

Factors Affecting Voter Behavior with a View to Declining Participation in the Fourteenth Election Cycle in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

The present study primarily aims to analyze and trace the roots of various factors influencing Iranian voters' behavior, with a focus on the reasons for declining participation in the fourteenth presidential election cycle. Accordingly, the question arises as to what structural and functional factors have laid the groundwork for the reduced participation rate in this election cycle, and what commonalities or differences exist between this phenomenon and similar instances in the United States and certain European countries. This research has been conducted using a qualitative descriptive-analytical method; the required data, in addition to library sources, written documents, and reputable articles, have been extracted and analyzed through the systematic enumeration and examination of the opinions, interviews, notes, and positions of forty prominent political experts and leading journalists. The research findings indicate that livelihood problems and economic challenges, the continuation of international sanctions, the lack of formation and dynamism of strong political parties, the emergence of political disorientation and anomie (political apathy), the perception that votes have no impact on the fate of society, declining social capital and distrust in official institutions, and finally, the limited diversity of candidates to cover all political persuasions, have been the primary drivers of reduced participation. Ultimately, the research results suggest that voter behavior in Iran is the product of the synergy between economic crises and structural blockages; therefore, restoring the

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participation rate in the future will not be achieved through one-dimensional approaches, but rather requires the tangible reconstruction of social capital, the revival of pluralistic partisanship, the reproduction of a sense that the ballot box is effective in elite circulation, and a tangible improvement in the people's livelihood conditions.

Keywords

Voter Behavior, Political Participation, Fourteenth Presidential Election, Political Development, Democracy.

1. Introduction

Citizens' political activism and electoral behavior in Iran have always had unique characteristics; however, in recent years, voters' behavioral patterns have been accompanied by a certain distancing from the ballot boxes, bringing the participation rate to its lowest level. An examination of the statistical trend across the fourteen presidential election cycles (1979–2024) shows that after numerous fluctuations, the participation rate has followed a declining trajectory since the thirteenth cycle. Political participation is defined as a form of purposeful action within the interactive process between the actor and the social environment, through which individuals consciously contribute to determining public policies and selecting political leaders (Emanjomezadeh & Karamirad, 2012, p. 11). Hence, measuring electoral participation is recognized as a key indicator for assessing the health, legitimacy, and efficiency of democratic systems. Understanding citizens' electoral behavior and analyzing the reasons for declining participation, due to the multidimensional nature of human behavior, requires a multi-faceted perspective. Accordingly, the decline in public participation in the fourteenth presidential election in Iran must be analyzed from various political, economic, and structural dimensions. This election cycle was held under particular and unpredictable circumstances. Despite the presence of candidates from the country's two main political currents (Principlists and Reformists) and the expectation of an electoral fervor, no significant participation rate materialized, and the statistics remained within the range of the thirteenth cycle. This phenomenon indicates that deeper layers of structural and functional factors have influenced voter behavior, operating beyond conventional factional rivalries. The present study, employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical method, seeks to identify and trace the roots of the main variables affecting this decline in participation. The data for this research have been compiled through the systematic analysis of the positions, interviews, notes, and writings of forty prominent political experts and leading journalists; an approach that attempts to reveal new dimensions of voter behavior by aggregating and conducting a networked analysis of media and political elites. The outcome of these perspectives has been formulated in several main sections, the details of which are presented in Table No. 2. The explanation of these categories can open new paths for research centers and the country's macro-level policymakers.

2. Research Background and Literature

Another study entitled "Investigating and Explaining the Level of Citizens'

Participation in Elections with an Emphasis on the Advertising Policies of Parties and Candidates" was conducted by Karimi Fard (2022). The findings of the research indicated that in the studies reviewed, the impact of print and digital media advertising policies was confirmed, but their interactive effect on individuals was rejected. Additionally, a significant effect of partisan affiliation on determining the media's advertising policies was found, but the effectiveness of the advertising methods employed by the parties was rejected.

The book *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* by Seymour Martin Lipset, translated by Fariborz Majidi with an introduction by Alireza Mohseni Tabrizi. The findings of this book are based on political behavior, participation, and the factors involved in voting behavior. In this book, Lipset, in the capacity of a sociologist belonging to the paradigm of social reality and the school of "structural functionalism," presents a model of political participation in which participation, like any behavior, is a function of social and external forces and factors. In this model, assuming political participation as a dependent variable, he seeks to explain the phenomenon of individuals' and groups' participation or non-participation in the capacity of political actors through several social, economic, demographic, and cultural factors as independent variables.

The book *Political Sociology* by Robert Dowse and Seymour Martin Lipset, translated by Mohammad Hossein Farjad. In addition to topics such as the activity of political parties, concentration of power, state power and society, analysis of political systems, and issues of this kind, this book also addresses the subject of elections and non-participation in elections by various segments of society. The author considers the effects of occupational, familial, economic, and similar factors to be influential and significant in shaping individuals' attitudes toward organizational and electoral activities.

A study from Stanford University (2022) examined the role of racial differences, poverty, and inequality in reducing participation in predominantly Black-populated areas and emphasized that voting policies in these regions are primarily obstructive. In a report from the Pew Research Center (2020), it was found that a high percentage of non-voters in the United States complained about the registration process, lack of sufficient time, or a feeling that their vote would not make a difference.

3. Theoretical Literature

Putnam defines social capital as encompassing interpersonal communications, social networks, norms of reciprocity, and mutual trust that arise from these

interactions. In his view, social trust is a key element in the conceptualization of social capital that operates beyond specific individual networks and represents the trust that individuals have toward members of society in general; however, the formation of specific trust in micro-level relationships is considered a prerequisite for the realization of macro-level social trust. Lester Milbrath also proposes a specific hierarchy of political participation that ranges from absolute non-involvement in politics to holding administrative and political offices. In this model, voting is the most inclusive and numerous form of activism in terms of the number of people involved, but in terms of the quality of participation, it is situated at a minimal level. Milbrath emphasizes that in evaluating electoral behaviors, attention must also be paid to those who do not participate in this process at all, in order to determine whether this abstention is the result of a rational decision or is due to factors beyond the individual's control. In his view, the propensity to participate has a close relationship with social status and position; meaning that citizens with higher social status tend to have a greater inclination toward active participation (Milbrath & Goel, 1977, p. 124).

On the other hand, political participation is a deliberate, active, free, and responsible action that arises as a mechanism for the exercise of power from within society, and its purpose is to influence public decisions and policymaking, such as the selection of political leaders (Abdollahi-Nejad & et al., 2016, p. 36). In this regard, René Becker considers education, religious beliefs, income level, and social capital as the main determining factors of participation, and believes that even psychological variables are influenced by structural-social factors and indirectly affect political behavior (Safiri & Sadeghi, 2009, p. 23). Huntington and Nelson also regard participation as a function of two variables: the priorities of political elites and the status of intermediary civil institutions in society. In their view, the process of socio-economic development leads to the expansion of participation through two channels: first, the channel of social mobility, which, through the acquisition of higher status, instills in the individual a subjective sense of efficacy in influencing public decisions; second, the organizational channel, whereby membership and activity in social groups and organizations strengthens the likelihood of citizens' political participation (Rezaei, 1996, p. 56). Within the framework of rational choice theory (Verba, Nie, and Kim), as the level of awareness and literacy increases, voters attempt to detach themselves from traditional affiliations and make decisions independently. Anthony Downs (1957), within this framework, likens political parties to commercial firms and

presents the voter as the true embodiment of an economic human; just as firms in a competitive market strive to produce and supply goods favored by consumers, political parties likewise endeavor to present candidates and platforms that best align with the rational interests and priorities of voters.

Relative deprivation theory holds that the unequal distribution of economic and social opportunities lays the groundwork for the formation of feelings of deprivation and inequality among members of society. The findings of researchers indicate that while the feeling of deprivation at the individual level leads to the spread of anxiety, distress, alienation, and social isolation, its manifestation at the group level results in a decline in normative participation and the erosion of legitimacy—a phenomenon that demonstrates that the political behavior of the masses is a reflection of the deep gap between subjective expectations and the objective realities of society (Abdollah & Tavakolnia, 2022, p. 17). In a distinct approach, Franklin (2002) considers the decline in participation to be due to the diminished importance of the issues debated in elections within modern democracies following the establishment of welfare states, which has reduced the appeal of the ballot box. Morton Deutsch also believes that the perception of distributive injustice in the allocation of resources acts as a stimulus for political action, and that citizens adjust their inclination toward the political system based on their assessment of justice (Castillo & et al., 2015). Finally, social exchange theory (Cook & et al., 2013) views electoral behavior as the result of a rational cost-benefit analysis; accordingly, if the perceived rewards of participation (such as material or symbolic influence) outweigh its costs (such as time and energy expended), the act of voting will occur (*ibid.*). Drawing upon the above approaches, the analytical framework of this research is an integrated model that simultaneously takes the structural-social foundations and psychological drivers of voter behavior as the basis of its analysis.

4. Methodology

The present study falls within the category of applied research. In this research, an attempt has been made to examine the factors affecting voter behavior that have led to the decline in participation in the fourteenth presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran, utilizing a qualitative descriptive-analytical method. Regarding the data collection method, given the nature of the research, one part relied on library sources and the use of reputable books and articles to identify and examine the influential indicators contributing to the decline in participation. In the other part, data were

collected by referring to articles, interviews, and websites, and the opinions of 30 experts in the political field and journalists regarding the causes of the decline in participation in the presidential election were gathered, examined, and analyzed.

5. Decline in Participation in Other Countries

Based on numerous studies conducted on voter behavior with a view to declining participation in various countries, especially in European countries and the United States, the results provide us with findings that are highly illuminating and useful for our research, and can make our perspective on declining participation somewhat more realistic. In particular, it may be possible to identify commonalities in the electoral behavior of the Iranian people with other countries, while at the same time examining the unique behavioral aspects that have led to the decline in participation in the fourteenth election cycle.

5.1. Voter Behavior and Decline in Participation in the US

The United States of America, as one of the oldest modern democracies, has always faced a participation paradox. Unlike many European countries that have experienced high participation rates, the American electoral system has chronically suffered from low public participation rates, particularly in midterm congressional elections. Historical examination shows that the twentieth century was a period of expanding the scope of democratic inclusion and removing legal barriers; so much so that the civil rights movements of the 1960s, led by Martin Luther King Jr., led to the passage of two vital pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). These laws were able to legally dismantle structural barriers, the discriminatory Jim Crow laws, and racial disenfranchisement mechanisms in the southern states (Davidson, 1994). However, the removal of legal barriers did not necessarily translate into stability in participation.

With the entry into the 1970s through the 1990s, new variables cast a shadow over the American political atmosphere. The growing rise of extreme individualism, a deep decline in trust toward macro-governance structures—particularly after the Watergate crisis and the Vietnam War—and the implementation of neoliberal economic policies transformed electoral behaviors. During this period, the erosion of social capital caused young people, the working classes, and racial minorities to become increasingly distanced from the official political atmosphere, as they felt their voices were

not being heard in the Washington lobbies (Putnam, 2000). The tangible manifestation of this trend can be observed in electoral statistics; in the 1992 presidential election, the contest between Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush attracted only 48.6 percent of eligible voters, whereas this figure had been recorded at 52.6 and 62.8 percent in 1960 and 1980, respectively. This statistical decline reached its peak in the 1994 midterm congressional elections, registering a disappointing rate of 38.6 percent—indicating that in local and municipal elections, participation had fallen below 30 percent (Booth, 2000).

The twenty-first century is an era of sinusoidal fluctuations and intense polarization in American voting patterns. In 2008, the entry of Barack Obama as the first African-American candidate generated a wave of psychological hope and raised participation to its highest level in forty years (approximately 62 percent). However, this civic fervor was not sustained, and in the 2014 midterm elections, the participation rate fell below 37 percent, which was the lowest in 72 years. In 2016, despite the highly polarized atmosphere and tensions between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the participation rate remained around 55 percent, indicating the deep distrust of the masses toward both available options. Although in 2020, due to the crises stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the unprecedented facilitation of mail-in voting, participation reached an all-time high of 66 percent, this downward trend was repeated again in the 2022 midterm elections with the imposition of new restrictive laws in some states (Pew Research, 2023).

In general, the dissection of electoral behavior in the United States reveals that abstention from voting is a function of six key drivers:

1) Political apathy and a sense of powerlessness: This psychological condition occurs when citizens reach the analytical conclusion that their vote has no tangible effect on the system's output and that political elites pay no attention to the demands of the middle and lower classes (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Pew Research Center data from 2023 confirms that 45 percent of those who boycotted the 2020 election cited "the ineffectiveness of their vote" as their main reason—a sentiment that is more prevalent among young people and minorities (Pew Research, 2023). Seymour Martin Lipset, in explaining the roots of this phenomenon, believes that politicians' abstract behavior and the lack of responsiveness of structures to tangible needs gradually render politics meaningless in the minds of citizens and lead to the decay of civic responsibility among the working classes (Lipset, 2020, p. 24).

The trend predicted by Lipset was clearly realized in subsequent decades; so much so that historical examinations of electoral behavior in the United States show that in the mid-1990s, the participation rate of the poorest fifth of society fell to below 35 percent, while this figure for the wealthiest and most privileged fifth was reported to be above 75 percent. This civic erosion was especially evident among the working classes, as their participation rate dropped from 59 percent in the late 1960s to approximately 34 percent in the mid-1990s (Booth, 2000).

2) Distrust in political institutions: The erosion of the legitimacy of structures (Congress, the courts, and the macro-executive mechanism) is a serious obstacle. Gallup reports from 2022 show that only 7 percent of Americans trust Congress and fewer than 40 percent trust the health of the electoral system. This disbelief in vote counting and fear of fraud lay the groundwork for withdrawal from the voting process (Hetherington, 2005).

3) Polarization of politics and disillusionment with the two-party system: The radical divide between Democrats and Republicans has led to the isolation of independent voters, as they find no option between these two extreme spectrums (Fiorina & et al., 2011). Additionally, in non-competitive (safe) states, due to the predictability of outcomes, the incentive to participate drops sharply (Abramowitz, 2018).

4) A sense of non-belonging or cultural disconnection: New generations and immigrants do not see themselves reflected in the traditional structures of American democracy and feel that the system is designed to reproduce the interests of particular classes (Rogers & Terriquez, 2021). With the decline of micro-level social capital (such as neighborhood affinities), tendencies toward subnational identities, racial loyalties, and state-based affiliations have replaced national interests; to the extent that in a Gallup survey, 40 percent of people considered the federal government a threat to their fundamental rights (Lipset, 2020).

5) The impact of media and fake news: The saturation of cyberspace with misleading information, conspiracy theories about vote theft, and systematic rumors regarding the nullification of minority votes have plunged public opinion into confusion and extreme cynicism (Tucker & et al., 2018).

6) Structural barriers and alternative identities: Low-income classes and young people aged 18 to 29 face logistical registration challenges and structural obstacles (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Of course, history shows that non-material motivators can also be decisive; such as the high participation of Jews in the 1960s as a defensive reaction against anti-Semitism, the turnout of

Catholics at the polls to counter communism, and the widespread presence of women following the introduction of moral issues such as the prohibition of alcohol and gambling (Lipset, 2020). Of course, economic interests are not the only interests that encourage voting. The high rate of Jewish participation in elections (in the 1960s) has been described as a reaction against Nazism and political anti-Semitism. It is said that anti-religious threats associated with communism were very effective in bringing Catholics to the ballot boxes.

Of course, issues related to moral matters, such as the prohibition of alcoholic beverages and gambling, have also increased the rate of women's participation in elections in both the United States and Europe (Lipset, 2020, p. 24). The historical analysis of electoral participation in the United States shows that the roots of declining participation are not merely rooted in contemporary conditions, but are embedded in deep-seated historical, social, and institutional structures. Racial discrimination, economic limitations, the distancing of parties from popular demands, and distrust in official institutions are among the factors that have continued to exert their effects from the past to the present day. What can be noted in summary as the factors affecting the decline of voters in United States elections is that under social and economic factors, issues such as poverty, inequality, structural racism, and discrimination against immigrants have been influential in reducing participation. Furthermore, psychological and cultural factors—including general distrust in the political system, a sense of the ineffectiveness of one's vote, and despair over reforming the political condition—have played a prominent role in this process.

5.2. Voter Behavior and Decline in Participation in Canada

In addition to the United States, Canada has also witnessed a decline in participation in recent decades. In the early years of the 21st century, we are faced with a decrease in the participation rate of Canadian citizens in elections, to the extent that Canadian election officials have implemented various initiatives to address this problem and increase the level of citizen participation in the political process, including in elections. Among the most important of these initiatives is the "Student Vote" program. The slogan of this program is that becoming an active citizen is something that takes shape from the very early years of childhood. Therefore, by providing proper and scientific education to children about how to participate in political and civic activities, they can be transformed into active citizens (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2011).

5.3. Voter Behavior and Decline in Participation in Europe

In the United Kingdom, the erosion of the participation rate after the 1990s compelled policymakers to establish the "Electoral Commission" in 2000. This commission, recognizing the fact that a significant portion of abstainers either lack structural awareness of the voting process or suffer from a "crisis of meaning" and deny the role of the ballot box in improving their livelihoods, focused its programs on two major principles: "step-by-step civic education" and "redefining the necessity and importance of voting in individual destiny" (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2011). In France, the civil society approach was also prominent; so much so that in 1984 the "Association of Citizens and Democracy" was formed through a coalition of the Human Rights League and the Education League. The main strategy of this association was to use normative advertising tools with the slogan "If you do not vote, others will decide your fate." Although electoral behaviors were complex and, for example, in the European Parliament elections, despite the activities of this association, participation experienced a 4 percent decline and reached 42.8 percent, evaluations indicated that without these civil interventions, the rate of decline would have been far more severe (ibid.). Finally, Seymour Martin Lipset, through conducting comparative studies between Norway and the United States, arrived at thought-provoking conclusions. He demonstrated that there is a direct relationship between the level of political activity within a family and the activism of their children; so much so that children of active parents participate twice as much in political organizations. However, the striking point in the Norwegian study was that, contrary to the common assumption that the erosion of participation is limited to the less educated classes, the rate of abstention from voting among citizens with formal higher education has also been increasing—a phenomenon indicative of the "withdrawal of professional elites from the cycle of formal political activity" (Dowse & Lipset, 1994, p. 405). In his final analysis in *Political Man*, Lipset explains that the concept of "being a good citizen" and the sense of duty to vote are deeply intertwined with middle-class culture, whereas political apathy is associated with mechanisms of class conformity. Group pressure and contact with dominant social networks are decisive; for this reason, newcomers to a society or young people who have not yet been integrated into the adult structure and occupational-social networks are less subject to this civic conformity pressure and record lower participation rates (Lipset, 2020, p. 418).

Table 1. Factors Affecting the Decline in Voter Participation in the United States, Canada, and Europe

Decline in political competition	Polarization of politics and disillusionment with the party system
	Distrust toward the candidates of the two main parties in the United States
	Decline in political competition in some regions of the United States
	Existence of structural barriers, especially for racial minorities, people of color, and Latinos
	Cynicism toward the political system
	Neglect of religious minorities
Despair and sense of non-belonging	Ineffectiveness of votes in changing voters' living conditions
	Sense of non-belonging or cultural disconnection
	Feeling of having no representative in the governmental structure, especially among the younger generation and immigrants
	Individualism
	Sharp decline in public knowledge and interest in social and political affairs
	Elections being perceived as unimportant due to the lack of prospects for change and improvement
Impact of media	Impact of media and misleading information
	Conspiracy theories regarding vote theft or widespread fraud
	Confusion in public minds about the illegality of certain individuals' votes
Distrust in political institutions	Decline in trust in Congress, the courts, and electoral institutions
	Decline in trust in the government

In conclusion, it should be noted that democracy without participation is devoid of meaning. In the United States, Canada, and Europe—which are among the established and long-standing democracies—for various reasons and at different junctures, they have faced declining citizen participation in elections, and a rupture has emerged between citizens and governments. Reviving this bond depends on redefining electoral processes, rebuilding social trust, and re-educating the role of citizenship.

6. Research Findings

According to the theoretical analysis and the concepts contained in the research background and the proposed theories, voter behavior—whose concrete manifestation has been revealed in the decline of participation in the fourteenth presidential election—like any other social phenomenon, requires an examination of the causes and conditions of its formation, as well as the growth and expansion of the space for action. The set of elements and variables that shape political non-participation in the electoral arena are both independently and in direct relation to one another influential and worthy of attention. The research findings, in addition to drawing upon library sources

and the use of reputable books and articles, have been compiled, examined, and analyzed by referring to articles, interviews, websites, and virtual pages of 40 experts in the political field and journalists who have expressed views and opinions regarding the causes of the decline in participation in the presidential election.

6.1. Voter Behavior and Decline in Electoral Participation in Iran

Drawing upon the theoretical analysis and the theoretical foundations of the research, as well as the results obtained from referring to articles, interviews, websites, and virtual pages of 30 experts in the political field and journalists regarding the causes of the decline in participation in the election, these have been utilized as the research findings, which will be addressed in several main sections.

1. Economic and Livelihood Problems: As derived from the writings, assessments, and opinions of political experts, it can be stated that the existence of economic and livelihood problems can be among the primary issues prioritized in political non-participation in elections. That is, individuals have perceived the lack of financial and economic resources, through international sanctions, as influential in creating economic problems and obstacles; for this reason, they believe that participating in elections cannot have any effect on their livelihood, life, or future, nor can it provide hope for a better and more desirable life ahead. According to the statistics of the Central Bank, the average inflation rate over the past five years has exceeded 40 percent. Therefore, this has, on the one hand, reduced people's purchasing power and standard of living, and on the other hand, increased concerns about the improvement of economic conditions.

2. Decline in Electoral Competition: Another factor that has diminished the presence of people in the electoral arena is the issue of reduced competition in elections, one of the underlying causes of which is the absence of strong political parties. The function of genuine parties is that they should act as active and influential actors throughout political activities, and during electoral campaigns, they should be taken into consideration and attention by the public, and by introducing their preferred candidates, create a vibrant atmosphere in electoral competitions. This is an issue that is not observed in the activities of parties in Iran in a logical, proper, and effective manner. In addition to the lack of strong and influential parties, the failure to form a complete bipolar atmosphere within the electoral context has further contributed to the decline in public participation in elections. Given the

prevailing atmosphere in society since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, in which the people have played a serious role in political developments and felt a sense of efficacy, what has left a negative impact on the electoral participation process is the feeling among the people that political participation is ineffective—at its highest level, manifesting as a sense of instrumentalization, which has taken shape on certain occasions. This factor has both played a role in reducing public participation in elections and has influenced the non-entry of independent and diverse candidates. Iranian society in 1997 experienced a movement of a reformatory and restorative nature. The contest between the two poles known as Reformists and Principlists in that election, despite yielding a favorable outcome for the political system (in terms of deriving high political legitimacy), also indicated a tendency toward long-term evolutionary change (i.e., reformism, as opposed to rapid changes like revolution), which represented a spectrum of the majority of the population, and further exposed the tensions among powerful groups, especially in the political and cultural arenas of power. Reforms were also implemented in certain sectors of society's management, but for various reasons, including deviations that occurred within the movement itself, it ultimately reached a stage where the sense of the ineffectiveness of political participation set in. Of course, the atmosphere of maximum participation was repeated once more in the 2009 election, but again, through certain atmospheric and illegal actions, it led to public discouragement. The failure to form extensive and powerful campaigns by political and social currents itself results in a lack of vibrancy in elections and, in a sense, a decline in electoral competition. Although this issue manifested in certain ways in the fourteenth election, we did not witness strong and influential campaigns.

3. Despair over Reform and Improvement of Conditions and Lack of Benefit: Another important reason for the non-participation of people in political elections is political passivity or political apathy, which people in today's society have fallen into. Some may attribute the non-participation of various segments of society in elections to their complete satisfaction with the current political process and their lack of need for political participation, but surveys indicate that while a portion of the people have not withdrawn from the participatory arena due to satisfaction with the status quo, a large segment of the population has become politically passive or is deeply dissatisfied and discontented with the existing situation. Under such conditions, for a great majority of people, elections have become a meaningless affair. In fact, this feeling is reinforced among a segment of the population that they do not

have a serious influence in decision-making. One of the reasons for the superficialization of politics among the people is precisely this. In a situation where people's despair and distrust toward existing political institutions increases, two completely opposite reactions to this condition have emerged: on the one hand, a vast majority of people retreat further into the shell of their private lives, and politics and social events have become meaningless and unrelated to their personal lives for them; on the other hand, gradually, some of these politically frustrated individuals, who do not find democratic options to be a suitable path for creating change and improving conditions, become increasingly angrier and express their anger through illegal and non-democratic means, such as local uprisings and terrorist acts, and as long as these individuals do not find their preferred options on the existing political scene, the trend of non-democratic movements will become deeper and more prominent. Another variable that is very important in whether individuals vote or not is rational choices based on personal interest. Individuals assess, based on cost-benefit and profit-loss calculations, whether participating in elections has any effect on their lives. If they feel that participating in elections is beneficial and effective for themselves or their children's future, then they will participate. Therefore, personal interest and rational choices are highly influential in people's participation or non-participation in elections.

4. Disillusionment, Lack of Sense of Responsibility, and the Existence of Inequality: Another sign of political non-participation in the electoral arena is the devaluation of the sense of collective commitment and civic participation. That is, people no longer feel a sense of commitment and responsibility toward their own destiny, and have developed a kind of political apathy and indifference toward the political system. Interestingly, collective commitment, a sense of responsibility, and civic participation are among the components of a democratic society. The absence of this type of civic participation, collective commitment, and sense of responsibility can affect the process of political and social participation. Political aversion in elections and the sharp decline in voter turnout is a phenomenon that seems to indicate that people cannot convince themselves that their presence at the ballot boxes will have any impact on their future lives. Disinterest in participating in elections has been observed across all social classes and cannot be attributed to any particular stratum. Of course, in developed countries as well, this difference exists—though political disinterest and non-participation in elections are more pronounced among the poor and illiterate classes—but in Iran, this is not very conspicuous. In a society where the sense of political duty and political

obligation has faded, individuals feel neither remorse nor guilt for not participating in elections; for this reason, the decline in participation is observable in such societies. One of the important variables that fosters social solidarities and increases social capital is social belonging. That is, the sense of attachment, affiliation, and loyalty to society and the state, which generates solidarity among individuals and creates a sense of cohesion or a "we-feeling," such that the individual considers themselves an inseparable part of society and the state. When individuals do not feel social affiliations and emotional attachments, nor a sense of belonging and loyalty at the general societal level, consequently, social ties are weakened and collective destiny becomes meaningless and worthless to them, which leads to reduced participation or non-participation in elections. Another variable that influences the reduction or lack of political participation by the people, and has a significant relationship with the level of social and political participation, is injustice, the feeling of inequality, and the perception of unfair treatment by people within society. This is while in the research literature, political participation has a multifaceted relationship with the concept of injustice. Since people seek social justice in elections, if they do not find it in society and do not consider elections as one of the means to achieve this important goal, their voting behavior may tend toward non-voting or boycotting elections. Hence, the deprivation and perceived injustice on the part of the people leads to political non-participation in elections.

Table 2. Factors Affecting the Decline in Voter Participation in the Fourteenth Presidential Election in Iran

Decline in Electoral Competition	Lack of strong and influential political parties
	Non-simultaneous holding of city and village council elections
	Absence of prominent and influential candidates
	Lack of support and participation of influential figures (celebrities, intellectual and political leaders, etc.)
	Absence of representatives from all political currents
	Insufficient acceptability of the candidates present
	Multiplicity of revolutionary and value-oriented currents and lack of serious unity and coalition
	Failure to form a fully bipolar atmosphere
	Failure to form extensive and powerful campaigns by political and social currents
	Weakness of dialogue in society, especially among political elites and influential currents
	Feeling of ineffectiveness of the electoral institution in the country's developmental process
	Lack of sufficient electoral mobility and enthusiasm in the media and cyberspace

Despair over Reform and Improvement of Conditions	Moving away from the realization of justice
	Intensification of pressure on cultural issues
	Candidates' failure to address the demands and concerns of the people in some provinces
	Events such as November 2017 (Dey 96) and the incidents of 2022 (1401)
	Despair over the lifting of sanctions
	Despair over the act of voting in elections
	Despair over reforming the mode of governance
	Dissatisfaction with the performance of officials in recent years
	Unfulfilled promises
	Poor media performance regarding the positive actions of incumbent governments
Economic and Livelihood Problems	The impact of sanctions on people's livelihoods
	Economic pressure on the people
	Inattention to people's livelihood demands
	Gap between the people and officials
	Emergence of functional weaknesses in various sectors of the country's management
	Instability and rising prices of goods and services
	Devaluation of the national currency
	Widening of class disparities and increase in the Gini coefficient
	Lack of public awareness regarding the proper economic and social measures taken by government bodies
	Continuation of economic sanctions
Public Disillusionment with Elections	Lack of prominent and strong candidates and the failure to form serious competition among candidates in the elections
	Not including all segments of public opinion in the elections
	Inattention to certain freedoms (such as lifting internet filtering, etc.)
	Friday prayer leaders and state media paying attention to the importance of participation only during election time
	Candidates making impractical promises
	Unprincipled competition based on self-interest
	The feeling that the preferred candidate has already been predetermined and that their vote is ineffective
	Politics being deprioritized in people's lives
Incorrect Social, Religious, and Doctrinal Education	The perception of voting as a right rather than a duty
	Perfectionism in elections
	Cultural divergence and evasion of national identity
	Growth of individualism in society
	Negligence of the education system, mosques, and state broadcasting in social and religious upbringing
	Existence of certain misconceptions regarding religion and religious governance

Negative Propaganda by Domestic and Foreign Media	Negative propaganda by foreign media
	Negative propaganda by domestic media
	Pessimistic portrayal (blackwashing) of elections by the press and media
	The "Vote for No Vote" campaign abroad and creating obstacles for voters
External Factors	Difficult access for overseas voters
	The outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19)

6.2. Common and Non-Common Variables Affecting the Decline in Participation (Iran, the United States, and Europe)

Considering the examination of the decline in electoral participation in the United States and Europe, as well as the analysis of the factors contributing to the decline in participation in Iran, particularly in the fourteenth presidential election, it is possible to distinguish the congruent and similar variables from the specific and unique variables of each country. The research findings indicate that variables such as structural barriers, political apathy, the ineffectiveness of one's vote, distrust in political institutions, the influence of media on the public, and the existence of inequalities can be mentioned as common and congruent aspects in the decline of public participation in elections across these countries. However, certain variables were also identified that are specific to each country, differing according to the type of structure and culture of each. The variables specific to the United States and, to some extent, European countries include: disillusionment with the party system—particularly in the case of the United States, the sharp increase in polarization between the two main parties—a sense of social non-belonging regarding immigrants, and racial discrimination. The variables specific to Iran include: economic and livelihood problems, especially in recent years, the continuation of sanctions, the absence of strong political parties, and unstructured political activity.

7. Conclusion

The rate of voter participation in electoral processes has always been regarded as one of the most critical indicators for assessing political dynamism and structural legitimacy in various political systems around the world. A review of the political literature shows that high participation rates not only bestow democratic legitimacy upon elected officials but also consolidate the functional authority of the system and, acting as a safety valve, prevent structural violence and social instability. Conversely, the decline in political participation subjects the efficiency and legitimacy base of governing

institutions to serious questioning; for low participation renders the output of electoral democracy unequal, leading to the amplification of certain classes' voices and the silencing or marginalization of other segments and persuasions of society. Within this analytical framework, voting behaviors are a multidimensional phenomenon that functions as a reciprocal communicative act between the masses and the power structure. This act can be formulated both at the micro level (focusing on the individual characteristics of participants) and at the macro level (focusing on social structures and macro-systemic interactions). Traditionally, researchers have relied on a spectrum of competing theories to explain the causes of participation or non-participation; one group emphasizes individual and demographic variables such as age, gender, educational attainment, class status, and a sense of social conscientiousness, while another group considers structural variables such as the electoral system, voting history, the number of candidates, and the configuration of parties as the primary drivers. The findings derived from the analysis of the perspectives of forty politicians, experts, and prominent journalists in this research indicate that reducing the phenomenon of declining participation in the fourteenth Iranian presidential election to a single factor constitutes an analytical error. In fact, the confluence of variables such as the contraction of the competitive space, relative despair over the immediate reform of affairs, intense criticism of livelihood conditions and the accumulation of economic demands, the reproduction of a sense of the ineffectiveness of one's vote, the erosion of social capital in political institutions, and ultimately the absence of candidates representing all spectra and intellectual persuasions, have laid the groundwork for this phenomenon—factors that have activated other secondary variables examined in the research as complementary drivers of the participatory decline. Moreover, a comparative and cursory analysis of the causes of declining participation in Western societies (particularly the United States and European countries) revealed that there are meaningful commonalities between these societies and Iranian society. Variables such as the reduction of genuine competition, despair over the effectiveness of representative institutions, a sense of non-belonging to governance processes, the erosion of trust in political institutions, and the directional role of the media are among the shared behavioral patterns that can be traced, with varying intensity, in both contexts. However, there are also distinct differentiating boundaries; in Western societies, the specific motivations for declining participation are primarily oriented toward disillusionment with the inefficacy of the party system, the deepening of acute

polarizations between major parties (as in the U.S. political structure), structural discrimination against people of color, and the identity challenges of immigrants. On the other side, the distinguishing specificities of Iranian society are centered on acute livelihood challenges, the heavy shadow of international sanctions on daily life, and the lack of dynamism and cadre-building of powerful and influential parties. Additionally, components such as administrative-political corruption, the prioritization of individual interests over collective interests by some officials, the inflexibility of structures to meet the needs of the new generation, the erosion of a sense of social belonging, and finally, a significant decline in participation among the youth compared to other age groups, are among the other supplementary findings of this research. In a general conclusion, to overcome the current situation and increase the participation rate in the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, the adoption of multifaceted strategies is inevitable. This requires the creation of legal grounds for strengthening civic parties, guaranteeing the diversity of candidates to cover different persuasions, a tangible improvement in economic indicators, transparency and a structural fight against corruption, and the reproduction of a sense of the effectiveness of the vote among the masses. In Iran's political atmosphere, if citizens come to the objective belief that the electoral institution possesses a high capacity for elite circulation, redirecting the country's macro-policies, and realizing the general will, they will rediscover the importance of their vote and will participate more actively. Proper social and religious socialization and education in an Islamic society can play an encouraging role, provided that communicative institutions (particularly state broadcasting, the press, and cyberspace), Friday prayer leaders, and preachers, instead of adopting one-dimensional approaches, become genuine reflectors of the people's voices. This public perception—that the political system only needs the masses during electoral seasons—must be erased through continuous structural behaviors so that citizens realize that the ballot box is, first and foremost, a tool for safeguarding their own interests and, subsequently, for the country's development. The reconstruction of social capital and eroded public trust will be the primary mission of the government and the media on the path to sustainable confidence-building.

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