



↑ Iraqi Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Shia al-Sudani (3rd-L) attends a parliament session to elect a new speaker in 2024.
● EPA



↑ Supporters of Iraqi cleric Muqtada Sadr (not pictured) storm the parliament located in Baghdad's high-security Green Zone on July 27, 2022, to protest a rival bloc's nomination for prime minister.
● AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP

can now fetch several thousand US dollars.

Why turnout in Iraq is low
Since the high turnout of almost 80 per cent in December 2005, turnout has steadily fallen in Iraq. This reflects widespread scepticism that voting can change who governs or how they govern.

Official turnout figures in Iraq often overstate the level of public engagement. This is because the percentage is calculated based on the number of voters relative to registered voters, or those who have updated their electoral registration, and not the entire voting-age population, many of whom choose not to register. In 2025, out of roughly 30 million eligible voters, only about 21 million registered, meaning that official turnout rates exclude a third of the electorate from the calculation. For the many Iraqis who stand outside the networks of power described above, the political system feels neither representative nor responsive. After two decades of elections and promises of reform, daily life for most Iraqis remains defined by hardship and neglect. On the most basic measures of governance, the state consistently falls short. Iraq, despite its vast oil wealth, continues to rank among the poorest performers in service delivery.

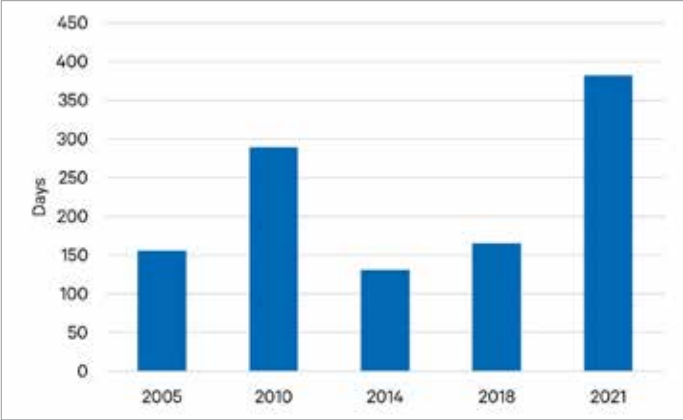
Sadr's boycott campaign will also contribute to low turnout. His movement won the largest number of seats — 73 out of 329 — in the 2021 election, only to withdraw dramatically from parliament after failing to form a "majority government" in August 2022.

Sadr has warned his followers against running on other lists and even dismissed 31 members of his organization for supporting other candidates. His position has frustrated many of his closest advisors, who argue that his organization remains one of the few with a powerful and disciplined electoral machine capable of mobilizing large numbers of voters. But Sadr is seeking to publicly position himself outside of the political order, allowing him to claim moral distance from an election in which so few Iraqis are expected to take part.

How Iraq's gov't formation works

On paper, Iraq's constitution outlines a clear timetable for forming a government after the election. In practice, each step becomes an opportunity for political blocs to extract concessions, exchange offices, and

reinforce the elite pact that underpins the system itself. Since 2005, the period from voting to the formation of a government has averaged around 224 days. Cabinet posts and senior positions are allocated according to an informal "points system," calibrated to the number of seats each party secures. The negotiations begin almost



↑ Duration of government formation in Iraq, by election year
● CHATHAM HOUSE

immediately after the Federal Supreme Court (FSC) ratifies the election results, following the resolution of polling disputes. Within 15 days of ratification, the caretaker president must call the newly elected parliament to convene. The first parliamentary session, chaired by the oldest member, is meant to elect a speaker and two deputies by an absolute majority. However, in practice, this moment often becomes the first arena of political negotiation. Parties delay the vote and keep the session "open" for months, as happened in 2022, while they negotiate over positions and alliances.

Once a speaker is finally chosen, attention shifts to the presidency, which requires a two-thirds parliamentary vote. Here, too, political manoeuvring is intense. Since 2022, a two-thirds quorum is required for the presidential vote, effectively forcing consensus and enabling a one-third minority to block progress.

When the president is eventually elected, he has 15 days to nominate a prime minister from the "largest bloc". This itself is a source of contention. In a landmark 2010 ruling, the FSC interpreted "largest bloc" to mean one formed after elections rather than the list that won the most seats. This allowed Nouri al-Maliki's coalition to outmanoeuvre Ayad Allawi's winning alliance. That precedent, reaffirmed in 2019, institutionalized post-election bargaining as a defining feature of government formation.

Once nominated, the prime minister-designate has 30 days to present a cabinet and government programme to parliament for a vote of confidence. This stage is also dominated by negotiation. Prospective ministries are divided among the main factions, each claiming key portfolios in proportion to their parliamentary weight.

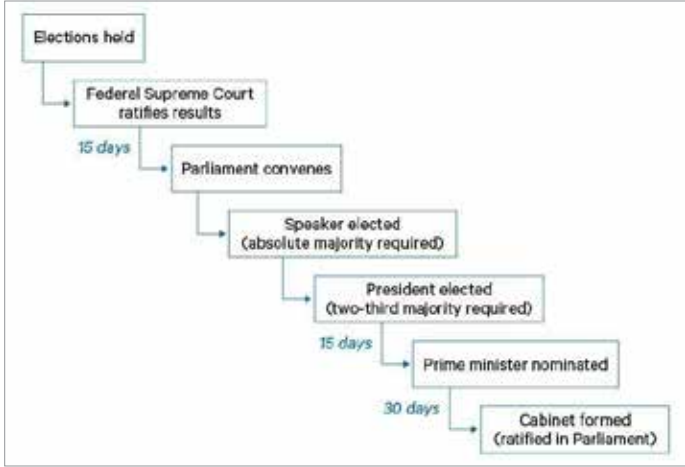
At every stage, these negotiations are not done in the parliament, but in the backrooms of power. The real decision-makers, the heads of the ruling blocs, treat electoral results as bargaining chips in negotiations over ministerial positions and almost 1,000 other senior government posts, known as "special grades". These positions offer access to vast state resources, patronage networks, and the machinery of influence. Yet, seats are only one bargain-

sion into the Green Zone amid their failure to form a government, leaving some 30 people dead. During that government formation process, the homes of politicians, including Halbousi and then-prime minister Mustafa Kadhim, were attacked. Tit-for-tat assassinations, common during election season, remain a standard feature of how the system operates.

The fragmentation in Iraq's elections is therefore less about ideological division than strategy. Each faction competes separately, seeking to measure its electoral weight and amass bargaining chips for the post-election negotiations. Once the seats have been traded for positions, these groups inevitably reconverge within their traditional ruling blocs, reassembling the same order of power in a slightly altered form. And so, the cycle endures: the same elite, reshuffled and rebranded, returns to power under the familiar guise of democratic renewal.

Encouraging participation, accountability

Iraq's post-2003 electoral system was designed to prevent the return of dictatorship. Elections were meant to serve as a periodic rebalancing mechanism, a way to recalibrate political representation every four years and to allow rival parties to contest power peacefully within an agreed constitutional framework. Competition was meant to pro-



↑ The stages of the government formation process in Iraq
● CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ

duce pluralism, while inclusion across ethno-sectarian lines was intended to sustain stability. The promise to the public was that, through elections, Iraqis could hold leaders to account and preserve the hard-won gains of democracy. Yet, two decades on, that system has hardened into something different. Rather than preventing authoritarianism, it is con-

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solidating a competitive political order in which elections persist, but democracy and accountability are being eroded. The very institutions designed to uphold democratic checks, transparency, and the rule of law have been captured or politicized by the same elite. Other ways of holding the elite accountable, such as protests, have been systematically weakened through co-optation, intimidation, and violence.

In the near term, no overhaul of Iraq's self-sustaining political system is likely. The SCF is expected to continue steering government formation, maintaining its central role in determining the prime minister and executive portfolios. The Sadrist movement will likely keep "one foot in and one foot out" of the system, influential enough to shape outcomes but distant enough to claim opposition. Meanwhile, the major Kurdish and Sunni parties will seek to regain ground lost during the last government formation process and secure a larger share of power.

Rebuilding trust, therefore, requires addressing Iraq's democratic deficit at its core and then restoring the connection between elections and accountability. Beyond this, Iraq needs electoral rules that make votes truly count: clearer seat allocation mechanisms, transparent candidate vetting, enforcement of rules around campaign finance and political parties, and an electoral commission insulated from political capture. Equally important is strengthening parliament's oversight capacity, enabling committees to genuinely scrutinize budgets, monitor ministries, and question senior officials without partisan obstruction.

Such steps require political will from the elite that has so far been absent. Cultivating the political will necessary for change will require a networked approach that connects civil society with reform-minded actors inside the system to generate meaningful pressure.

Without structural reform, Iraq's elections will remain arenas of elite competition rather than vehicles for citizen accountability. They will continue to offer the appearance of democratic choice without its substance. Only through genuine reform can Iraq's democracy begin to deliver what it once promised: not just the reshuffling of power, but the restoration of trust.

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