis' lives; according to the Iraqi Constitution, provincial councils have significant legislative and executive powers over their areas. These councils are not subject to the control or oversight of Iraq's various federal ministries, and they enjoy an independent financial system with the power to set budgets for many local sectors, including education and health. Provincial councils have the legal authority to appoint or dismiss the governor, and they also monitor departments linked to central ministries, tracking the performance of their managers and staff.

These provincial elections are the first to be held in over a decade, but certain trends in previous national elections suggest that voter participation will be significantly lower than in previous years. While the turnout in the first Iraqi elections for members of the Council of Representatives, held in December 2005, reached almost 80%, turnout significantly declined by the 2021 elections, polling at just 41%. Due to [instructions](#) (<https://ihec.iq/28767/2023/12/>) received from the Electoral Commission regarding the necessity of using a biometric card to vote and a popular boycott, the turnout in the December 2023 provincial election is expected to [fall below 21%](#). (<https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/provincial-elections-2023/475783/%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%A8%D9%83%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-21-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86->

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(/sites/default/files/2023-12/chart%20iraq%20elections.png)

*\*Numbers from Iraq High Electoral Commission, as reported by IFES*

(<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/104/>), *WSJ*

(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323551004578437010842687422>), and *Al Jazeera English*

(<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/iraqi-parliamentary-elections-see-record-low-voter-turnout>)

The low expected turnout in the upcoming elections reflects a popular rejection of the Iraqi political system, which is suffering from a legitimacy crisis and the absence of real opposition forces to vie with the parties in power, especially after the boycott of the elections by the Sadrist movement and some civil parties. There is little hope for change, and voters doubt the legitimacy of the elections, accusing the Electoral Commission of submitting to the influence of political parties and manipulating results in the interest of ruling parties. Elected institutions, such as parliament and the provincial councils, lack a monitoring role, and their laws have not been implemented by the executive authority.

Legal problems related to the voting process could also significantly contribute to a low turnout in the December 18 provincial council elections. According to the Electoral Commission, the names of more than 23 million citizens are included on the voter list. Only 60% of these individuals have received **a biometric card**

(<https://ihec.iq/28767/2023/12/>), which is legally required in order to cast a vote. In other words, more than nine million people (40%) have lost their right to vote before the electoral process begins. “According to the Electoral Commission’s instructions, any citizen who does not have a biometric card cannot participate in the elections,”

**Hawri Tawfiq** (<https://www.facebook.com/Rudaw.net/videos/1494450331406456>), advisor to the presidency and an expert in electoral affairs, stated. “The absence of the Sadrist movement and civil parties will be another reason for the low participation rate in the upcoming elections.”

Meanwhile, the government is trying hard, through its executive institutions in fifteen out of eighteen governorates—the remaining three are within the Kurdistan region, and are not included in the elections—to boost the turnout by supporting the Electoral Commission’s work and providing all that is needed to ensure fair, honest, and transparent elections. It also emphasizes the implementation of the federal system, which will grant broad powers to the provincial governments. The ruling parties have also spent all their money and energy to raise the level of participation in the provincial council elections.

The parties’ electoral platforms include several fundamental proposed reforms. These include:

- eradicating poverty; Iraq’s Ministry of Planning **reports** (<https://themedialine.org/mideast-daily-news/poverty-rate-in-iraq-was-25-or-11-million-people-for-2022/>) 25% (11 million people) were below Iraq’s poverty line in 2022.
- exempting the poor from taxes
- adopting the new **Social Security Law** ([https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_882430/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_882430/lang--en/index.htm)), replacing Iraq’s 1971 Social Security Law and enacting numerous reforms to social security for

individuals employed in the private sector

- identifying the parties and individuals who killed peaceful demonstrators during the October 2019 demonstrations,
- revealing the fate of the missing—such as efforts to introduce several **draft laws** ([https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CED%2F%2FIRQ%2FVR%2F1%20%28Findings%29&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CED%2F%2FIRQ%2FVR%2F1%20%28Findings%29&Lang=en)) addressing enforced disappearance in Iraq in response to the estimated **12,000 reports** (<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/forced-disappearances-iraq-around-12000-reports-missing-persons-last-six-years-enar>) of missing persons over the past six years.
- involving young people in the facets of the state.

Parties have also pledged to hold the corrupt accountable, fight corruption, develop infrastructure in lagging governorates, support the tourism and agriculture sectors, and fight desertification.

While these proposals sound good on paper, the reality is that Iraqi voters have heard these promises before, during previous electoral cycles. Ultimately, reforms addressing these issues have not been applied on the ground, and the recycled promise to tackle these issues, while lacking results to show the Iraqi electorate, are not expected to draw voters to the polls.

A low turnout in the elections will raise questions about the legitimacy of local governments, especially as Baghdad continues to suffer from the same crisis. When legitimacy is eroded, citizens can resort to acts of violence against the existing regime, such as demonstrations and protests. In response, the regime is likely to increasingly resort to violence to ensure its survival, a cycle that poses a threat to social stability. Thus, ruling parties should use the results of voter turnout for the upcoming elections as an indicator of the extent of public acceptance and satisfaction towards the government—or lack thereof.

In conclusion, the upcoming elections will not help end Iraq's current political instability. The country continues to suffer from rampant corruption and ethnic and national conflicts. The majority of Iraqi people are not convinced of the efficacy and legitimacy of the systems established after 2003, and there is little hope of a political change.

Once the dust settles on the provincial elections and Iraqis find out who will become their new local representatives, it is possible that some Iraqis will resume demonstrating against the regime. For their part, civil and opposition forces participating in the elections have one more week to convince voters that they can reform the political system and win votes. But beyond this election cycle, they must work to develop a clear and mature political program based on the candidates' political and professional experience, proposing actionable solutions rather than empty promises. Nevertheless, the main goal of these forces should ultimately be to bring about real democratic change in Iraq, and to end the rule of power and money. Continuing the status quo will mean that Iraqi citizens' faith in electoral change or the possibility of reform through new political movements will only continue to erode. ❖

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