

CHAPTER 15

ECONOMIC VOTING DURING THE AKP ERA IN TURKEY

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SINCE coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) registered an impressive electoral record: it won plurality of votes in all of the six general and four local elections held by 2019, and as the incumbent its vote share did not fall below 40 percent in general elections. As a result, the party was able to secure parliamentary majorities and form single-party governments except for the brief period between June and November 2015 general elections. This electoral strength has also had significant repercussions beyond general and local elections: the party was able to push through three constitutional amendments via referenda, and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won two presidential elections in 2014 and 2018.

In this chapter I explore to what degree Turkish voters' economic evaluations played a role in AKP's electoral fortunes. As one of the main approaches to voting behavior, the basic premise of the so-called economic voting hypothesis is that the state of the economy is a key factor for election results: incumbents are more likely to be re-elected in good economic times and cast out of office when the economy performs poorly (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Economic voting has a certain normative appeal for democratic theory since it could serve as a mechanism for electoral accountability (Healy and Malhotra 2013)—incumbents have incentives to improve public welfare if they know that they will be punished or rewarded at the polls for the state of the economy (Ferejohn 1986). Do we observe evidence for economic voting in a consistent and substantial manner during the AKP years in Turkey?

The era of AKP rule in Turkey is a suitable case to test the economic voting hypothesis because the party's long tenure in power entailed periods of both good and poor economic performance. The 1990s in Turkey was a period of economic and political instability, and the AKP came to power shortly after one of the deepest economic recessions the country experienced. Benefiting from a favorable global economy and EU and IMF anchors, the Turkish economy recovered swiftly and displayed mostly robust macroeconomic performance until about the end of the party's second term in

2011, notwithstanding the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. As such, the AKP leadership has been very vocal in emphasizing that it is a competent manager of the economy, and this theme played a pivotal role in the AKP's election manifestos and campaign discourse (Aytaç 2017). Beginning with the party's third term (2011–2015), however, we observe a period of weak macroeconomic performance accompanied by democratic backsliding, especially since 2015 (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016; Somer 2017).

Drawing on individual-level data from nationally representative surveys conducted right after the general elections of 2007, 2011, June 2015, and 2018,¹ and another one fielded in the summer of 2019 when the country was in the midst of a severe economic crisis, I find that individuals' economic evaluations are a significant predictor of voting for the AKP throughout this period: people with more positive evaluations about the economy were more likely to vote for the AKP, even after controlling for several socio-demographic factors. This result holds if we take into account individuals' partisanship and ideology as well, suggesting that the effect of economic evaluations on vote choice is not just an artifact of partisanship and ideological orientations.

At the same time, we observe a growing partisan divergence in perceptions of the economy with supporters of the AKP reporting consistently and substantially more positive evaluations of the economy than other voters. Thus, while the effect of the economic evaluations on vote choice is not driven by partisanship alone, partisanship likely plays a significant role in the forming of these evaluations. This implies that economic evaluations may not necessarily correspond to objective economic conditions, and electoral accountability for actual economic outcomes might not be fully realized in Turkey's politically polarized environment.

The chapter is organized as follows. The first two sections present overviews of the economic voting hypothesis and the literature on economic voting in Turkey. Next comes the analysis of economic voting during the AKP era, starting with some descriptive patterns and followed by individual-level multivariate analyses. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the broader implications of findings in a comparative perspective.

THE ECONOMIC VOTING HYPOTHESIS IN BRIEF

The literature on economic voting is vast; in fact, one could argue that it is the most studied aspect of voting behavior (Kayser 2014). Economic concerns are typically among the most salient and important electoral issues for voters (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007), and thus it is reasonable to expect voters to hold governments accountable for the state of the economy at the ballot box. The continuing scholarly interest in exploring economic voting is partly driven by

a motivation to show that electoral accountability, one of the main premises of democratic governance, does exist in practice (Healy and Malhotra 2013).

While thorough overviews of the economic voting literature have been presented elsewhere (e.g., Healy and Malhotra 2013; Kayser 2014; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013), the core argument is straightforward: people are more likely to vote for incumbents during good economic times and vote against them when the state of the economy is poor. This idea can be traced back to Downs (1957) who argued that each individual “votes for the party he believes will provide him with a higher utility income than any other party during the coming election period” (38–39). Therefore, the likelihood of an individual voting for a party depends on her estimate of future economic outcomes under that party’s incumbency. But the future is fraught with uncertainties so that it is difficult to make prospective assessments. In turn, a simple heuristic that a voter can use is to consider how the incumbent performed during its tenure. This behavior is called retrospective voting—voters base their decision of whether to re-elect incumbents on their observed past performance, because it is informative of how the economy is likely to perform if the incumbent is re-elected (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). In line with this idea, empirical studies provide evidence that retrospective assessments of the economy are more strongly correlated with voting decision than prospective assessments (e.g., Anderson 2000; Kiewiet 1983; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Belanger 2013).

Findings in the literature suggest that individuals’ perceptions of national economic conditions are more predictive of their voting decision than evaluations of their own personal finances (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). The theoretical explanation for this finding is that the state of the national economy is a better signal of the incumbent’s competence in managing the economy (now and in the future) than changes in one’s personal finances, which are more prone to non-political and idiosyncratic fluctuations (Kiewiet 1983; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 1981). Therefore, scholars of economic voting are more interested in voters’ evaluations of the national economy (their so-called *sociotropic* evaluations) than their evaluations of personal finances (their *pocketbook* evaluations) to predict vote choice.

Another dominant approach in the literature is to focus only on economic conditions temporally close to the election, typically a one-year period. Accordingly, survey questions aimed to measure individuals’ evaluations of the economy usually ask them to think about the past year. People are thought to forget or discount past economic conditions significantly and form a perception of the economy only on the basis of what happened recently (Achen and Bartels 2016). Yet as Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2013, 381) note, this approach rests on “reflexive practice” rather than rigorous testing of alternative time specifications. Moreover, all the evidence favoring this short time span approach regarding economic conditions comes from the US presidential elections (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Kiewiet 1983; Kramer 1971), and we do not know whether this pattern is generalizable to other democracies. In fact, recent studies report findings that contradict voter myopia assumption (Aytaç 2018; Hellwig and Marinova 2015; Wlezien 2015).

An ongoing source of concern in the economic voting literature is the infamous “instability problem”: studies trying to predict election results from macroeconomic outcomes draw a mixed picture rather than a clear link, as there is substantial variation in the impact of the economy on governments’ electoral standing (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hart 2016; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). Consequently, scholars have come to emphasize the importance of the political and institutional context of voting. For instance, economic voting is strongest when policy responsibility could be clearly attributed to incumbents, and thus factors like bicameralism, dispersed policymaking power, weak party cohesion, parliamentarism, and coalition governments are associated with weaker economic voting (Anderson 2006; Anderson 2000, 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Powell and Whitten 1993). There is also evidence that economic voting is weaker in countries that are more integrated into the world economy, because voters in such contexts are relatively less likely to attribute economic outcomes to the incumbents (Hellwig and Samuels 2007). Finally, an emerging literature suggests that economic voting might actually be driven by the relative performance of incumbents—namely by how the national economy performs relative to recent past outcomes in the country or in a cross-national perspective (e.g., Aytaç 2018; Kayser and Peress 2012).

ECONOMIC VOTING IN TURKEY

Şerif Mardin (1973) highlighted the importance of an overarching historical cleavage shaping modern Turkish politics, and this framework has been widely employed in empirical studies of voting behavior in Turkey. Mardin argued that the Turkish Republic inherited from the Ottoman Empire a deeply entrenched sociocultural cleavage between the ruling elites of the “center” and the parochial, traditionalist “periphery.” The military and judicial bureaucracy together with state-dependent businesses and the mainstream intellectual community constituted the center during the Republican period. In turn, the periphery is characterized by various traditionalist provincial, ethnic, or religious groups that were systematically kept out of power.

The fundamental premise of the center-periphery cleavage approach for Turkish politics is that the party system and electoral competition are shaped by this sociocultural divide. The centrist constituencies are characterized by higher levels of education, urbanity, lower levels of religiosity, and have consistently supported the founding party of the republic, the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), and other center-left parties. The peripheral constituencies, who exhibit higher levels of religiosity, rurality, and lower levels of education, have formed the electoral backbone of first the Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) and later of other center-right parties that claimed the heritage of the DP (Çarkoğlu 2012b; Kalaycıoğlu 1994). This sociocultural cleavage and the accompanying alignment of voters and parties have proved to be quite durable.² Although the Turkish political context has not been amenable to long-term

political socialization and development of partisanship in the traditional sense (due to short-lived parties and military interruptions), voters' allegiance to party groups representing the center and periphery is strong and could be considered as a form of partisanship (Kalaycıoğlu 2008, 2010).

Individual-level empirical studies based on surveys have confirmed the relevance of the center-periphery cleavage for voter preferences in Turkey. In one of the earliest studies in this field, Ergüder (1980) identifies significant differences between CHP and right-wing Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) voters in the 1977 election with respect to occupation and levels of education and religiosity, as predicted by the center-periphery cleavage. Similar results have been reported in studies focusing on subsequent elections (e.g., Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017; Başlevent, Kirmanoğlu, and Şenatalar 2004, 2005, 2009; Çarkoğlu 2008, 2012a; Ergüder and Hofferbert 1988; Esmer 1995, 2002; Kalaycıoğlu, 1994, 1999, 2008, 2010). These studies highlight how the sociocultural divide (especially with respect to level of education, religiosity, and ethnicity), forming the center-periphery cleavage as articulated by Mardin, continues to shape the voting preferences of Turkish citizens.

Although the center-periphery framework has been the dominant paradigm in studies of Turkish voting behavior, other empirical studies have employed a rational choice framework and investigate economic voting.³ It is certainly plausible that more educated citizens with greater access to information give relatively more weight in their voting decision to the economic performance of governments, especially when parties conduct more widespread and sophisticated electoral campaigning. An important question at this point is how widespread economic voting could be in a society with a deep sociocultural cleavage like that of Turkey.

The earliest studies on economic voting in Turkey focused on the relationship between various economic indicators and aggregate-level election results. Bulutay and Yıldırım (1968) and Bulutay (1970), for instance, analyze the relationship between province-level agricultural income and election results between 1950 and 1969. They find a positive relationship between increases in agricultural income and support for the incumbent party. A comprehensive macro-level analysis in the pre-2000 period reports that low growth and increasing levels of unemployment and inflation had adverse effects on the incumbent party's vote share (or that of the largest party in a coalition government) in the twenty-one elections between 1950 and 1995 (Çarkoğlu 1997). More recently, Akarca and Tansel (2006) analyze twenty-five general and local elections between 1950 and 2004 and report that one percentage-point increase in the GDP per capita in the year prior to the election is associated with a 0.88 percentage-point increase in the vote share of the incumbent party. A similar study focuses on the incumbency of the AKP and reports positive effects of macro-economic indicators on the party's vote share (Akarca 2015).⁴

While macro-level studies are useful for demonstrating electoral effects of the economic performance of governments, survey-based micro-level studies are better suited to analyzing the relationship between individuals' economic evaluations and their political preferences. Accordingly, an increasing number of studies utilize public opinion

surveys to study voter behavior in Turkey. Başlevent, Kirmanoğlu, and Şenatalar (2004, 2005, 2009) present some of the earliest micro-level studies with a research design informed by the broader literature on economic voting. These studies use data from surveys fielded in April 2002 and December 2003 that include voters' socio-demographic information, policy positions, and pocketbook and sociotropic economic evaluations (both retrospective and prospective). The analyses show that all types of economic evaluations shaped electoral support for the government. Drawing on a nationally representative survey fielded after the July 2007 general election, Çarkoğlu (2008) evaluates the importance of long-term ideological factors (such as left-right self-placement, religiosity, and conservatism) vis-à-vis short-term economic evaluations with respect to their effects on voting preferences, and reports strong effects of retrospective sociotropic evaluations on support for the incumbent AKP. In a later study, Çarkoğlu (2012a) analyzes the three general elections of 2002, 2007, and 2011 together and again highlights the importance of governments' perceived economic performance for voting preferences. Scholars have also looked at the effects of economic perceptions in local elections and similarly report positive effects (Çarkoğlu 2014; Kalaycıoğlu 2014). Other recent studies highlighting the electoral importance of economic evaluations include Başlevent and Kirmanoğlu (2016) and Gidengil and Karakoç (2016).

This review highlights that voting behavior in Turkey is strongly influenced by the state of the economy in addition to the relevance of factors associated with the center-periphery framework. In the following I present a comprehensive analysis of economic voting in the AKP era.

ECONOMIC VOTING IN THE AKP ERA

Before conducting a multivariate analysis of individuals' economic evaluations and vote choice, I first present the trajectory of the Turkish economy and AKP's vote share in the post-2002 era and briefly discuss the electoral salience of economic concerns during this period. Figure 15.1 plots AKP's vote share in the four general and three local elections held between 2004 and 2018 (bars drawn to the axis on the left) and Turkey's election-year real GDP growth, the most commonly used macroeconomic indicator in economic voting studies (dotted line drawn to the axis on the right).⁵ We see that there is a certain level of correspondence between election-year economic growth and AKP's electoral fortunes.⁶ The lowest vote share received by the AKP during this period, 38 percent in the 2009 local election, also witnessed the lowest election-year growth, and the party's highest vote share, 50 percent recorded in the 2011 general election, coincided with highest election-year growth.

While the pattern in Figure 15.1 is suggestive for the presence of economic voting, is there micro-level evidence that economic concerns were among the key issues for voters in elections? An open-ended question in the pre-election waves of the 2011, 2015, and 2018 Turkish Election Study surveys and in the summer 2019 survey asked respondents

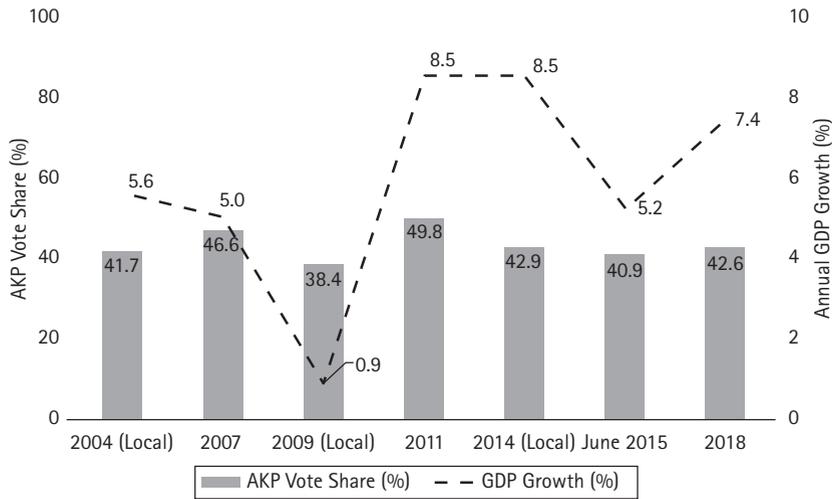


Figure 15.1: Election-year GDP growth and AKP vote share, 2004–2018.

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (GDP figures) and Supreme Electoral Council (vote shares).

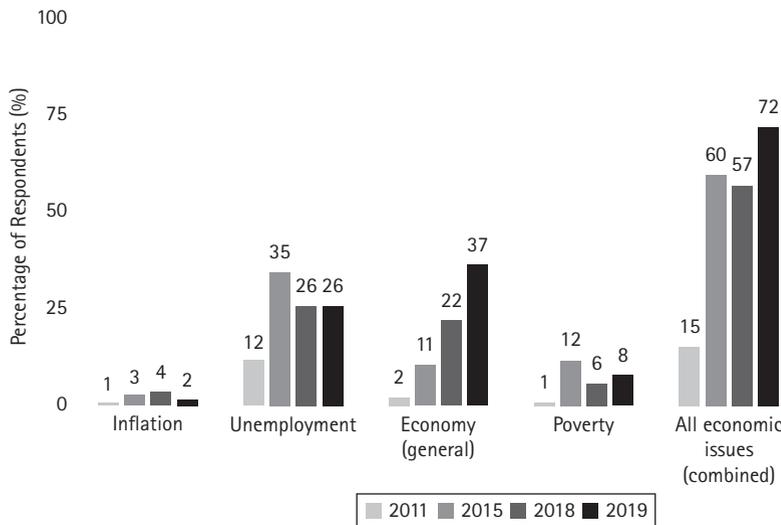


Figure 15.2: Voters' perceptions of the most important problems facing Turkey, 2011–2019.

Source: Author's surveys.

the most important problem facing the country. Figure 15.2 presents the percentages of respondents mentioning economy-related issues and terrorism, the most frequently mentioned noneconomic policy issue. We see that the economy was the key issue in the (June) 2015 and 2018 elections, and as of summer 2019, about 60 percent of voters in 2015, 57 percent in 2018, and 72 percent in 2019 thought that an economy-related issue was the most important problem facing the country. Among the economy-related

issues, unemployment seems to be a particularly pressing problem. In 2011 only 15 percent of voters thought that the economy was a key issue; in this election terrorism-related concerns were more salient than the economy, with more than a third of voters (about 35 percent) mentioning terrorism as the most important problem facing the country. As we saw in Figure 15.1, growth in 2011 was the highest election-year growth registered during the AKP era, thus it is not surprising that economic concerns were not that salient in this election. In contrast, the summer 2019 survey, fielded a few months after the 2019 local elections in which the AKP suffered a major setback, was conducted in the context of a contracting economy characterized by high levels of inflation and unemployment; accordingly, the economy was the primary source of concern for an overwhelming majority of voters.

I now turn to public evaluations of the economy as measured in the surveys mentioned earlier. The nationally representative samples of the surveys, employing a similar probability sampling procedure, range from 1,071 to 1,388.⁷ The questions used to construct the variables in the analyses are identical in all surveys, facilitating comparisons across elections.

The questions for respondents' economic evaluations are presented in Table 15.1. Consistent with the economic voting literature, I consider four different measures: pocketbook retrospective, sociotropic retrospective, pocketbook prospective, and sociotropic prospective evaluations. Pocketbook evaluations refer to respondents' household finances while sociotropic evaluations are about respondents' views on the state of the national economy. Retrospective evaluations ask respondents to consider the past year and prime them to think about the effects of government policies. Prospective evaluations are about expectations in the coming year. In each case we presented respondents with a 0–10 scale. In the retrospective questions, the value of 0 corresponds to a “very bad effect” and 10 to a “very good effect,” while in the prospective questions the value of 0 corresponds to “will be much worse” and 10 to “will be much better.”

Figure 15.3 presents respondents' mean economic evaluation scores (on a 0–10 scale) across the surveys. A number of observations are worth noting. First, we see that respondents' different types of evaluations exhibit consistency across years. The average levels of prospective evaluations (dashed lines) are consistently a little higher than those of retrospective evaluations, possibly reflecting the more optimistic nature of the former in general. The deterioration in economic evaluations in the second half of the period under analysis (2015–2019) is also evident: while the mean levels of retrospective sociotropic evaluations are 5.3 and 5.4 in 2007 and 2011, they drop to 4.0 and 4.1 in 2015 and 2018, respectively, and further decrease to 3.9 in the summer of 2019.

Figure 15.4 presents an alternative way of visualizing the trajectory of public economic evaluations during the same period. Recall that respondents were asked to indicate their evaluations on a 0–10 scale with the value of five corresponding to the middle score of the scale. Therefore, we can define evaluations of six and above as being positive. Evaluations across the periods 2007–2011 and 2015–2019 exhibit a stark contrast: while close to half of respondents had positive retrospective sociotropic evaluations in 2011, less than 30 percent had such views in the 2015–2019 period.

Table 15.1: Questions Asked to Measure Respondents' Economic Evaluations

Pocketbook Retrospective

When you think about the last year, what was the effect of government policies on the economic condition of your HOUSEHOLD? (0–10 scale follows; 0 corresponds to "very bad effect," 10 corresponds to "very good effect")

Sociotropic Retrospective

When you think about the last year, what was the effect of government policies on the economic condition of TURKEY? (0–10 scale follows; 0 corresponds to "very bad effect," 10 corresponds to "very good effect")

Pocketbook Prospective

When do you think about the coming year, how do you think your HOUSEHOLD's economic condition will change? (0–10 scale follows; 0 corresponds to "will be much worse," 10 corresponds to "will be much better")

Sociotropic Prospective

When do you think about the coming year, how do you think TURKEY's economic condition will change? (0–10 scale follows; 0 corresponds to "will be much worse," 10 corresponds to "will be much better")

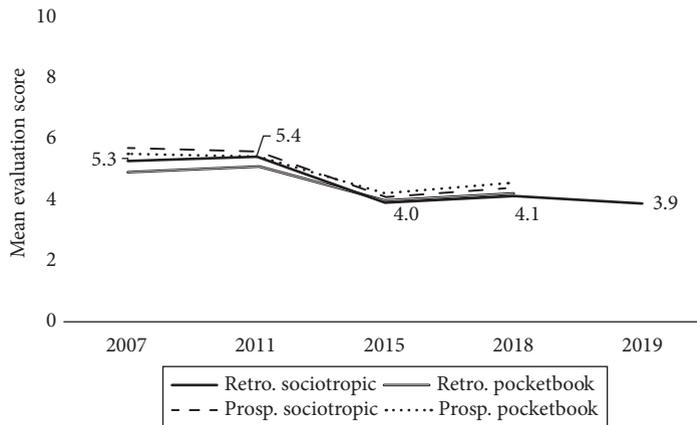


Figure 15.3: Mean economic evaluation scores across surveys.

Source: Author's surveys.

Note: In the 2019 survey only retrospective sociotropic evaluations were asked. The data labels in the figure refers to retrospective sociotropic evaluations.

The literature suggests that economic evaluations are heavily influenced by partisanship—partisans of the governing party evaluate the state of the economy more positively than others, while partisans of the opposition parties tend to have a more negative view (Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010). Do we observe a similar pattern in Turkey during the AKP era? To analyze this, I use a question in the surveys that asked respondents whether they feel close to a political party. Those who responded

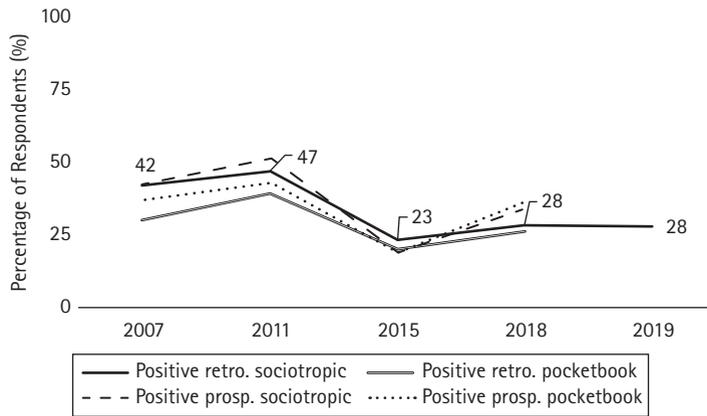


Figure 15.4: Percentage of respondents with positive economic evaluations across surveys.

Source: Author's surveys.

Note: In the 2019 survey only retrospective sociotropic evaluations were asked.

The data labels in the figure refers to retrospective sociotropic evaluations.

Economic evaluations above the value of five in the 0–10 scale are considered as positive.

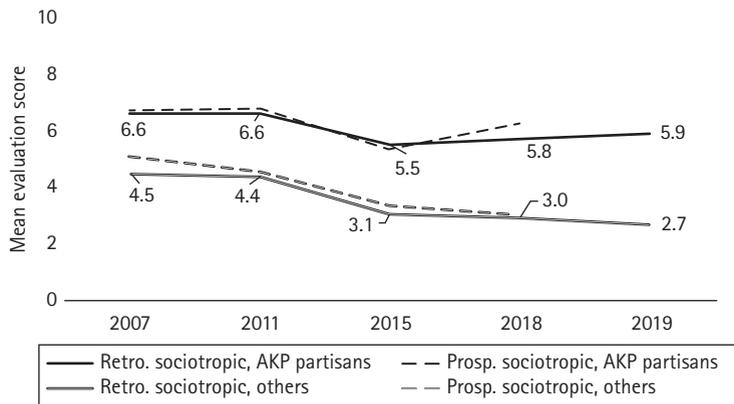


Figure 15.5: Mean sociotropic evaluation scores across surveys, broken down by partisanship (AKP partisans and others).

Source: Author's surveys.

Note: In the 2019 survey only retrospective sociotropic evaluations were asked.

The data labels in the figure refers to retrospective sociotropic evaluations.

affirmatively were then asked to name the party that they feel close to in an open-ended fashion. I label respondents who declared feeling close to the AKP as AKP partisans. Figure 15.5 shows the sociotropic evaluations (both retrospective and prospective) of AKP partisans in comparison to other respondents. As expected, AKP partisans' economic evaluations are consistently and significantly higher than those of other voters. Moreover, the difference in evaluations seems to be widening over time as well: while

the difference in mean retrospective sociotropic evaluations between AKP partisans and others was 2.1 in 2007, it increased to 3.2 in 2018. This widening gap likely reflects the increasing partisan polarization in the country (Somer 2019).

The analyses so far have presented the evolution of economic evaluations over time in broad strokes only. To dig deeper into the relationship between individuals' economic evaluations and vote choices, I now present multivariate analyses of vote choice. The dependent variable is whether the respondent votes for the incumbent AKP, and the main explanatory variable of interest is individuals' retrospective sociotropic evaluations (*Econ. Eval.*), the most commonly used variable to test the economic voting hypothesis in the literature.⁸ I perform my analyses in two stages. First, I inquire whether economic evaluations have an independent effect on vote choice after accounting for several socio-demographic factors. Next, I subject the economic voting hypothesis to a stricter test by taking respondents' ideological positions and partisanship into consideration as well.

The socio-demographic variables include respondents' gender (*Female*), age in years (*Age*), highest level of formal education completed (*Education*, ranging from no formal education, coded 1, to college, coded 5), Kurdish ethnicity (*Kurdish*, operationalized by a binary variable for respondents who can speak Kurdish), religiosity⁹ (*Religiosity*, measured by the frequency of prayer, *namaz*, during the past year, ranging from never, coded 1, to more than once a week, coded 6), urban residence (*Urban*), and income (*Income*, operationalized as five quantiles over reported monthly household income).

Table 15.2 presents five logistic regressions, each utilizing data from a different survey, with voting for the AKP as the dependent variable.¹⁰ Looking at the socio-demographic variables, we see that education and religiosity have the most consistent effects across the years: while higher levels of education are negatively associated with voting for the AKP, religiosity has a positive effect. This result resonates well with Mardin's center-periphery cleavage framework, since the AKP could be considered as the latest incarnation of the political forces representing the periphery. There is also evidence that younger voters and those with Kurdish ethnicity are less likely to vote for the AKP, but the effects of these variables reach statistical significance at conventional levels only in some years. Turning to our main variable interest, we see that respondents' retrospective sociotropic evaluations (*Econ. Eval.*) are consistently significant and positive—meaning that individuals with better economic evaluations are more likely to vote for the AKP in all of the surveys considered. Recall that this effect holds after taking into account respondents' socio-demographic characteristics included in the models.

How substantial are the effects of economic evaluations on voting for the AKP, controlling for other important socio-demographic factors, like education and religiosity? Since the dependent variable is binary and I employ logistic regression in the analyses, interpreting effect sizes from the coefficient estimates in Table 15.2 is not straightforward. Therefore, I calculate the predicted probabilities of voting for the AKP for different values of variables of interest and plot the result.

Figure 15.6 utilizes data from the survey fielded shortly after the 2018 general election. The left-hand panel illustrates the effects of economic evaluations and educational attainment on voting for the AKP; it plots the predicted probabilities of voting for the

Table 15.2: Determinants of Voting for the AKP

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Dep. Var: Voting for the AKP	2007	2011	2015	2018	2019
Female	0.01 (0.13)	0.24 (0.18)	0.24 (0.18)	0.42* (0.17)	0.10 (0.27)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Education	-0.27*** (0.07)	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.45*** (0.09)	-0.30*** (0.08)	-0.33* (0.13)
Kurdish	-0.30 (0.20)	-0.87*** (0.24)	-1.62*** (0.29)	-0.20 (0.27)	-1.30** (0.42)
Religiosity	0.24*** (0.05)	0.39*** (0.05)	0.18** (0.06)	0.24*** (0.05)	0.48*** (0.11)
Urban	-0.02 (0.14)	-0.29 (0.24)	0.12 (0.21)	0.04 (0.31)	-0.59 (0.37)
Income	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.07 (0.11)
Econ. Eval.	0.37*** (0.03)	0.71*** (0.06)	0.42*** (0.04)	0.45*** (0.04)	0.55*** (0.06)
Constant	-2.38*** (0.47)	-4.02*** (0.66)	-0.33 (0.60)	-2.03*** (0.61)	-3.25** (1.03)
Pseudo-R2	0.16	0.33	0.22	0.25	0.34
Observations	1,256	898	849	873	437

Logistic regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

AKP for different values of economic evaluations separately for individuals with primary school education and for individuals with college education, while keeping other variables in the model at their sample means. The vertical lines display 95 percent confidence intervals around the point estimates. In a similar fashion, the right-hand panel illustrates the predicted probabilities of voting for the AKP for different values of economic evaluations separately for individuals who do not pray at all and for individuals who pray more than once a week.

Lower levels of education and higher levels of religiosity are positively associated with support for the AKP—for any given level of economic evaluation, the probability of voting for the AKP is higher for less educated and more religious individuals. For example, among voters with an economic evaluation of five, the probability of voting for

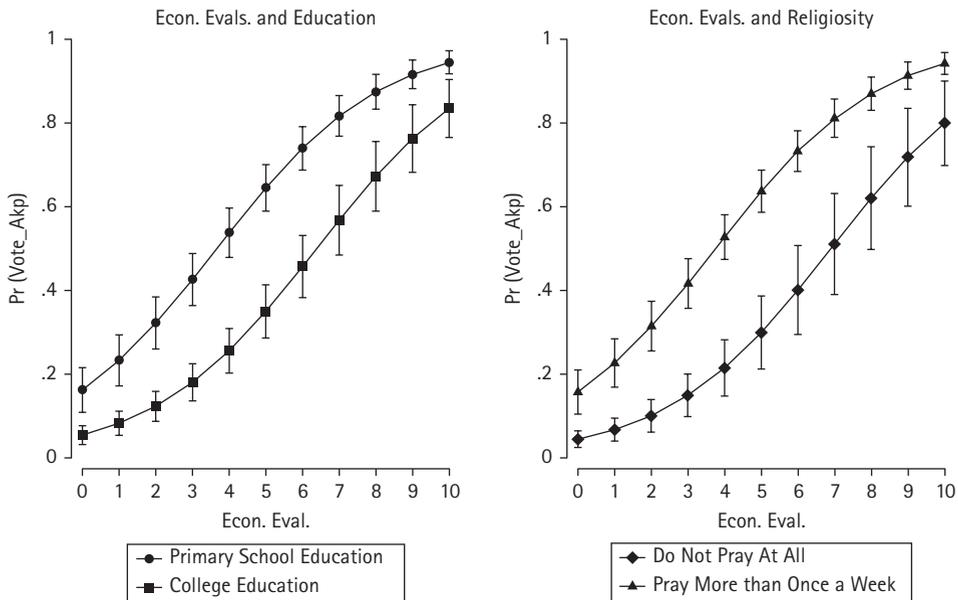


Figure 15.6: Estimated probabilities for voting for the AKP in the 2018 election (Model 4 from Table 15.2).

Source: Author's survey.

the AKP is about 65 percent for primary school graduates but only 35 percent for college graduates, holding other variables at their sample means (left-hand panel). With respect to the effects of religiosity among voters with an economic evaluation of five, the probability of voting for the AKP increases from about 30 percent for individuals who do not pray at all to about 64 percent for individuals who pray more than once a week (right-hand panel).

At the same time, the positive effect of economic evaluations on the probability of voting for the AKP is very salient. As we move from worse to better economic evaluations (from zero to ten on the x-axis), the probability of voting for the AKP increases steadily for all groups. In the left-hand panel we see that a voter with primary school education and the worst economic evaluation (zero) has 16 percent probability of voting for the AKP, keeping other covariates at their sample means. A similar voter has a probability of 65 percent when her economic evaluation is five, and 94 percent if her economic evaluation is ten. A voter with college education and economic evaluation of seven has about the same probability of voting for the AKP as a voter with primary school education and economic evaluation of four. In this regard, the difference in probability of voting for the AKP between primary school and college graduates is roughly equal to a three-point difference in economic evaluations on a 0–10 scale.

Earlier we noted that partisan considerations color voters' political perceptions, including their views about the state of the economy. Will the results about the effect of the economy on support for the AKP still hold if we take into account voters' ideological

leanings and partisan orientations? To answer this question, I include two new variables into the analysis. First, the variable *L-R Ideology* indicates respondents' self-placement on a 0–10 ideological scale with higher values indicating more right-wing positions. Respondents were told that sometimes people talk of the left and right in politics, and then asked where they would place themselves on a 0–10 scale where 0 corresponds to the most-left and 10 to the most-right position. Second, *AKP Partisan* is a binary variable for those respondents who declared feeling close to the AKP.

Table 15.3 presents results of the regressions with these two variables added to the models. As expected, both individuals who place themselves on the right of the ideological spectrum and AKP partisans are more likely to vote for the AKP. The inclusion of these variables to the model dampens the effects of other socio-demographic variables like education and religiosity, since they are correlated with ideology and partisanship. We see that the effects of economic evaluations remain positive and statistically significant, though the effect sizes are smaller. This suggests that the positive effects of economic evaluations on voting for the AKP are unlikely to be driven by partisanship and ideological considerations alone.

Figure 15.7 presents probability estimates of voting for the AKP in the 2018 election derived from model (4) in Table 15.3. A hypothetical voter with primary school education, worst economic evaluation (zero), and mean values of other covariates in the model has a probability of 41 percent of voting for the AKP (left-hand panel). An otherwise similar voter has a probability of 63 percent of voting for the AKP when her economic evaluation is five and 80 percent if her economic evaluation is ten. Recall that these probabilities were 16 percent, 65 percent, and 94 percent in the model where partisanship and ideology are not considered (Figure 15.6). Thus the impact of economic evaluations on the probability of voting for the AKP is considerably weaker when we take into account respondents' partisanship and ideological leanings, but they still have a noticeable positive effect.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I focused on economic voting during the AKP era in Turkey. Drawing on data from five nationally representative surveys fielded in the aftermath of the 2007, 2011, June 2015, and 2018 general elections and in the summer of 2019, I find that people's economic evaluations were a significant predictor of voting for the AKP during this period, even after accounting for several socio-demographic factors. Individuals' partisanship and ideological leanings cannot fully account for this result, as the effects of economic evaluations on support for the AKP were still significant after taking partisanship and ideological self-positioning into account. These results suggest that the AKP's electoral success during its incumbency cannot be solely attributed to the dynamics of center-periphery cleavage in Turkish politics—we observe that the characteristics of the

Table 15.3: Determinants of Voting for the AKP—Ideology and Partisanship Considered

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Dep. Var: Voting for the AKP	2007	2011	2015	2018	2019
Female	0.01 (0.16)	0.36 (0.29)	0.47* (0.22)	0.13 (0.27)	0.21 (0.49)
Age	0.01* (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.06** (0.02)
Education	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.34** (0.12)	-0.08 (0.13)	-0.44 (0.23)
Kurdish	-0.24 (0.25)	-0.92* (0.40)	-0.98* (0.40)	0.91** (0.35)	-0.08 (0.56)
Religiosity	0.13* (0.06)	0.29*** (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)	0.16 (0.09)	0.63** (0.23)
Urban	0.07 (0.16)	-0.14 (0.40)	0.01 (0.28)	0.68 (0.46)	-1.32* (0.53)
Income	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.25** (0.08)	0.06 (0.09)	0.18 (0.17)
Econ. Eval.	0.23*** (0.04)	0.41*** (0.09)	0.30*** (0.05)	0.17** (0.06)	0.25** (0.08)
L-R Ideology	0.18*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.32*** (0.04)	0.23*** (0.05)	0.19* (0.08)
AKP Partisan	1.87*** (0.17)	3.90*** (0.34)	2.98*** (0.39)	3.82*** (0.29)	5.62*** (0.74)
Constant	-3.67*** (0.56)	-5.69*** (1.12)	-2.30** (0.82)	-5.37*** (1.12)	-3.78* (1.47)
Pseudo-R2	0.30	0.64	0.44	0.61	0.76
Observations	1,149	752	767	769	378

Logistic regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

“peripheral” constituencies, such as lower levels of education and higher levels of religiosity, do indeed predict voting for the AKP, but economic evaluations play a role as well.¹¹

While these findings could be interpreted positively for the presence of electoral accountability through economic voting in the Turkish context, we should keep in mind

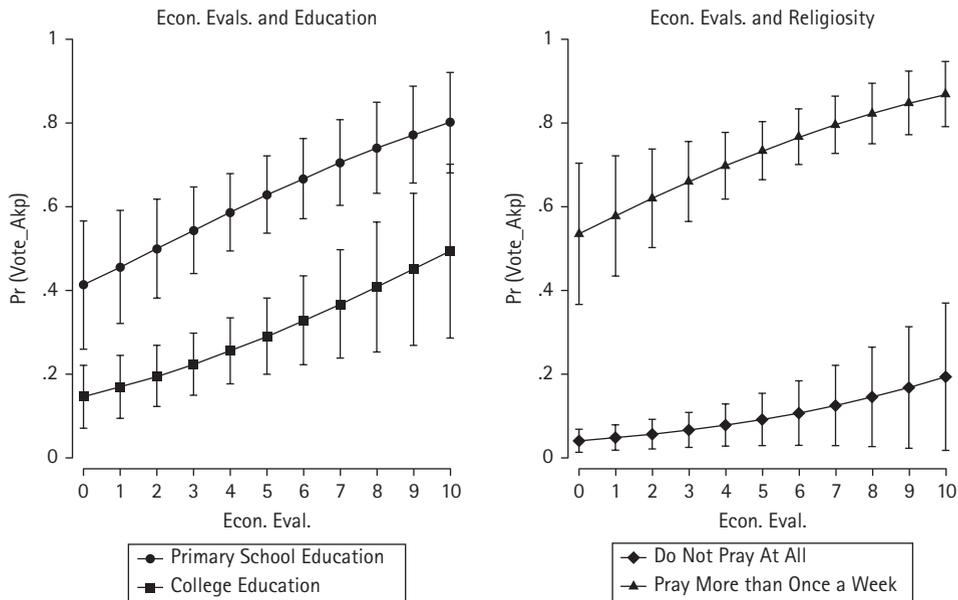


Figure 15.7: Estimated probabilities for voting for the AKP in the 2018 election (Model 4 from Table 15.3).

Source: Author's survey.

that individuals' subjective economic evaluations do not necessarily have to correspond to objective economic conditions. We have seen that economic evaluations of AKP partisans are significantly better than those of other voters, highlighting the role of partisanship in the formation of these evaluations. And partisanship and ideological positioning do exert significant influence on vote choice (Table 15.3). With increasing partisan polarization in the Turkish context, we can expect AKP partisans to downplay economic downturns and conversely opposition partisans to ignore improvements in objective economic conditions. As the gap between subjective economic evaluations and objective conditions widens, electoral accountability for actual economic outcomes would be diminished.

Our summer 2019 survey further highlights the partisan divergence of perceptions of economic conditions. As of summer 2019, the Turkish economy had been going through a difficult period for about a year, precipitated by a currency crisis in the summer of 2018. During this period inflation and unemployment rates increased significantly and economic activity contracted sharply. In this context we asked respondents whether the state of the Turkish economy was much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse compared to a year ago. In the overall sample, about 39 percent of respondents stated that the state of the economy was much worse compared to a year ago. The same figure was just 11 percent among partisans of the AKP, however, and 71 percent among partisans of the main opposition party, CHP. These striking differences highlight that partisanship exerts a considerable influence on individuals' evaluations of the economy even in a time of objectively dire economic circumstances.

Severe economic downturns such as Turkey experienced in 2018 and 2019 are particularly threatening to competitive authoritarian (CA) incumbents like the AKP for a number of reasons. First, incumbents in CA regimes typically present themselves as competent managers of the economy, often shrugging off deficiencies in rule of law or civil liberties by highlighting improved living standards (Guriev and Treisman 2015; Treisman 2011). Therefore, prolonged economic weakness could raise legitimacy concerns for their rule. Second, rulers in such regimes are likely to be less tolerant to losing elections as they would risk losing control of politicized state institutions as well as privileged access to media and resources (Levitsky and Way 2010). Popular discontent due to a weak economy might force CA rulers to resort to riskier strategies like large-scale electoral fraud or repression to prolong their rule (Rosenfeld 2018). Finally, Reuter and Gandhi (2011) show that key members of hegemonic ruling parties are more likely to defect and challenge the party in times of economic crises. The party-building efforts of some senior ex-members of the AKP that were publicized in late 2019 is likely related to this pattern as they might want to capitalize upon increasing public discontent.

While there is still considerable time to the next legislative and presidential elections scheduled in 2023, the state of the economy does not bode well for the electoral fortunes of the AKP. At the same time, however, the party enjoys almost total hegemony in the mainstream media so that information reaching voters about the economy is selected and framed in a way that benefits the AKP. A systematic media content analysis in Russia, a CA regime like Turkey, shows that the pro-government media engages in selective attribution about economic news where bad outcomes are attributed to global economy or actions of foreign governments and good outcomes to Putin (Rozenas and Stukal 2019). It is likely that a similar dynamic takes place in Turkey as well, and representatives and supporters of the AKP also enjoy disproportionately more visibility in the media than opposition figures (Toksabay and Kucukgocmen 2018). Given the significant asymmetry in resources and media coverage between the AKP and the opposition, it is yet to be seen to what degree voters would punish the AKP, or Erdoğan in particular, for a weak economy.

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NOTES

1. The general election of June 7, 2015, resulted in a hung parliament, and a snap election was held on November 1 of the same year. The November 2015 election is excluded from the analyses in this chapter for a couple of reasons. First, the snap election was announced on August 21, giving parties little time to conduct election campaigns. Second, the

inter-election period was marred by a significant upsurge in terror attacks, completely changing the political agenda of the country in a matter of weeks (Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2021). This rather unusual character of the November 2015 election renders it unsuitable for comparison with other elections.

2. See Bakiner (2018) for a critical reading of the center-periphery framework to understand Turkish politics.
3. A comprehensive review of voting behavior in Turkey is presented by Çarkoğlu (2012b).
4. Recent studies highlight that regionalization of voting patterns has been a significant feature of the Turkish electoral scene in the post-2002 era (Akarca and Başlevent 2011; Ozen and Kalkan 2017; Tezcür 2012). The implications of this trend for economic voting are yet to be analyzed.
5. GDP figures are from Turkish Statistical Institute and AKP vote shares from Supreme Election Council. In line with the economic voting literature (e.g., Aytaç 2018; Hellwig and Samuels 2007) I define election-year as the year preceding the year of the election if the election was held in the first six months of the year. For example, the 2009 local election was held on March 29, therefore the 0.9 percent growth rate in the figure corresponds to the growth rate in 2008. Conversely, the 2007 general election was held on July 22, and thus for this election we use the growth rate of the same year, 2007. The 2019 local election is not included in the figure because parties did not field candidates in every district due to the new alliance formation strategies, which might have impacted parties' vote shares.
6. The correlation coefficient between the two series is 0.64.
7. The sampling procedure for the surveys starts with the use of Turkish Statistical Institute's (TUIK) NUTS-2 regions. The target samples were distributed according to each region's share of urban and rural population in accordance with current records of the Address Based Population Registration System (ADNKS). Next, TUIK's block data were used with block size set at four hundred residents. Twenty voters were targeted from each block and no substitution was used. The selection of individuals in households is done on the basis of reported target population of eighteen years or older in each household according to a lottery method. If for any reason that individual cannot respond to our questions on our first visit, then the same household is visited up to three times until a successful interview is conducted and no substitution was applied. All interviews are conducted face to face in respondents' households.
8. In the surveys conducted after the general elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2018, the question referred to the last general election. In the 2019 survey the question asked how the respondent would vote if there was an election that day.
9. This measure of religiosity corresponds to its behavioral dimension (Wald and Smidt 1993). An alternative measure of religiosity could focus on its belief dimension, i.e. how religious respondents consider themselves irrespective of their frequency of prayer. The substantive results of the analyses are identical if we use this belief measure.
10. The reason for the number of observations in the 2019 survey being notably lower than other surveys is that the retrospective sociotropic economic evaluation question in this survey (the key independent variable) was asked only to a randomly selected subset of the sample.
11. There is also systematic evidence that the AKP has engaged in electorally targeted public spending (Aytaç 2014) and large-scale vote buying attempts (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015). Overall, AKP's ability to strategically distribute patronage seems to have played a role in its

electoral victories (see the chapter by Laebens in this volume). The precise impact of such efforts on election results are yet to be rigorously analyzed.

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