

Turkey's Local Elections of 2009: Winners and Losers

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a descriptive account of the March 2009 local elections in Turkey and offers a nation-wide and regional evaluation of trends in Turkish elections since 2004. The results of these analyses suggest that, although the AKP's rise in support has stalled, it remains the dominant political party in Turkish politics. However, a regionally differentiated analysis shows that significant differences can be observed between the more developed western coastal regions, where the opposition parties received a lot of support, and the eastern and southeastern provinces, where parties that represent the ethnic Kurdish minority have seen rising support. In between these two areas, the AKP continues to dominate in the more conservative provinces, followed by the MHP. The article emphasizes the worsening economic conditions as the main factor that shaped these developments, and underlines the geographically advantageous positioning of the MHP which may mount a credible opposition to the AKP in the future.

This paper intends to provide a descriptive account of what took place in the March 2009 local elections and then to contextualize the electoral developments that are most relevant for Turkish domestic politics. This analysis concentrates on the provincial general council (*il Genel Meclisi*) elections, which is thought to give the best approximation to the results of a general election compared to other levels of local elections. It should nevertheless be underlined that no matter how far one may want to push the argument about the similarity of local elections to general elections, all rational voters knew what was at stake in the March 29, 2009 local election and that it was not a general election. Therefore, the dynamics that shaped voting decisions in the local elections were of a distinctly different nature to those of a general election. The provincial general council elections do obviously provide some clues as to future voting trends

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in general elections, but these are mere clues and nothing more than that. Local election results are shaped not only by ideology and government performance, but also by local concerns, policy issues and candidates. As such, they reflect many issues that would not be relevant in a general election and thus any conclusions should be evaluated cautiously. When the country enters a new general election campaign there could be a new set of dynamics at play that would determine voting decisions.¹

A Summary of Main Arguments

Looking at the nation-wide aggregate results, Table 1 below shows that the Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) is still the largest party in Turkey. In provincial general council election results aggregated for the whole country, the AKP, with about 39% of the vote, was about 16% ahead of its main competitor, the Republican People's Party (CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), and about 23 percentage points ahead of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP, *Milîyetçi Hareket Partisi*). Compared to the 2004 municipal elections, where the AKP was also the incumbent party, support is about 3% down, and compared to the 2007 general elections support is about 8% down. However, in terms of municipalities won (greater city municipalities, provincial and district levels combined), out of 973 municipalities (81 greater city municipalities and provinces plus 892 districts) the AKP won 492 (approximately 51%) while those of the CHP and MHP totaled 322. Since these elections are decided based on a simple plurality, this clearly shows that the AKP is still the largest electoral force in more than half of the municipalities.

The main opposition CHP as well as the MHP have both been steadily raising their support in countrywide election returns. The most impressive was the MHP's record which showed about 53% increase in its support from 2004 to 2009. The CHP's gains were relatively modest with about 27% rise in support from 2004 to 2009, from 18.2% to 23.1% respectively. The Democratic Society Party's (DTP, *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*) vote in 2004 was part of a large six-party coalition of marginal left parties, of which the DTP was the larger coalition partner, especially in eastern and southeastern provinces.²

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especially in eastern and southeastern provinces.² In the 2007 general elections, the DTP candidates ran as independents to by-pass the 10% threshold to secure nation-wide representation. Keeping these caveats in mind, DTP's share of the vote appears frozen at about 5% of the na-

Table 1. Local Elections, 2004-2009

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	March 2004				March 2009		
	Provincial general council Election	Mayorships won		General election 2007	Provincial general council election	Mayorships won	
	Vote share (%)	Greater city/provi nces	Distri cts		Vote share (%)	Greater city/provinces	Distri cts
AKP	41.7	58	470	46.6	38.8	45	447
CHP	18.2	8	125	20.9	23.1	13	170
MHP	10.5	4	70	14.3	16.1	10	129
Other	16.4	1	120	10.7	5.8	1	45
DTP*	5.2	5	29		5.6	8	50
SP	4.0	1	12	2.3	5.2	0	23
DSP	2.1	3	5		2.8	2	10
BBP	1.2		3		2.2	1	3
Indepe ndents	0.7	1	17	5.2	0.4	1	15
	100	81	851	100	100	81	892

*The DTP was part of a six party pre-election coalition in 2004 and supported independent candidates to pass the 10% threshold for representation in 2007. Similarly, the DSP joined the CHP in a pre-election coalition in 2007.

tional vote, which by all estimates is well below the share of the ethnic-Kurdish population of voting age. Nevertheless, as will be underlined below, the DTP managed to pull together an impressive increase in its support compared to the 2004 local elections at the expense of mainly the AKP but also the Democrat Party (DP, *Demokrat Partisi*) or the continuation of the True Path Party (DYP, *Doğru Yol Partisi*), which five years ago garnered about 4-16% of the vote in the eastern and southeastern provinces but in March 2009 appeared to have lost more than half of its support.

Yet another pattern that emerged from the March 2009 results is the stagnant performance of the Felicity Party (SP, *Saadet Partisi*), the party which inherited the old-generation conservative Islamists of the National View (*Milli Görüş*), namely the National Salvation Party (MSP, *Milli Selamet Partisi*) of the 1970s and the Welfare Party (RP, *Refah Partisi*) of the 1990s. The AKP members predominantly broke away from this tra-

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dition and the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. Among the opposition groups, the SP had the lowest gain over its 2004 performance. However, compared to the 2007 general elections, the SP seemed to have more than doubled its support, rising to 5.3% in 2009 compared to 2.3% in

2007. Despite such relative success, it is clear from the small size of its electoral support that the challenge to AKP is not growing from within the conservative Islamist tradition.

To the extent that these figures can be used as a basis for voting trends in the country, it is clear that the electoral appeal of the AKP has stopped rising and shows signs of retreat. Again looking solely at the provincial general council election results, in 2004 the AKP vote share was surpassed only in 10 provinces (İzmir, Kırklareli and Tunceli, won by the CHP; Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, Batman, Şırnak and Iğdır, won by the DTP; and Mersin, won by the MHP). Seven of these provinces were eastern and southeastern provinces where the six-party coalition that included the DTP led the polls. In 2009, the AKP only managed to take Tunceli from the CHP and continued to trail behind the same parties in all the other nine provinces they had lost in 2004. In addition, the MHP, CHP, DTP and the Great Union Party (BBP, *Büyük Birlik Partisi*) were able to win in an additional eleven provinces (Osmaniye, won by the MHP; Ağrı, Muş, Siirt, and Van, won by the DTP; Antalya, Aydın, Edirne, Muğla, and Tekirdağ, won by the CHP; and Sivas, won by the BBP). In other words, in the 2009 provincial general council elections the DTP had a larger share of the vote than the AKP in 10 provinces, the CHP in seven and the MHP in two. From this perspective, the DTP emerged as the most successful in attracting a greater share of the votes at the expense of the AKP at the provincial level. However, the DTP's success came in relatively smaller and less-developed eastern provinces while the CHP's success came from the relatively larger provinces of the more developed western coastal regions. The rise in the CHP vote could be seen as an indication of a shifting balance of electoral power against the AKP originating from the more modernized segments of the Turkish society. As the ethnic Kurdish vote reflects the lowest socio-economic strata of the Turkish society, it may be that the higher as well as the lower echelons of the Turkish society may be moving away from the AKP. However, as long as the larger, and more conservative, segments of the Turkish society that are between these echelons remain with the AKP, the leadership of the AKP may not be very distressed about such a new electoral settlement.

The AKP leadership may feel comfortable in that their party remains the largest dominant electoral force in Turkish politics. Its success in attracting national votes is only comparable to the earlier center-right wing parties such as the Democrat Party (DP, *Demokrat Parti*) of the 1950s, the Justice Party (AP, *Adalet Partisi*) of the 1960s, or the Motherland Party (ANAP, *Anavatan Partisi*) of the early 1980s. Over the last two decades, no other party has even come close to such an electoral appeal, even after including the down turn in the March 2009 elections. However, the nature of the provincial distribution of electoral support for different parties reveals a deepening divide between the eastern and southeastern provinces, the western coastal provinces and the inner Anatolian and Black Sea provinces.

Regional Division of Electoral Support

The nature of electoral support in the provincial general council election results is clearer when regional divisions are analyzed. Table 2 shows the electoral results from March 2009 based on the Turkish Statistical Institute's (TUIK) division of the country's 81 provinces into 12 regions. The AKP was the largest party in all regions except the Western Marmara region, where it had its lowest level of support at more than seven percentage points below its overall national level of support. In this region, which includes Balıkesir, Çanakkale, Tekirdağ, Edirne and Kırklareli, the CHP was the largest party with close to 33% of the vote, followed closely by the AKP at around 31%. The region also had the highest level of support in the country for the smaller parties in the "other" category, with these parties having around 9% of support. The second highest level of support in the country for the DSP was also found in this region with around 5% of support. Therefore, the Western Marmara region appears to not only favor left-wing parties, but also marginal ones. However, even in this region, when we look into the ideological divide, we see that major right-wing parties, the AKP, MHP, SP and the BBP, collectively attracted more than 51% of the vote.

In the Aegean and the Mediterranean regions, the AKP received around 33% of the vote, again below its national average support level. Nevertheless in both regions, the AKP was still the largest party. In the Aegean region, the CHP is slightly below the AKP and reached its second highest level of support just below its performance in Istanbul where it was still almost seven percentage points behind the AKP. In the Mediterranean region, the MHP had its highest level of

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support with about 25% of the votes, but remained about 8% behind the AKP. However, the MHP continued to hold on to its long-term stronghold in the central Anatolian provinces that are covered by the regions of West Anatolia (23.3% for the MHP) and Central Anatolia (23.1% for the MHP). Yet in these regions, the AKP, with 43.5% and 44.6% support respectively, still had more than a 20% lead over the MHP.

Region	Provinces	AKP	CHP	MHP	Other	DTP	SP	DSP	BBP	Independents
Istanbul		40.3	33.4	7.3	2.7	4.7	7.2	2.5	1.8	0.0
Ageean	Izmir, Manisa, Afyon, Kütahya, Uşak, Aydın, Denizli, Muğla	33.1	33.0	18.0	7.2	2.3	2.2	2.9	1.3	0.1
Mediterranean	Adana, Mersin, Hatay, K. Maraş, Osmaniye, Antalya, Isparta, Burdur	33.3	23.2	25.2	6.6	4.2	2.7	2.4	2.1	0.3
Southeast Anatolia	Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Adıyaman, Kilis, Mardin, Batman, Şırnak, Siirt	39.2	8.9	4.8	7.0	29.7	7.0	0.9	1.1	1.3
West Anatolia	Ankara, Konya, Karaman	43.5	22.7	23.3	2.4	0.6	4.2	0.8	2.4	0.1
Eastern Marmara	Bursa, Eskişehir, Bilecik, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Düzce, Bolu, Yalova	41.8	19.8	16.1	7.3	1.1	7.1	5.1	1.5	0.2
Western Black Sea	Samsun, Tokat, Çorum, Amasya, Zonguldak, Karabük, Bartın, Kastamonu, Çankırı, Sinop	43.7	18.2	19.9	7.2	0.1	4.8	3.8	2.1	0.3
Central Anatolia	Kayseri, Sivas, Yozgat, Kırıkkale, Aksaray, Niğde, Nevşehir, Kırşehir	44.6	11.5	23.1	4.8	0.1	4.8	1.2	9.7	0.2
Eastern Central Anatolia	Van, Muş, Bitlis, Hakkari, Malatya, Elazığ, Bingöl, Tunceli	39.2	7.1	6.1	5.8	25.3	11.1	1.5	2.4	1.4
Eastern Black Sea	Trabzon, Ordu, Giresun, Rize, Artvin, Gümüşhane	43.8	16.7	15.6	8.0	0.1	6.4	5.9	2.5	1.0
Western Marmara	Balıkesir, Çanakkale, Tekirdağ, Edirne, Kırklareli	31.2	32.9	17.3	9.1	0.8	2.1	5.2	1.0	0.4
North eastern Anatolia	Erzurum, Erzincan, Bayburt, Ağrı, Kars, Iğdır, Ardahan	39.8	7.2	16.0	6.9	14.5	7.4	3.2	2.7	2.2
	National total	38.8	23.1	16.1	5.8	5.6	5.2	2.8	2.2	0.4
	Variance explained by regional dummy variables	27.1	51.3	56.2	10.2	53.7	23.4	13.2	17.3	20.0

The AKP's support was highest in the Central Anatolia region where they had received about 45% of the vote. The BBP, whose charismatic leader died in a helicopter accident while campaigning just a few days before the election, obtained its highest level of support in this region as well, with about 9% of votes primarily due to its strong showing in Sivas where it won the provincial mayoral race as well. In this region the CHP had 11.5% of support, about half that of its nation-wide average.

In both the Western as well as the Eastern Black Sea regions the AKP's support was about 5% above its national level and was close to its highest level in the Central Anatolia region. In both regions, the CHP and the MHP had similar levels of support, but were both more than 20 percentage points behind the AKP. The DSP had more than double its national level of support in Eastern Black Sea region due primarily to its strong showing in Ordu. Nevertheless, in all of these regions, the AKP's support was below its 2007 general election results. Compared to the 2004 local election, the AKP's results in 2009 were either at a comparable level or in many cases showed a slight decline.

In Southeast, Eastern Central and North Eastern Anatolia regions, the AKP support remained at about 39%. In Southeast and Eastern Central Anatolia regions the ethnic Kurdish DTP obtained the second largest share of the votes with around 30% and 25% respectively, behind only the AKP. In the North Eastern Anatolia region the MHP received the second largest share of the votes with about 16%, followed by the DTP with about 15%. The CHP only got about 7-8% in all these three regions. The MHP remained in the 5-6% range in Southeast and Eastern Central Anatolia regions.

The influence of regional factors in the parties' electoral support was larger for the CHP, the DTP and the MHP than for the AKP. This is a clear sign of the nationalization of electoral forces behind the AKP when compared to its main competitors.³ The rises and falls of electoral support for the AKP appear to be more uniform and show a relatively lower degree of regional variations when compared to the opposition parties that both rely on regional advantages and suffer from regional weaknesses. Not only does the AKP still have a commanding electoral presence, but it also seems to have maintained this support relatively more homogeneously all over the country.

In the mayoral elections in the east and southeastern regions, the DTP won in eight provinces (Iğdır, Tunceli, Diyarbakır, Batman, Siirt, Şırnak, Hakkari, and Van) and in 50 district mayoral

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elections. The AKP in contrast won in nine provinces and 44 districts, while the CHP won in only 12 districts. However, candidate selection appears to have played an important role in these elections. For instance, the DTP lost the mayoral election in Ağrı but had more than 16,000 votes over the AKP in the provincial general council elections. In Muş and Mardin as well, we had a similar situation with DTP losing to the AKP candidate in the mayoral race but obtaining considerably more votes than the AKP in the provincial general council race. In Tunceli, there was the opposite situation where the DTP candidate won over the AKP candidate in the mayoral race, but the AKP vote exceeded that of the DTP in the provincial general council election. However, besides the case of Tunceli, in all the other seven provinces where the DTP won the mayoral race, it also obtained a higher vote share than its primary competitor, the AKP. These are clear indications that voters had different motives in their voting decisions when they cast their votes for candidates in mayoral races as opposed to parties in provincial general council elections and these examples can be further enlarged in provinces of the other regions.

One other point to note in the Southeast and Eastern Central Anatolian elections concerns the movement of electoral support from the 2004 elections to

March 2009 (see Table 3). When compared to the 2004 provincial general council elections, in 2009 the DTP only lost a small fraction of its support in Adıyaman and Malatya. In the other provinces there was either a modest or quite large increase in its share of the vote. In nine of these 17 provinces the AKP managed to increase its share of the votes from 2004. For the CHP, a modest increase only occurred in Adıyaman, Malatya and Gaziantep. In the other provinces, the CHP support contracted compared to 2004. The MHP saw a slightly better performance with increasing support in Elazığ, Adıyaman, Şırnak, Bitlis, Bingöl, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Siirt and Kilis. With the exceptions of Elazığ and Kilis, all of these gains were quite small.

The big loser seems to be the DP, following upon similar losses by the DYP in 2004. The real competition of the region appeared to be for winning the voters that five years ago voted for the DP/DYP. In Adıyaman, some of these voters appear to have shifted to the CHP as well as to the AKP and the MHP. In Elazığ, both the AKP and the MHP seemed to have benefited. In Şırnak, the DTP, perhaps more than anyone else, benefited. However, it is clear that the electoral dynamics of the region is quite complex. Ethnic politics, candidate characteristics, municipal

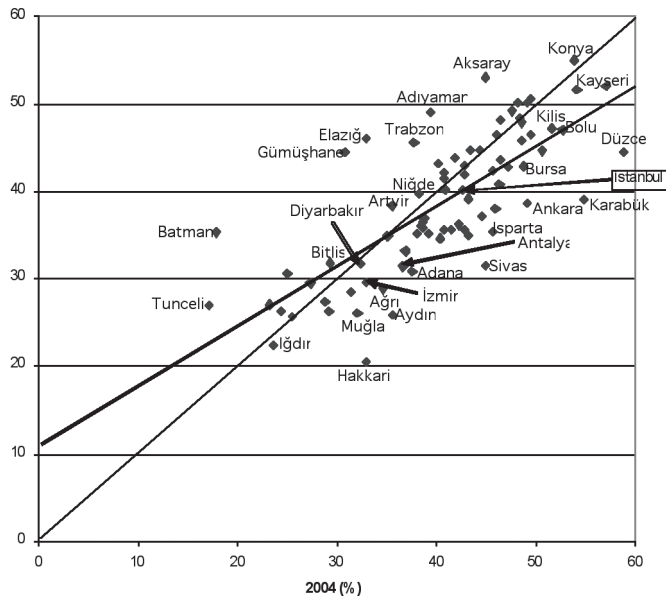
	AKP	CHP	MHP	DTP	DP	Independents
Batman	17.65	-1.63	-1.61	3.11	-4.82	-0.10
Elazığ	13.28	-0.39	9.01	0.30	-23.91	-0.33
Tunceli	10.10	-5.28	-0.14	2.17	-7.00	-11.99
Adıyaman	10.01	1.70	3.37	-1.93	-8.93	-0.09
Şırnak	5.87	-3.48	1.17	22.80	-16.52	-5.44
Mardin	4.07	-7.90	-0.25	17.26	-6.11	0.76
Bitlis	2.76	-3.30	1.94	12.08	-2.19	-5.16
Malatya	2.16	0.99	-7.92	-2.90	-2.33	0.39
Bingöl	0.34	-0.83	0.05	7.55	-4.76	-3.17
Diyarbakır	-0.26	-3.15	-0.57	16.02	-6.57	-1.82
Şanlıurfa	-0.39	-6.86	2.25	2.79	-5.79	-5.37
Gaziantep	-0.42	0.43	3.22	2.03	-1.70	-0.93
Siirt	-2.62	-0.83	1.99	10.63	-2.64	-4.74
Muş	-2.65	-1.12	-0.71	13.01	-8.79	0.97
Kilis	-4.10	-10.79	15.20	0.00	-3.76	-0.39
Van	-5.50	-4.94	-0.49	21.80	-6.71	-2.63
Hakkari	-12.13	-3.36	-0.66	28.44	-2.03	-5.12

service provision performance and the over-all national political and economic scene all played significant roles in the shaping of these results.

So far we have only examined the March 2009 election results and the changes from the 2004 election in a limited number of provinces. For a national perspective, a simple pictorial depiction of where parties have moved over the last two local elections can be obtained by a scatter plot of the 2004 provincial general council national election results against the 2009 results. These are shown in Figures 1 to 3 for the AKP, the CHP and the MHP respectively. The main diagonal line shows the line of equality between the 2004 and 2009 vote shares for these three parties. Any province that remains below the main diagonal is where the vote share of the party in question has declined and any province that lies above it is where the party has managed to increase its share of votes in provincial general council elections from 2004 to 2009.

The AKP's record is mixed when viewed across all 81 provinces. While sizeable increases were observed in Tunceli, Batman, Gümüşhane, Trabzon and Aksaray, there was a significant number of provinces where the share of AKP's vote declined. The AKP's share of the vote appears to have risen in the smaller Anatolian provinces, while the larger metropolitan centers such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir,

Figure 1. AKP Vote Share in Provincial General Council Election in 2004 and 2009



Bursa, Adana and Antalya all lie below the main diagonal indicating an erosion of support for the AKP. In the majority of provinces we see support for the AKP close to or slightly below its 2004 levels. However, when compared to its two main competitors we still see that the bulk of AKP support lies above the 30% threshold in both the 2004 as well as the 2009 elections.

The thick solid line in the graphs depicts the estimated regression line that takes the AKP's share of the votes in 2004 as the sole explanatory variable for its 2009 provincial vote shares in provincial general council elections. That its slope is less than the unity line depicted by the main diagonal line of equal vote shares in both elections is a clear sign of deteriorating electoral performance. We see from this line that on average the AKP was only able to carry about seventy percent of its vote share in 2004 into 2009.

In contrast, the CHP's estimated regression line clearly shows increasing support with approximately 34% additional vote share for every percentage of vote obtained in 2004. Dramatic increases were observed for the CHP primarily in the larger metropolitan cities where the AKP's support has retracted. For the MHP we see a similar positive slope, larger than unity line but smaller in size than that of the CHP.

Figure 2. CHP Vote Share in Provincial General Council Election in 2004 and 2009

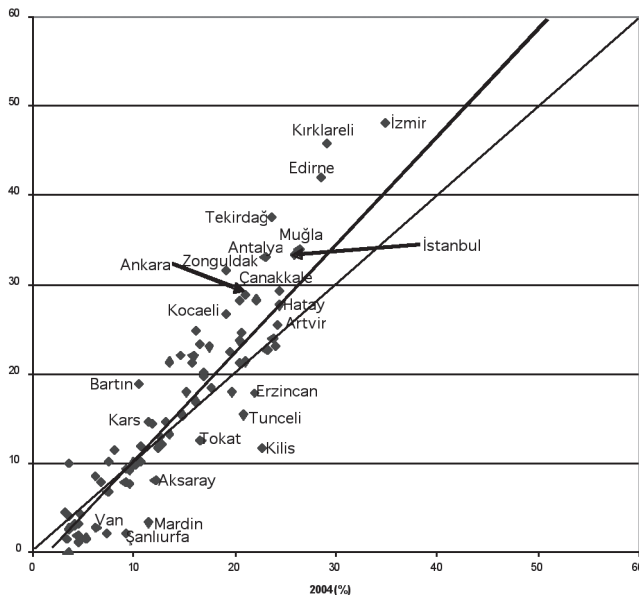
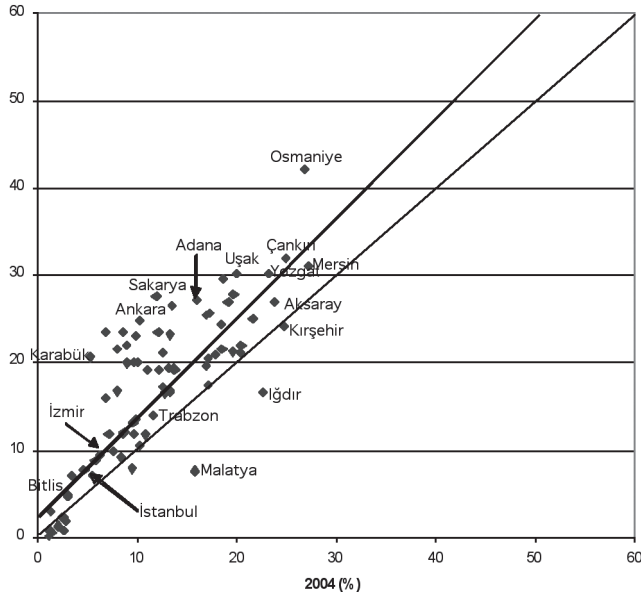


Figure 3. MHP Vote Share in Provincial General Council Election in 2004 and 2009



Kırklareli and Edirne is responsible for the large regression slope. As previously observed, the MHP won in a larger number of provinces in comparison to 2004. In only 12 provinces is a drop in the MHP's share of the vote observed while this figure is 30 for the CHP and 50 for the AKP.

Conclusions and Speculative Explanations

Several conclusions are worthy of note. First, the AKP's rise at the polls seems to have ended. Compared to its earlier success in the 2004 provincial general council elections, the 2009 results make this an indisputable observation. A questionable comparison with its even more stunning performance of the 2007 general elections would have yielded an even worse picture for the AKP's electoral retreat.

There are primarily two distinct provincial clusters, or electoral regions, where support has fallen. One is where the rise of the ethnic Kurdish vote seems to have diverted support from the AKP. However, in a significant number of these provinces the AKP still managed to retain its previous electoral support or to even slightly improve upon it. The reason for the declining support of the AKP was most likely the ethnic identity issues in these regions. The military operations that followed the AKP's electoral success in the region in the July 2007 elections appear

to have tilted the electoral balance in favor of the DTP. Nevertheless, other than the DTP, the AKP is still the only other party that maintained a significant appeal in the region and continues to get about one third of the votes. Other parties remained well below 10% in the provinces in eastern and southeastern Anatolia.

The lack of appeal for any party other than the DTP and the AKP in these provinces is clearly a weakness for the party system as a whole and risks marginalizing the region from the rest of the country in electoral terms in addition to the already apparent socio-economic cleavages. From an optimistic perspective, these developments could be seen as an opportunity to further integrate the region through party politics. Now that the DTP has not only a significant presence in the Turkish Grand National Assembly but also an increasing presence in the local service-delivery mechanisms, the party should start to be evaluated on its performance rather than on ethnic identity issues. This may be an opportunity for the further integration of the region's politics with the rest of the country. It is important that the increasing electoral presence of the DTP in the region should not be used as an excuse to move beyond the meritocratic and needs-based evaluations of support for local administrations. Success of the local administrations rather than their failure, the blame for which could easily be shifted to discriminatory policies of the central government, is more likely to normalize the DTP's policies not only at the local but also at the national level.

This line of argument may seem to be naïve by those who argue that the rise of the DTP has nothing to do with service delivery but is directly linked to identity politics and thus the marginalization of the region cannot be addressed with service-delivery based political initiatives. However, a failing service-delivery mechanism would certainly not be of much help in fulfilling any policy initiative in the region. Second, the March 2009 results may not be entirely due to identity politics and the service-delivery performance of the incumbents might have been considered by the voters. The evaluation of the service-delivery performance in the region would always include an analysis of the over-all performance of the incumbent central government and would be influenced by the security situation in the post-2007 election period. And third, since the DTP has an unambiguous responsibility for local service delivery in the region this situation should help pull their local identity-based politics down to bread-and-butter politics. The success or failure in non-identity based service delivery could help ease the tensions in the region.

The AKP also experienced a downturn of its electoral appeal in the largest and most populous group of provinces in the western coastal regions where the

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AKP's support was reduced on average by around 5% compared to 2004. However, with the exception of the Western Marmara and Aegean region, the AKP remained the dominant party with about one third or slightly larger share of the votes.

Several speculative explanations are possible for this movement of electoral support. One is obviously concerned

with the economic difficulties that are more likely to be most severely and directly felt by the relatively more prosperous and open economies of these provinces.⁴ While perhaps a more self sufficient and agricultural economic structure defines other regions, the western coastal regions are more likely to have been affected by the contracting export markets, declining industrial production and the general contraction of the most modern sectors of Turkish economy. One argument for explaining such regional variation in effects of the economic crisis may also be the differential rate of informality that is prevalent across regions. More informal and thus more vulnerable segments may be relatively more easily reached by the government's latest emergency aid but market forces will be needed to address the stresses in the more formal sectors of the economy. Such claims however are hard to evaluate on the available data and remain largely speculative. The AKP was also quite successful in diverting attention away from the economy by focusing on such issues as the war in Gaza and the Davos affair, and the Ergenekon case. However, it has once again become clear that when the pocketbook of the masses is hurt, the politicians in responsible positions will pay a price no matter how ideologically predisposed the voters might be towards them. This is clearly a wake-up call for the governing party that they are not likely to stay in power if they cannot deliver concrete economic benefits to the masses. Ideological debates around the headscarf issue or the anti-establishment rhetoric that underlines the Ergenekon affair cannot be a substitute for good economic performance.

The shift in support away from not only the AKP but also the other centrist parties like the ANAP and the DP in the western provinces also suggests that the center of the left-right ideological spectrum may be moving away from the AKP. However, support seems to be moving predominantly to the MHP, which by all standards has yet to convince larger segments of the Turkish voters that it has mellowed its ultra-nationalist stance concerning, for example, international

relations and EU membership, as well as its hawkish stance on the ethnic Kurdish minority in the country. It was an earlier similar moderation by the AKP that was in large part responsible for the large electoral embrace that it has enjoyed. One alternative explanation for the increasing support of the MHP may also be a function of AKP's relative success in appealing to ethnic Kurdish groups both in the eastern and southeastern region in the eyes of the reactionary and increasingly nationalist electorate of the western provinces. To what extent any distancing from the western electorate is a function of the AKP's rapprochement with the Kurdish minority in their recent policy initiative, such with as Kurdish TV, is hard to determine. It should be noted that an increasingly mass and violent reactionary potential seems to be growing in the west and these election results may just be the beginning. However, the apparently low degree of regional differentiation in the AKP's support is, to a large extent, a reflection of the party's ability to embrace a similar electorate in various corners of the country. This nationalization of electoral forces is lacking in the MHP's, as well as the CHP's, recent rise in the polls.

The MHP's electoral record in the aftermath of March 2009 appears much stronger and consistent than that of the CHP. Although, the MHP's electoral appeal has yet to surpass the CHP's, it seems to have a strong electoral base not only in the AKP's core constituency in the Anatolian and eastern Black Sea provinces, but increasingly in the more developed western provinces where the CHP has traditionally had a strong showing. If the economic crisis gets even deeper, the MHP would thus be more likely to benefit from the deteriorating conditions than the CHP, which is primarily reliant only on its growing support in the relatively more developed western provinces, while the MHP has an increasingly more widespread appeal and its support seems to have grown nearly twice as fast as that of the CHP. As the economic crisis takes a deeper hold within the core AKP constituencies of Central Anatolia and Eastern Black Sea, the MHP's electoral success is more likely to grow.

Other than the economic difficulties, many other issues might have played some role in the voters' decisions. The performance of the governing party in many policy areas is likely to have had some influence. After nearly nine years

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in power, it should not be surprising to note that the AKP's policymaking capacity as a party and its cabinet is increasingly in need of new energy. One persistent pattern concerning the cabinet has been a complete defiance of pressures from the opposition or public at large. Changes in the cabinet have been undertaken primarily due to necessity or have been simple reshuffles or additions. In some municipalities, the AKP administrations since 2004 have been a continuation from the earlier success of the RP in local elections in the mid-1990s. In that sense, these *Milli Görüş*-based administrations may have been in power for more than a decade and thus bear the natural signs of deterioration, tiredness and lack of energy. However, in all these performance considerations the key point to keep in mind is that voters not only look into what the governing party did or did not do, but also what the alternative parties could have done. This is, after all a hypothetical judgment on the part of the voters and such considerations can be only partially grasped by looking into the credibility of parties in dealing with different problems of the country. A number of questions are relevant here: Who can resolve a given problem? Is it the governing party, or is one of the alternatives better suited to resolving the problem? Which policy areas are more important? Is national foreign policy as important as local traffic problems? Which issues and policy areas are more salient than others in the context of local elections? More information is obviously needed about individual decision-making contexts to answer some of these questions and to find out to what extent local issues shape voters' decisions. We have observed some significant shifts from the mayoral to the general council elections and so obviously, there are different motivations behind deciding on which candidate or party to support. However, unless carefully crafted individual survey instruments provide some information we are not able to cipher through this maze of individual decision making especially in the context of local elections.

We have well documented evidence that economic difficulties affect voting decisions in Turkey. However, they are not the only source of influence. Ideology as reflected in conservative worldviews, traditional left-right considerations or religion all exert some influence. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals reach a decision and this can only be accounted by a partial probabilistic manner and never deterministically.

Electoral politics in Turkey may once again be under the heavy influence of yet another economic crisis. A critical issue in dealing with economic performance is the attribution of responsibility to the government in power. Similar to the developments that formed the background to the 2002 general election, we seem to

be entering a new era of shrinking electoral support behind the governing party due to its perceived poor economic performance. Back in 2002, the reaction of the voters to the economic crisis of 2001 resulted in the complete elimination of the coalition partners from the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Nevertheless, while the MHP still seems to survive and continues to attract rising support, the ANAP and the DSP remain marginal. The AKP has no coalition partner to conveniently shift the responsibility for its inability to deal with economic crisis. As the favorable economic performance evaluation benefited the AKP in the 2007 general elections, a downturn could decisively take away most of these electoral gains. However, as I underlined above, economic difficulties will not be felt equally by all segments of the Turkish society. The relatively closed agricultural economies of Anatolian towns may only be hurt later and to a lesser degree compared to the western economies. Therefore, regional variation in political support is once again likely to play an important role in reflecting the effects of the economic crisis.

While the developed western provinces appear to be the most seriously affected by the economic crisis and to have slowly shifted their support to the CHP and MHP, the ethnic identity considerations seem to shift the eastern and southeastern provinces away from the mainstream politics towards the marginalized DTP. As such, the Turkish electorate is likely to become even more polarized as the economic crisis continues to develop. The western provinces are likely to shift into a more nationalist tone in reflecting their anger towards the government and this would inevitably carry them further apart from the relatively more conservative smaller Anatolian provinces and the eastern and southeastern provinces where Kurdish identity politics might divert the electorate into a divergent path from the rest of the country. To avoid such divergence, with the success in the local elections the DTP might develop policies that are more deeply grounded into the bread-and-butter issues of local governance rather than the identity politics which is bound to speed divergence and create more conflict. Electoral politics should be allowed to bring much desired and needed services to the eastern and southeastern region's population that not only observe the plight of their western compatriots but also compare the developments in northern Iraq. Holding competitive elections should help improve the daily lives of urban residents in the region and thus should be allowed to effectively compete with divisive ethnic

The success in the local elections the DTP might develop policies that are more deeply grounded into the bread-and-butter issues of local governance rather than the identity politics

identity politics. Obviously, this requires responsible and visionary political maneuvering on the part of both the DTP as well as the rest of the party-system players. It takes two to tango, but this game of electoral competition takes more than two players. The presence of only two parties in the region does not help bring about any such harmonious game play in the region.

Endnotes

1. There is convenient temptation among journalists and some academic circles to take the 2007 general election results as the basis of comparisons for the 2009 local elections. This would obviously lead to sharper declines of electoral support for the AKP across provinces. However, this would be comparing general election results with local election results that were immeasurably affected by locally specific issues as well as concerns regarding municipality performances and candidates. Moreover, this would also take a truly extraordinary election in 2007, which had with presidential election conflicts, military involvement, peculiarly high PKK terror and mass polarisation, as a basis for an incomparably different local elections in 2009 that took place under much more normal conditions. The ensuing analyses thus primarily, but not exclusively, consist of comparisons with 2004 local election results.

2. See Turan, A. E. *Türkiye’de Yerel Seçimler* (Local Elections in Turkey) in Turkish (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Publications, 2008) p.341.

3. The nationalization of electoral forces refers to increasing homogeneity of vote shifts across localities within national boundaries. See A. Çarkoğlu, and I. Ergen “The Rise of Right-of-Centre Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol.26 (2002) pp.95-137 for a presentation of the literature on nationalization and its application in Turkish electoral politics.

4. As I argued elsewhere, the 2007 general elections were primarily shaped by economic pragmatism rather than ideology. The same trend seems to continue in March 2009 as well. See A. Çarkoğlu, “Ideology or Economic Pragmatism: Profiling Turkish Voters in 2007”, *Turkish Studies* vol.9 No.2 (June 2008) pp.317-344 and references therein for Turkish experience with economic voting.