

Terror attacks, issue salience, and party competence: Diagnosing shifting vote preferences in a panel study

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S Erdem Aytaç  and Ali Çarkoğlu

Koç University, Turkey

Abstract

How does a dramatic shift in political context that renders security concerns the most salient electoral issue influence voting? To address this question, we take advantage of the peculiar timing of elections and heightened terror attacks in Turkey with the use of original panel data. The June 2015 Turkish general election resulted in a hung parliament, and a snap election was held in November. While the period before June was relatively calm, the inter-election period witnessed an upsurge of terror attacks and casualties. A three-wave panel enables us to track how voters' electoral preferences changed over this period. Our analyses suggest that the terror attacks led voters to prioritize parties' perceived competence in addressing security concerns at the ballot box. The abrupt change in issue salience has bolstered support for the incumbent Justice and Development Party which was evaluated by voters as more competent than other parties.

Keywords

elections, issue salience, party competence, terror attacks, Turkey

Dramatic shifts in the electoral context render the diagnosis of influences upon the vote decision difficult. Such shifts weaken the explanatory power of long-term factors of partisanship and social cleavages while empowering relatively shorter term considerations of the electoral campaign, the influence of leaders, and performance evaluations concerning the economy and other policy areas. Party competence is one such alternative explanatory factor for vote choices and election results.

Terror attacks ahead of elections create a context where not only the salience of issues drastically changes but also the competence evaluations of parties and leaders can shift substantially. As terror attacks have become frequent in many parts of the world, having a thorough understanding of their impact on elections is crucial to have an insight on how terrorism shapes politics. In times of increased political violence, are voters more likely to support right-wing nationalist parties that are more hawkish and less likely to make concessions? Alternatively, perhaps party competence and leadership qualities trump such considerations, so that voters prioritize strong leadership and competence in their vote choices?

In this study, we take advantage of the peculiar timing of elections and heightened terror attacks in Turkey and employ original panel data to address these questions. The Turkish general election of June 7, 2015, resulted in a hung parliament, and a snap election was held on November 1. While the period before the June election was relatively calm, the inter-election period was characterized by a significant upsurge in terror attacks. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), there were 422 terror attacks in Turkey in 2015, resulting in 374 victim fatalities.¹ About 85% of these casualties were due to attacks perpetrated during the inter-election period, and there were just 13 casualties in the first five months of the year before the June election. The period after the November election was again relatively calm.

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Corresponding author:

S Erdem Aytaç, Department of International Relations, Koç University, Rumelifeneri Yolu Sarıyer, Istanbul 34450, Turkey.
Email: saytac@ku.edu.tr

An original, three-wave panel enables us to track how electoral preferences of Turkish voters have changed over this tumultuous period. Respondents in our panel were interviewed before the June election, between June and November elections, and after the November election. Thus, we can compare the political preferences of the same individuals before and after the surge in terror attacks, allowing us to overcome difficulties associated with inferring causality from cross-sectional data. In addition, we have representative surveys conducted around the June election and after the November election, enabling us to make inferences that are generalizable to the adult population of Turkey. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first in the literature to take advantage of such rich individual-level data and timing of terror attacks to investigate the electoral effects of terrorism.

Our analyses suggest that terror attacks during the inter-election period of 2015 bolstered support for the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)). Specifically, the upsurge of attacks led to a significant increase in the proportion of voters who perceived terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey in the post-June period. In turn, these voters were more likely to switch their votes to the AKP, mostly at the expense of the right-wing, Turkish nationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP)). We also find evidence that this shift in electoral preferences is likely driven by the perceived competence of the AKP in addressing security concerns. The AKP is seen as more competent than other parties in general, but the difference in competence evaluations between the AKP and other parties is especially substantial with respect to addressing terrorism. In addition, we observe a jump in the favorability ratings of the AKP leadership among those individuals who switched their votes to the AKP from the pre-June to post-June period.

These observations are compatible with the proposition that voters prioritize strong leadership and competence in times of heightened terror attacks. In contrast, the argument that voters are more likely to support right-wing nationalist parties in a context of increased security concerns is not supported. If this were the case, we would expect the MHP to gain votes in the aftermath of June elections in Turkey, but this has not happened. Our panel research design, which is especially suitable to explore the dynamics of electoral change over time, suggests that voters' electoral response to terror attacks is shaped by leadership and competence considerations rather than ideological shifts, at least in the Turkish context. Furthermore, the case that we study illustrates how hegemonic incumbents can weather serious economic setbacks by exploiting a shift in political agenda due to heightened security concerns.

Electoral consequences of terror attacks

Studies analyzing the electoral consequences of terror attacks point to two distinct phenomena.² First, voters seem to be more likely to support right-wing parties in times of heightened terrorist violence. One could think of a couple of rationales behind this pattern: Right-wing parties are typically less likely to give concessions to the groups challenging the state than their left-wing counterparts. As such, by amassing support behind right-wing parties, voters might signal that the attacks would not lead to concessions, hence rendering them useless from the attackers' perspective.³ Another relevant factor is issue ownership of parties. The argument here is that parties would benefit when "their" issues become salient (Petrocik, 1996; Wright, 2012). In this respect, right-wing parties are considered to possess a valence advantage in addressing security threats and thus should reap electoral benefits in times of heightened security concerns (Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014).

Empirically, Berrebi and Klor (2006, 2008) provide evidence that terror attacks pushed Israeli voters toward right-wing parties. Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014) exploit the variation in the range of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel and reach a similar conclusion: The threat of rocket attacks leads to an increase of two to six percentage points in the right-wing vote. Outside Israel, using election results across Turkish provinces, Kıbrıs (2011) also reports a positive correlation between military and police force casualties in a province and vote shares of right-wing nationalist parties. Economou and Kollias (2015) analyze survey data from 12 European countries between 1985 and 2010 and find that terror attacks lead to a rightward shift in voters' self-positioning on the ideological spectrum.

A second, distinct electoral consequence of terror attacks is the prioritization of strong leadership and competence in voters' considerations. It has been argued that in a social and political climate of fear and anxiety, people look for leaders that can provide protection (Albertson and Gadarian, 2016; Huddy et al., 2005; Skitka et al., 2004). Security-related threat perceptions increase support for political leaders who are considered as forceful and active (McCann, 1997) and also lead voters to give more emphasis on leadership in their vote choice (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009). Similarly, terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991) argues that mortality salience makes individuals more likely to follow "charismatic leaders who bolster their self-worth by making them feel that they are valued participants in a great mission to heroically triumph over evil." (Cohen et al., 2005: 179). It has also been theorized that people in a state of psychological distress are more likely to support charismatic political leaders (Cohen et al., 2004).

Evidence in these directions has been provided by the post-9/11 US context where concern over terrorism was heightened. In the 2004 US presidential election, the

majority of voters considered terrorism as the most important problem facing the country and also “disproportionately saw [the incumbent President] Bush as a strong leader” (Abramson et al., 2007: 218). Voters who perceived a high threat of terrorism were more likely to support the Bush administration’s policies (Huddy et al., 2005), and Bush performed significantly better than expected in the election in the three states most affected by terror attacks (Abramowitz, 2004). Oates et al. (2009) report that the Bush campaign successfully projected an image of a safe and secure leader in chaotic times, and Landau et al. (2004: 1139) present experimental evidence that among American college students reminders of 9/11 increased support for Bush, who may have provided “a sense of protection from the overwhelming terrorist threat.”

Outside the United States, the consequences of the March 2004 attacks in Madrid that took place only three days before the national election defied the expectation that terror attacks would bolster support for right-wing parties. As a result of the election, the incumbent right-wing Popular Party (PP) government was replaced by the left-wing Socialist Party (PSOE) even though during the campaign “nobody doubted that the PP would win” (Torcal and Rico, 2004: 111). Analyzing postelection survey data, Bali (2007) argues that the PP’s unpopular foreign policy of supporting the invasion of Iraq and its mismanagement of the investigation of the terror attacks favored the PSOE at the polls. She concludes that voters’ evaluations of government performance in security-related policy areas are consequential for terror attacks’ electoral effects.

A methodological point concerning these contributions in the literature is the use of cross-sectional surveys or geographical election results as a basis of inference about the electoral consequences of terror attacks. Studies that rely on probability samples enable us to generalize the results to the population of interest, yet it is difficult to pinpoint the dynamics behind any observed changes in preferences in the absence of individual-level panel data. The two consecutive elections in Turkey in 2015 with heightened terror attacks during the inter-election period and the availability of panel data around these two elections as well as nationally representative cross-sectional surveys present an excellent opportunity to study voters’ electoral responses to terror attacks. Thus, our research design puts us in an advantageous position to illuminate the dynamics of electoral preferences in times of heightened security concerns, as we elaborate below.

The Turkish context

The Turkish party system had four major players ahead of the twin elections of 2015. The conservative, Islamist AKP had won pluralities in all of the three legislative elections since its founding in 2001 and had been holding the majority of seats in parliament. The main opposition party during

this period was the social democratic, secularist Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP)). Other opposition parties in the parliament were the MHP with a right-wing, Turkish nationalist ideological outlook, and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP)) with roots in the Kurdish nationalist movement.

The year 2015 turned out to be a turbulent period for Turkish politics. The general election of June 7 witnessed about nine percentage point loss of support for the AKP compared to the 2011 election. With 41% of the votes, the party lost the parliamentary majority for the first time since its coming to power in 2002. The sluggish economy ahead of the election seems to be consequential for this result (Sayarı, 2016). Another critical factor was HDP’s decision to run as a party in the election instead of fielding independent candidates to get around the ten percent national threshold required to have seats in parliament. The HDP won 13% of the votes, a gain of about seven percentage points over the votes obtained by independent candidates in 2011, and a significant portion of these gains came at the expense of the AKP. The CHP and MHP obtained 25% and 16% of the votes, respectively. Since none of the parties received the majority of seats in parliament, coalition talks were necessary to form a government.

As the coalition negotiations continued, a suicide bomber of the Islamic State (ISIS) detonated himself in the district of Suruç in Southeastern Anatolia on July 20, killing 34 people. Most victims were members of socialist youth organizations giving a press statement on their planned relief trip to the nearby Syrian town of Kobanî, which was devastated by the clashes between the ISIS and Kurdish groups. A spiral of violence began with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane* (PKK)) carrying out revenge attacks on Turkish security forces that triggered a massive military response, leading to further escalation of violence.

An important factor shaping Turkish politics during this period was the so-called “Kurdish Peace Process.” The AKP leadership had taken initiatives early in their tenure to address the Kurdish problem in Turkey, but a major move for the negotiated settlement of the conflict with the PKK only came at the end of 2012. The negotiations initially moved quite fast, and within a few months a ceasefire was declared by the PKK. The expectation was the simultaneous withdrawal of all armed PKK members out of Turkey and constitutional and legal changes toward the recognition of political and civil rights of Kurds. Yet this fragile process effectively ended in June 2015 and hostilities resumed. The reasons behind the collapse of negotiations are subject to much debate.⁴

With the failure of coalition talks between parties, on August 21 President Erdoğan announced a snap general election to be held on November 1. The terror attacks continued unabated during the campaign period. Less than a month before the snap election, the ISIS targeted a rally of

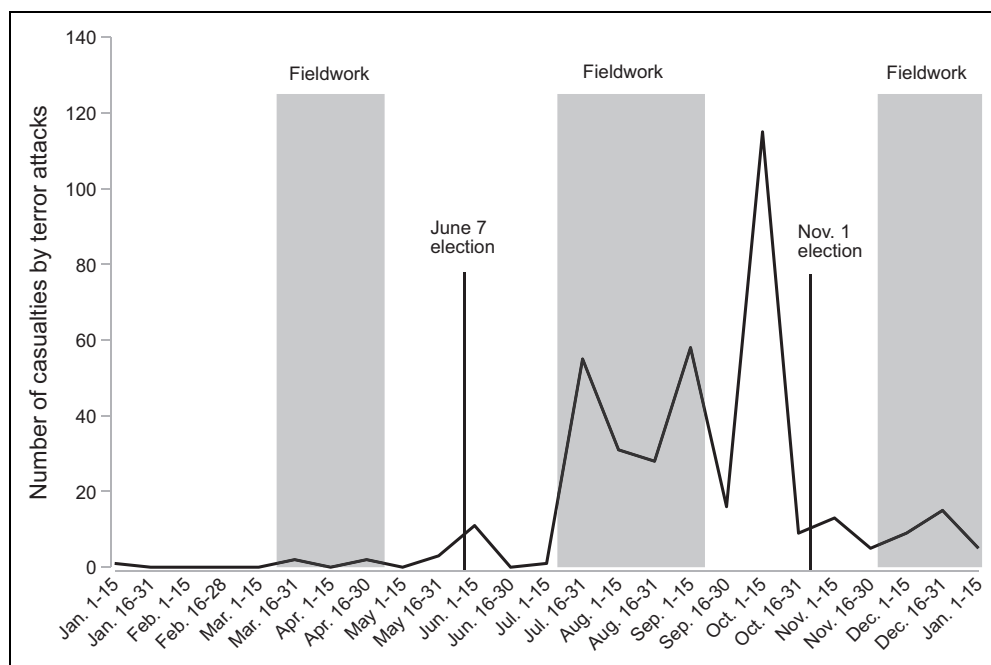


Figure 1. Victim fatalities due to terror attacks in 2015 and timing of fieldwork. *Source:* Authors' calculation using data from START (2018).

socialist and Kurdish groups outside the main railway station in Ankara, killing 105 civilians. In the shadow of the rising toll of terror attacks, the electoral scene was reversed in favor of the incumbent. The AKP emerged as the clear winner of the snap election, reaching a vote share of 49.5% and obtaining about 58% of seats in parliament. The primary loser was the MHP, losing about four percentage points in vote share, and crucially about half the seats it won in June. There was a slight increase in the vote shares of CHP (about half a percentage point) and a decline in the vote shares of HDP (about two percentage points).

These shifts in party support cannot be analyzed in isolation from the sharp rise in terror attacks during the inter-election period. We take these developments as the background for our analyses, and the timing of our fieldwork puts us at an advantageous position to study changing electoral dynamics. Figure 1 plots the number of victim casualties by terror attacks in Turkey in two-week intervals throughout 2015 and early 2016 together with the timing of our three-wave panel surveys. Our fieldwork ahead of the June election coincides with a relatively calm period, and hence security concerns should not be a salient issue for most voters during this time. In contrast, the timing of the post-June panel coincides with a period of frequent terror attacks (about 30–50 casualties every two weeks), and by this time, security concerns should be a significant concern in the electorate. The attacks were relatively subdued again during the fieldwork of the post-November panel, but they continued.

While Turkey has long been suffering from terror attacks, their intensity and nature during the inter-election period of 2015 were unique. In the period of the GTD tracking terror attacks (since 1970), only in 1992 there had been more attacks in Turkey than in 2015, and the number of attacks in 2015 was about the same as in the preceding seven years combined.⁵ The attacks in 2015 were also unusually concentrated in a few months; there were 130 attacks in August 2015, and this figure was even higher than the number of attacks in the worst month of the worst year in record to that date (84 attacks in March 1992). The nature of attacks in 2015 was particularly threatening to ordinary citizens as well, with the ISIS targeting civilian crowds with suicide bombings and the PKK adopting urban warfare. All these factors should contribute to the heightened security concerns in the Turkish populace during this period even though they are not unfamiliar with terror attacks. Moreover, both the AKP leadership and the pro-government media, which controlled a substantial share of the overall media market, framed the November election as a choice between “stability or chaos,” helping to create an atmosphere of fear and render terrorism a major salient issue for the election (Davies, 2018).

Research design and analyses

We analyze original, individual-level data from the Turkish Election Study 2015 (TES 2015) that consists of three nationally representative cross-sectional samples accompanied by a

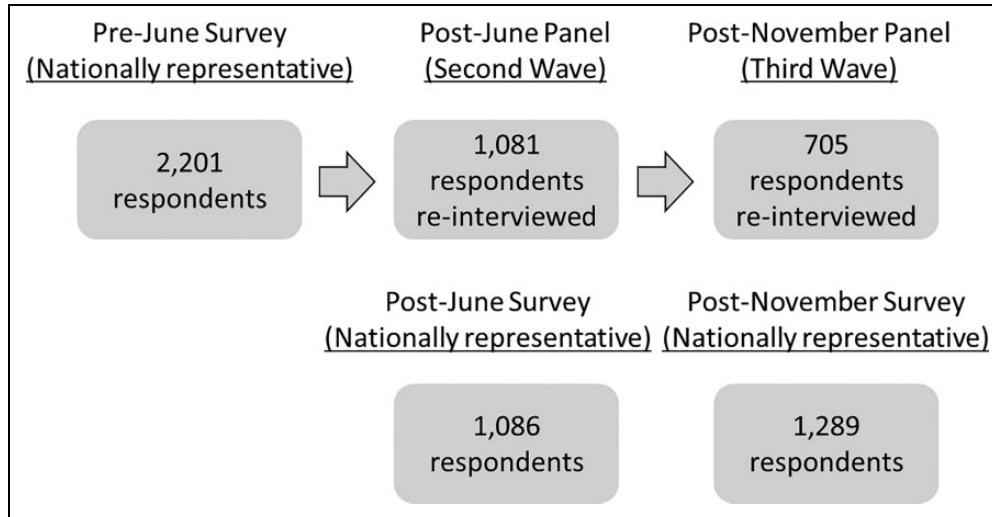


Figure 2. Structure of the Turkish Election Study 2015.

three-wave panel.⁶ The first survey, the *pre-June survey*, was conducted in late March and April with a probability sample of 2,201 respondents. Participants in this pre-June survey were contacted again after the election to participate in a post-election wave. About 49% ($N = 1,081$) of participants in the first wave were interviewed in this second wave, which we call the *post-June panel*, fielded from late July to early September. Finally, about 65% ($N = 705$) of participants in the second wave were again interviewed after the November election in the *post-November panel* fielded between late November and early January of 2016. Thus, our panel consists of 705 individuals who were interviewed three times: before and after the June election and after the November election. In addition, we fielded probability sample surveys after the June and November elections. The *post-June survey* was conducted with 1,086 respondents during the same period with the post-June panel, and the *post-November survey* was conducted with 1,289 respondents during the same period with the post-November panel. The structure of TES 2015 is illustrated in Figure 2.

We proceed with our empirical analyses in three steps. First, we establish the change in the political salience of terrorism during the inter-election period. Second, we present multivariate analyses of determinants of vote choice in the June and November elections using the pre-June, post-June, and post-November representative surveys. In the third step of our analyses, we turn to our panel data and explore the characteristics of individuals who switched their votes to the AKP from June to November.

There is strong evidence from our surveys that terrorism-related concerns have substantially increased among the Turkish electorate in the aftermath of the June election. We asked respondents to tell us the most important problem facing Turkey in an open-ended fashion and coded their responses. In the pre-June survey, those who

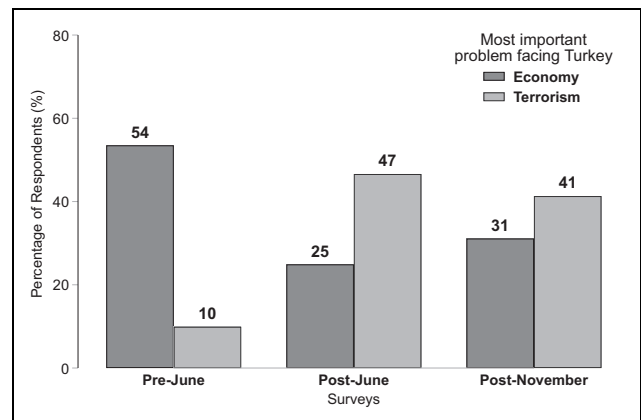


Figure 3. The most important problem facing Turkey according to panel respondents. *Source:* Authors' panel surveys. Post-stratification demographic weights applied.

said terrorism was the most important problem amounted to only about 10% of respondents while 54% stated that it was the economy (Figure 3). The salience of terrorism surged in the post-June panel with the proportion of respondents stating terrorism as the most important problem increasing by more than fourfold to 47%, while the percentage of those who chose economic problems declined down to about 25%. The salience of terrorism remained high in the post-November panel as well.

Did this significant increase in the salience of terrorism from the pre-June to post-June period have any effects on vote choices? To address this question, we move to the second stage of our analyses and focus on the pre-June, post-June, and post-November representative surveys. We present multivariate analyses of determinants of voting for the three major parties (AKP, CHP, and MHP), and examine whether there are differences in these determinants

across voting intentions in the pre-June survey and declared vote choices in the post-June and post-November surveys.⁷

Our dependent variables are (i) vote intention for the June election as measured in the pre-June survey, (ii) declared vote choice in the June election as measured in the post-June survey, and (iii) declared vote choice in the November election as measured in the post-November survey. We created binary variables for respondents who declared that they voted for (or intend to vote for) the AKP, CHP, and MHP. For the June election, we include analyses both for the pre-election vote intentions and post-election declared vote choices to account for any potential changes during the campaign period. We employ relatively simple specifications to model vote choice with demographic and economic evaluation variables. The rationale for these specifications, variable descriptions, and descriptive statistics are presented in the Online Appendix. An important variable for our purposes is *Problem: Terror*, a binary variable to identify individuals who considered terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey when asked in an open-ended fashion.

Table 1 presents an analysis of the determinants of vote intentions for the June election as elicited in the pre-June survey and vote choices in the June and November elections as reported in the post-election surveys for the three major parties. Models (1) to (3) consider the determinants of preferences for the AKP in the pre-June (model (1)), post-June (model (2)), and post-November surveys (model (3)). As expected, models (1) and (2) are substantively identical: While age and education are negatively associated with a vote for the AKP, more religious individuals are more likely to vote for the party. This result is compatible with the implications of the center-periphery cleavage in Turkish politics where the AKP presents itself as the party of the ‘periphery’ (Çarkoğlu, 2012; Mardin, 1973). Kurdish voters were also less likely to vote for the AKP in the June election. We find evidence of economic voting, as individuals with a higher count of negative economic evaluations were less likely to vote for the AKP. Finally, individuals who considered terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey ahead of the June election were no more or less likely to vote for the AKP than others, indicated by the statistically insignificant coefficients of *Problem: Terror* in models (1) and (2).

The determinants of vote choice for the AKP in the November election are presented in model (3), and we see that now *Problem: Terror* has a positive and statistically significant effect on the reported vote for the AKP. This is the first indication in our analyses that terrorism concerns in the aftermath of the June election seem to have had a positive effect on the electoral fortunes of the AKP. The only other change among the determinants of support for AKP from June to November is that in November being Kurdish has no statistically significant effect on the vote for the AKP, in contrast to a negative effect in June, though the

Table 1. Individual-level determinants of vote intentions and choice for the AKP, CHP, and MHP in June and November 2015 elections in Turkey.

Dependent variables	(1) Vote intention for AKP in June election		(2) Reported vote for AKP in June election		(3) Reported vote for AKP in November election		(4) Vote intention for CHP in June election		(5) Reported vote for CHP in June election		(6) Reported vote for CHP in November election		(7) Vote intention for MHP in June election		(8) Reported vote for MHP in June election		(9) Reported vote for MHP in November election	
	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June	Pre-June	Post-June
Female	0.23 (0.14)	0.21 (0.18)	0.23 (0.18)	0.23 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)	-0.13 (0.16)	0.05 (0.22)
Age	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Education	-0.07** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.01*** (0.03)	-0.01*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.11** (0.03)
Religiosity	0.20*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.05)
Kurdish	-0.72** (0.24)	-1.28*** (0.32)	-0.26 (0.26)	-0.26 (0.26)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)	-1.59*** (0.31)	-1.79*** (0.42)
Negative Economic Evaluations	-0.68*** (0.04)	-0.42*** (0.05)	-0.51*** (0.05)	-0.51*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.39*** (0.05)
Problem: Terror	0.15 (0.25)	-0.001 (0.18)	0.59*** (0.18)	0.59*** (0.18)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)	-0.83* (0.40)	-0.53* (0.21)
Constant	0.38 (0.47)	0.95 (0.58)	0.76 (0.60)	0.76 (0.60)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)	-1.65*** (0.45)	-2.66*** (0.78)
Observations	1776	932	1191	1191	1776	932	1776	932	1776	932	1776	932	1776	932	1776	932	1776	932

Note: Logistic regressions with standard errors in parentheses. Post-stratification demographic weights applied. AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; MHP: Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

sign of the coefficient is still negative. The effects of other variables are substantively similar across the two elections.

Models (4) to (6) present the same analyses with vote choice for the CHP as the dependent variable. The only result we would like to highlight is that *Problem: Terror* has a negative effect on support for the CHP in the June election and again negative but somewhat weaker effect in November. Thus, individuals who considered terrorism as the most important problem were less likely to vote for the CHP. Looking at the determinants of electoral support for the MHP in models (7) to (9), we see that individuals who considered terrorism as the most important problem were more likely to vote for the MHP in the June election, but this was no longer the case in November; the coefficient for *Problem: Terror* is insignificant in post-November data as presented in model (9). If we recall that these samples are independent cross-national samples, this result implies that considering terrorism as the most important problem was not a distinguishing factor for MHP voters in November.

This analysis of three cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys highlights that considering terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey was not a significant predictor of vote for the AKP in the June election, but those who did think so in November election were more likely to vote for the AKP. The opposite was true for the MHP: Respondents who considered terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey in the June election were more likely to vote for the MHP, yet this factor did not have a statistically significant effect on the vote for the MHP in November.

Analysis of panel respondents

To analyze how electoral support for different parties evolved over the period of interest, we turn to the three-wave panel in the third stage of our analyses. Recall that we had successfully reinterviewed about 49% of respondents in our pre-June survey in a post-election (June) wave, and about 65% of these second-wave participants were again interviewed after the November election. Thus, 705 voters were interviewed three times, and they constitute the sample in the following analyses. A comparison of some observable characteristics of our panel respondents ($N = 705$) with the respondents in the pre-June probability sample ($N = 2,201$) is presented in the Online Appendix. The fact that there are no significant differences between the two samples provides some assurance that the panel is not radically different from the cross-national sample.

Our panel allows us to track how respondents' vote preferences have changed over time. First, Figure 4 presents a cross-tabulation of the panel respondents' June election vote intentions (as measured in the pre-June survey) and November reported votes (as measured in the post-November panel) for the four major parties.⁸ From the figure, it is possible to infer, for example, that among those

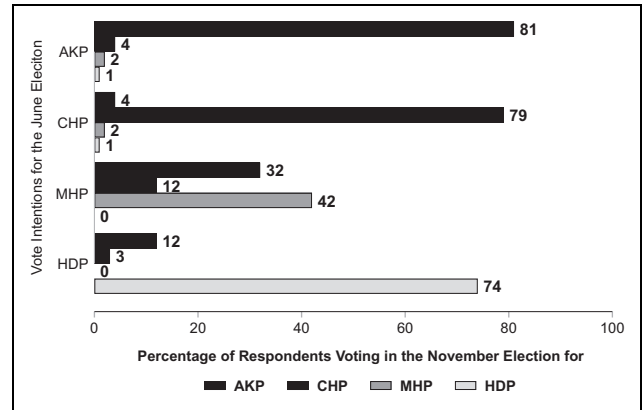


Figure 4. Shifts across June vote intentions and November reported votes of panel respondents. *Source:* Authors' panel surveys.

who reported an intention to vote for the AKP in the pre-June survey, about 81% reported voting for the AKP in the November election as well (in the post-November panel). We see that while the AKP, CHP, and HDP managed to keep their voter bases relatively intact from June to November, this was not the case for the MHP. Remarkably, only less than half (about 42%) of panel respondents who said they were going to vote for the MHP in the pre-June survey reported doing so in the November election. About a third (32%) of pre-June MHP voters report switching to the AKP, and about 12% switched to the CHP in November.⁹ Thus, the AKP seems to be the primary beneficiary from the MHP's electoral losses from June to November.

What are the characteristics of individuals who switched their votes to the AKP from June to November? We define "Switchers-to-AKP" as those who did not declare a vote intention for the AKP in the pre-June survey (first wave) but reported voting for the AKP in November election in the post-November panel (third wave). This way we can diagnose the electoral shift among panel respondents toward the AKP from a context where terrorism was not salient (pre-June period) to one where it was (post-June period). We measure the impact of terrorism concerns on this electoral shift by identifying those panel respondents who considered terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey in the post-June period (as measured in the post-November panel); we create a dummy variable *Problem: Terror* for these respondents.

Table 2 presents an analysis where the dependent variable is *Switchers-to-AKP* among panel respondents, that is, a binary variable indicating those individuals who did not declare a vote intention for the AKP in the pre-June survey but did so in the post-November panel. In model (1), we see that only two variables display statistically significant effects. Most importantly for our purposes, those individuals who considered terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey in the post-June period, indicated by the

Table 2. Determinants of switching to the AKP from June to November election.

DV: Switching vote to the AKP	(1)	(2)
Problem: Terror	0.65* (0.28)	0.60* (0.30)
Female	0.36 (0.30)	0.49 (0.32)
Age	-0.003 (0.01)	0.001 (0.01)
Education	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
Religiosity	0.11 (0.08)	0.10 (0.09)
Kurdish	-0.51 (0.42)	-0.81 (0.42)
Negative Economic Evaluations	-0.26** (0.09)	-0.26** (0.08)
June vote—CHP		-0.53 (0.56)
June vote—MHP		1.17** (0.40)
June vote—HDP		0.80 (0.53)
Constant	-2.06* (1.02)	-2.29* (1.07)
Observations	648	648

Note: Logistic regressions with standard errors in parentheses. Post-stratification demographic weights applied. AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; DV: dependent variable; CHP: *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*; MHP: *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*; HDP: *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*.
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

variable *Problem: Terror*, were more likely to switch to the AKP. This result is strongly suggestive that concerns about terrorism were a significant motivation for individuals to switch their votes to the AKP from the pre-June to post-June period. Second, respondents with more negative economic evaluations were less likely to switch to the AKP. This is expected, as the AKP was the incumbent ahead of the June election.

In model (2), we add binary variables for reported votes in the June election. We see that *Problem: Terror* has still a positive and statistically significant effect on switching to the AKP, and those who report having voted for the MHP in June are more likely to switch to the AKP as well. The coefficients for the other parties are statistically insignificant. This result is another indication that the AKP seems to have benefited from the developments in the inter-election period at the expense of the MHP.

Our findings so far can be summarized as follows. The upsurge of violence in Turkey from July to November 2015 was accompanied by a significant increase in voters' perceptions of terrorism being the most important problem facing the country. In turn, those who considered terrorism as the most important problem in the post-June period were more likely to switch their votes to the AKP from June to November. This tendency to switch to the AKP was especially true for voters who voted for the MHP in June. Thus, security concerns in this period seem to have bolstered support for the AKP by inducing an electoral shift from MHP voters.

These results are in contrast with the proposition that voters are more likely to support right-wing nationalist parties in a context of increased political violence. While it is true that both the AKP and MHP are right-wing parties, the AKP has a more religious (Islamist) character, whereas

the MHP is a nationalist party. Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014) report that it is primarily the right-wing nationalist parties, and not all right-wing parties, that benefit from the increased terrorist threat in Israel. Moreover, the AKP had taken initiatives for a negotiated settlement of the conflict with the PKK not long before the 2015 elections. In contrast, the MHP leadership had always been more hawkish and less concessionist toward the Kurdish group. Therefore, this line of argument would have predicted an increase in the support for the nationalist right-wing MHP, not a decline as we observe.

Is there evidence for the prediction that in times of heightened terror attacks voters prioritize strong leadership and competence in their vote choices? Could this perspective help explain the electoral shift toward the AKP in Turkey during the period of interest? One way to address these questions is to track the favorability ratings of political leaders. In our surveys, we asked respondents to rate how favorable they see political leaders on a scale of 0–10. Figure 5 presents these leader favorability ratings among all panel respondents (left panel) and among those who switched to the AKP in the post-June period (right panel). We see that Erdoğan and then chairman of the AKP, Ahmet Davutoğlu, are consistently rated higher than other leaders (Kılıçdaroğlu of the CHP, Bahçeli of the MHP, and Demirtaş of the HDP). Moreover, we also observe a jump in the favorability ratings of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu from pre-June to post-June among those panel respondents who switched their votes to the AKP. If we take favorability ratings as a proxy for charismatic leadership, our findings can be considered a case of voters' flight to charismatic, strong leadership in times of heightened security threats. The November campaign strategy of the AKP that emphasized the virtues of a single-party government with frequent references to the party's successes during its early rule has likely contributed to this outcome (Sayarı, 2016).

Our data also show that the AKP is seen as more competent in general than other parties and especially so in addressing security challenges. After asking our respondents what the most important problem facing Turkey was, we also asked which party they thought would best solve the problem they just mentioned. The left panel of Figure 6 considers all panel respondents, and the AKP is seen as overall more competent than other parties. The right panel focuses on those panel respondents who identified terrorism as the most important problem facing Turkey. We see that the AKP is consistently rated as considerably more competent than other parties in addressing terrorism, and the difference in competence evaluations between the AKP and other parties in this case is larger than among all respondents. The decline in the proportion of respondents who considered MHP as competent with respect to addressing terrorism from the pre-June to the post-June period is also noticeable.¹⁰ Thus, we do find evidence for the hypothesis that the increase in votes of the AKP in the

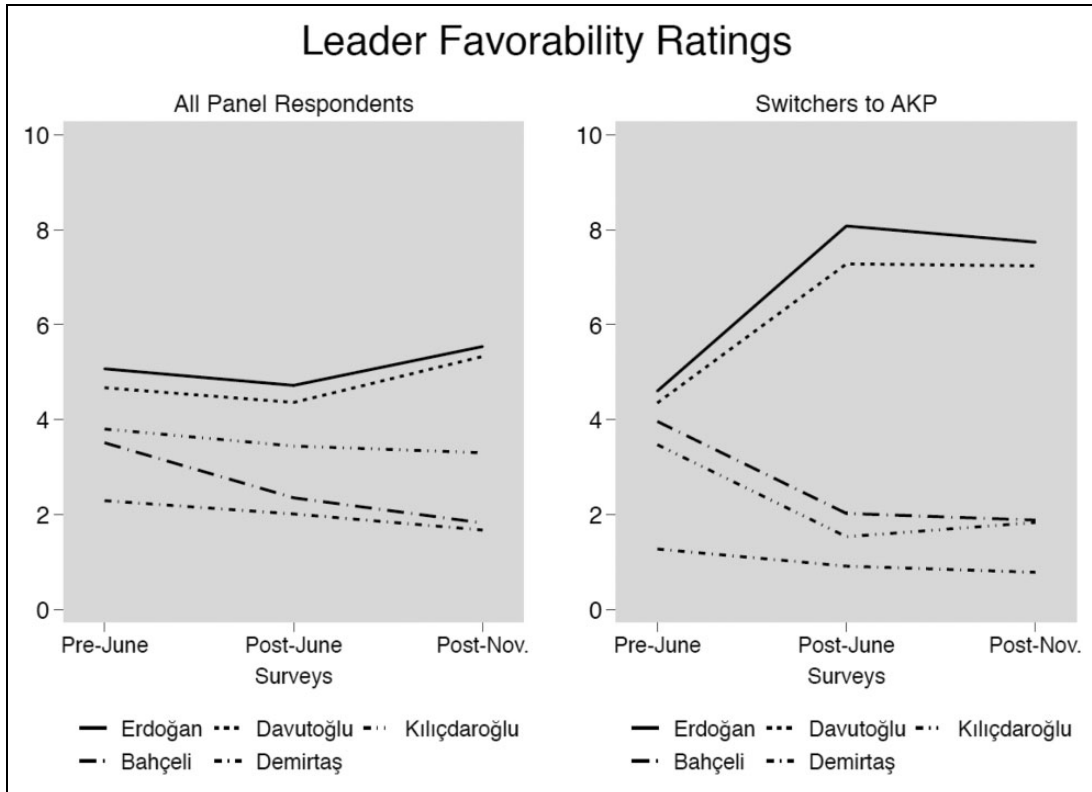


Figure 5. Leader favorability ratings among all panel respondents (left panel) and among those who switched to the AKP in the post-June period (right panel). AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*. Source: Authors' panel surveys. Post-stratification demographic weights applied.

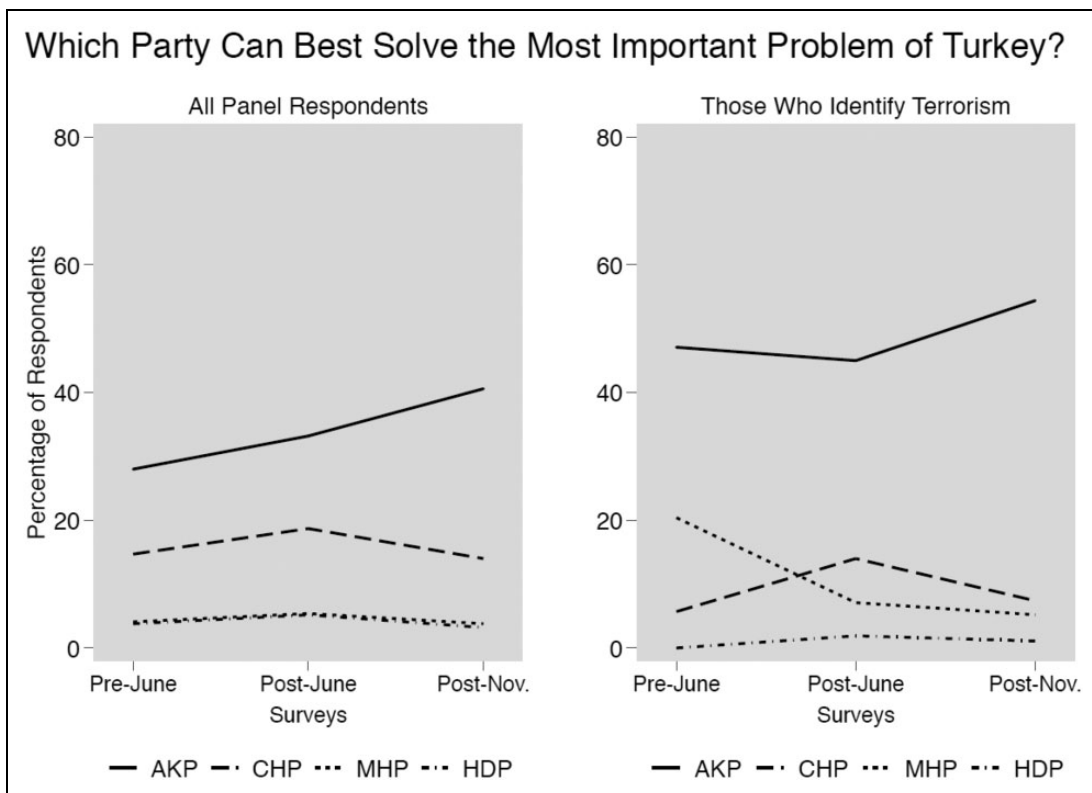


Figure 6. Competence evaluations of parties—All panel respondents (left panel) and among those who considered terrorism as the most important problem (right panel). Source: Authors' panel surveys. Post-stratification demographic weights applied.

post-June period as a result of heightened security concerns is likely due to the AKP being perceived as more competent than other parties in addressing this issue.

Conclusion

Our analyses with panel data highlight how the political agenda in Turkey dramatically shifted from June to November 2015 elections. Economic concerns were salient ahead of the June election, and they were consequential in the incumbent AKP's loss of parliamentary majority in that election. Turkey witnessed a surge in terror attacks by the PKK and ISIS during the inter-election period, and this political violence pushed primarily nationalist, right-wing constituencies toward the AKP—a dynamic that played a prominent role in the party's ability to regain parliamentary majority in the November snap election. Voters' favorable evaluations of the AKP leadership and its perceived competence in addressing terrorism seem to be the driving factors of this outcome, mostly at the expense of the nationalist MHP.

An implication of our study is that competence and leadership qualities seem to trump ideological considerations to a certain extent in times of heightened threat perceptions—a conclusion that we reach with a research design that circumvents limitations of analyses relying on cross-sectional survey data only. In the Turkish case, we did not observe an electoral shift toward the nationalist, right-wing MHP in the aftermath of terror attacks. Instead, these attacks seem to have benefited the AKP, thanks to its higher perceived competence. Nevertheless, ideological considerations are still relevant as we do not observe an across-the-board shift toward the AKP in the electorate; there were relatively few individuals who switched from the left-wing CHP and HDP. The bulk of the electoral shift originates from the right-wing MHP. This implies that ideology is important in determining who are going to switch their votes as a response to heightened security concerns.

Our results also highlight that increased terror attacks and heightened security concerns ahead of elections do not necessarily imply that the incumbent is going to be punished at the polls. As of 2015, the AKP had been in power as a single-party government for 13 years, and even though the party had lost the parliamentary majority in the June election, it was still *de facto* in charge during the inter-election period. Rather than attributing responsibility for the worsening security situation to the incumbent government and punishing it, Turkish voters seem to have prioritized competence at the polls. This suggests that during times of heightened security threats opposition parties cannot rely on blaming the government for the situation; they must project leadership and competence at addressing terrorism to gain an advantage at the polls.

Finally, the electoral rebound of the AKP in a short period offers a viable survival strategy for hegemonic incumbents facing economic challenges. Such incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes are especially vulnerable to economic downturns as their legitimacy is closely tied to economic performance (Treisman, 2011), and weak performance can trigger elite defections (Reuter and Gandhi, 2011). While hegemonic incumbents like the AKP possess significant propaganda advantage to distort economic reality or deflect blame for bad economic conditions, recent research suggests that maintaining popular support using this strategy has limits (Rosenfeld, 2018). Our results highlight that in such circumstances, hegemonic incumbents could benefit from a change in political agenda due to heightened security concerns. Obviously, the availability of security issues that offer the potential for political exploitation and a sizeable constituency ready to switch allegiance are necessary for this strategy to work. The case of Turkey that we focus on constitutes a successful example in this direction with lessons for the stability of hegemonic regimes.


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ORCID iD

S Erdem Aytac  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6544-8717>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) has the following definition for what constitutes a terror attack: “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” (START, 2018). The criteria for an incident to be included in the GTD could be found in the codebook of the database, available at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.
2. While we explicitly focus on the electoral consequences of terror attacks in this study, there is a voluminous literature on electoral consequences of political unrest broadly conceived and on the link between political parties and electoral violence. See, among others, Altier et al. (2014), Ellman and Wantchekon (2000), and Rapoport and Weinberg (2000).

3. In this case, we could also observe a shift to the right in the centrist parties' positions. See Howard (2009) for a similar dynamic in the realm of citizenship politics.
4. One argument is that Erdoğan backtracked from negotiations since he saw the process benefiting the HDP more than the AKP—the AKP seemed to lose the Turkish nationalist vote in addition to not receiving the expected support from Kurdish constituencies; the latter continued to throw support behind the HDP. Another argument is that the PKK became over ambitious with the success of Kurdish rebels in northern Syria, and thought that it could carve out “autonomous” regions in the Turkish Southeast through force. At this point, public information sources are rather scarce to have an impartial verdict, and debates have a strongly partisan character.
5. The Global Terrorism Database lists a total of 3,569 terror attacks in Turkey from 1970 to 2015, and about half of them are concentrated in the early 1990s. This period was the high point of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, most of the incidents taking place in the Southeastern region of the country.
6. See the Online Appendix for sampling methodology.
7. For this analysis, we leave out vote for HDP as the dependent variable, the party with the smallest vote among the four major parties, as the logistic regression cannot be estimated due to complete separation.
8. Responses included “other parties,” “undecided” (for the June vote intention), and “no response” as well, but we do not present shifts across these categories to make the figure legible. Our data show that about 48% of individuals who had “undecided” vote intention for the June election reported having voted for the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) in November. Similarly, about 32% of individuals who had offered no response for vote intention in June reported having voted for the AKP in November. Therefore, the AKP seems to have received a disproportionately high share of votes in November from individuals who were undecided or offered no response in the pre-June survey.
9. The respondents in our panel who switched from MHP to CHP tend to be less religious than the average MHP voter and reside in more developed regions of the country.
10. In the aftermath of the June election, MHP leader Bahçeli announced that under no circumstances would his party participate in a coalition government. This might have been perceived by the electorate that MHP is not up to the task of dealing with the challenges Turkey faces, and therefore led to a decrease in competence perceptions.

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Author biographies

S Erdem Aytaç is an assistant professor in the Department of International Relations at Koç University. He received his PhD from Yale University in 2014 and his research focuses on political behavior and electoral politics.

Ali Çarikoğlu is a professor in the Department of International Relations at Koç University. He received his PhD from the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1994, and previously taught at Boğaziçi University and Sabancı University in Istanbul. His areas of research interest include voting behavior, public opinion, and party politics in Turkey.