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## Turkey's Local Elections of 2009: Results, Trends and the Future

Ali Çarkođlu



## ABSTRACT

This article aims at presenting a descriptive account of the March 2009 local elections in Turkey. Comparing the general and local elections since 2004, an overall evaluation of trends in electoral preferences is presented. Using provincial general council election results, a detailed geographical comparative analysis of the 2004 and 2009 local elections is also carried out. The analyses show that the AKP's rise has stalled but it still remains as the dominant power in the party system. The electoral map continues to be divided between the coastal western and most developed provinces where the opposition is significantly supported, the east and southeastern provinces where the Kurdish ethnic electoral support is rising and the more conservative provinces in between where the AKP continues to be dominant with the MHP trailing behind. Even though the March 2009 elections had all the characteristics of a local election, they also reveal the rising trends in electoral behaviour in Turkey.



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# TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTIONS OF 2009: RESULTS, TRENDS AND THE FUTURE\*

Ali Çarkoğlu\*\*

Despite mixed expectations to the contrary, the ruling conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP) did not manage to maintain its electoral appeal in Turkey's March 29, 2009 municipality elections. The municipal elections marked the first electoral test for the AKP after its stunning showing in the general elections of July 2007. These earlier elections had followed an intense period of conflict between peripheral conservative Islamists and the centrist secular state establishment and its partners in civil society, and conflict within the party system itself.<sup>1</sup> In the March 2009 elections, the opposition parties exploited the favorable electoral climate to push their support levels upward. However, despite the AKP's slippage, the net sum of opposition gains are little and divided across many modest-to-smaller size parties. No single opposition party seems to have gathered the overall electoral momentum behind its organization.

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\* This is an expanded version of my article in *Insight Turkey*, 2009. "Turkey's Local Elections of 2009: Winners and Losers," Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 1-18. I am indebted to Ahmet Dalman, Çağlayan Işık, Fuat Keyman and İhsan Dağı for discussion of local election results, and for the maps I use for the ensuing presentations and suggestions. As usual, I alone am responsible for the final version of this piece.

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1. I am using here Şerif Mardin's framework of analysis for Turkish politics. Mardin, Ş. 1973. "Centre Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus*, 2(1) 169-190. See also, for an adoption of this framework in the analysis of 2007 election, Çarkoğlu, A. 2007. "A New Electoral Victory for the "Pro-Islamists" or the "New Centre-Right"? The Justice and Development Party Phenomenon in the July 2007 Elections in Turkey," *South European Society & Politics*, Vol. 12.4, pp.501-519.

Candidates in many localities run successfully against partisan or ideological currents and receive or lose votes on the basis of pragmatic considerations specific to their locality.

## Main Observations About the Election Results

We should be cautious about making comparisons between general election results and those of any one of the local elections. The local elections consisted contemporaneously in the selection of local headmen (*muhtar*) and the district mayor and council; moreover, the provincial or greater city mayoral, council, and general council elections were held on the same day. It is obviously a challenge for voters to meaningfully distinguish their choices across these elections, and it is virtually impossible for analysts to see through the unique factors that account for the variations across such a diverse body of elections. As I will underline below, however, there seem to be meaningful differences in various parties' votes across different election types, which suggest different voting motivations on the part of the electorate in different localities. The following questions thus remain with us: Does the ideology or partisanship of the voter, independently from the appeal of various candidates, determine his or her choice in any one of these elections? To what extent does the national policy performance of the incumbent government in the economic sphere or other policy areas exert an influence over these election choices? Is the performance of the incumbent local administrators from *muhtars* to greater city mayors a salient factor that drives vote choice in local elections? How important is the appeal of the candidates, their credibility, experience, charisma, and project proposals for the localities in shaping voters' decisions at the polls? The vote choice is clearly a mixture of all of these factors and unless a detailed questioning of the individual voters with a reliable survey instrument is available, these factors cannot be separated from one another using only the macro level election results. Bearing these limitations in mind, in the analysis below I will use only the unofficial election returns for the 2009 local elections in comparison to previous elections.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is true that municipal general council election (*il Genel Meclisi*) results, rather than candidate-specific mayoral elections, approximate general election results best, it is important to note that March 2009 was not a general election. It was only a mid-term local election, and, as such, its campaigns necessarily put more emphasis on

2. Perhaps conveniently some journalists and academic circles are tempted to take the 2007 general election results as the basis of comparisons for the 2009 local elections. Such a comparison 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, with presidential election conflicts, military involvement, peculiarly high PKK terror and mass polarization, forms an unsuitable basis of comparison for 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 provincial general council election results.



locality-specific issues. We have to acknowledge that even in municipality elections, the overall party positions and national issues are being debated and evaluated by candidates and party cadres. However, to claim that local municipal elections are just a different form of general elections would be an unfounded exaggeration. We see that candidates in many localities run successfully against partisan or ideological currents and receive or lose votes on the basis of pragmatic considerations specific to their locality. While in some localities weak and discredited candidates seem to win because of partisan or ideological alignments, credible candidates from weak parties may run successful campaigns and win local elections. So, everything said about general elections or general vote inclinations should be evaluated with some caution and skepticism.<sup>3</sup>

Regional divisions of party support still appear significant for all parties. However, as I will underline below, the AKP appears to have a more uniform and, despite its losses, still dominant support across provinces. Among the regional divisions, western Marmara, and the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal regions appear closer to the opposition despite a strong and in many cases still dominant showing by the incumbent AKP and significant gains for the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* or MHP). The eastern and southeastern Anatolian provinces have somewhat reverted back to ethnic party support behind the ethnic Kurdish Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi* or DTP), but the AKP still has a significant presence in the region. The inner Anatolian and Black Sea provinces are still controlled by the AKP, but the MHP appears to have gained ground there at the expense of the incumbent party.

From the perspective of ideological divisions, support for the right-wing seems to have consolidated significantly in the inner Anatolian and Black Sea coastal regions. The left appears to have a significant presence in the western coastal provinces and almost nowhere else. With the exception of a few localities, left-wing support always tends to be behind that of the right-wing. In the east and southeast, there is practically no left-wing or MHP support. Only the ethnic Kurdish DTP and the AKP maintain a significant electoral presence there. Where changes in electoral support from the

From the perspective of ideological divisions, support for the right-wing seems to have consolidated significantly in the inner Anatolian and Black Sea coastal regions.

3. A methodological caution at this juncture should be voiced about survey research during the course of a local election campaign. Although hypothetical questions concerning vote intentions at a general election are routinely asked during inter general election periods, such questioning during the course of local election campaigns are likely to suffer severe interference from locality effects. If such influences from the real campaign context onto hypothetical evaluations were to be too small to warrant dismissal then it would make sense to also question local election municipality vote choices during the course of a general election campaign. This is hardly advisable and sensible. Similarly, any survey data collected during the course of local election campaign should for the sake of measurement validity concentrate on local election vote intentions and would not tell us anything worthy of substance about general election tendencies.

Regional divisions of party support still appear significant for all parties. However, the AKP appears to have a more uniform and, despite its losses, still dominant support across provinces.

2004 results are concerned, we observe that the left, which is primarily the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP), managed to garner increasing support only in the relatively larger provinces; little or no increase and even some decreases are observed in the smaller Anatolian provinces. Although modest in size and still lagging behind the CHP, a more consistent and widespread geography of gains is observed for the MHP.

As Table 1 below clearly shows, according to the aggregate results the AKP is still the largest party in Turkey. In municipal council election results aggregated for the whole country, the AKP, with about 39% of the vote, is approximately 68% larger than its main competitor the CHP and has about 2.4 times the electoral support of the MHP. Compared to the 2004 municipal elections in which the AKP was likewise the incumbent party, this aggregate support level is down about 3 percentage points; compared to the 2007 general elections AKP support is about 8 percentage points down. The AKP's votes are slightly less than the combined total of its two closest competitors the CHP and MHP. The vote differential appears to be less than 300,000 votes between the AKP and the CHP plus MHP votes within an electorate of more than 42 million. However, in terms of municipalities (greater city, provincial and district level all combined), AKP wins exceed 492 (approximately 51%) while those of the CHP and MHP combined comprise about 322 out of a total of 973 municipalities. Since these elections are run on the basis of simple plurality or first-past-the-post principle, this clearly shows that the AKP remains the largest electoral force in more than half of the municipality election districts.

When we look into the performance of the opposition parties in comparable local and general elections held since 2004, we see that both the main opposition CHP as well as the MHP have maintained a steady record of raising their support in country-wide election returns. The most impressive is the MHP's record which shows an increase of about 53% in its voting base from 2004 to 2009. The CHP's gains are relatively modest, showing about a 27% rise from 18.2% to about 23.1%. The DTP's vote in 2004 was part of a large six-party coalition of marginal left parties.<sup>4</sup> However, the DTP appeared to be by far the larger coalition partner, especially in the east and southeastern provinces. In the 2007 general elections, the DTP candidates ran as independents to bypass the 10% nation-wide representational threshold. Keeping these caveats in mind, we see that the ethnic Kurdish vote behind the DTP is frozen at about 5% of the national vote

which by all estimates is well below the share of the voting age population with a Kurdish background. Nevertheless, as I will underline below, the DTP managed to pull together an impressive increase in its support compared to the 2004 local elections, mainly at the expense of the AKP but also the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti* or DP) and the continuation of the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi* or DYP) which five years ago garnered between 4 to 16 percent of the vote in the east and southeastern provinces and which in March 2009 seem to have lost more than half of this support.

	March 2004			General Election	March 2009		
	Provincial General Council Election	Mayorships won			Provincial General Council Election	Mayorships won	
	Vote share (%)	Greater City/ Province	Districts		Vote share (%)	Greater City/ Province	Districts
				<b>2007</b>			
<b>AKP</b>	41,7	58	470	<b>46,6</b>	38,8	45	447
<b>CHP</b>	18,2	8	125	<b>20,9</b>	23,1	13	170
<b>MHP</b>	10,5	4	70	<b>14,3</b>	16,1	10	129
<b>Other</b>	16,4	1	120	<b>10,7</b>	5,8	1	45
<b>DTP*</b>	5,2	5	29		5,6	8	50
<b>SP</b>	4,0	1	12	<b>2,3</b>	5,2	0	23
<b>DSP</b>	2,1	3	5		2,8	2	10
<b>BBP</b>	1,2		3		2,2	1	3
<b>Independents</b>	0,7	1	17	<b>5,2</b>	0,4	1	15
	100	81	851	<b>100</b>	100	81	892

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

Yet another pattern that emerges from the March 2009 results is the stagnant performance of the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi* or SP) which inherited the old-school conservative Islamists of the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*) and the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi* or MSP) of the 1970s, and the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* or RP) of the 1990s. The AKP cadres predominantly broke away from this tradition and with it the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and his followers. Among the opposition group, the SP witnessed the lowest gain over its 2004 performance. However, compared to the 2007 general elections, the SP seems to have more than doubled its support, raising it from 2.3% to 5.3%. Despite such a mixed record of relative success, it is clear by the sheer size of the growth in electoral support for the SP that its challenge to the AKP is not growing from its old roots within the conservative electoral tradition.

The nature of the provincial distribution of electoral support for the different parties reveals a deepening divide between the eastern and southeastern provinces, the western coastal provinces and the inner Anatolian and Black Sea provinces.

To the extent that these figures can be used as a basis for assessing 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 (Izmir, 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 it had lost in 2004. In addition, the MHP, CHP, DTP and the Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* or BBP) 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 the relatively smaller and less-developed eastern provinces while the CHP's success came in the relatively larger provinces of the more developed western coastal regions. The rise in the CHP vote can be seen as an indication of a shifting balance of electoral power against the AKP originating from the more modernized segments of Turkish society. As the ethnic Kurdish vote reflects the lowest socio-economic strata of Turkish society, it may be that the higher as well as the lower echelons of Turkish society are moving away from the AKP. However, as long as the larger and more conservative middle class segments of Turkish society remain with the AKP, the party leadership may not be very distressed about the new electoral settlement.

The AKP leadership may indeed feel comfortable in that their party remains the largest dominant electoral force in Turkish politics. However, the nature of the provincial distribution of electoral support for the 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 Standard Approach

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, more than seven percentage points below its overall national level. 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 with 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 not only to favor left-wing parties, but also marginal ones. However, even in this region, when we look into the ideological divide, we see that the AKP, MHP, SP and the BBP collectively attracted more than 51% of the vote.

The AKP's support was highest in the central Anatolia region where it received about 45% 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 only slightly below the AKP; it reached its second highest level of support there, 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 support with about 25% of the votes, but remained about 8% behind the AKP. However, the MHP continued to hold onto its long-term stronghold in the central Anatolian 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.

The AKP's support was highest in the central Anatolia region where it 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 – about 9% – 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 of its nation-wide average.



**Table 2. Provincial General Council Election Results across Turkish Statistical Institute Regional Division of Provinces**

Region	Provinces	AKP	CHP	MHP	Other	DTP	SP	DSP	BBP	Independents
Istanbul	Istanbul	40.3	33.4	7.3	2.7	4.7	7.2	2.5	1.8	0.0
Aegean	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
	<b>National total</b>	<b>38.8</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>0.4</b>
	<b>Variance explained by regional dummy variables</b>	<b>27.1</b>	<b>51.3</b>	<b>56.2</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>53.7</b>	<b>23.4</b>	<b>13.2</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>20.0</b>

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

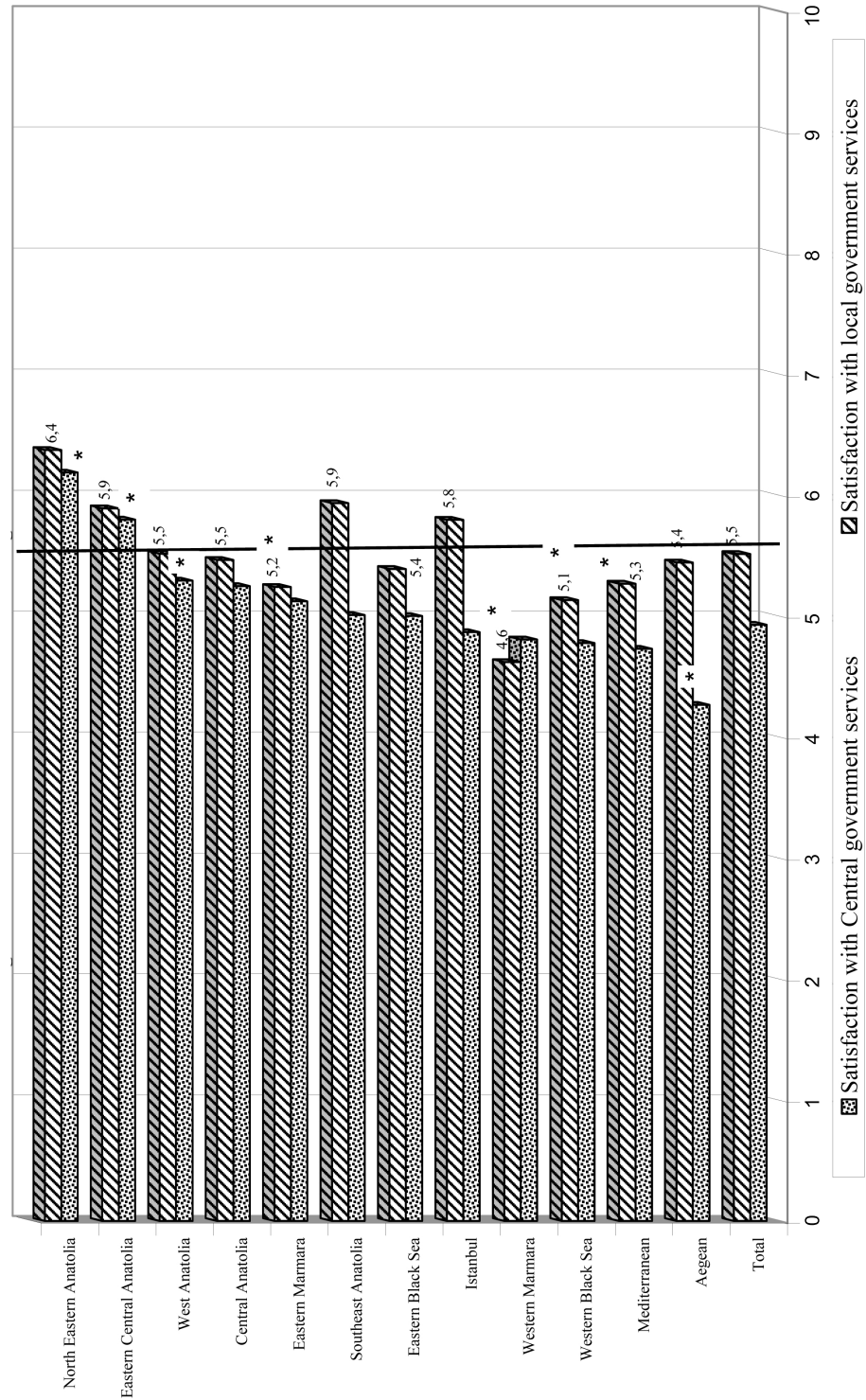
The influence of regional factors in the parties' electoral support was larger for the CHP, DTP and MHP than for the AKP. This is a clear sign of the nationalization of electoral forces behind the AKP when compared to its main competitors.<sup>5</sup> The rises and falls of electoral support for the 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, it 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 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, the opposite situation occurred; 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

The influence of regional factors in the parties' electoral support was larger for the CHP, DTP and MHP than for the AKP.

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

Figure 1. Satisfaction with Central and Local Government Services



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 the provincial general council elections. These examples can be further enlarged in provinces of the other regions.

Figure 1 above presents mean satisfaction levels with central and local government services obtained about three months prior to the local elections.<sup>6</sup> The question posed was about the extent to which the voting age respondent was satisfied with the central government's service since the general elections of July 2007 and with municipality services since the 2004 local elections. Starred entries show statistically significant deviations from the levels of satisfaction in Istanbul. It is interesting to note that the lowest electoral performance for the AKP obtained in the Aegean region corresponds with the lowest performance evaluation for the central government in the same region. Although for the Mediterranean region the satisfaction level in regard to central government services is neither significantly different from Istanbul nor the overall country, it is significantly lower for the municipality services, and the AKP received the third lowest vote support in this region. It is also noteworthy that Istanbul as a single-province region had the third highest satisfaction level after northeastern and southeastern Anatolia. Only in the western Marmara region where the AKP obtained its lowest support level, was the level of satisfaction with central government services slightly higher than that of the local government services. In all other regions, the central government obtained a lower satisfaction level than the local government. In other words, while lower than country average performances in the western coastal regions appear to be linked to lower central government evaluations, a higher than average electoral showing for the AKP seems to go hand in hand with higher performance evaluations for municipality services.

In southeast Anatolia the satisfaction level for the municipalities appears significantly higher than for central government services, which remain at approximately the country aggregate average level.

In southeast Anatolia the satisfaction level for the municipalities appears significantly higher than for central government services, which remain at approximately the country aggregate average level. This suggests that despite the ethnic identity rhetoric of the DTP, in regard to its tenure in provincial municipalities like Diyarbakır, Mardin, Batman and Şırnak the overall performance evaluation of municipalities might have been to its advantage. In other words, there appears to be a performance evaluation basis for the DTP's continuing success in the region despite or hand in hand with rising ethnic identity rhetoric.

So far we have only examined the March 2009 election results from a static perspective. For a dynamic national perspective, a simple pictorial depiction of where the parties have moved over the last two local elections are shown in Figures 1, 2, and 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.

6. See F. Adaman, A. Çarkoğlu and B. Şenatalar. Forthcoming 2009. *Hanehalkı Gözünden Kamu Hizmetleri ve Yolsuzluk* (Public Services and Corruption from the Perspective of Households) in Turkish, TEPAV Publications.

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

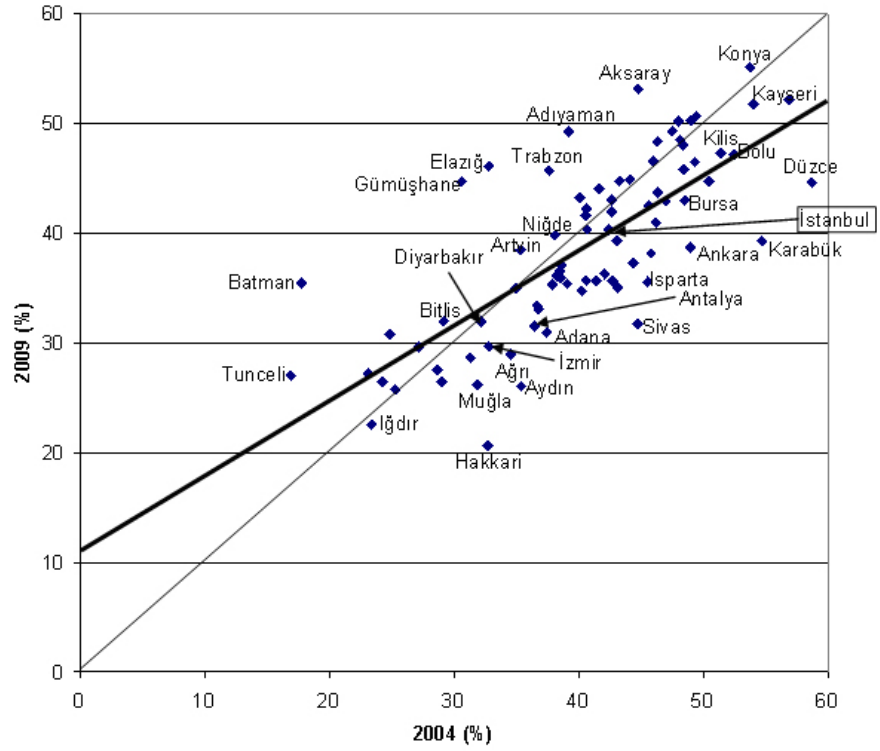


Figure 3. CHP Vote Share in Provincial General Council Election in 2004 and 2009

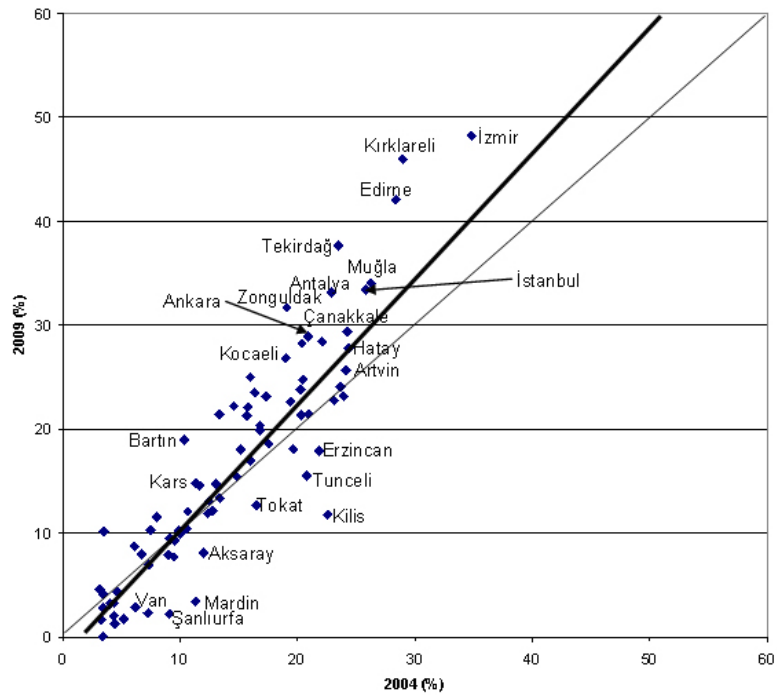
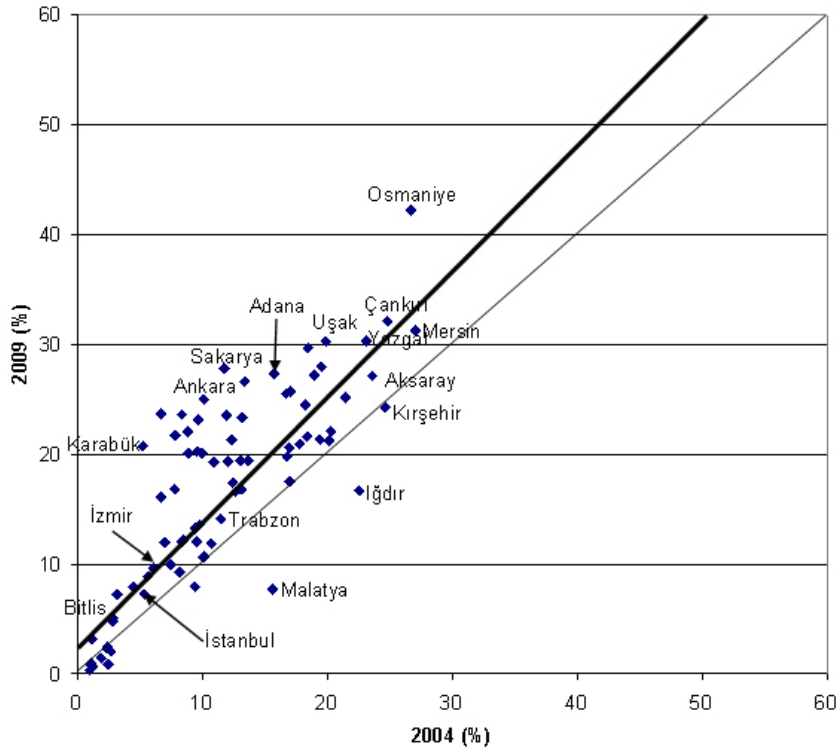




Figure 4. MHP Vote Share in Provincial General Council Election in 2004 and 2009



The AKP's record is mixed when viewed across all 81 provinces. While significant increases were observed in Tunceli, Batman, Gümüşhane, Trabzon and Aksaray, there were 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 İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, 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 2004 AKP's share of the votes 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.

The AKP's record is mixed when viewed across all 81 provinces. While significant increases were observed in Tunceli, Batman, Gümüşhane, Trabzon and Aksaray, there were a significant number of provinces where the share of AKP's vote declined.

Clearly the AKP is losing ground but not in areas that will truly hurt it. The AKP is losing ground in the most developed and most liberal of Turkish electoral regions.

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 declined. For the MHP we see a similar positive slope, larger in unity but smaller in size than that of the CHP. It seems that the CHP's electoral success in places such as Izmir, Kırklareli and Edirne is responsible for the large regression slope. As previously observed, the MHP won in a large number of provinces in comparison to 2004. Only 12 provinces witnessed a drop in the MHP's share of the vote, while this figure is 30 for the CHP and 50 for the AKP.

### **Regional Division of Electoral Support: The Cluster Approach**

TUIK's regional division of provinces suffers from a definition of regions that is non-political. Thus, a purely a geographic logic is imposed upon electoral dynamics, which may be blurring the results obtained. A better approach would be to let the data speak for itself and determine the borders of regions. Such a method can be found in factor as well as cluster analyses. The main difficulty here is that these methods leave a lot of room for interpretive decisions on the part of the analyst. The exposition of such an approach onto the municipal general council election results would take longer than the limits of this article.<sup>7</sup> However, I want to briefly summarize some of its main findings. When we apply a cluster analysis, we basically create groups of provinces wherein the variance of vote distribution across parties are minimized while between-cluster variances are maximized. This can be achieved in an iterative way.

Focus on the Level of Electoral Support for Parties: Table 3 presents the results of a cluster analysis of the provincial general council election results (See Figure 5 for the map of these clusters). Whatever number of clusters is sought in such a framework, Sivas always stands out as a cluster of its own (Cluster 1). This is not surprising given the extraordinarily high levels of support for the BBP in this province compared to that party's poor showing in all other provinces. All other 80 provinces can be grouped into five clusters.

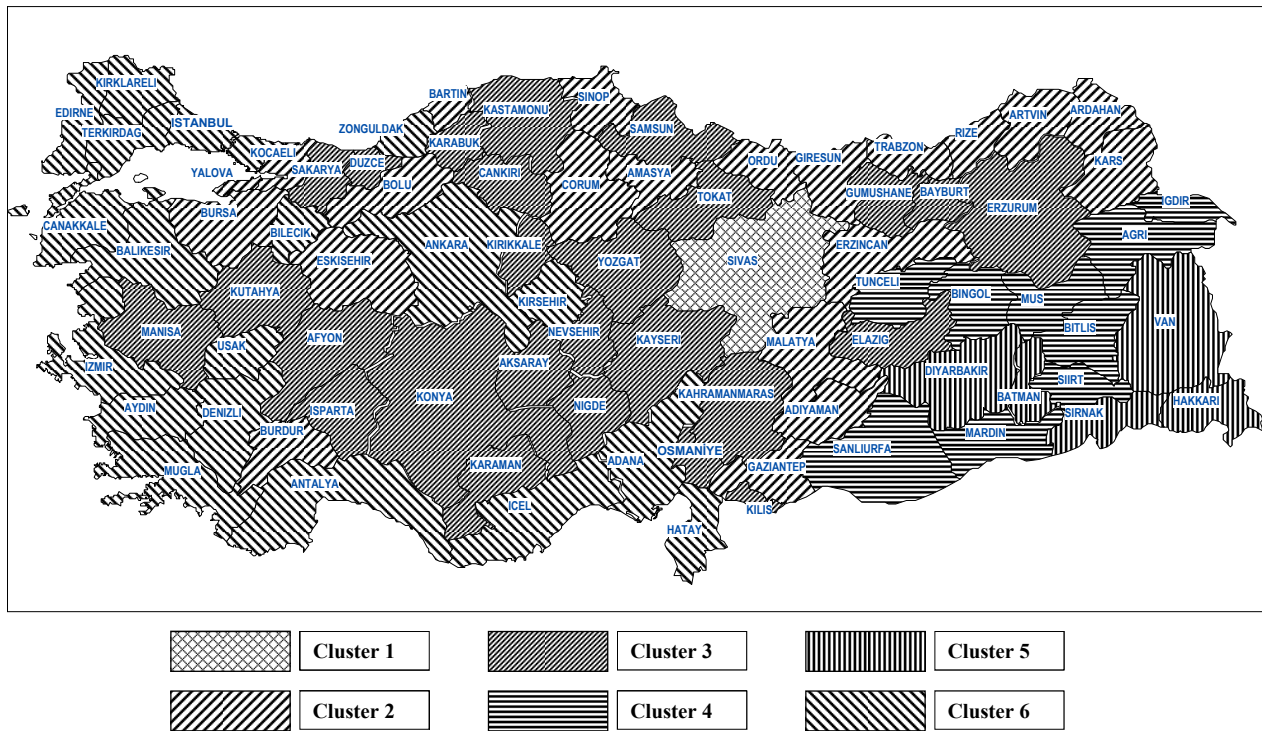
In two of these clusters we observe a significant presence of the DTP vote with about one third of the vote going to the AKP. One of these clusters contains Diyarbakır,

7. For a similar and more in-depth exposition of these techniques see Çarikoğlu, A. and G. Avci. 2002. "An Analysis of the Turkish Electorate from a Geographical Perspective" in *Politics, Parties and Elections in Turkey*. Lynn Rienner, Sabri Sayarı and Yılmaz Eşmer (eds.), pp.115-135; and Çarikoğlu, A. 2000. "Geography of April 1999 Turkish Elections" *Turkish Studies*, vol.1, no.1 pp.149-171.

Hakkari, Van, Batman and Şırnak (Cluster 5) wherein the DTP gets nearly 57% of the regional vote. This region of five provinces only comprise 3.7% of the total valid votes in the country. The AKP is about 25 percentage points below the DTP in this region at about 32% of the provincial general council vote. In all of these provinces the DTP won the mayoral races as well.

Another region (Cluster 4) turns out to be composed of 9 provinces (Ağrı, Bingöl, Bitlis, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Tunceli, Şanlıurfa and Iğdır) wherein 4.4% of the total valid provincial general council votes lies. There the AKP gets about 34% while the DTP is about four percentage points behind but well above the other parties. In three of these provinces (Tunceli, Iğdır and Siirt) the DTP won the mayoral races; however, the AKP won in the remaining six provinces. In Clusters 4 and 5, the CHP (MHP) receives about 3% (4%) and 2% (1%) respectively. The pro-Islamist SP and other marginal parties receive 10 to 12% of the vote in this region, perhaps thus holding the key to electoral dominance for either the AKP or the DTP.

Figure 5. Regionalization in Municipal Council Elections, March 2009



**Table 3. Regionalization of Party Support-March 2009 Municipal Council Elections**

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	Turkey
<b>AKP</b>	31,7	43,5	46,2	33,7	32,2	35,1	38,8
<b>CHP</b>	11,9	20,3	11,1	3,1	1,6	32,8	23,1
<b>MHP</b>	9,3	13,5	24,1	3,9	0,9	15,8	16,1
<b>Other</b>	1,9	7,0	6,3	10,7	3,6	4,9	5,8
<b>SP</b>	5,9	6,6	6,3	11,6	3,0	3,7	5,2
<b>DSP</b>	1,3	4,8	1,9	1,2	1,0	2,7	2,8
<b>BBP</b>	37,6	1,9	2,9	1,5	0,5	1,6	2,2
<b>DTP</b>	0,1	1,9	0,9	30,4	56,9	3,3	5,6
<b>Independents</b>	0,3	0,4	0,3	3,8	0,3	0,1	0,4
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Share in Turkey total</b>	0,95	18,18	21,83	4,36	3,71	50,97	
Number of Provinces	<b>1</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>19</b>	
Share in valid votes (%)	<b>1</b>	<b>18,2</b>	<b>21,8</b>	<b>4,4</b>	<b>3,7</b>	<b>50,9</b>	<b>100</b>
	Sivas	Adiyaman	Afyon	Ağrı	Diyarbakır	Adana	
		Amasya	Çankırı	Bingöl	Hakkari	Ankara	
		Artvin	Elazığ	Bitlis	Van	Antalya	
		Bolu	Erzurum	Mardin	Batman	Aydın	
		Burdur	Gümüşhane	Muş	Şırnak	Balıkesir	
		Bursa	Isparta	Siirt		Bilecik	
		Çorum	Kastamonu	Tunceli		Çanakkale	
		Erzincan	Kayseri	Şanlıurfa		Denizli	
		Eskişehir	Konya	İğdır		Edirne	
		Gaziantep	Kütahya			Hatay	
		Giresun	Manisa			Mersin	
		Kars	Kahramanmaraş			Istanbul	
		Kocaeli	Nevşehir			Izmir	
		Malatya	Niğde			Kırklareli	
		Ordu	Sakarya			Kırşehir	
		Rize	Samsun			Muğla	
		Sinop	Tokat			Tekirdağ	
		Trabzon	Yozgat			Uşak	
		Bartın	Aksaray			Zonguldak	
		Ardahan	Bayburt				
		Yalova	Karaman				
			Kırıkkale				
			Karabük				
			Kilis				
			Osmaniye				
			Düzce				

The AKP gets 43 to 46% of the valid votes in two clusters of provinces with a total of 47 provinces where 40% of the valid provincial general council votes are to be found (Clusters 2 and 3). The borders of these two clusters reach Manisa and Kütahya in the Aegean, Burdur on the Mediterranean, Konya, Karaman and Kayseri in central Anatolia, down to Kilis and up to Elazığ, Erzurum and Kars in the east. The whole of the Black Sea coast reaching Kocaeli on the west with Zonguldak and Ankara in its south, as the only two exceptions, wraps up the boundaries of this conservative region. In Cluster 2 provinces the MHP received about 14% and in Cluster 3 about 24% of the valid votes of provincial general council elections. The CHP however, received about 20% in Cluster 2 and 11% in Cluster 3 provinces. Cluster 3 is the only cluster where the MHP performs above its national level of support. However, this is the cluster where the AKP is strongest. In Cluster 2, the CHP is the main competitor of the AKP but in Cluster 3 it is the MHP that pressures the AKP. Still, in both of these clusters of provinces, the AKP's lead is wide enough (more than 20 percentage points) to provide some electoral comfort.

In 19 of the larger provinces of Cluster 6 which comprise about 51% of the valid votes of the provincial general council elections, the AKP received about 35% while the CHP got about 33% of the provincial general council vote. These are the provinces where the toughest electoral competition took place. The MHP received about half of what the top two vote-getters won at about 16%. This cluster of provinces covers the whole of coastal provinces in the Aegean and the Mediterranean regions plus the provinces of Thrace and Zonguldak from the western Black Sea. Bilecik, Ankara and Kırşehir from central Anatolia are the three exceptions to the coastal nature of this cluster. It seems that this cluster of provinces is the foundation of the CHP support. It is the only cluster of provinces wherein the CHP received a vote share larger than its national level of support. In this cluster, we observe that AKP support is below its national level and the MHP is also performing below its national level of support.

The fact that the CHP performs better where the AKP is already not doing well may be a sign of promise for the CHP. It may be taken as a sign that the CHP opposition is already wearing down the AKP stronghold and weakening its electoral stronghold. However, the same cannot be said about the MHP, which performs its best in exactly the region where the AKP still out-performs not only its competitors but its own national level of support. Such a result is to be expected, given the natural similarity of ideological stances between the MHP and the AKP. Their natural geographic support basis should be expected to be similar. The election results may be interpreted as a sign that the MHP will have to work on its campaign to weaken the AKP constituencies or wait until it makes mistakes that will eat into its own electoral base. However, the fact that MHP is to date unable to eat into this conservative support base indicates

The fact that the CHP performs better where the AKP is already not doing well may be a sign of promise for the CHP.



The election results may be interpreted as a sign that the MHP will have to work on its campaign to weaken the AKP constituencies or wait until it makes mistakes that will eat into its own electoral base.

that the real threat to the AKP electoral base from within the right-wing conservative constituencies is yet to come.

Clearly the AKP is losing ground but not in areas that will truly hurt it. The AKP is losing ground in the most developed and most liberal of Turkish electoral regions. There may be a natural limit to this weakening if it does not expand into the conservative regions of the country. The CHP stronghold, located mainly along the coastal developed regions might be reaching its natural limits as well. In a general election setting, the rural vote of clearly more conservative nature is expected to bring the CHP advantage down a little bit. Even in the urban settlements, the shanty town areas where the rural dominates over the urban, the appeal of the CHP may be weakening. Unless the CHP finds ways to appeal to rural and shanty town dwellers its support base may remain more or less where it currently is and this will not help much in capturing the commanding vote in general elections.

Focus on Changing Electoral Support: So far we only concentrated on the provincial general council election results for March 2009 and ignored changes from the 2004 general council elections. When we conduct another cluster analysis, this time attuned to changes in party shares in provincial general council votes, we obtain a clearer dynamic picture of where the parties might be moving in the different electoral regions.

Again a six cluster solution is obtained. Table 4 and the map in Figure 6 show a clear depiction as to where the wins and losses of the parties happen to be. In Cluster 1 we have Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Muş, Siirt and Şırnak where on average the DTP gained about 16 percentage points above its 2004 performance as part of the six-party coalition reaching about 50% of the votes in this region. The AKP support at about 31% is stagnant at about the same or a slightly better share of vote than it obtained in 2004. The BBP and DSP both show slight improvements, but their level of vote is still marginal in these provinces. The real winner in this region is clearly the DTP. In a similar but more impressive showing, the DTP manages to expand its support on average by about 23 percentage points reaching nearly 49% in the Cluster 4 provinces of Ağrı, Hakkari and Van where besides the SP (with about 7%) and DSP's (with about 2%) marginal vote gains every other party support declined from 2004 to 2009. The largest losses in these three provinces were actually observed in the AKP (with about 31%) which on average lost about 8 percentage points. Clusters 1 and 4 comprise only about 5% of the total urban voters and thus do not account for significant national shifts in partisan support. However, since these provinces show the contours of DTP's rising electoral support and thus more ethnic Kurdish appeal at the expense of more nation-wide centrist parties, these two clusters are significant.

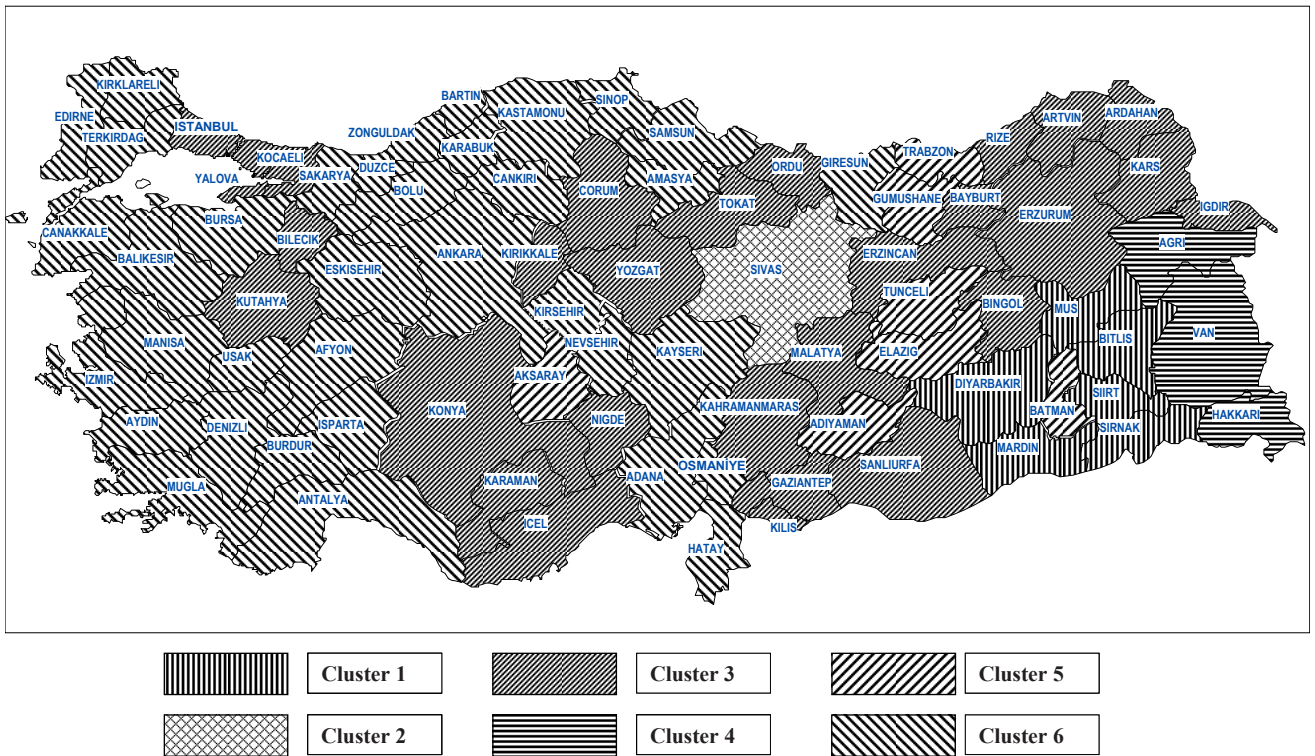
Table 4. Regionalization of Changes in Party Support from 2004 to 2009 Municipal Council Elections

	Cluster 1 DTP dominant, AKP stagnant, CHP in retreat		Cluster 2 BBP's success in Sivas		Cluster 3 AKP and CHP stagnant, MHP and SP on the rise at the expense of ANAP and DP		Cluster 4 DTP dominant, all others in retreat		Cluster 5 AKP and MHP on the rise at the expense of ANAP and DP		Cluster 6 MHP and CHP on the rise at the expense of AKP, ANAP and DP	
	Average changes	Level of Vote	Average changes	Level of Vote	Average changes	Level of Vote	Average changes	Level of Vote	Average changes	Level of Vote	Average changes	Level of Vote
ANAP	-2,9	1,1	0,1	0,1	-1,0	0,8	-3,0	1,5	-3,1	0,8	-1,5	0,7
MHP	0,6	1,5	1,1	9,3	2,5	12,9	-0,4	1,6	3,3	13,5	9,3	20,6
DSP	1,2	1,1	0,5	1,3	1,4	2,6	0,5	1,3	0,9	1,6	0,5	3,2
DTP	15,3	50,3	-0,2	0,1	0,5	4,5	22,7	48,8	0,5	9,3	-0,7	1,5
CHP	-3,3	2,3	-0,4	11,9	0,7	23,0	-3,5	1,9	-0,8	11,4	5,4	26,7
BBP	1,7	1,2	21,0	37,6	1,3	2,2	-1,0	1,2	0,2	2,0	0,8	1,7
DP	-7,1	4,1	-4,4	0,5	-5,4	2,7	-4,1	3,5	-10,9	3,8	-7,5	4,6
SP	-0,5	3,9	-2,6	5,9	2,0	7,4	1,3	7,0	0,1	9,3	1,6	3,0
AKP	1,2	30,8	-13,1	31,7	0,0	42,4	-7,8	30,9	11,6	45,4	-5,0	36,4
Independents	-2,6	2,7	-1,0	0,3	-0,4	0,3	-2,6	0,7	-2,0	0,9	-0,2	0,2
Other parties	-3,5	1,1	-0,9	1,4	-1,5	1,3	-2,1	1,8	0,2	2,0	-2,8	1,3
<b>Number of Cases in each Cluster</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>35</b>				
<b>Share in Turkey total</b>	<b>3,8</b>	<b>1,0</b>	<b>1,0</b>	<b>1,7</b>	<b>40,3</b>	<b>1,7</b>	<b>3,8</b>	<b>49,4</b>				
	Bitlis		Sivas		Artvin	Ağrı			Adıyaman			Adana
	Diyarbakır				Bilecik	Hakkari			Elazığ			Afyon
	Mardin				Bingöl	Van			Gümüşhane			Amasya
	Muş				Çorum				Trabzon			Ankara
	Siirt				Erzincan				Tunceli			Antalya
	Şırnak				Erzurum				Aksaray			Aydın
					Gaziantep				Batman			Balıkesir
					Mersin							Bolu
					İstanbul							Burdur
					Kars				<b>Cluster 6 cont.</b>			Bursa
					Kırşehir				Muğla			Çanakkale
					Karaman				Neşehir			Çankırı
					Kırıkkale				Neşehir			Denizli
					Ardahan				Sakarya			Edirne
					İğdir				Samsun			Eskişehir
					Yalova				Sinop			Giresun
					Kilis				Tekirdağ			Hatay
									Uşak			İsparta
									Zonguldak			Izmir
									Bartın			Kastamonu
									Karabük			Kayseri
									Osmaniye			Kırklareli
									Düzce			Manisa

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Cluster 3 brings together 29 provinces wherein AKP support is again stagnant, receiving on average about the same level of support as it did in 2004, which comes to about 42% in 2009. The center-right ANAP and DP's losses seem to accrue into primarily the right-of-center parties the MHP (with about 13%) and SP (with about 7%) but also in the DSP (with about 3%) and very little on average in the CHP (with about 23%). Despite its stagnant vote shares the AKP's total vote share is more in this region than the total of its two main opponents the CHP and the MHP. Given more or less the same partisan distribution of the vote from 2004 to 2009 with the notable exception of rising support for the CHP, Istanbul falls into this group. Besides the *sui generis* case of Sivas, with the BBP's dominant showing, Cluster 5 brings together the 7 provinces wherein the AKP managed on average to increase its vote share by nearly 12 percentage points, reaching its highest vote share of about 45% in this region. It seems that large losses by the DP and ANAP have primarily accrued into the AKP, and also by an average of only about 3 percentage points into the MHP (with about 14%). However, these provinces comprise only about 4% of the urban electorate and thus the gains or losses in this region do not account for much change at the national level.

Figure 6. Regionalization in Changing Electoral Support for Municipal Council Elections, 2004 to 2009



The remaining 35 provinces form Cluster 6 with about half the urban electorate. This is where the incumbent AKP lost on average 5 percentage points while the MHP managed to gain about 9 and the CHP about 5 percentage points. The two other major losers appear to be the ANAP and the DP. Nevertheless, the AKP's vote share in this region, where it lost a significant share compared to 2004, is about 36% while the CHP garners about 27% and the MHP about 21%. Clearly, in this cluster where Ankara and Izmir together with Adana, Antalya, Denizli and Bursa appear to be, the shift seems more likely to be from the centrist ideological positions and away from the AKP constituency. This cluster of provinces covers almost the whole of the Aegean, Mediterranean, Marmara and Western Black Sea provinces. This region is not only the most populous but also the most prosperous.

Comparing Figure 5 to Figure 6 we see that despite its still dominant position at the polls the electoral weakening of the AKP has expanded over a large region of provinces. In most provinces that comprise Clusters 1, 3 and 6 of Figure 6 the AKP is either stagnant or has lost electoral support. As such, the more dynamic depiction of movements reveal a more accurate understanding of where the future electoral tendencies might lean.

## Conclusions and Speculative Explanations

What then do we learn from the resulting electoral picture for Turkey in March 2009? First, it seems clear that the AKP's rise at the polls has come to an end. In a sense, this may be taken as a sign of normalization in the electoral scene of the country. Comparisons with its earlier successes in the 2004 provincial general council elections or the 2007 general elections both yield similar pictures of an electoral retreat for the AKP. However, although perhaps the conservative ideological leaning of the AKP is receiving a shrunken electoral appeal, the rising appeal is not primarily a more libertarian electoral agenda. It is rather an ethnic identity influence that is matched by rising nationalistic fervor.

The party system that seems to arise out of this election is one that is severely divided on a regional basis. Although the AKP's still powerful and dominant electoral force is relatively more homogeneous compared to that of its competitors, we observe that parties that are rising in the western developed provinces fail to attain any significant presence in the least developed east and southeastern provinces where

The MHP's electoral appeal is yet to surpass the CHP's. However, the rise of the MHP's electoral support is stronger and more consistent than that of the CHP.

Although economically mobilized voting is a prevalent factor in Turkish politics, other sources of influence upon voting also exist.

the Kurdish ethnic vote mobilized by the DTP is on the rise. The rise of the ethnic Kurdish vote seems to have eroded AKP support. However, in quite a number of east and southeastern provinces the AKP still managed to retain its previous electoral support or even slightly improve upon it. The falling AKP support is thus most likely linked to the military operations that followed the AKP's successful showing in the region for the July 2007 elections. Despite obvious difficulties, the AKP is still the only party that maintains a significant appeal in the region and gets about one third of the votes. All other parties remain well below 5% in the cluster 1 and 4 provinces which comprise about 5.5% of the total urban electorate.

Besides the AKP and the DTP, no other party has a significant electoral presence in these two province clusters. Take the CHP (or the MHP) for example, which receives only about 2% (2% for MHP) of the vote in cluster 1 and about 27% (21% for MHP) in cluster 6 which covers mostly the western coastal provinces. Such vote differential between one cluster of provinces to another simply is a sign of weakness not only for the parties involved but for the whole party system. When we look into the nationalization trends in different party votes, we observe that both opposition parties suffer from heavy reliance on regionally mobilized votes. While this may be seen as an advantage in some regions, it clearly remains a sign of weakness in others.

One way to deal with this systemic problem is by normalizing the electoral politics in the region. The significant presence of the DTP in the Turkish Grand National Assembly and its increasing presence in the local service delivery mechanisms should be allowed to effectively shape service delivery mechanisms in the region and the party administration should be held accountable for its performance. Any sense of discrimination against these local administrators would only work against normalization of electoral politics. Failure at the level of local administrations could easily be shifted to the discriminatory policies of the central government. However, success will bind the DTP to bread and butter issues and render it accountable to regional constituencies.

The AKP also experienced a downturn of about 5 percentage points on average in the largest and most populous group of provinces. Despite these loses it still remains the dominant party with about 36% of the votes and an advantage of about 10 percentage points over its closest competitor. Such contraction may be attributable to the economic crisis taking hold in the country.<sup>8</sup> These difficulties are more likely to be felt most

8. See Çarkoğlu, A. 2008. "Ideology or Economic Pragmatism: Profiling Turkish Voters in 2007", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.9 No.2, June, pp. 317-344 and references therein for Turkish experience with economic voting.



severely and directly by the relatively more prosperous and more open economies of the western provinces. Other regions may be relatively more self sufficient and more agricultural in their economic structure and thus are more likely to enjoy some time lag before feeling the decline in economic fortunes. However, the western provinces are more directly hit by closed export markets, declining industrial production and the general contraction of the most modern sectors of Turkish economy.

In their local election campaign, the AKP obviously tried to use every opportunity to divert attention away from the economy. If this opportunity was seen in the war in Gaza, it was used with some reckless inattention to diplomatic consequences in the long term. Similarly, in the infamous Davos affair, Prime Minister Erdoğan perhaps genuinely but clearly also tactlessly confronted the Israeli president and obviously scored some short lived points. However, as the sugar high eroded, much remained to be corrected both domestically as well as internationally. The timing and intensity of the Ergenekon case also leaves the impression that somehow a very convenient electoral agenda was also being served in its shaping. Nevertheless, such speculative scenarios proved to be futile in obtaining much of a desired electoral success. When the pocketbook of the masses hurt, the politicians in responsible positions once again paid a price no matter how the masses might be ideologically favorably predisposed towards them. This clearly could be read as a healthy signal from the masses. Unless the daily pragmatic concerns of the masses are served and responded to, no party is likely to stay in power. Ideological debates grounded on sensitive religious sentiments or anti-establishment rhetoric that underlines the Ergenekon affair are not likely to divert the attention of the masses from their own pocketbooks.

The shifting electoral bases of the AKP, ANAP and DP are signals that a new electoral movement may be in the making. Some of these votes are flowing into the other centrist parties like the CHP. However, a new and imposing direction is towards the MHP as well. The maturing and mellowing of the ultra-nationalist stances of the MHP are yet to be observed. Their strong and vocal opposition to the EU as well as their hawkish stance concerning the ethnic Kurdish minority in the country are likely to keep the MHP regionally un-integrated and divisive.

The MHP's electoral appeal is yet to surpass the CHP's. However, the rise of the MHP's electoral support is stronger and more consistent than that of the CHP. One advantage (potentially a weakness as well) is that the not only MHP possesses a strong electoral basis at the heart of the Anatolian and eastern Black Sea provinces,

Given the trends of March 2009, the western provinces appear more likely to adopt a nationalist tone in reflecting their anger towards the government.

The long-term experience of Turkey in holding competitive elections should be proven to make a difference in the lives of the region's population and help improve their daily lives.

where the AKP's core constituency lies, but also enjoys an increasing presence in the more developed western provinces wherein the CHP has traditionally made a strong showing. The MHP may have to wait until the AKP's performance deteriorates in the eyes of its core constituency in order to have a break in those provinces. CHP support in the western regions may also be primarily mobilized by the hurting economy, but may also be driven by a deeper ideological opposition to the conservatism of the AKP that does not necessarily exist amongst the new MHP supporters. However, given the deepening economic crisis, the MHP is better placed to benefit from deteriorating conditions than the CHP which will have to share the voters shaken by the crisis in the western provinces with the MHP as well. While the CHP cannot practically capitalize on deteriorating AKP electoral basis in the central Anatolia and Eastern Black Sea regions, the MHP's electoral success is more likely to grow in both regions.

Although economically mobilized voting is a prevalent factor in Turkish politics, other sources of influence upon voting also exist. Left-right ideology and various guises of conservative worldviews all exert some influence. However, with a few years of relative prosperity now behind it, electoral politics in Turkey may once again be under the heavy influence of yet another economic crisis.

As a single party in power, the AKP will not be able to shift responsibility on the economic front to any other party. Just as a favorable economic performance prior to the 2007 general elections benefited the incumbent AKP, a downturn in economic evaluations could decisively take away most of these electoral gains. However, one could easily conjecture that economic difficulties will not be felt equally strongly by all segments of Turkish society nor through all the geographic regions of the country. The relatively closed agricultural economies of the Anatolian towns may make them latecomers into this unfavorable economic experience, and thus be hurt later and to a lesser degree compared to the western province electorate. So, the reflection of the economic crisis upon the electoral fortunes of the incumbent party is likely to be shaped in accordance with regional variation in partisan support. As we already observe, on the one hand, the developed western provinces appear most seriously hit by the economic worries and appear to slowly be shifting their support to the CHP and MHP. On the other hand, ethnic identity considerations seem to be shifting the east and southeastern provinces away from mainstream politics and towards the marginalized DTP. During the deepening phase of the apparently impending economic crisis, the Turkish electorate is likely to get even more polarized along regional lines.

Given the trends of March 2009, the western provinces appear more likely to adopt a nationalist tone in reflecting their anger towards the government, which would inevitably carry them further apart from the relatively more conservative smaller Anatolian provinces. Similarly, the west will more likely move further away from the east and southeastern provinces wherein Kurdish identity politics might divert the electorate into a divergent path from the rest of the country.

The recent success of the DTP could provide a healthy basis for avoiding such potential divergence and might simply help their party politics get more deeply grounded in the bread and butter issues of local governance rather than identity politics which are bound to speed divergence and create more conflict. Electoral politics focused on service provision for the needy east and southeastern Anatolian citizens should be allowed to work their way into the regional politics. It should be noted that the region's population at large not only observes where their western compatriots stand in comparison to their conditions but also constantly compare the developments in Northern Iraq with their daily lives and the services they receive from different levels of administrations. The long-term experience of Turkey in holding competitive elections should be proven to make a difference in the lives of the region's population and help improve their daily lives. Only in such an event will the vernacular bread and butter politics of service provision be able to compete with divisive ethnic identity politics. Such a new approach to region's politics could only work if both the DTP and the rest of the party system players act responsibly and with adequate visionary political maneuvering. In politics, like everywhere else, it takes two to tango. However, Turkey's regional political game of electoral competition takes more than two players. The presence of basically only two parties in the region does not help to bring about any such harmonious game play in the region. This is the main challenge that Turkish party politics will face in the years to come as we approach the next general election.

This article aims at presenting a descriptive account of the March 2009 local elections in Turkey. Comparing the general and local elections since 2004, an overall evaluation of trends in electoral preferences is presented. Using provincial general council election results, a detailed geographical comparative analysis of the 2004 and 2009 local elections is also carried out. The analyses show that the AKP's rise has stalled but it still remains as the dominant power in the party system. The electoral map continues to be divided between the coastal western and most developed provinces where the opposition is significantly supported, the east and southeastern provinces where the Kurdish ethnic electoral support is rising and the more conservative provinces in between where the AKP continues to be dominant with the MHP trailing behind. Even though the March 2009 elections had all the characteristics of a local election, they also reveal the rising trends in electoral behaviour in Turkey.

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