

# Iraq's 2021 Elections: voter disengagement imperil democracy?



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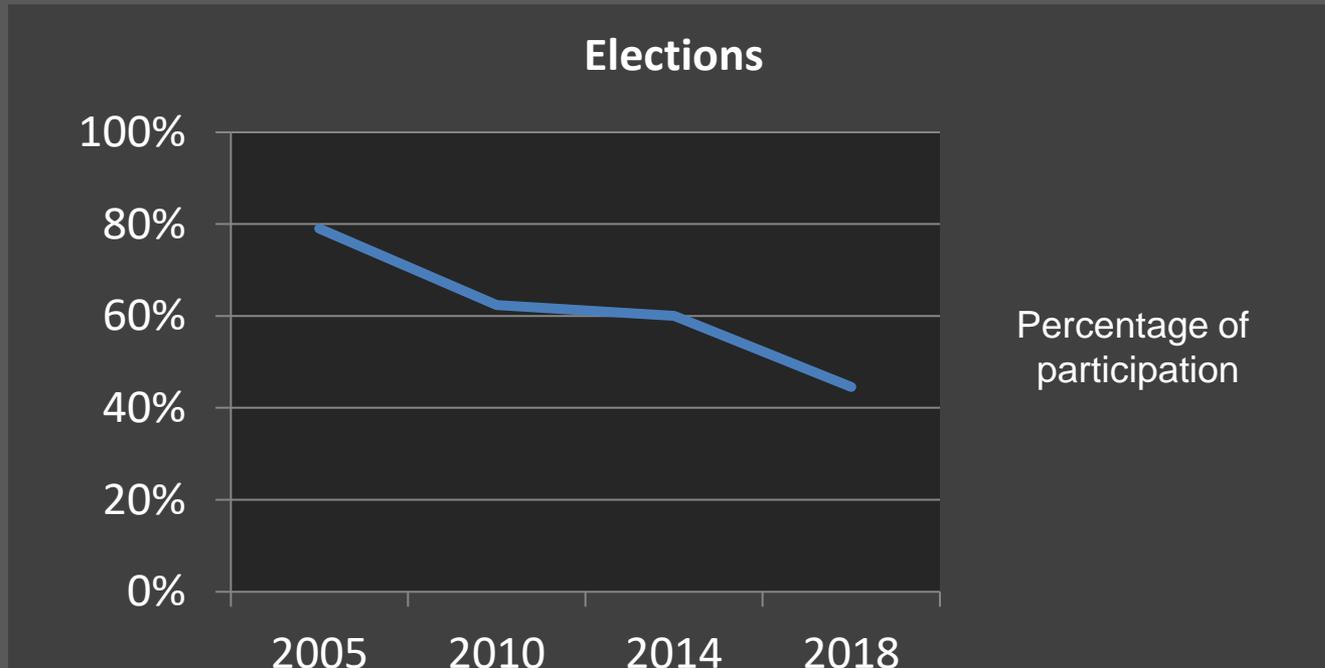


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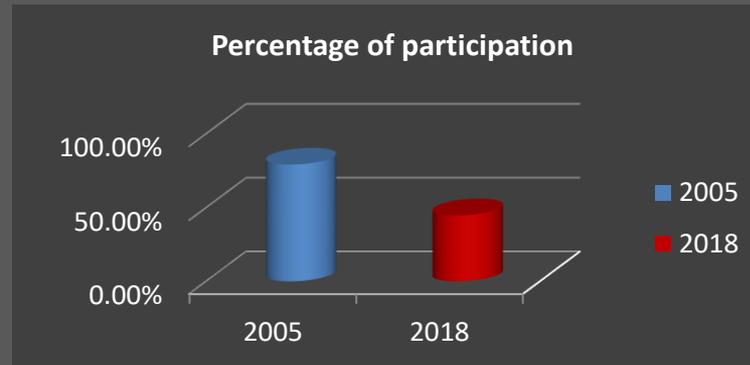
## Iraq's 2021 Elections: Voter Disengagement Imperil Democracy?

Iraq's 2021 Parliamentary elections are scheduled for October. Despite the elections drawing near, there is little enthusiasm among the electorate with hopes for meaningful reforms having faded with the failure of successive governments to address endemic corruptions, economic crises, security issues, and environmental disasters, among other things. It is unclear whether the upcoming elections will make the current situation better or worse. Either way, there will at least be a government with a mandate.

Iraq has held four Parliamentary elections since the former Ba'ath regime was toppled in 2003. None of these elections have led to much needed structural reforms but, with each round of elections, the size of the electorates has decreased as the divide between the people and the power has increased. During the 2005 election, 79% of the electorate participated; by 2010 that number was 62.4%; and in 2014 and 2018 the decline continued to 60% and 44.52% respectively.



There has been a staggering 34.48% decrease in election participation between 2005 and 2018, and participation is expected to decline 69.5% during the upcoming election. During the 2018 Parliamentary elections, out of 24.5 million eligible voters, 10.8 million participated in the process. The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) estimates the number of eligible voters in 2021 is 25,139,375, and voter turnout is expected to significantly decrease in comparison to 2018, partly due to the exclusion of Iraqis living abroad and lack of biometric voter card registrations.



There are significantly fewer candidates running for Parliamentary election in 2021 due to changes in electoral law, including the electoral system becoming a non-transferable voting system, and changes to the size and geographical boundaries of constituencies from 18 to 83. Currently 3,523 (2,560 males and 970 females) candidates will compete for 329 Parliamentary seats in the October election. These numbers contrast with the 2014 election with 9,040 candidates (the highest number); 2005, with 6,655 candidates; 2010, with 6281 candidates; and, most recently, 2018 with 7,178 candidates. In the 2021 elections, 1,634 candidates are aligned with individual political parties; 1,002 are from coalitions; and 887 are independent candidates.

Candidates	2005	2010	2014	2018	2021
	6655	6821	9040	7178	3530

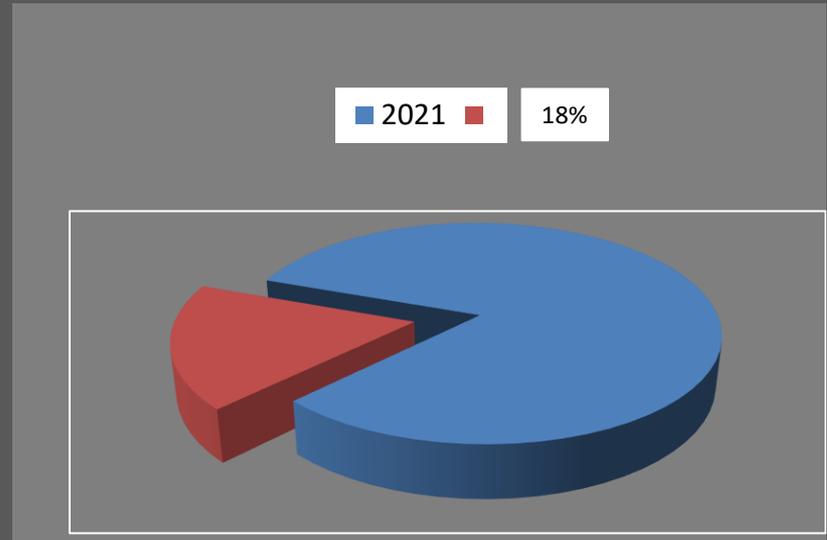
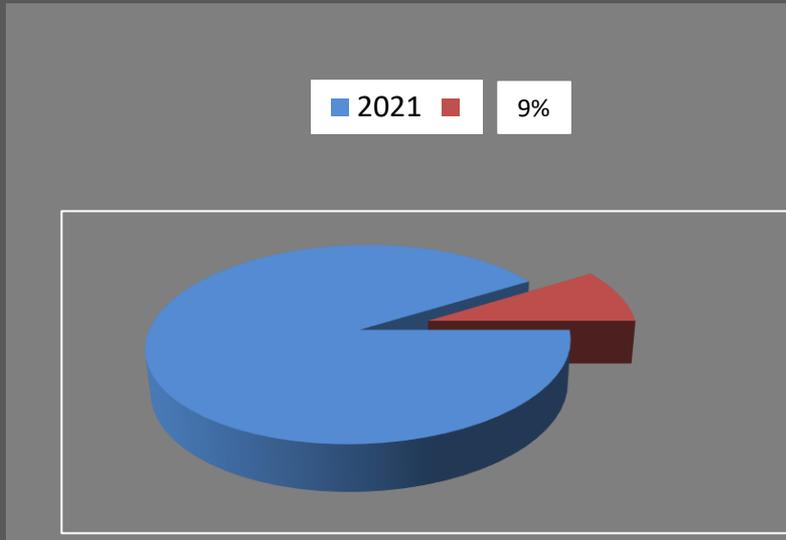
While the IHEC is responsible for overseeing the election process, helping enhance the democratic progress, establishing and fostering trust and confidence in the ruling government, and ensuring there is a high level of transparency, a lack of trust continues to exist between the state and the people. The IHEC itself has been accused of bias during past elections, including ignoring election rigging by the larger parties. Further, until recently, leading IHEC positions were divided between the political parties, thereby harming the organisation's credibility.

According to the Iraqi Constitution, all Iraqi nationals over the age of 18 have the right to vote and, based on Article 39 of the Elections Law, Iraqis living abroad can vote using their biometric cards. IHEC, however, without explaining their decision, has rescinded the right of Iraqis living abroad to vote. According to IHEC, more than 850,000 eligible voters were registered and living abroad in 2018. That number is expected to increase to approximately 1 million in 2021.

The Elections Law states that only those Iraqis with biometric voter cards can participate in elections. In 2021, only 16,777,333 of 25,139,375 eligible voters are registered for biometric voter cards, which means that only 66.73% of eligible voters can participate in the elections. During the 2018 Parliamentary elections, 10.8 million of the 24.5 million eligible voters voted, so, considering current circumstances, voter participation in the October 2021 elections is expected to decrease further to 7.4 million.

Eligible Voters	25,139,375
Registered Voter Cards	16.777.333
Expected Turnout	7.4 million

Constitutionally, the largest elected Parliamentary bloc has the mandate to form a new government through a simple majority voting system of 50% + 1. Based on the estimated number of participants in the October 2021 elections, Iraq’s new Parliament will represent 29.5% of 25,139,375 eligible voters, or just over 18% of Iraq’s population. The simple majority system which is the basis for the formation of the new government requires 3,711,896 votes, which means the new government will be formed based on just over 9% of the votes of the Iraqi population.



The security vacuum which exists in Iraq is likely to be exploited by militia groups to influence election results beyond the electorates. Those with the means to tip the balance are likely to resort to extreme measures to eliminate the competition, from assassinations and intimidation to threatening and blackmailing stronger candidates, IHEC staff, and independent observers; influencing voters through threats, incentives, theft, and misuse of voter ID cards; and electronic infiltration of the system.

## Recommendations

- I. IHEC should avoid repeating past mistakes to alleviate concerns and rebuild trust. The first step to rebuilding trust is to improve transparency, connecting with the electorate by updating its digital platforms more frequently and offering as much accurate information as possible; raising awareness about new electoral laws, rules, and procedures through a widespread voter education campaign; and, simultaneously, encouraging people to participate in the elections' process.
- II. Given the expected low turnout, IHEC should develop a strategy to include the 8 million otherwise ineligible voters who have not yet registered for biometric voter cards, without compromising the integrity of the elections process.
- III. The government should immediately address the security issues and ensure that the election process is smooth, free, and fair. Additionally, the government should provide adequate security to candidates that are at risk, as well as establishing robust safety measures for all IHEC staff, independent observers, and vulnerable voters.
- IV. The IHEC and the government should ensure that the communications system used to record, count, and transfer the votes are impenetrable. Results should be transparently recorded and announced at the local level before being transferred to data management centres via a secure network.

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