

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE TO “Trump’s Regime Change Fantasies Never Stood a Chance,”  
*Responsible Statecraft*: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/trump-regime-change-iran/>

Studying public opinion in countries that are not liberal democracies poses methodological and logistical challenges, which are heightened with Iran due to U.S. legal restrictions. The project team at the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) has collected and analyzed Iranian public opinion data regularly since 2014, with earlier single surveys dating back to 2006. Topics covered include attitudes toward Iran’s nuclear program and options to address international concerns, regional security issues, economics, domestic politics, and social issues. Since the beginning of this project, we have been publishing reports and articles analyzing findings from one or more closely related surveys and tracking changes over time in trend-line questions. We have recently integrated data from all of these survey waves into a database that can be used for more sophisticated analyses of demographic and attitudinal subgroups, some of which are too small for statistically significant analysis in a single sample of roughly 1,000 respondents.

This methodological note is divided into four sections:

- (1) Survey-specific methodology
- (2) Reliability tests: cell phones vs. landlines
- (3) Tests for respondent fears or inhibitions
- (4) Cross-survey methodology in the integrated survey database

### **Survey-specific methodology**

CISSM designs and analyzes its own surveys. They are fielded by an independent Toronto-based polling organization with an export control license to work in Iran. IranPoll typically conducts nationally representative probability-sample telephone surveys with random-digit-dial samples of Iranian landlines, stratified by province and settlement size and type, with all 31 provinces represented. Wave size is 1,000 to 1,010 respondents, with margins of error around plus or minus roughly 3 percentage points, and CISSM publicly reports field dates and response metrics.

IranPoll methods conform to standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR). Surveys fielded for CISSM employ probability-based nationally representative sampling using random digit dialing. This has a track record of being the most reliable, consistent means of assessing public attitudes. Gallup World Poll has used similar methods in Iran since at least 2011. Comparisons of Gallup and CISSM polls fielded in close succession (August and September 2021, respectively) found results within four percentage points of one another on major issues like job approval and confidence ratings for President Raisi.

The samples were RDD samples drawn from all landline telephones in Iran. The samples were stratified first by Iranian provinces and then in accordance to settlement size and type. All 31 Iranian provinces were represented in proportions similar to their actual populations, as were rural and urban areas.

When a residence was reached, an adult was randomly selected from within that household using the random table technique. An initial attempt and three callbacks were made in an effort to complete an interview with the randomly selected respondents. All of the interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). All interviews were monitored in real-time by call-center supervisors.

Survey wave results have been periodically compared with the most recent official census conducted by the Statistical Center of Iran in 2016. In general, there has been a close match.

### **The Issue of Cell Phones vs. Landlines**

In March 2023 we collected a quarter of the sample from mobile phone numbers rather than landline numbers to test the common assumption that mobile phone users are younger, more likely to be critical of the government, and more negative about Iran's economy than landline users. Our analysis found no evidence that land-line-only samples yield biased results.

All variables were cross-tabulated and checked for differences that might conceivably yield significance; a smaller set were subjected to chi-square tests for statistical significance. Possible differences checked included age, attitude toward President Raisi, view of protestors, economic outlook, desire to immigrate, and preference for self-sufficiency vs. trade.

The analyses yielded only two minor but statistically significant differences at or near the .05 level. For a complete discussion, see pp. 40-41 of the report:

[https://cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2025-01/Iran 2023 and March 2024 -- Raisi era domestic issues](https://cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2025-01/Iran%202023%20and%20March%202024%20--%20Raisi%20era%20domestic%20issues)

### **Tests for respondent fears or inhibitions**

CISSM has also examined the objection that Iranian respondents may simply repeat official talking points. In the three 2019 maximum-pressure waves, only 2.0 percent, 5.7 percent, and 2.8 percent of respondents gave answers fully consistent with stated government positions, while more than 94 percent in each wave gave at least one answer directly at odds with them.

Similarly, for its September 2021 report CISSM conducted an analysis to see what proportion of the sample systematically provided responses that were in line with the stated positions of the Iranian government. The analysis found that in this survey, only 3.1% of the respondents provided answers that are systematically and fully in line with stated positions of the Iranian government, and 96.9% of the respondents provided at least one response that is strongly at odds with positions articulated in Iranian state-owned news media.

### **Cross-survey methodology using the integrated survey database**

The subgroup analysis in the Responsible Statecraft article pools responses from 15 surveys totaling 14,959 respondents. The 15 waves that included a standard question about favorability toward the United States were in the July 2014, May 2015, August 2015, January 2016, June 2016, December 2016, January 2018, May 2019, August 2019, October 2020, February 2021, September 2021, July 2022, March 2023, and March 2024. Some questions used as dependent variables for this paper were asked in every survey wave, while others were asked less often depending on space and survey priorities. With only two exceptions, all questions used as dependent variables were asked at least twice, and to at least 3,500 respondents.

The analysis compares the U.S.-favorable minority to the U.S.-unfavorable majority across harmonized measures of age, education, income, media exposure, JCPOA approval, sanctions perceptions, and related attitudes. To test whether the size and attitudinal composition of the U.S.-favorable group changed significantly after U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive

Plan of Action in 2018, we also analyze the pooled data from the pre-withdrawal period separately from the post-withdrawal period.