

Corruption, Clerics, or Crackdowns: What Shapes Iranians' Trust in Government?

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in government is crucial for the stability and efficiency of any political system. In an era of global skepticism towards public institutions, scholars continually seek to identify the key factors—demographic, social, economic, and institutional—that shape public trust in government. Previous research has focused extensively on measuring trust in countries with a recent history of democratic governance, such as South Korea, Japan, Norway, and Brazil. Building on this body of work, this study shifts the focus to Iran and its hybrid system. Through the use of regression models and cross tabulation of data, this paper aims to answer: what factors—such as satisfaction with public services, political, religious, and economic perceptions, or demographic factors like age, gender, and settlement size—affect Iranians’ trust in the various government institutions, namely the president, parliament, local councils, judiciary, military, police, and IRGC? How do these findings in Iran compare with other countries previously studied? To address this research question, this study uses 2021 data from the University of Maryland Center for Security Studies (CISSM) and the 2020 World Values Survey on Iran. The surveys used are nationally representative and probability-based, with stratified sampling by province.

This study finds that, apart from religion, personal utility factors—such as economic conditions, satisfaction with healthcare services, the government’s COVID-19 response, and personal living conditions—are the strongest predictors of trust, as indicated by their coefficient magnitudes and pseudo R^2 values. Demographic factors like gender, age, settlement size, and ethnicity had minimal relevancy. Surprisingly, despite Iran’s distinct government context, the factors shaping institutional trust resemble those in democratic countries like Japan, South Korea, Brazil, and South Africa. Furthermore, the insignificance of demographic factors suggests that trust in the Islamic Republic of Iran is more nuanced than a simple reaction to political oppression. Marginalized groups—such as women, youth, and ethnic minorities—do not consistently show lower levels of trust in the government. These findings suggest that trust in government is perceived by Iranians as a pragmatic concept, rather than something rooted in abstract ideals. The statistical significance of utility variables indicates that trust operates like a commodity that the government can “purchase” through actions that improve citizens’ personal utility. Therefore, the Islamic Republic can build trust by focusing on material and social needs, without necessarily addressing freedom-related grievances. These findings from Iran and other countries indicate that, as globalization shapes expectations of governance, trust is increasingly driven by universal needs—such as security, economic stability, and well-being—suggesting that humans across the globe may be prioritizing tangible outcomes over political ideologies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been over a year in the making, and I am deeply grateful to the many individuals who have supported, guided, and challenged me throughout the process.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Nancy Gallagher and Clay Ramsay at the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies (CISSM) for their generosity in sharing data, their willingness to collaborate, and their invaluable feedback on my research. Their guidance and thoughtful critiques shaped my approach and strengthened my analysis in countless ways.

I am deeply grateful to the faculty at Harvard who supported me throughout this project. Professor John Kenneth Felter's course, *An Economic Analysis of Law*, helped shape an early version of this paper on trust in Iran's legal system, and his insights provided a crucial foundation for my thesis. I am also indebted to Professor Shahradsafar, whose mentorship in understanding Iran's history, refining my Persian skills, and interpreting sources with nuance has been invaluable. My deepest thanks go to my advisor, Professor Chase Harrison, who responded to my initial cold email with enthusiasm and has been an unwavering source of support. His expertise, patience, and guidance—especially through technical challenges—have been instrumental in shaping this project. I also extend my gratitude to the Aga Khan Fund for Iranian Studies for their financial support, which made this research possible. Lastly, I am thankful to the professors in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard, whose courses, discussions, and encouragement have shaped my studies and ultimately led me to write this thesis.

On a more personal note, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my mother, Mojdeh Khalighi, whose stories and experiences of Iran have profoundly shaped my perspective. This thesis is, in many ways, a reflection of my upbringing in an Iranian American household and the broader influence of the Iranian diaspora. People like my mother, who left Iran and carry deeply personal, often complex views of the country's past and present, have challenged me to think more critically. My debates with family members—particularly my mother—on Iranian public opinion have at times been intense, but they have also pushed me to question my assumptions, ultimately strengthening both my research and my capacity for empathy.

I recognize that my work presents a perspective on Iran that may be contentious and subject to debate. I welcome all feedback, including the most critical perspectives, and I remain committed to engaging with differing viewpoints in the pursuit of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of public opinion in Iran.

PREFACE

On November 29, 2022, in a stadium in Qatar, two teams took the field, but the match was far bigger than just a game of soccer. Iran and the United States—the two geopolitical adversaries locked in decades of enmity—were set to face off in a final World Cup group-stage match.

It was only a few months before when the Iranian World Cup team met with then-President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran, receiving his blessings as representatives—not just of the sport, but of the Islamic Republic itself. By the time they landed in Doha, Iran was in crisis. Protests over Mahsa Amini’s death had gripped the nation, and the team’s role had shifted. Their performance on the field mattered less than their actions off it. Unwillingly, they had become symbols in a battle over national identity and state legitimacy.

When the U.S. won 1-0, Western media headlines exploded with a surprising angle: they claimed Iranians were *celebrating* Iran’s loss in the World Cup. NBC reported that crowds in Tehran and other cities cheered the defeat, interpreting it as an act of defiance against the Islamic Republic.¹ The idea took root quickly—here was evidence, as many had long suspected, that Iran was a country of secular, progressive people trapped under an oppressive theocracy, waiting for its downfall. The Western-world saw a simple narrative: a regime teetering on collapse, a people in rebellion, a soccer match as a proxy war.

For much of the American public, Iran exists only in the form of headlines—an opaque, villainized entity whose complexity is distilled into soundbites about nuclear ambitions, sanctions, protests, and repression. Few spend time thinking about the country beyond what they are told by news outlets, and fewer still engage with the nuances of its society. Yet, Iran remains one of the most consequential geopolitical concerns of the West. In fact, the first question in the 2024 Vice Presidential debate between J.D. Vance and Tim Walz was about Iran.²

I have lived at the intersection of these narratives. I am Iranian but grew up in America, part of a diaspora shaped by displacement—a persecuted religious minority that has known Iran only through exile and repression. In my world, the Islamic Republic has always been an object of fear, a force that has inflicted suffering on those I know and love.

Knowing this, the headlines around Iran and America in the World Cup were unsurprising to me. The reaction of Iranians cheering the national team’s defeat fit perfectly into the framework I had always known—Iran’s people had long since turned against their rulers, that the Islamic Republic was clinging to power in a country that wanted nothing more than to break free from its grip.

An outspoken and influential Iranian diaspora in the West fueled this narrative for me. Riddled with accolades, the Western Iranian community has, in many ways, come to embody the Western ideal

¹See NBC News report: Smith, Alexander, and Caroline Radnofsky. “Iranians Celebrate Defeat to United States at Soccer World Cup.” *NBC News*, 30 Nov. 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/world-cup-iranians-celebrate-defeat-united-states-soccer-rcna59320>.

²Vice-presidential candidates were asked about Iran’s missile attack on Israel. See *WRAL*, “2024 VP Debate Topic 1: Iran Attack on Israel | Middle East Policy,” YouTube, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqMsupCtyhA>.

of success—defined by entrepreneurship, wealth, and intellectual prestige. Iranians abroad are not just participants in these spaces; they are leaders. They have founded companies, reshaped industries, and ascended to the highest levels of corporate power. Dara Khosrowshahi, the CEO of Uber, Omid Kordestani, the former executive chairman of Twitter and a key architect of Google’s rise, and Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay are just a few names of a long list I could generate for you.

And it’s not just business. Iranian names fill the ranks of top journalists, doctors, lawyers, and academics in America, Europe, and Australia. The diaspora has flourished in the fields that define Western secular achievement—professions of influence, authority, and supposed meritocracy. The Iranian-American community ranks among the highest in educational attainment and median household income in the U.S as well.³ In many ways, the Iranian diaspora is seen—both by themselves and by those around them—as a model minority.

That very success has shaped a particular narrative of Iran from this diaspora—one of exile, of loss, of hardship, of longing for an Iran that could have been. It is a story told by those who left and never returned, by those whose vision of Iran is frozen in time or shaped by secondhand memories. It is a story of a country waiting to be freed, a people waiting to reclaim their nation from a regime that no one they know supports. So why would I not believe it? This was the Iran I had always known—the Iran of my family, my community, my identity. The Iran that has always been extraordinary and a regime that was always supposed to fall.

But if everything I had learned about Iran growing up was true, then the simplest question remains: *why hasn’t the Islamic Republic collapsed?* Rest assured, this is not an attempt to turn an academic work into speculation about regime change. Predicting the fall of governments is a futile exercise, and that is not my aim. But the question still lingers: *If the Islamic Republic is truly the most repressive and dysfunctional government in the world, as the diaspora claims, how does it continue to function?*

A simple review of political theory and a brief historical exercise might suggest an easy answer: it won’t. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, argues that fully repressive regimes contain the seeds of their own demise (Arendt, 478). So if the Islamic Republic is as fragile as the diaspora insists—if it is so universally despised, if it has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of its people—then why has it survived? Why, despite decades of sanctions, internal dissent, economic hardship, and international isolation, does it persist?

I would even dare to argue Iran has not just survived, but adapted. It remains one of the most sanctioned countries in the world, yet it wins more gold medals at math Olympiads than Israel, Egypt, Canada, or Taiwan.⁴ Iran produces world-class scientists and engineers, and continues to function as a global power while far wealthier states have collapsed under far less pressure. For example, Venezuela, despite having the world’s largest proven oil reserves and far greater access to global markets than Iran, has suffered economic collapse, hyperinflation, and mass emigration due to governance failures and economic mismanagement.

³Iranian Americans have notably high median household incomes and educational attainment. See *Resources on the Iranian American Community*, Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), <https://paaia.org/educate/resources> for more demographic data on the Iranian American community.

⁴Iran has consistently ranked among the top countries in the International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO), earning numerous gold, silver, and bronze medals since 1974. See official IMO results at <https://www.imo-official.org/results.aspx>.

The most immediate response to my question might be that the Islamic Republic simply hasn't broken yet. And this may be true. For all I know, the Islamic Republic could crumble as fast as Bashar al-Assad Regime did in Syria in the winter of 2024, making this entire thesis irrelevant in a few months or years.⁵ However, something tells me that Iran is not like Syria. Unlike Syria, Iran's situation is different in key ways that may offer it greater stability. With secure borders and a military that operates within a centralized structure, Iran avoids the fragmentation seen in other conflict zones. Moreover, its political institutions, while far from perfect, continue to function and provide a foundation of governance that sets it apart from the chaos that has engulfed neighboring countries. So, it may be true that the Islamic Republic's time has not come yet, but, given the ambiguity of this prediction, let us set aside the assumption of time for now.

Among the many answers to my question, one plausible explanation is that I have the story wrong. And, if my story about the Islamic Republic of Iran is wrong, then perhaps I must reconsider a handful of assumptions my story relies on:

First: maybe the narrative of Iran's government's fragility is incomplete or incorrect—perhaps the Islamic Republic has sources of legitimacy, adaptability, or resilience that are often overlooked. Therefore, Iranian public opinion, too, is more complicated than a simple pro-regime vs. anti-regime binary. Trust in the Iranian government, dissatisfaction, and political participation do not exist in isolation but in a nuanced and sometimes contradictory balance.

Second: maybe Iran is not an outlier even though I have framed it as one. Iran is often discussed as uniquely repressive theocracy in a region that is supposedly moving toward secular modernity.⁶ But is that assumption accurate? In all the Middle Eastern countries I have been to, I see the same enduring patterns: women still covering their hair, taxi drivers still saving up for Hajj, Islamic values deeply embedded in daily life, and religion continuing to shape societies in ways that cannot simply be legislated away. Iran is not an island; it exists within a regional context where political Islam has not disappeared, despite repeated predictions of its decline.

Perhaps, then, Iran is following a trajectory similar to other modern Middle Eastern states. If this is true, a simple historical exercise challenges my assumption of inevitable collapse. Look at Iran's neighbors—when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, it did not lead to a secular democracy despite billions of dollars in investment; instead, the Taliban returned to power within a matter of days from the U.S. departure. Iraq, once envisioned as a testing ground for Western-style governance, has moved in a far more religious direction than ever before. The Arab Spring, initially celebrated as a wave of secular uprisings, ultimately resulted in governments that became more Islamic in governance and practice than before—just look at Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia.

⁵The Assad regime in Syria collapsed in December 2024 as opposition forces seized key cities, culminating in the fall of Damascus. Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia, marking the end of over five decades of Assad family rule. See *The New York Times*, "The Fall of Assad in Syria: How It Happened and What Comes Next," *The New York Times*, 18 Dec. 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/18/world/middleeast/syria-assad-fall.html>.

⁶Numerous headlines depict Iran in this manner. See Vox, "How Iran's Repression Machine Works," *YouTube*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caUMtmxa5E8>; VICE News, "Inside Iran: What Happened to Iran's Women-led Uprising?" *YouTube*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAQRCCWsi-s>; Pahlavi, Reza. "Iran Is Ripe for a Revolution, Exiled Prince Says." *Iran International*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202407290007>; Jerusalem Post Staff. "Majority of Iranians Want Secular Government, Leaked Study Shows." *The Jerusalem Post*, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-788842>.

Many argue Iran is unlike the other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, making it an unhelpful comparison. While there is some truth to this, I do think there is a tendency among Iranians to overestimate their uniqueness and superiority. This inflated sense of distinction often overlooks the fact that, in many ways, Iran shares more similarities with its Arab neighbors than it would like to admit. For example, Arabs and Iranians share a rich literary tradition, religious practices, and family values rooted in Islam. The cuisines, traditional clothing, and social norms around modesty and hospitality further highlight the shared cultural heritage across both cultures. Nevertheless, they are somewhat different. Iran was never formally colonized like Egypt, Jordan, or Lebanon though it did face imperial influence from the British, Americans, and Russians. Iran was also never invaded by a Western power—like Iraq or Afghanistan—and practices a different sect of Islam (Shia Islam). So, if the Arab world is a bad comparison. Let's use Turkey as a case study.

Iran and Turkey are quite similar historically, culturally, and geographically. Both countries experienced the influence of modernizing rulers in the 20th century—Atatürk and the Reza Shah Pahlavi—who sought to usher their nations into secular modernity. However, if Turkey serves as a comparison, the story is not so different. When Erdoğan rose to power in the early 2000s, he shifted Turkey away from secular modernity, moving toward a more traditional, Islamist approach. Decades after Atatürk's forceful modernization, Erdoğan, a traditional Islamist, reversed many of his predecessor's policies, consolidating power, mandating Islamic education, and undermining women's workplace protections. The point is that despite Iran's perception of uniqueness, its trajectory may not be so different and, therefore, Iran's trajectory may be more aligned with broader regional trends than I would like to acknowledge.

So if Iran is part of a broader regional trend—if repressive regimes do not always collapse, if religion remains deeply influential, if secular movements do not always translate into lasting political change—*then why do so many insist that Iran is an exception?* What makes us—namely Iranians in the West—believe that the Islamic Republic is uniquely fragile, that Iran is uniquely destined for Western-style democracy, and Iranians are uniquely at odds with their own government?

This is where the study of Iranians' relationship with trust in government became an interesting question for me. If the Islamic Republic has not collapsed, if it continues to function despite sanctions, protests, and internal strife, then I may make the assumption that there might be trust in the government. This then forced me to ask: What role does trust—however conditional, fractured, or coerced—play in sustaining the Islamic Republic? What does it mean for an Iranian to “trust” their government, despite it being a system that is neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian? And most importantly, what factors shape that trust—or its absence—in modern Iran?

Unlike regime change—a question that is nearly impossible to measure and predict—trust is tangible. Trust, or the lack thereof, is a window into the political psychology of a nation. It reveals not only how people feel about their rulers but also how they perceive the state's legitimacy, its ability to govern, and their own role within it. Understanding trust in government in Iran is essential to understanding the country itself, and yet it is a topic rarely explored beyond superficial analyses of dissent and repression.

All of this is a long-winded way of saying that perhaps I have been wrong about Iran. Perhaps the relationship between its Iranians and their government is more layered than I had assumed. This paper is my attempt to explore that complexity—to go beyond the headlines, beyond the diaspora narratives, beyond the easy binaries of oppression and resistance.

At the heart of this study is the analysis of public opinion polls. I understand if polling data might make you want to stop reading right now. However, I would reinstate that polls, even in tightly controlled environments, are not meaningless. They are one of the few tools we have to systematically capture patterns of thought in places where voices are often silenced. They do not give us perfect truths, but they give us something just as valuable: contradictions, tensions, and glimpses into how people navigate life under a complex system.

And if the polls are any indication—which they will be in this paper—then both my perspective and, arguably, the Western media’s narrative about Iran warrant reevaluation. Only about 6% of Iranians reported being happy that Iran lost to the U.S. in the World Cup, while approximately 87% were upset (Gallagher et al., *Raisi Period*, 33). If polling data on something as emotionally charged as a soccer match does not align with the opposition narrative often portrayed in Western media, what might a deeper analysis of trust in government reveal about Iranians’ relationship with their state?

How Did You Feel About Iran Loosing to USA in World Cup (March 2023)

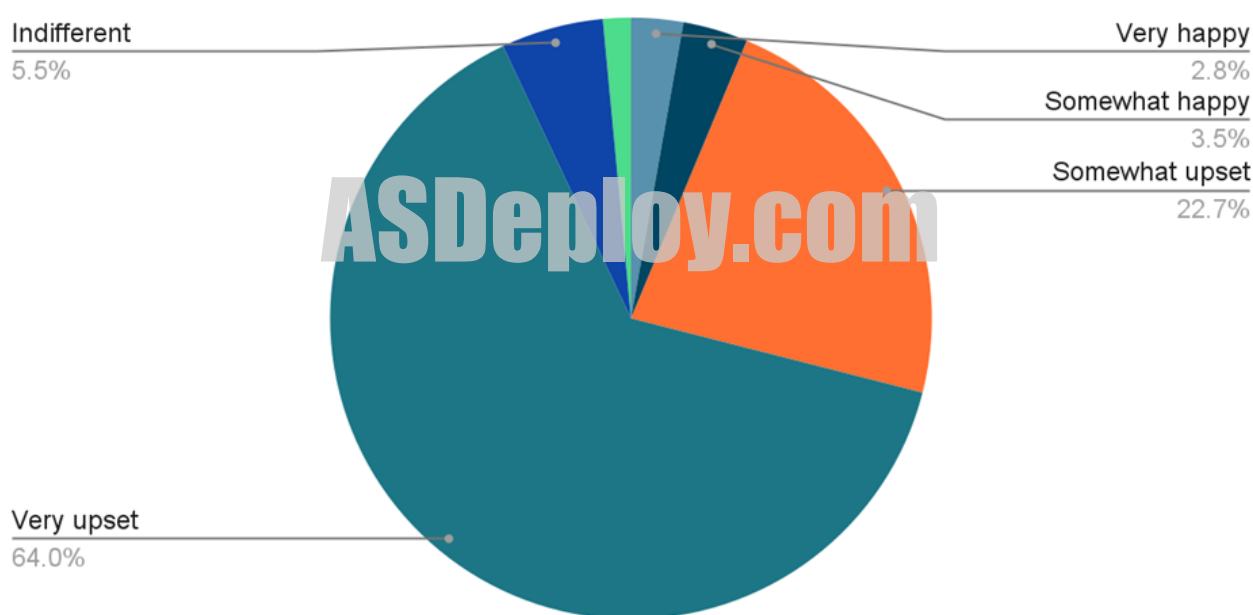


Figure 1. Polling Result: How Did You Feel About Iran Loosing to USA in World Cup? Results from the CISSM 2024 Report on Iranian Attitudes Toward the 2022 World Cup Game Results (Gallagher et al., *Raisi Period*). This figure illustrates public sentiment regarding Iran’s performance in the tournament, highlighting high levels of dissatisfaction with Iran’s loss.

CHAPTER 1 | INTRODUCTION: FOUNDATIONS OF STUDYING TRUST IN IRAN

Trust in government plays a pivotal role in ensuring the stability and efficiency of a political system. High levels of trust in government make institutions work “effectively” by promoting social cohesion, encouraging policy reform, and freeing resources previously spent on excessive regulation and supervision (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund, 2). In addition, an abundance of literature suggests trust “fosters cooperation” and is critical for a country’s “economic and social development” (Pourfazez, 1692). Causal studies even show that countries with low levels of trust face a populace that is unwilling to “co-produce,” limiting their potential for economic prosperity (Liu, 437). Given the importance of trust in government, the question then becomes: how do governments build trust and what affects the perception of trustworthiness among their citizens? Recognizing the importance of this question, scholars have long sought to identify the key factors—demographic, social, economic, and institutional—that shape public trust in government. This paper aims to expand on this body of research by examining the specific determinants of trust in the case of Iran.

The Iranian government is a hybrid system, blending unelected theocratic leadership with elected institutions that operate within the framework of the Islamic Republic. At its core, power is divided between competing factions—some elected, some appointed—each wielding influence over different aspects of society, security, and the economy. The executive branch (*Qovve-ye Mojriye*), led by the president, is elected by popular vote and oversees domestic policy, economic management, and diplomacy—though its power is checked by other institutions like the parliament. The parliament (*Majles*), also elected, plays a significant role in passing laws and shaping policy, though its legislation can be reviewed by the Guardian Council (*Shora-ye Negahban*), an appointed body that ensures laws align with Islamic principles and the constitution. Beyond the national level, local councils (*Shora-ye Shahr va Rusta*) play a role in municipal governance, handling local administration and public services. The Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan-e Rahbari*), another elected body, is tasked with selecting, overseeing, and, if necessary, dismissing the Supreme Leader (*Rahbar-e Mo’azzam-e Enqelab*).

Beyond the elected institutions, the Supreme Leader wields significant authority, overseeing the military, judiciary, and foreign policy while acting as the ultimate arbitrator between factions. The Expediency Council (*Majma’-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*) mediates legislative disputes and the police (*Niru-ye Entezami-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, FARAJA*) function as the primary law enforcement body, operating under the Ministry of Interior but ultimately overseen by the Supreme Leader, while the judiciary (*Qovve-ye Qaza’iye*), Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami, IRGC*), and various economic and security institutions operate with substantial autonomy—sometimes aligning with elected officials, at other times acting as independent power centers. This complex structure creates an internal system of checks and rivalries, where factions within the government negotiate, compete, and consolidate power—blurring the lines between authoritarianism and political

pluralism.

The classification of Iran's political system remains a subject of debate among scholars and analysts. Some argue Iran is primarily a theocracy, as the Supreme Leader wields ultimate authority and governance is rooted in Islamic jurisprudence (*velayat-e faqih*).⁷ Others categorize it as an authoritarian regime, emphasizing its restrictions on political freedoms, repression of dissent, and centralized control over key institutions.⁸ However, Iran also features elected institutions, such as the presidency, parliament, and local councils, which exercise varying degrees of power within the system. These elements of representative governance—while constrained—complicate a purely authoritarian or theocratic label.

Given this complexity, characterizing Iran as a hybrid regime is most suitable, as it acknowledges its democratic, theocratic, and autocratic dimensions while recognizing its retention of some institutional features of political pluralism.⁹ Classifying a government is inherently contentious, and as the balance of power within Iran's political structure evolves, this debate remains unsettled. Since the focus of this paper is not on classifying Iran's government structure, I will refer to Iran as a "hybrid regime" throughout this work.

Many studies aimed at identifying factors relevant to trust in government focus on countries like South Korea, Japan, Norway, Finland, or Brazil where trust in political institutions is influenced by a recent history of democratic governance. This previous scholarship provides a foundation for examining trust, offering methodological frameworks and anticipated outcomes. This study shifts the focus to Iran and its hybrid regime, investigating the variables that significantly affect citizens' trust in its president, parliament, local councils, IRGC, police, military, and judiciary. In some cases, my analysis will explore trust both at local levels (e.g., individual parliament members and local courts) and centrally (e.g., the judiciary and the parliament as a whole). Here are the research questions this paper addresses:

⁷For more reading on this categorization, see Syed Raheem Abbas and Muhammad Asim, "What Is Theocratic Democracy: A Case Study of Iranian Political System." *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2015, pp. 387–400. <https://doi.org/10.17516/1997-1370-2015-8-3-387-400>.

⁸For more reading on this categorization, see Abbas Milani, "Iran's Paradoxical Regime." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2015, pp. 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0034>.

⁹For a more in-depth discussion of this characterization, see Pejman Abdolmohammadi and Giampiero Cama, "Iran as a Peculiar Hybrid Regime: Structure and Dynamics of the Islamic Republic," which effectively argues why "hybrid regime" is the most accurate framing. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2015, pp. 558–578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.1037246>.

Research Questions:

1. What factors influence Iranians' trust in different branches of government, including the executive, legislative, judicial, and security institutions? Do these factors vary across institutions, and are they different at the local versus national levels?
2. How does Iranians' satisfaction with public services relate to their trust in government institutions? What role do political, religious, economic, and societal dynamics—as well as demographic factors—play in shaping trust in Iran's governing bodies? Which of these factors are the most significant?
3. How do the findings from this analysis of trust in Iran's government institutions compare to existing literature on the key factors that shape trust in political systems more broadly?

This study draws on data from the 2020 World Values Survey (WVS) on Iran and a 2021 nationally representative, probability-based survey conducted by the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) through IranPoll. A detailed discussion of the survey's methodology, strengths, and limitations is provided in Chapter ??.

Before delving into the factors that may shape trust, it is important to contextualize the current landscape of institutional trust in Iran. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below present the results from questions regarding trust in the 2021 CISSM¹⁰ and the 2020 WVS¹¹ polls. These tables provide an overview of how Iranians perceive key institutions—ranging from elected bodies like parliament and the presidency to more insulated entities such as the judiciary, military, and religious leadership. The definition of trust and its implications will be further addressed in Chapter ?? of this paper.

¹⁰“Trust” includes the sum of “A great deal of trust” and “Some trust.” “Distrust” includes the sum of “Not much trust” and “Almost no trust.”

¹¹“Trust” combines “A great deal of confidence” and “Quite a lot of confidence.” “No Trust” combines “Not very much confidence” and “None at all.” The translations differed, but the same Persian word, *etemad* (آرامش), was used in both polls questionnaires.

Trust in Iran Government (2021)

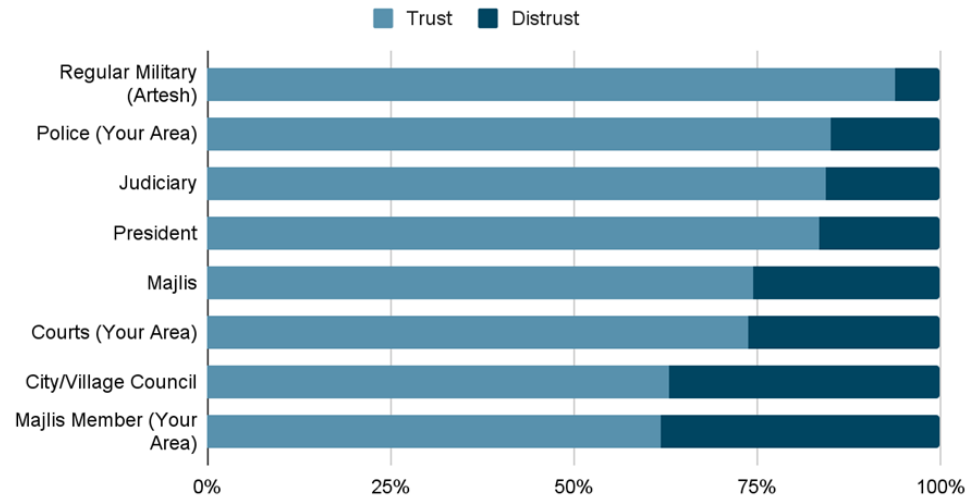


Figure 1.1. Polling Result: How Much Trust Do You Have In the Institutions Below To Take Care Of People's Problems? Results from the CISSM Public Opinion Poll at the Start of the Raisi Administration (Gallagher et al., *Start*.) This figure highlights that a majority (> 50%) of respondents expressed trust in all major Iranian institutions.

Trust in Iran Government (2020)

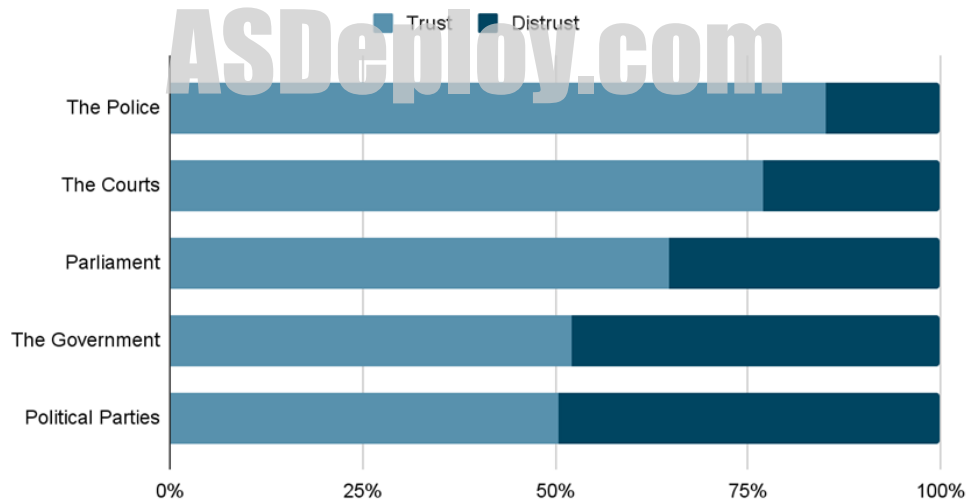


Figure 1.2. Polling Result: How Much Confidence/Trust Do You Have In These Institutions? Results from the 2020 World Values Survey (World Values Survey, *Iran Survey*). This figure highlights that a majority (> 50%) of respondents expressed trust in all major Iranian institutions, with political parties ranking the lowest among them.

As seen in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, Iranians demonstrate high levels of trust in Iran's governing institutions, with some notable differences between local and central governance. Armed forces, including the police and military, receive some of the highest trust ratings, with over 75% of respondents expressing confidence in them (Gallagher et al., *Start*). In contrast, trust in local parliamentarians and council members is lower, ranging between 50-60% (Gallagher et al., *Start*). Data from the 2020 World Values Survey largely aligns with these findings but indicates slightly greater distrust in institutions not covered

by the CISSM datasets. For instance, trust in political parties and the government (broadly defined) hovers around 50% (World Values Survey, *Iran Survey*). Understanding these baseline levels of trust helps frame our subsequent analysis, offering insight into the broader socio-political environment in which our predictors operate.

The findings indicate that public trust in Iran’s government institutions—both at the central and local levels—shares notable similarities with trends observed in other countries. For example, like many OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, trust in elected officials, such as parliamentarians, is generally lower than trust in institutions like the judiciary or police (OECD, *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy*, 12).

Unlike global trends where local governments inspire more trust, Iran shows the opposite (OECD *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy*, 12). As shown by Figures 1.1 and 1.2 above, Iranians appear to have slightly less trust in the parliament (about 25% negative responses on the central level and 37% on the local level) compared to the judiciary (about 15% to 24%, respectively) (Gallagher et al., *Start*).

Current societal dynamics offer important context for studying trust in Iran. Various questions from the 2021 CISSM poll also show Iranians’ general perceptions of public services and societal dynamics in Iran. For example, a majority of Iranians consider the country’s economic conditions to be “very bad” (see figure 1.3). In contrast, most respondents express positive views about Iran’s public healthcare system (see figure 1.4). Additionally, a significant number of individuals believe religion should play a major role in the government decision-making process (see figure 1.5). Furthermore, a majority of respondents rely on domestic television for news about both domestic and international affairs (see figure 1.6). Domestic television is state-sanctioned and is regulated by the IRIB/Iranian Broadcasting Company (controlled by the Islamic Republic of Iran with leadership appointed by The Supreme Leader). This study aims to explore the relationships between factors like these and their influence on trust in various institutions of government.

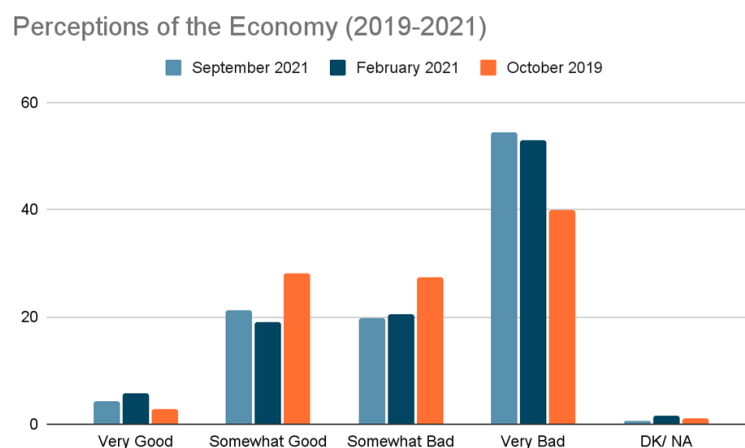


Figure 1.3. Polling Result: How Would You Rate Iran’s Current Economy? Results from the CISSM Public Opinion Polls (2019–2021) (Gallagher et al., *Start*, *Maximum Pressure*, and *After the Protests*). This figure highlights a steady and growing perception of Iran’s worsening economy over this period.

The findings of this study highlight that personal utility factors are key predictors of government trust in Iran. Iranians’ satisfaction with government-provided public services and their assessment of societal dynamics (e.g., political, cultural, religious, and economic conditions) significantly influence

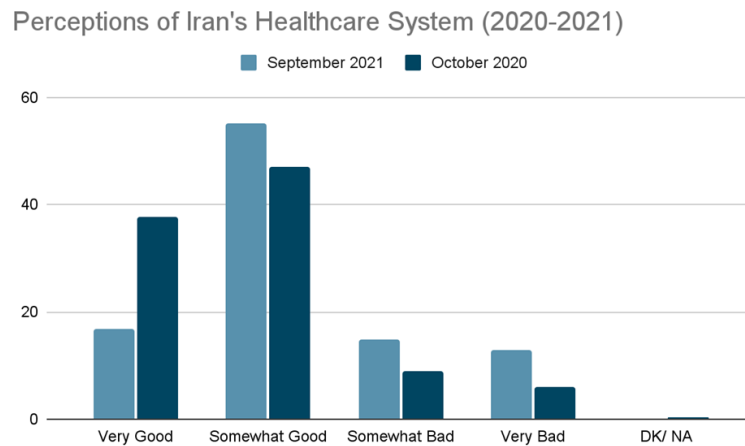


Figure 1.4. Polling Result: How Would You Rate Iran's Current Healthcare System? Results from the CISSM Public Opinion Polls (2020–2021) (Gallagher et al.). This figure highlights a consistent perception of Iran's healthcare system, with most respondents expressing satisfaction.

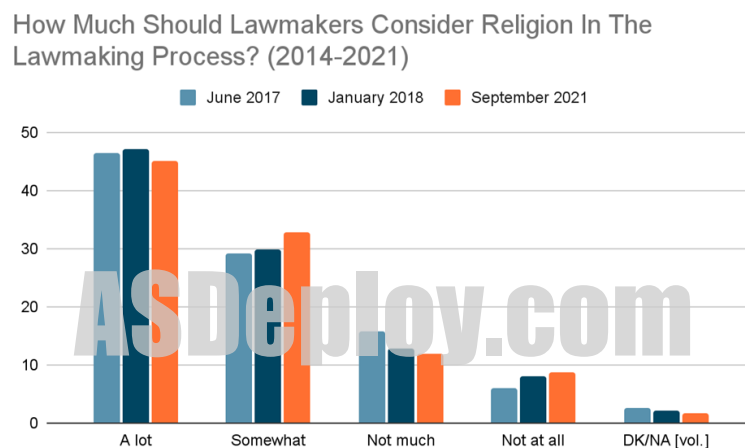


Figure 1.5. Polling Result: How Much Should Lawmakers Consider Religion In The Lawmaking Process? Results from the CISSM Public Opinion Polls (2014–2021) (Gallagher et al.). This figure highlights that a majority of Iranians prefer religion to be considered in the lawmaking process.

how trustworthy they see government institutions in Iran. In contrast, demographic characteristics—including age, gender, ethnic background—are largely irrelevant, often lacking statistical or practical significance. These findings align with studies from South Korea, Japan, Norway, Finland, and Brazil, suggesting that regime type (e.g., authoritarian or democratic) may be less significant in shaping citizens' trust than the government's ability to address people's practical needs. In other words, Iranians seem to embrace the sentiment that: what the government does for "me" or the level of stability—be it economic, social, or religious—it provides for "me" are much more important than who "I" am characteristically. The insignificance of demographic factors suggests that trust in the Islamic Republic is more nuanced than a simple reaction to political oppression. Marginalized groups—such as women, youth, and ethnic minorities—do not consistently show lower levels of trust in the government. These findings suggest that trust in government is perceived by Iranians as a pragmatic concept, rather than something rooted in abstract ideals. The implications of these findings will be explored further in the conclusion.

This introduction served as Chapter 1 of this paper. Chapter ?? will review existing literature on

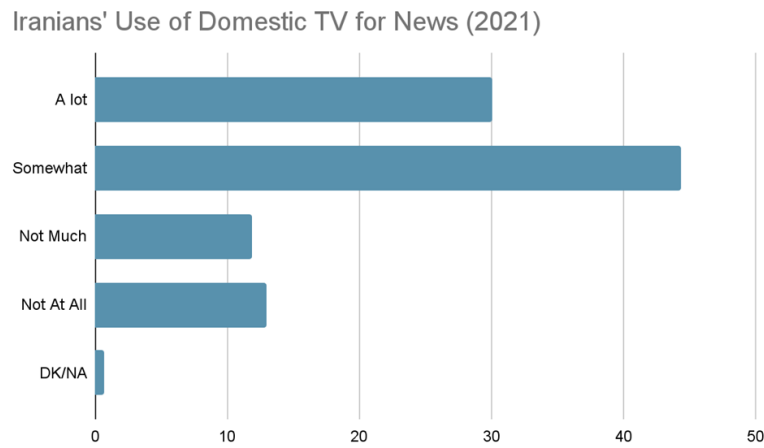


Figure 1.6. Polling Result: How Much Do You Use Domestic TV For News? Results from the CISSM Public Opinion Polls (2021) (Gallagher et al., *Start*). This figure highlights that a majority of Iranians rely on domestic news sources to stay informed about both domestic and foreign events.

measuring trust in government, highlighting key theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies used in prior studies. Chapter ?? will outline the data used for this study, the statistical methods applied, and the study's limitations. Chapter ?? will provide background on Iran's key government institutions and political processes. Chapter ?? will present and analyze the study's results, comparing them with existing literature. Finally, Chapter ?? will conclude with key findings and final reflections.

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