

Party Preferences and Economic Voting in Turkey (Now That the Crisis is Over)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to re-examine the factors that shape party preferences in Turkey by estimating an individual vote intention function. The economic variables in the empirical model are items that can be used to test the conventional ‘economic voting’ hypotheses, i.e. whether individuals’ economic evaluations about the past or the near future affect their party choice. In an earlier paper, based on data from 2002, evidence was found in favor of these hypotheses. Those who had been affected adversely by the economic crisis of 2001 were found to be very unlikely to vote for the incumbent parties of the time. In the present paper, we focus on the comparison of the characteristics of the intended voters of the currently-ruling - and so far successful - Justice and Development Party (AKP) with those of other parties. According to multinomial logit estimates, those who make the more optimistic evaluations about the state of the economy are more likely to vote for the AKP. This finding is at variance with the dominant empirical finding of what is known as ‘grievance asymmetry’, i.e. that voters may react more to negative changes than to corresponding positive ones.

1. Introduction

The general elections of November 2002 were considered as a political earthquake in Turkey. With thirty-four percent of the votes, the ‘moderate-Islamist’ Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) won nearly two-thirds of the seats in the parliament owing to the election system that imposes a ten percent national threshold for representation. The AKP has been the recipient of a substantial amount of protest votes by large masses that were adversely affected by the dismal economic conditions that prevailed in Turkey after the former ruling coalition led the country into its worst ever economic crisis. While the center-left Republican People’s

Party became the only party other than the AKP to enter the parliament, members of the former coalition suffered the heaviest losses as their combined vote share dropped by about 39 percentage points (to 14.7 percent) within the three and a half years following the April 1999 elections. This was the first time in Turkey that ruling parties were totally wiped out of the parliament.

The purpose of this study is to analyze party preferences in Turkey and determine the characteristics of the electoral base of the AKP with a particular focus on the role of economic evaluations. This issue has previously been dealt with in our earlier paper (Başlevent, Kirmanoğlu, and Şenatarlar, 2005). The empirical work of that paper was based on an April 2002 electorate tendency survey conducted at a time when the effects of the economic crisis were still strongly felt. The empirical model performed well in predicting that the incumbent parties would be punished by those who were badly affected by the economic conditions. The survey utilized in the present paper was conducted in December 2003 at a time when the economy had begun its recovery, most noticeably in the form of a significant decline in the inflation rate and a more stable exchange rate against the euro and the U.S. dollar.

Empirical findings from a survey conducted one year after the 2002 elections could be informative for two main reasons. The first one is that, after one year in power, the AKP was regarded more as a 'conservative-democrat' party, rather than pro-Islamist. It would be interesting to see if that perception translated into political support to the party from the more liberal/modern segments of the society. Another reason is that the model allows us to test - in a multivariate setting - the role of economic evaluations when the ruling party is successful in creating a stable economic environment. This is not a result to be taken for granted since Lewis-Beck and Paldam (2000) report that there is dominant empirical finding on what is known as the 'grievance asymmetry', which asserts that voters may react more to negative changes than to corresponding positive ones.

2. Economic Voting

In examining party preferences, we estimate an individual vote intention function that includes both economic and non-economic factors. The economic factors considered are the variants of the two main approaches to economic voting theory, i.e. the retrospective and prospective pocketbook/sociotropic evaluations of individuals. Economic voting is a general concept that relates electoral support for incumbent parties to economic performance built upon the hypothesis that voters hold the government responsible for economic events.¹ Central to the economic voting argument is the idea that uncertainty about the future and about the sincerity of the candidates (parties) make the past action the best guide for assessing the future utilities of candidates (parties). Empirical analysis involving economic voting may be carried out at the individual level to discover the determinants of voters' party choice or at the aggregate level to analyze election outcomes. At the individual level, sociotropic and egotropic (or pocketbook) voting are two approaches to modeling economic voting behavior and so are the retrospective and prospective voting hypotheses.

Retrospective pocketbook voting hypothesis is the notion that party choice is influenced by individuals' assessments of their personal (household) economic

¹ For more on economic voting, see the special issue of *Electoral Studies: Economics and Elections* (Volume 19, Number 2/3, June/September 2000).

situations in the recent past. If an individual feels that her economic situation worsened (improved) under a given government, she will be less (more) likely to vote for the ruling party in the next election. Retrospective sociotropic voting refers to the notion that voters' consider the state of the national economy when they decide which party to vote for. Taking into consideration the general economic situation does not necessarily reflect an altruistic thinking of the voter for the economic needs of others, but may be based upon the notion that a better macroeconomic situation benefits the individual.

Both types of retrospective voting imply that votes are cast on the basis of economic performance, rather than economic policy proposals and promises. Hypotheses of prospective voting, on the other hand, argue that party choice is based on the assessment of future economic prospects rather than the past. Prospective pocketbook voting refers to the consideration of individual economic expectations for the future while individuals who consider the larger national prospects are said to vote sociotropic prospectively.

Examination of the relationship between economic performance and electoral success in Turkish politics goes as far back as Bulutay and Yıldırım (1969) and Bulutay (1970) that make use of aggregate data. Among the more recent studies, Çarkoğlu (1997) develops an aggregate vote function for Turkey that relates variations in electoral support for the incumbents in 21 elections during the 1950-1995 period to macroeconomic conditions, namely the percentage changes in consumer price index and real per capita GNP and the unemployment rate. The author finds that "rising unemployment and inflation rates lead to declining electoral support for the incumbents whereas higher per capita GNP growth rates lead to higher levels of support" (p.90). Kalaycıoğlu (1999) estimates a model of party preference to determine the factors that explain the voting behavior in Turkey. Discriminant analysis on individual level data reveals that voting behavior is motivated more by cultural and ideological factors than by socio-economic factors. In assessing the role of economics on voting, Kalaycıoğlu employs an economic self-satisfaction variable based on the current level of satisfaction of the respondents'. As such, this variable represents voters' pocketbook evaluations at the time of survey.

Taking a different approach, Akarca and Tansel (2002) use province level data from the 1991 and 1995 general elections to examine the association between the vote shares of political parties and economic growth. Their finding is that the major incumbent party benefits from a good performance at the expense of extremist parties in the opposition while the junior party in the coalition and the centrist opposition parties are unaffected by the economic conditions. Finally, Esmer (2002) carries out binary logit analysis to examine voter behavior in Turkey. He concludes that the most important determinant of the party choice is the left-right ideology whereas indicators of economic well-being are not good predictors.

3. Data and Model Specification

In the empirical work, we use data drawn from the Electorate Tendency Survey conducted in December 2003 by Veri Araştırma, a private research company. The survey was conducted in 26 (out of 81) provinces of Turkey on a nationally representative sample.² The original sample included 1,806 individuals at or above

² The 26 provinces are Adana, Ankara, Bursa, İstanbul, İzmir, Konya, İçel, Hatay, Antalya, Aydın, Tekirdağ, Manisa, Kütahya, Isparta, Sakarya, Karabük, Çorum, Trabzon, Samsun,

the voting age of 18. The respondents were asked which party they would vote for if general elections were to be held on that same day. Of the respondents, 8.9 percent gave no answer, 6.9 percent stated that they were undecided about their votes, and 5.4 percent stated that they would not vote for any of the parties.³ Put differently, 78.7 percent of the respondents stated an explicit party preference. The AKP is the leading party in the sample with 62.4 percent of explicit party preferences.

In the empirical investigations, we work on a sample of 1,520 individuals that excludes the undecided and the no-answer cases. Thus, we examine the choice between the five major parties in Turkey plus the minor parties lumped as one party and the “no vote” decision. The reason we include the non-voters in the analysis is that a non-negligible share of voters seem to have lost belief in the political system. In the November 2002 elections, 8.6 million out of the 41.4 million registered voters failed to turn up at the ballot-box. While this was the lowest turn-out rate (79.1%) in the last 7 elections, it amounted to a drop of nearly 9 percentage points from the 1999 general elections. By including the non-voters as a separate category, we hope to be able to gain some insights as to what kind of people these are.

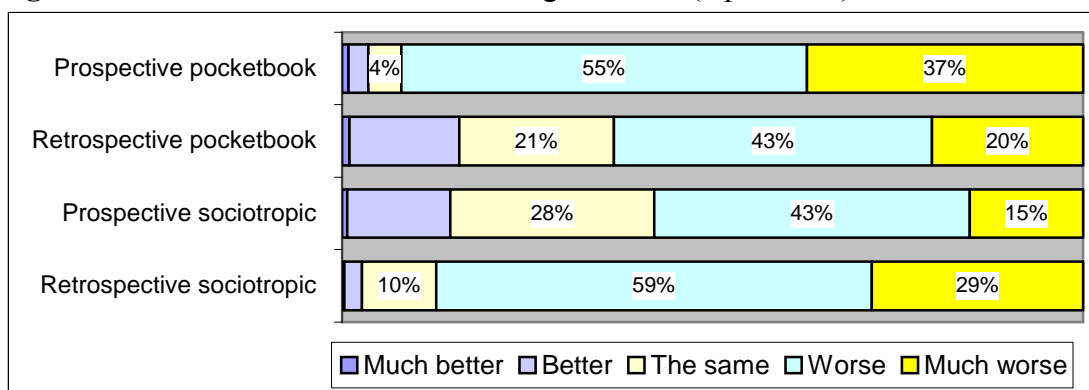
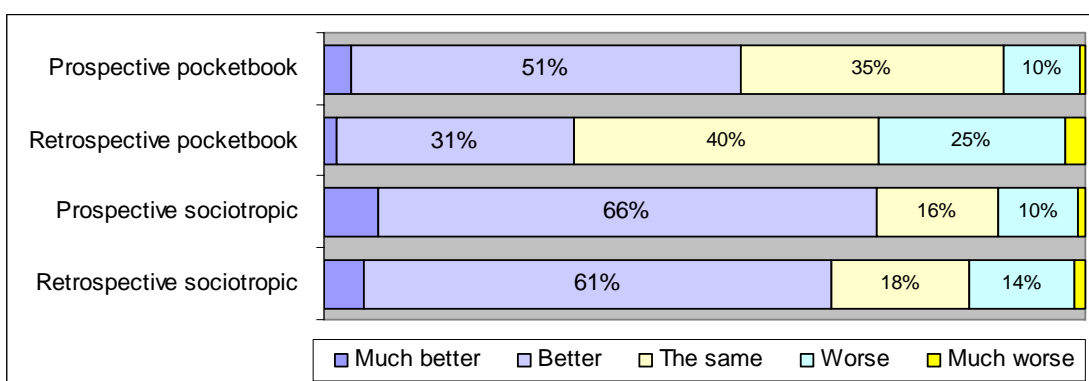
Among the four parties other than the AKP, the Republican People’s Party’s (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) ideological position would be best described as center-left. The True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP) is on the center-right; the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) gets its support from Turkish ultra-nationalists while the Democratic People’s Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP) is the representative of Kurdish nationalists.

The vote intention function we estimate is made up of economic and non-economic factors, and the specification is similar to the one used in Başlevent *et al.* (2005). The multinomial logit estimates for the earlier paper are given in the Appendix. The economic factors included in the present model are items that correspond to the four variants of the economic voting theory discussed earlier. The survey questions on the evaluation of economic changes in Turkey and in respondent’s household during the 12 months preceding the survey are responded to on a 5-point scale such that larger values correspond to more negative economic evaluations: 1 = much better, 2 = better, 3 = the same, 4 = worse, and 5 = much worse.

As reflected by the distribution of the variables in Figure 1a, the 2002 survey was conducted at a time when the effects of the economic crisis of 2001 were still strongly felt by the majority of the population. In each case, the share of those who respond negatively is more than half. By the end of 2003, the picture that emerges from the same distribution has changed dramatically (see Figure 1b). Positive evaluations are the majority except in the ‘retrospective pocketbook’ case. Evidently, there are many individuals who are hopeful about the economy’s future even though their personal condition has not improved during the past year.

Erzurum, Kayseri, Sivas, Adiyaman, K.Maraş, Diyarbakır, and Van. These were chosen after a stratification of provinces according to geographical location. Within these provinces, both urban and rural locations were represented in the sample in proportion with the number of voters they contain.

³ The last figure, which is down from 16.9 percent in April 2002, could be an indication that, during this period, a restoration of Turkish people’s trust in the political system has taken place.

Figure 1a: Distribution of economic voting variables (April 2002)**Figure 1b:** Distribution of economic voting variables (Dec. 2003)

In fact, comparison of the pocketbook and sociotropic variables provides a way of observing whether individuals feel that they are economically better or worse off compared with the society in general. In our sample, about 44 percent of the respondents have answered the retrospective pocketbook and sociotropic questions in the same way, while the corresponding figure for the prospective questions is 58% (See Table 1). The majority of the remaining individuals feel that they are worse off than others. Since the 'average' person should in reality be doing just as well as the rest of the society, it seems that people tend to overrate other people's welfare, or underplay their own. It may also be interesting to know whether people's retrospective evaluations coincide with their prospective ones. That happens to be the case 65% of the time for the sociotropic variables and 55% of the time for the pocketbook variables. The majority of the rest have more positive evaluations for the next 12 months.

Table 1: Comparison of economic voting variables (in %)

	A: Retro. pocketbook	A: Pros. pocketbook	A: Pros. sociotropic	A: Pros. pocketbook
	B: Retro. sociotropic	B: Pros. sociotropic	B: Retro. sociotropic	B: Retro. pocketbook
A better than B	9.7	12.4	21.8	38.8
A equal to B	43.5	57.7	64.8	54.5
A worse than B	46.8	29.9	13.4	6.7

The non-economic factors included in the model are standard socio-demographic variables (age, education, gender, the within-province location of the place of settlement, and religiosity) as well as other factors specific to Turkey that might affect voting behavior. These are operationalized through dummy variables for (i) belonging to the ‘Alevi’ sect of Islam (7.6% in sample), (ii) being an ethnic ‘Kurd’ (10.1% in sample), and (iii) the opinions on the issue of Turkey’s membership in the European Union. A similar question on the abolition of the death penalty present in the April 2002 survey is missing in the December 2003 survey since the death penalty was already abolished by that time.

Education is entered in the model as a single continuous variable that takes on its values depending on the years spent in school. The information is gathered from the survey question on the highest degree completed. We assigned 3 years to those who have - at most - completed elementary school (71% of sample), 8 to middle school (9%), 11 to high school (15%), and 15 to university graduates (5%). We expect this variable to perform well as a predictor of the party choice since Esmer (2002) reports that the level of education is repeatedly found to be positively related to leftist orientation in earlier work by the same author.

As in all predominantly Muslim countries, Islam plays an important role in Turkish politics, and a self-identified degree of religiosity has previously been found to be a significant factor of voters’ preferences (Esmer, 1995; Kalaycıoğlu, 1999; Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2000). The survey question on whether the respondent is a believer and how closely he or she follows the rules of Islam is responded to on a 5-point scale. While the overwhelming majority of the respondents claim to be believers, about two-thirds consider themselves “religious”. In an attempt to incorporate what’s known as ‘religious voting’ into the model, we include this variable linearly such that larger values correspond to higher degrees of religiosity.

Even though Turkey is far from becoming a full member of the European Union (EU), the issue of whether Turkey should become a member is a very contentious one. In our sample, around seventy percent of the respondents state that they support the EU membership of Turkey while 15 percent are against membership, and the rest have their reservations or are undecided. In the model, we treat the against-membership group as the reference category and include dummies for the remaining two groups (Cond-EU, for “conditional”, and Pro-EU). We expect this variable to capture the pro vs. anti-Western division among Turkish people.

The population of Turkey includes a very small share of non-Muslims while two sects of Islam combine for nearly 99 percent of the population. While most of the muslims are Sunni’s, there’s also a smaller population of Alevi’s. The share of Alevi’s, who are ethnically divided among Turks, Kurds, and Arabs in Turkey’s population, is estimated at nearly 20 percent (Güneş-Ayata and Ayata, 2002). The reason Alevi’s are of interest politically is that they are known to be supporters of the democratic-secular state, and they usually vote for center-left parties. Kurds, on the other hand, have a separate ethnic origin, and ethnically aware Kurds are known to be more likely to vote for the DEHAP, which they view as their representative. Güneş-Ayata and Ayata (2002) estimate the share of ethnic Kurds who vote for the DEHAP between one-quarter and one-third. Although the share of ethnic Kurds in Turkey’s population is estimated at anywhere between 12 and 20 percent (Andrews, 1989), the DEHAP and its predecessors have never been able to pass the 10 percent nationwide

threshold in any election except in 1991 when they formed a pre-election coalition with another party.⁴

3. Empirical Results

Multinomial logit estimation results are reported in Table 2. Since the model yields too many results to discuss here, we focus on the differences between the characteristics of the AKP voters and the voters of other parties. The coefficients reported are exponentiated coefficient estimates, otherwise known as odds-ratios. They measure the ratio of the probability of voting for a party to the probability of voting for the reference category, which in our case is the AKP. For example, a coefficient of 2 (along with a p -value of less than 10%) on the gender dummy for party X means that for two individuals who are otherwise identical, a female is two times more likely than a male to prefer party X to the AKP. Conversely, coefficients less than 1 indicate a negative association between the value of the explanatory variable and the probability of choosing the relevant party over the AKP, that is if statistical significance (p -value $<.1$) is present.

Leaving the discussion on the economic voting variables to the end, we first focus on the rest of the explanatory variables in the model. As far as the socio-demographic variables are concerned, there isn't strong evidence that age is a determinant of the choice between the AKP and other parties with the exception of the CHP. People who intend to vote for the AKP are younger than those who plan to vote for the CHP. However, since the coefficients on the age variable across the six estimated equations are jointly significant, it is appropriate to include the age variable (and all of the rest of the variables for the same reason) in the model. The education variable turns out to be a good predictor of the choice between the AKP and other parties. With the exception of the MHP and HADEP, individuals who fall into the other categories are more educated than AKP voters.

Coefficient estimates on the gender dummy indicate that females are more likely to choose the AKP over the MHP and DEHAP. Regarding the place of settlement dummies, the coefficient estimates confirm the general opinion that the AKP is strong in largely populated areas. As expected, the degree of religiosity is strongly positively associated with the intention to vote for the AKP. The DYP constitutes an exception here since there is no statistically significant difference between the AKP and DYP voters with respect to the religiosity variable.

As for the issues variables, estimation results indicate that the intention to vote for the AKP is not positively associated with being pro-EU membership. Even though statistical significance of the coefficients is generally absent, the magnitudes of the coefficients suggest that the intended voters of CHP, DYP and DEHAP are more pro-EU than AKP voters. On the other hand, MHP voters and those who intend to vote for minor parties are the two groups who are more strongly against EU membership than those who plan to vote for the AKP. It is worth mentioning that in the study based on the April 2002 survey, the finding was that AKP voters are statistically significantly less pro-EU than many of the other groups. The reason for the change must be that, as reflected by the vote share in the present data set, the AKP is getting more support from the modern/liberal segments of the society.

⁴ Incidentally, the HADEP ended up entering the elections under another name (DEHAP) in the face of the possibility of being closed down by the Constitutional Court.

Table 2: Multinomial Logit Results of the Vote Intention Function (Dec. 2003)

	DYP	CHP	MHP	DEHAP	Others	No vote
Subsample size (%)	48 (3.2)	202 (13.3)	62 (4.1)	40 (2.6)	122 (8.0)	98 (6.5)
Demographic variables						
Age	1.016 0.145	1.017 0.017	0.985 0.162	0.993 0.645	0.995 0.592	1.006 0.493
Education	1.087 0.061	1.102 0.000	1.037 0.367	0.890 0.148	1.144 0.000	1.112 0.001
Female	0.928 0.818	0.817 0.332	0.440 0.007	0.470 0.076	1.029 0.902	0.641 0.083
District	1.007 0.986	1.155 0.602	1.994 0.068	1.603 0.408	1.219 0.570	3.222 0.017
City center	0.434 0.052	0.561 0.038	0.486 0.094	2.200 0.152	0.882 0.710	3.324 0.011
Religiosity	0.920 0.716	0.440 0.000	0.645 0.038	0.418 0.001	0.577 0.000	0.517 0.000
Economic voting variables						
Retro. socio.	2.246 0.000	2.404 0.000	1.865 0.002	1.053 0.853	2.265 0.000	2.005 0.000
Pros. socio.	2.285 0.000	2.762 0.000	3.338 0.000	2.683 0.000	2.865 0.000	2.969 0.000
Retro. pocket.	1.397 0.126	1.240 0.133	0.869 0.492	2.162 0.006	1.747 0.000	1.337 0.093
Pros. pocket.	1.490 0.096	1.459 0.018	1.198 0.456	1.507 0.165	1.678 0.003	2.011 0.000
EU dummy variables						
Conditional	1.273 0.745	1.006 0.988	0.835 0.693	2.089 0.472	0.180 0.000	0.954 0.908
Pro-EU	2.768 0.102	1.533 0.182	0.512 0.061	2.333 0.328	0.493 0.011	0.658 0.204
Identity variables						
Alevi	1.353 0.779	25.760 0.000	5.652 0.007	4.982 0.025	6.446 0.000	8.905 0.000
Kurd	0.721 0.603	0.732 0.425	0.408 0.237	80.404 0.000	0.883 0.778	1.634 0.234

Notes: Reference category is the AKP, with 948 votes (62.4%). Sample size: 1,520. Table entries in each cell are exponentiated coefficient estimates (top) and *p*-values (bottom). Restricted log likelihood: -1941.36. Log likelihood of model: -1390.78. Likelihood ratio (84 d.f.): 1101.16. Pseudo R²: 0.2836.

Estimation results concerning the identity variables indicate that Alevis are highly unlikely to vote for the AKP while the CHP is confirmed as the most popular party among this group of voters. Kurds, on the other hand, are extremely more likely to vote for the HADEP rather than the AKP as well as the rest of the parties. There's also some evidence that the AKP is relatively more popular among Kurds as it has traditionally emphasized the notion of the "brotherhood of Islam" rather than the Turkish identity as the basis of unity in the society.

As far as the economic voting variables are concerned, there is strong evidence that voters with positive economic evaluations are planning to support the AKP government in the next elections. Interestingly, the coefficients on the sociotropic voting variables are statistically more significant than those on the pocketbook variables. In other words, people who believe that the state of the nationwide economy is improving are more likely to support the AKP than those who feel their personal situation has improved. The only exception here is that people who thought that the national economy worsened are as much likely to vote for the DEHAP as the AKP. This result does not come as a surprise since the two parties are known to be the most popular among the economically disgruntled masses.

4. Conclusion

Multinomial logit estimates of the vote intention function we estimated confirm our earlier finding that relatively younger, more religious, and less educated people, especially males, constitute the electoral base for the AKP. Those who have positive evaluations of the AKP's performance are also likely to vote for the AKP. We have thus found evidence that economic evaluations play a significant role in the party choice of Turkish voters alongside non-economic factors. We concluded that 'economic voting' is present in Turkey in the sense that successful incumbents are rewarded just as unsuccessful ones are punished.

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Appendix: Multinomial Logit Results of the Vote Intention Function (April 2002)

	DYP	CHP	HADEP	MHP	ANAP	SP	DSP	No vote
Subsample size (%)	148 (11.4)	134 (10.3)	101 (7.8)	94 (7.2)	85 (6.5)	50 (3.8)	36 (2.8)	306 (23.5)
Demographic variables								
Age	1.026 0.001	1.017 0.060	1.019 0.171	0.971 0.006	1.026 0.005	1.012 0.329	1.024 0.071	1.016 0.017
Education	0.960 0.323	1.007 0.866	0.871 0.033	0.972 0.535	1.012 0.795	1.002 0.978	0.974 0.691	1.057 0.060
Female	1.929 0.003	1.477 0.120	1.703 0.147	1.431 0.158	3.568 0.000	1.497 0.220	1.495 0.302	2.177 0.000
Urban	0.619 0.046	1.165 0.609	0.885 0.762	0.765 0.338	1.024 0.939	0.929 0.845	0.373 0.043	0.906 0.631
Metropolitan	0.447 0.011	1.504 0.212	0.420 0.139	0.507 0.065	1.400 0.324	1.697 0.195	0.599 0.286	1.711 0.019
Religiosity	0.467 0.000	0.255 0.000	0.202 0.000	0.397 0.000	0.691 0.068	0.852 0.524	0.255 0.000	0.376 0.000
Economic voting variables								
Retro. socio.	1.503 0.020	0.870 0.440	0.572 0.072	1.175 0.374	0.753 0.132	0.993 0.979	0.743 0.191	1.176 0.242
Pros. socio.	0.921 0.500	0.974 0.851	1.780 0.026	0.665 0.003	1.028 0.859	0.938 0.735	0.729 0.144	0.937 0.518
Retro. pocket.	0.717 0.013	0.926 0.628	0.982 0.948	0.858 0.324	0.686 0.022	0.801 0.260	0.757 0.254	0.886 0.273
Pros. pocket.	0.743 0.073	0.934 0.724	1.044 0.906	0.613 0.009	0.941 0.774	1.083 0.767	0.582 0.029	1.121 0.438
Issues variables								
Cond-EU	3.265 0.000	2.052 0.138	2.411 0.257	1.582 0.269	2.901 0.038	2.300 0.036	3.501 0.050	1.824 0.026
Pro-EU	2.588 0.000	4.046 0.000	3.259 0.051	1.491 0.146	4.783 0.000	0.578 0.145	2.862 0.033	1.369 0.105
Cond-abol	2.266 0.000	2.016 0.022	1.074 0.941	1.297 0.344	1.601 0.138	0.837 0.642	2.554 0.020	1.430 0.081
Pro-abol	0.846 0.612	3.273 0.000	22.936 0.000	0.303 0.020	3.006 0.001	0.660 0.390	0.754 0.646	1.965 0.004
Identity variables								
Alevi	4.954 0.064	90.083 0.000	8.783 0.018	1.391 0.793	14.239 0.001	3.827 0.281	10.358 0.016	15.817 0.000
Kurd	0.890 0.784	0.253 0.011	25.696 0.000	0.515 0.305	0.443 0.132	3.075 0.015	0.000 1.000	0.472 0.037

Notes: Reference category is the AKP, with 347 votes (26.7%). Sample size: 1301. Table entries in each cell are exponentiated coefficient estimates (top) and *p*-values (bottom). Restricted log likelihood: -2556.87. Log likelihood of model: -1988.29. Likelihood ratio (128 d.f.): 1137.15. Pseudo R²: 0.2224.