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# A Quick Glance at the History of Elections in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT** *Generally speaking, two traditions – right-wing politics and the Left – have dominated Turkish politics over the years. This study aims to analyze historic election results in order to determine roughly how much popular support each political movement enjoys in the country. Starting from transition to multi-party system in Turkey, one can see the emergence of several ideologies, groups and political parties that appeal to various social classes. Although military interventions caused a rupture in the democratization of the country, there has been a lively political environment with dynamic party politics and elections. During the span of Turkish democracy, a number parties were established and closed. This article examines the trajectory of elections and party performances with a special emphasis on ideology and electoral base of the parties.*

In the months leading up to the local elections on March 30, 2014, Turkey's political scene set the stage for an unusually intense debate. During this period, various anti-government media outlets expressed their firm belief that the country's political landscape was on the brink of a major transformation. So strong was their conviction that opposition commentators had begun to speculate that the ruling AK Party government would have no choice but to call for early elections and possibly find itself removed from power. The elections, however, yielded unsurprising results as the balance of power between the political parties remained largely unaltered. Thus, it became clear that the

glorified projections were more in line with wishful thinking and pipe dreams rather than real-life facts. As soon as the election results started flowing in, the opposition began sharing anecdotes about the late Aziz Nesin, a secularist writer and humorist who once famously claimed that 60 percent of Turkish citizens were idiots. Timeless classics such as *how terribly ignorant the voters were* and *that the country indeed was suffering from Stockholm syndrome* began to quickly circulate around social media outlets.

As a matter of fact, the pre-election overexcitement and post-election emotions of this nature have tradi-

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Polling clerks  
while counting  
the votes of  
Turkey's 2014  
local elections.

AA / Cem Öksüz



tionally been common features of elections in Turkey. Furthermore, there is no indication that the current situation will change in the foreseeable future. Generally speaking, two traditions – right-wing politics and the Left – have dominated Turkish politics over the years. This study aims to analyze historic election results in order to determine roughly how much popular support each political movement enjoys in the country.

The Ottoman Empire's gradual disintegration and its failure to compete with the West gave rise to two political traditions, which evolved into distinctly opposite camps as a result of numerous developments in the late 19th and early 20th century. In general terms, one of the groups aspired to reach the ideal of Western values through a centralized administration, a fundamentally secularist brand of

politics, social liberalism and a statist economic policy. Having attained considerable popularity in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, this political tradition had a serious following among the elites who founded the Republic in 1923. Their adversaries, understandably enough, made the case for a decentralized administrative structure that would bolster local values, social conservatism and economic liberalism, with a particular emphasis on democracy and political liberties.

From the Republic's establishment until its transition to a multi-party system in 1946, the Republican People's Party (CHP) single-handedly ruled the country as a handful of attempts to facilitate opposition parties proved futile and occasionally bloody. It was in this context that the Democrat Party (DP), which emerged immediately after the adop-

tion of multi-party politics, was founded by none other than former CHP politicians, including Celal Bayar, Adnan Menderes, Fuad Köprülü and Refik Koraltan. For the purposes of this study, however, we shall ignore otherwise significant nuances and describe the CHP and its successors as the Left, while political parties tracing their heritage to the DP will be referred to as the Right.

Figure 1 provides a list of political parties that participated in parliamentary elections since 1950 and identifies their position within the broader Left-Right dichotomy:

Before proceeding with our analysis, a methodological explanation might be necessary: In every given election, the results are calculated with reference to the number of registered voters that participate in the election without any procedural mistakes. In other words, election results ignore registered voters that do not participate in the election as well as invalid votes. For instance, let us consider that two candidates run for public office in a district with 100 registered voters and that the top candidate receives 40 votes while the runner-up wins 20 votes, meaning 40 people did not participate in the election. In

	LEFT		RIGHT		OTHER
	CENTER	FAR	CENTER	FAR	
1950	CHP		DP	MP	Independents
1954	CHP		DP	CMP, TKP	Independents
1957	CHP, HP		DP	CMP	Independents
1961	CHP		AP, YTP	CKMP	Independents
1965	CHP	TİP	AP, YTP	MP, CKMP	Independents
1969	CHP	BP, TİP	AP, YTP	GP, MP, MHP	Independents
1973	CHP	TBP	AP, DP	MSP, CGP, MHP, MP	Independents
1977	CHP	TBP, TİP	AP, DP	MSP, MHP, CGP	Independents
1983	HP		ANAP, MDP		Independents
1987	SHP, DSP		ANAP, DYP	RP, MÇP, IDP	Independents
1991	SHP, DSP	SP	ANAP, DYP	RP	Independents
1995	CHP, DSP	İP	ANAP, DYP	RP, MHP, MP, YDP, YP	HADEP, Independents, YDH
1999	CHP, DSP	ÖDP, BP, İP, EMEP, SİP, DEPAR, DBP	ANAP, DYP, DTP	MHP, FP, BBP, DP, MP, YDP	HADEP, Independents, LDP
2002	CHP, DSP, YTP	İP, ÖDP, TKP	ANAP, DYP	AKP, MHP, SP, BBP, YP, BTP, MP	GP, DEHAP, Independents, LDP
2007	CHP	HYP, İP, TKP, ÖDP, EMEP	DP	AKP, MHP, SP, BTP, ATP	Independents, GP, LDP
2011	CHP, DSP	TKP, EMEP	DP, DYP	AKP, MHP, SP, HAS, BBP, MP, MMP	Independents, HAKPAR, LDP

Figure 1: A categorization of political parties in parliamentary elections since 1950<sup>1</sup>

this case, the official results would indicate that the winner received 66.7 percent of the vote while their closest opponent won 33.3 percent. As such, 40 percent of all voters would effectively translate into 66.7 percent of valid votes, just as the loser's 20 percent would show up in the official results as 33 percent. It would be meaningless, of course, to expect election results to be reported with reference to the total number of registered voters. In the same spirit, assuming that failure to participate in the elections indicates apathy and a lack of interest might entail misleading assessments of election results. All quantitative data that this study presents, unless otherwise stated, reflect the distribution of votes with reference to the total number of registered voters since we conceptualize the decision to not participate in elections as a political reaction or a lack of viable options as opposed to a passive stance.

Figure 2 demonstrates the popular appeal of the Right and the Left in parliamentary elections between

1950 and 2011 with reference to the total number of registered voters. As such, the figure also identifies the percentage of voters that did not participate in the election (reactionary) as well as the popularity of contenders, such as independents, whom we cannot designate as part of either group (uncategorized).

As the data suggests, the Right received over 50 percent of the vote in the first free and fair elections in 1950 and recorded an approximately 5-percent gain four years later. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the Right's share of the total votes remained consistently below the 50-percent mark, although the first elections after the 1980 military coup drastically improved the movement's popularity. Despite some losses in the 1990s, there has been a consistent upward trend in support for the Right since 2000.

Meanwhile, the Left had a slightly different experience. First of all, it is important to note that the CHP's share of the vote in the 1950 elections

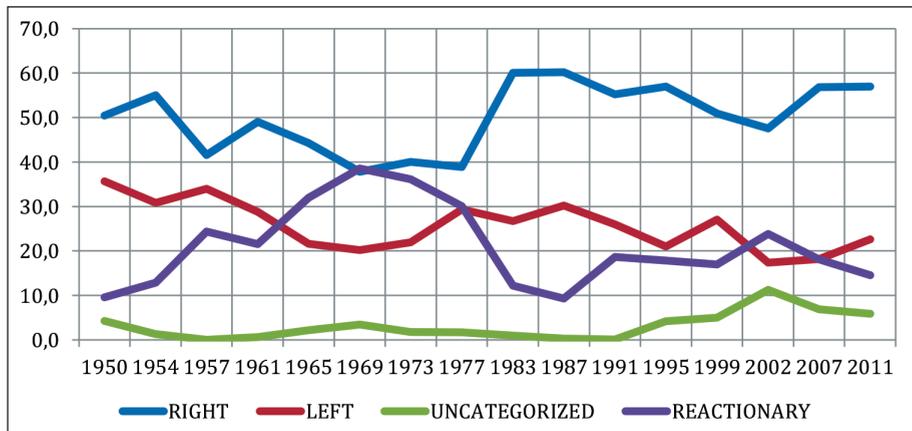


Figure 2: Distribution of all registered voters in parliamentary elections, 1950-2011.

represented a historic high for the camp. While the Left's popular appeal diminished in subsequent elections, the CHP's increasing popularity under Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s partially reversed their losses, while failing to break the 30-percent mark. In the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, the Left came close to receiving 30 percent of the vote in 1987 and 1999, but the overall trend has been downward.

A closer examination would also reveal that the Right and the Left followed similar trends in the 1960s and again after 1980, as a decline in the former camp's popularity typically coincided with a drop in the latter's votes, and vice versa. This phenomenon would attest to the limited electoral volatility between the Right and the Left. More specifically, the correlation coefficient between their votes amount to a meager 0.03, which means that volatility is practically non-existent. A case of high electoral volatility would have generated a higher correlation coefficient.

If there is virtually no electoral volatility between the Right and the Left, how can we account for the positive and negative changes in their popular support? Quite simply, the number of voters that do not participate in elections provides an explanation for this phenomenon. The correlation coefficient between right-wing voters and reactionaries remains at 0.92 – a significantly high number. Accordingly, an increase in the number of voters that choose not to go to polls leads to a drop in the Right's popular support.

## Right-leaning voters have a tendency to not participate in the elections at times when contemporary circumstances restrict the domain of parliamentary politics

While reactionaries could also account for the fluctuations in the Left's vote, the coefficient (0.33) makes this explanation less meaningful. Simply put, right-leaning voters have a tendency to not participate in the elections at times when contemporary circumstances restrict the domain of parliamentary politics. Furthermore, the high number of right-wing parties participating in the contest often draws the two camps closer with reference to valid votes.

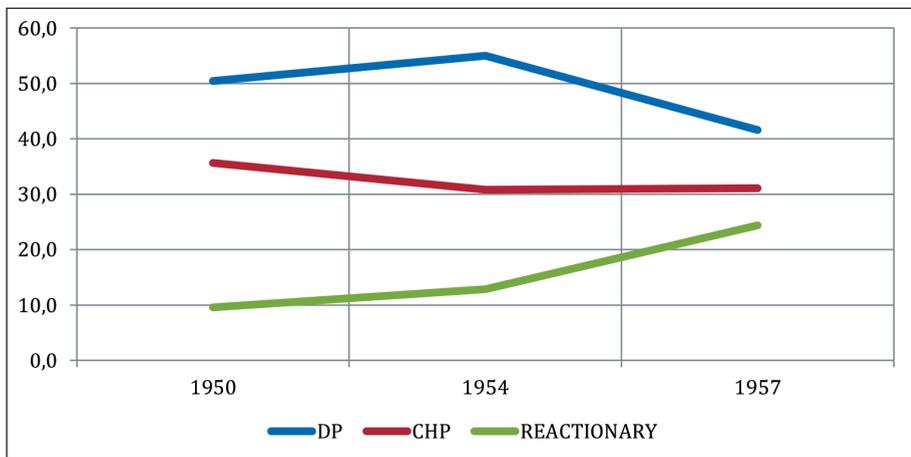
A case in point is the struggle between the CHP and the DP, which continued throughout the 1950s. Conventional wisdom suggests that the electorate, having had enough of the single-party regime, opted to give the opposition party a chance in the 1950 elections. By 1954, the DP's popularity climbed to 58 percent thanks to the government's impressive performance. During this period, the CHP's share of the vote inevitably dropped to 35 percent. As the DP, however, became increasingly authoritarian, performed poorly and found itself faced with charges of corruption and bribery, the party won the 1957 elections with a less comfortable margin (DP 48%, CHP 41%). Unwilling to change

its ways after the 1957 vote, the DP was removed from power by the military three years later. While election results alone might corroborate this narrative, adding the reactionaries to the mix would immediately and radically change the outlook.

According to Figure 3, the DP's share of the vote indeed increased in 1954

ward the CHP. Instead, a large group of voters who opted to withdraw their support from the DP simply chose to not participate in the elections. There was, however, no electoral volatility between the Right and the Left.

The 1960 military coup, which abruptly ended the DP's decade-long rule, represented new heights in the



**Figure 3:** Support for the DP and the CHP with reference to total number of voters, 1950-1957.

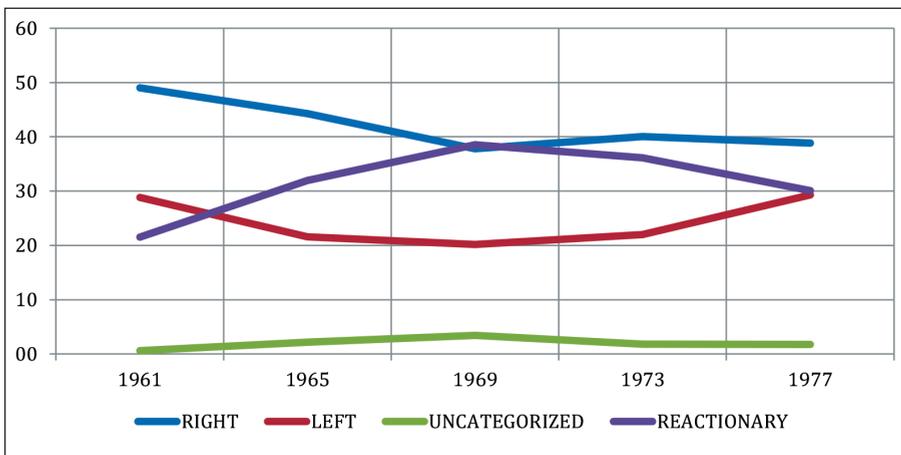
while the CHP suffered some losses. As mentioned above, however, the 1950 elections marked a historic high for the CHP, as the party failed to attain this level of popular support in later years. Meanwhile, the Left won 30 percent of all votes in the 1954 elections – a level that the camp reached just twice in the history of multi-party politics in Turkey. The 1954 vote, in this regard, manifested the extent of the CHP's actual voter base while positioning the DP as a political party on its path to self-actualization. While the DP experienced significant losses in 1957, the phenomenon did not reflect a shift to-

establishment's interference in civilian politics. As Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who won three consecutive parliamentary elections with historically high popular support, was executed following a show trial, the junta rule gave rise to widespread distrust of the political process. Consequently, the reactionaries rose from 20 percent to 40 percent by the end of the 1960s – which made it necessary for the military to act again in 1970. The trauma of the DP experience, however, continued to affect the masses throughout the 1970s as right-leaning voters found themselves split between five

political parties to facilitate the rise of Ecevit, a legend for the Left who won 33.3 percent in 1973 and 41.4 percent in 1977 to outperform the Right. Again, conventional wisdom regards the Ecevit episode as an indication that an honest, trustworthy and knowledgeable leader can draw a substantial amount of votes to the CHP. Figure 4, however, would in-

in the elections, the CHP managed to win elections in 1973 and 1977.

Another common misconception that emerged out of the political landscape of the 1970s was that the electorate had a tendency to opt for leftist candidates in municipal elections, which, by extension, meant that the Left was inherently gifted in



**Figure 4:** Support levels in parliamentary elections with reference to all voters, 1960-1980.

stead suggest that Ecevit's victories owed a great deal to the weakness of the Right.

Taking into account all registered voters in the country, the Left's share hardly exceeded 20 percent in the 1973 elections and was closer to 30 percent four years later. As mentioned above, this level represented a ceiling for the movement, which means that Ecevit owed his status as a political legend to his ability to court leftist voters. Since a multitude of right-wing parties competed over votes and large chunks of otherwise right-wing voters did not participate

managing local governments. This once-popular notion dated back to the 1970s, when the CHP won the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality with Vedat Dalokay in 1973 (42.4%) and Ali Dinçer in 1977 (48%). An oft-ignored fact about these mayoral races, however, was that the turnout rate was 53.5 percent in the former election and 50.6 percent in 1977. As such, the CHP candidates claimed 20 percent and 22.8 percent of all possible votes, respectively, in 1973 and 1977. The extremely low turnout reflected the overall sense of disenchantment among right-wing voters due to military interventions in 1960

and 1971, while the Left was particularly eager to score a victory. The lack of interest among right-wing voters was notably more common in local elections.

In this respect, the situation in the 1960s and the 1970s specifically resulted from the Right's failure to unite under a single party's banner as it did throughout the 1950s. As a matter of fact, just two years after the DP's establishment, public figures including Ret. Gen. Fevzi Çakmak and

a lesser evil compared to the CHP, which is why the party, along with the AP of the 1960s and the 1980s as well as the ANAP and the DYP of the 1980s and the 1990s, represented center-right organizations. Meanwhile, right-wing movements, which typically placed greater emphasis on nationalism and conservative values, engaged in parliamentary politics at the earliest possible time. In terms of electoral competition, both subcategories of the Right sought to attract the same voter base. Figure 5 would

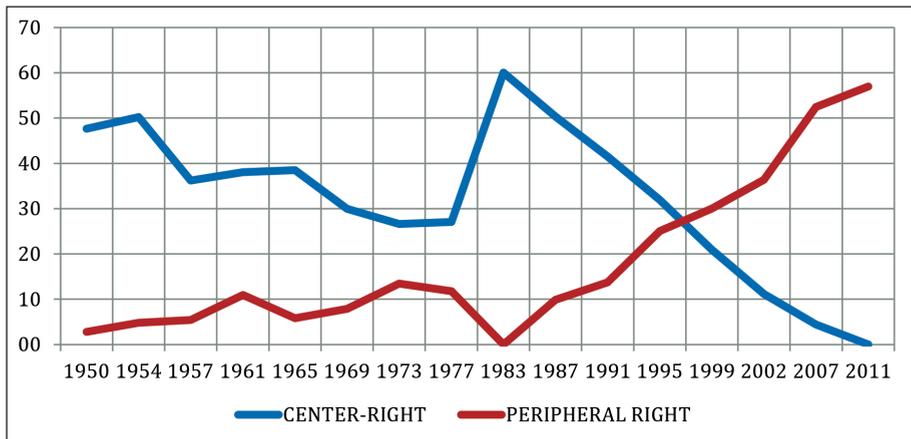


Figure 5: Popular support for center-right and peripheral right parties, 1950-2011.

Osman Bölükbaşı accused the opposition of playing a game of “guided democracy” with the Republican leadership and left the DP to form the Nation Party. They reasoned that the DP’s founders had previously served under the CHP and, in this sense, were loyal to the Republican ideology. The DP leadership’s disagreements with the CHP amounted to little more than nuances and therefore failed to live up to the expectations of right-wing voters. Given the circumstances, the DP was but

attest to this tradeoff between the two traditions.

The correlation coefficient between the center-right and peripheral right votes has traditionally been high and negative (-0.89). In other words, as peripheral right parties became increasingly popular, the center-right votes dropped. By the 2011 parliamentary elections, there was practically nothing left of the once overwhelmingly popular center-right parties.

When we distinguish between center and peripheral right votes, we also observe a drastic change in their correlation to the Left: The correlation coefficient between the center right and the Left stands at 0.67 and therefore is positive. In this regard, the two sets of political parties tend to experi-

platforms. The tipping point in this transition would appear to be the 1994 local elections, when the Welfare Party became the first peripheral right party to win elections in Turkey and, one year later, proceeded to form a coalition government with a center-right party. During this peri-



**Figure 6:** Metropolitan mayoral contests in the 1994 local elections<sup>2</sup>.

ence increases as well as drops in their popular support simultaneously. At a time when the establishment enjoyed support from the general population, both groups experienced periods of greater popularity. By extension, the correlation coefficient between the peripheral right parties and the Left is notably negative (-0,60). As Figure 5 would suggest, the perpetrators of the 1980 military coup specifically banned all peripheral right parties from the elections – a decision that effectively pushed the center-right vote to a historic height of around 60 percent. In later years, the inclusion of peripheral right parties resulted in a notable decrease in center-right votes as conservative and nationalist voters clustered around political parties with ideologically more suitable

od, the Welfare Party's ability to develop a platform with national appeal proved crucial (See Figure 6).

In the 1994 local elections, the Welfare Party claimed conservative-leaning peripheral areas such as Konya, Kayseri and Erzurum, as well as İstanbul and Ankara, the two largest urban centers in the country. Diyarbakır, the only metropolitan municipality in the predominantly Kurdish Southeast, also went to the party. The elections not only marked a huge success for the Welfare Party but also represented Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's debut on the country's political scene as the newly-elected mayor of İstanbul. The decrease of center-right votes, coupled with divisions among left parties and the constant increase

**Aside from the secular Kemalists, the Left appeals to two additional social groups: the Alevi community and the immigrant population from the Balkans**

in peripheral right votes, threatened the establishment, which responded by organizing the 1997 ‘postmodern’ coup. In doing so, the establishment falsely assumed that the Left and the center-right parties would experience a revival, only to witness the rise of peripheral right parties such as the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Virtue Party (FP), the outlawed Welfare Party’s political successor. Shortly after the Constitutional Court shut down the FP, the AK Party entered the country’s politics. Briefly put, right-leaning voters remained largely loyal to peripheral

right parties as failure to impress voters pushed the center-right parties to the fringes of Turkey’s politics.

Figure 7 offers a brief summary of how center-right, right and left parties performed in parliamentary elections since 1950. In recent years, center-right parties have effectively disappeared from the political landscape with theoretically no chances of revival. Meanwhile, the peripheral right’s level of support from the general population nears its peak. In contrast, we observe a slow yet notable decline in popular support for the Left. If the above trends rest on certain social groups and therefore are largely durable, then how can we account for the Left’s decline? First and foremost, we must note that leftist voters, at least for the time being, have not crossed over to the Right. Instead, center-left parties lost ground to their far-left competitors, whose share of the vote has become more noteworthy over the years. In the early 1990s, the Left lost a significant number of

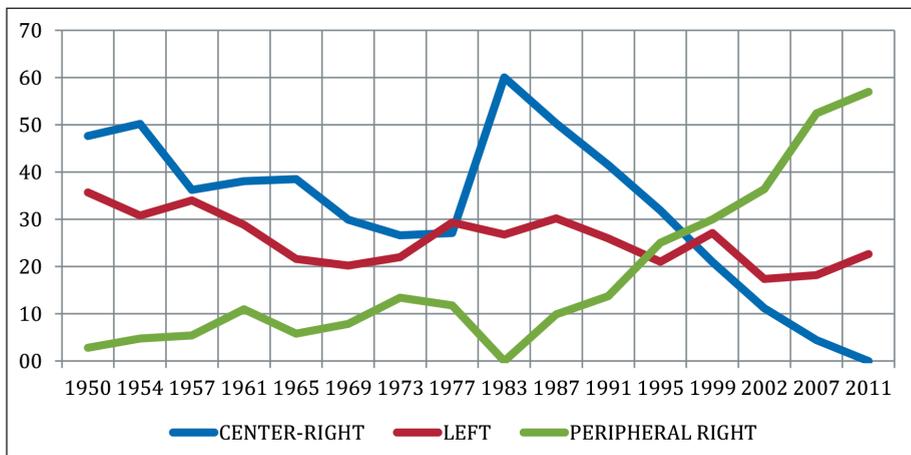


Figure 7: Voting trends in parliamentary elections, 1950-2011.

votes to the Kurdish political movement, whose party organizations such as the HADEP, the DEHAP and the BDP robbed the center-left of roughly 4 points in each election thanks to their emphasis on the Kurdish ethnic identity. As such, the Left's potential has dropped from 30 percent to 25 percent of the vote. Aside from the secular Kemalists, whose share of the vote remains unclear, the Left appeals to two additional social groups: the Alevi community and the immigrant population from the Balkans who reside in the country's western provinces. After a handful of attempts to form their own political party failed to attract the majority of Alevis, the former group opted to become part of a larger whole. The BDP experience, however, provided a valuable lesson to the Alevi community about influencing political debate through a smaller but well-organized political party rather than joining forces with other groups with distinct political agendas. Perhaps as a consequence of the BDP's considerable success, the Alevi community might consider forming their own political party in the future, which would result in a decrease in the Left's popular support (approximately 6 percent). Meanwhile, the immigrant communities have a tendency to support politicians that share their Balkan background, which was demonstrated by the Young Party's (GP) performance in the 2002 parliamentary elections.

This group, lacking any form of ethnic or ideological background, might be willing to retract their support from the Republic's founding party and side with a new political party that is able to influence the state apparatus. However, the overall voting trends are likely to continue without any significant changes in the foreseeable future. ■

## Endnotes

1. MP: Nation Party, CMP: Republican Nation Party, TKP (1954): Villagers Party of Turkey, HP: Liberty Party, AP: Justice Party, YTP: New Turkey Party, CKMP: Republican Villagers Nation Party, TİP: Workers Party of Turkey, BP (1969): Union Party, GP (1969): Reliance Party, MHP: Nationalist Movement Party, TBP (1973): Union Party of Turkey, MSP (1973): National Salvation Party, CGP (1973): Republican Reliance Party, HP: People's Party, ANAP: Motherland Party, MDP: Nationalist Democracy Party, SHP: Social Democratic People's Party, DYP: True Path Party, DSP: Democratic Left Party, RP: Welfare Party, MÇP: Nationalist Labor Party, IDP: Reformist Democracy Party, SP: Socialist Party, İP: Workers Party, MP (1995): Nation Party, YDP: Rebirth Party, YDH: New Democracy Movement, HADEP: People's Democracy Party, YP: New Party, ÖDP: Liberty and Solidarity Party, SİP: Socialist Power Party, EMEP: Labour Party, DBP: Democracy and Peace Party, BP: Peace Party, DTP: Democratic Turkey Party, FP: Virtue Party, BBP: Grand Union Party, LDP: Liberal Democratic Party, YTP: New Turkey Party, TKP (2002): Communist Party of Turkey, SP: Felicity Party, GP: Young Party, DEHAP: Democratic People Party, BTP: Independent Turkey Party, HAS: People's Voice Party, MP (2011): Nation Party, MMP: Nationalist and Conservative Party, HAKPAR: Rights and Liberties Party, HYP: People's Rise Party.

2. RP – İstanbul, Ankara, Konya, Kayseri, Erzurum and Diyarbakır; DYP – İzmir, Antalya and Eskişehir; ANAP – Bursa, Mersin and Adana; SHP – Kocaeli and Gaziantep; CHP – Samsun.

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