INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

IDE DISCUSSION PAPER No. 340

Non-Economic Voting and Incumbent Strength in Turkey

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March 2012

Abstract

Evidence suggests that incumbent parties find it harder to be re-elected in emerging than in advanced democracies because of more serious economic problems in the former. Yet the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) has ruled Turkey since 2002. Does economic performance sufficiently account for the electoral strength of the AKP government? Reliance on economic performance alone to gain public support makes a government vulnerable to economic fluctuations. This study includes time-series regressions for the period 1950-2011 in Turkey and demonstrates that even among Turkey's long-lasting governments, the AKP has particular electoral strength that cannot be adequately explained by economic performance.

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Introduction

Evidence suggests that incumbent parties find it harder to be re-elected in emerging than in advanced democracies because of more serious economic problems in the former (Molina 2001, Uppal 2009; Pacek and Radcliff 1995). The pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) has ruled Turkey since 2002. That this single-party government has won two consecutive general elections and entered a third term poses a stark contrast with the short-lived coalition governments of the 1990's. It has broken Turkey's record of the hitherto longest serving government, the Democrat Party of the period 1950-1960. The source of such longevity is of great interest not only for Turkey but for emerging democracies in general. This paper examines the economic and non-economic reasons for voting for the AKP.

The economic performance of the AKP government has been highly applauded both at home and abroad, but scholars also argue that the AKP government has carried out reforms that were of advantage for the masses (Yavuz 2006; 2009; Özbudun 2007; Hale and Özbudun 2010). From 2003, it has established policies that address serious problems for the general public such as the provision of collective housing for lower-income households, the equalizing integration of three pension systems that had privileged public servants, and the introduction of a universal health care system. Most recent data shows that the satisfaction of Turkish citizens with government services has been increasing since the establishment of the AKP government (Figure 1), and that its governance has been an improvement over previous governments (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Satisfaction with Public Services in Turkey: 2003-2010
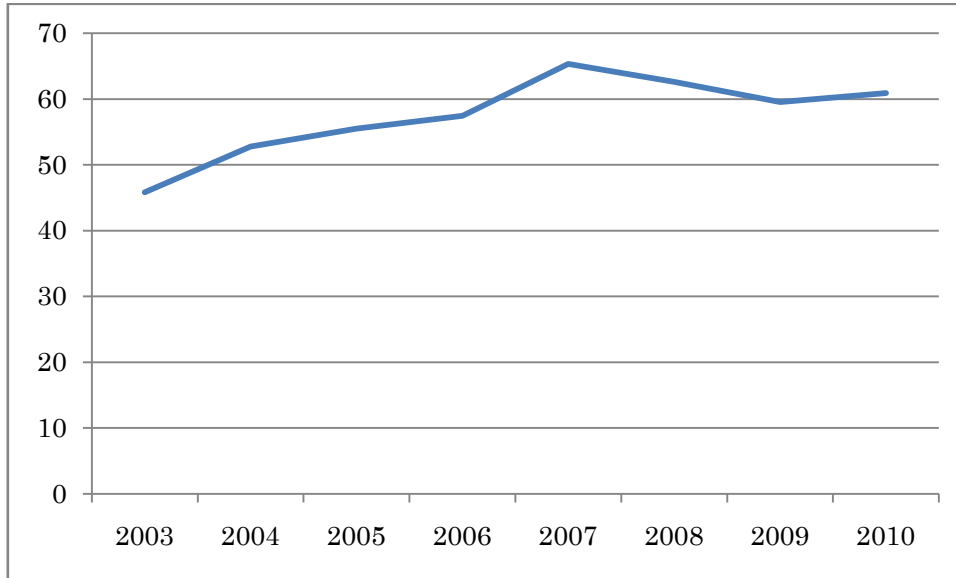
Source: TÜİK (2011b).

Note: This graph uses the un-weighted mean percentage of "Satisfied" out of "Satisfied," "In-between," and "Unsatisfied" responses for pensions, medication, education, justice, and security. Results are from the Life Satisfaction Research (Yaşam Memnuniyeti Araştırması) that encompassed about 7000 Turkish citizens.

Figure 2. Governance in Turkey: 1996-2009
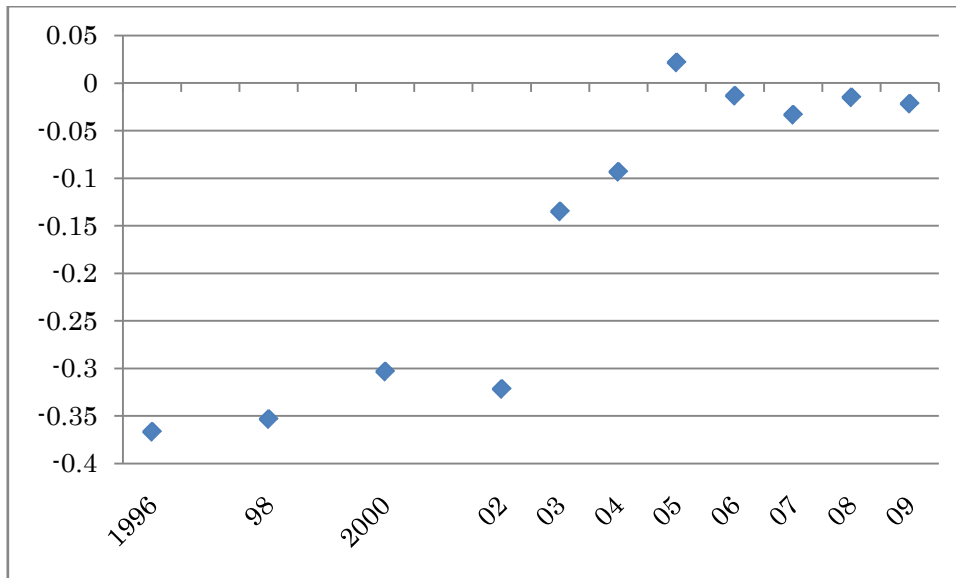
Source: Compiled by the author from Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2011).

Note: This graph uses the un-weighted mean of six governance indicators (Voice and Accountability, Political Stability, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption).

Does economic performance sufficiently account for the electoral strength of the AKP government, or is there a non-economic variable that makes the AKP government more popular than previous governments? Reliance on economic performance alone for public support makes a government vulnerable to economic fluctuations; this is often the case for emerging democracies. Non-economic reasons for voting for the incumbent party would seem to guarantee more stable popular support. The current analysis is based on time-series regressions for the period 1950-2011 in Turkey and parses incumbent support into economic and non-economic variables to show that the AKP government's electoral strength lies in both economic and non-economic variables.

This paper is organized as follows: The next section presents a brief review of literature on economic voting to lay the groundwork for analyzing an emerging democracy such as Turkey. The Research Design Section provides discussion of the data and estimation model. The Results Section demonstrates that among four governments that have been re-elected in Turkey, only the AKP's change in vote percentages can be attributed to both economic (per capita real GDP growth) and non-economic (AKP dummy) variables. Change in support for the other three governments can be associated only with the economic variable. The Conclusion provides interpretation of these findings and discussion of their implications.

Determinants of Incumbent Support in Emerging Democracies

The literature on economic voting shows that three major variables account for voter support for incumbents, but analysis of emerging democracies requires that adjustments be made to reflect their economic and political instability. First, economic conditions prior to election must be considered. Studies on advanced democracies have used macro-economic indicators within the preceding year of the election. Yet in emerging democracies, where the economy is more turbulent, the memory of an economic crisis that has occurred more than a year before cannot be easily erased, and high economic growth is often a result of recovery from a previous economic downturn.

For Latin American countries that experienced recurrent economic crises during the 1980's and 1990's, change in incumbent support was positively related to economic growth during the previous two years of the election (Remmer 1991; Benton 2005) but not to economic growth one year prior to the election (Remmer 1991). Quinn and Woolley's (2001) finding that volatile economic growth decreases vote percentage for the incumbent also suggests that voters are not simply fooled by high economic growth at election time. Because Turkey's economic growth rate has been highly erratic (Figure 3), it is more appropriate (as in Latin American cases) to use the economic growth rate during the previous two years, rather than one year, before the election.[1]

Figure 3. GDP Growth Rate (%) in the Last and Second-to-Last Year before the Election: Turkey, 1950-2011
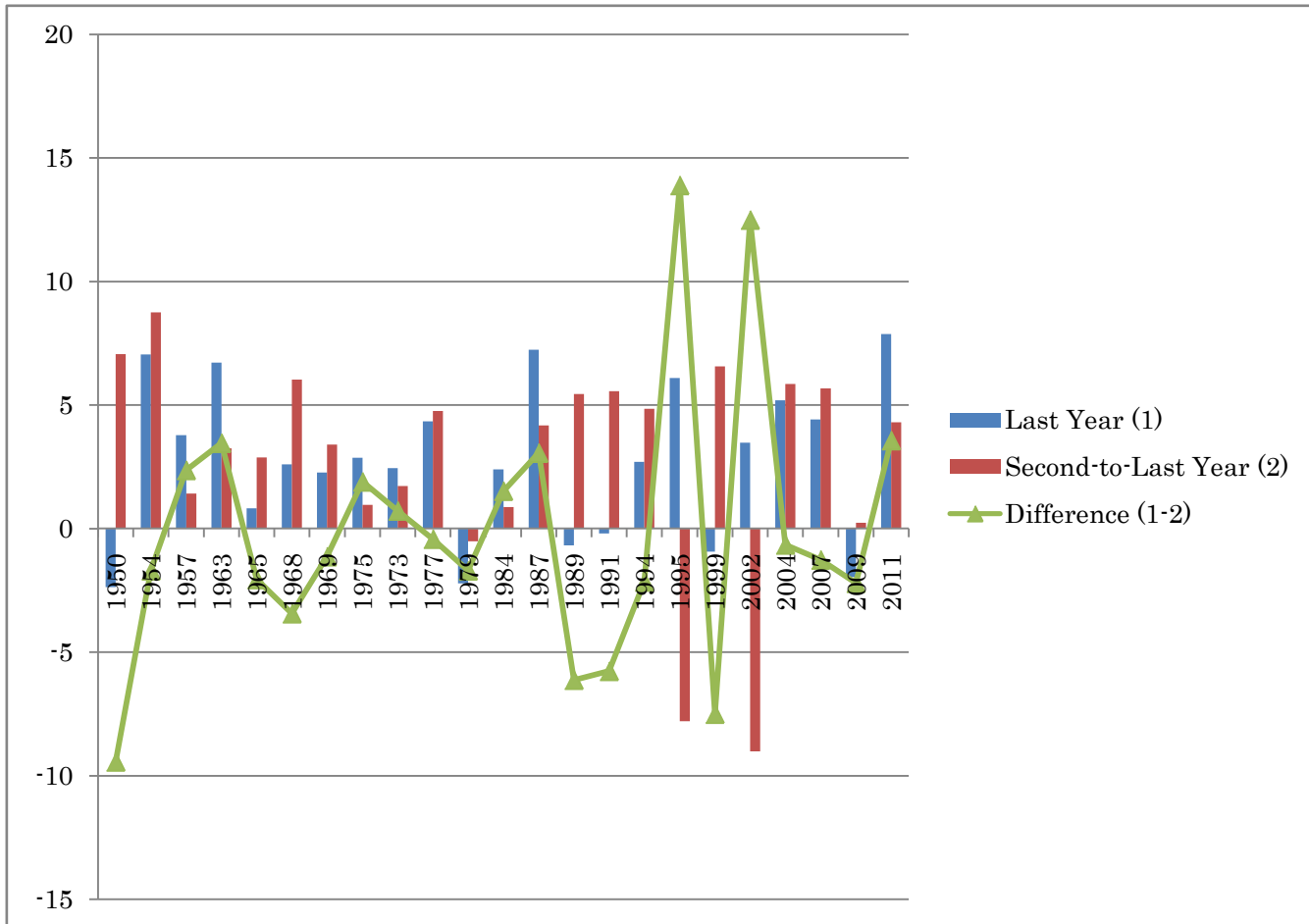
Source: Compiled by the author from Appendix 1.

Second, the longer a party is in government, the larger the decline in incumbent support. Long incumbency appears to bore the electorate and/or increase the likelihood of policy errors. This tendency, called the cost of ruling, applies to a large number of countries (Nannestad and Paldam 2002). The incumbency period is usually measured by months (or years) between two consecutive elections. Yet, what has been neglected is the possibility that a change in prime minister during the incumbency period may lift (or mitigate the decline in) incumbent support.

In general, a change in prime minister is regarded as change of government even if the incumbent party (or parties) remains the same. In addition, party leaders in Turkey have particularly strong control over their parties even when compared with political parties in Southern European countries where democratic experience is relatively short (Bosco and Morlino 2007). This means that the prime minister, the incumbent party's leader, has significant power in government. For these reasons, if the prime minister changes during incumbency, the incumbency period can be adjusted so that it starts at the time of premier change rather than at the previous election.

Third, voters punish single-party governments more severely than coalition governments. This is because the former seems to make it more clear who is to blame for policy failure (clarity of responsibility) than the latter (Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999; Anderson 2000; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Fisher and Hobolt 2010). However, for emerging democracies, few empirical studies exist, and among those that do address this issue, there is evidence that the clarity of responsibility hypothesis does not apply (Vowels 2010; Roberts 2008).[2] In fact, chronic political instability in emerging democracies, often governed by unstable coalition governments, may lead voters to support the current single-party government rather than voting for the most favorable party whose chances of securing a legislative majority are uncertain. If concern for stability is strong, it may cancel out the effect of clarity of responsibility.

Research Design

The hypothesis of this paper is that economic performance does not sufficiently account for strong electoral support for the AKP government when compared with other governments in Turkey. There are relatively few empirical studies on economic voting behavior in Turkey, but Akarca and Tansel (2006) provide the most systematic time-series analysis. The aim of this paper is to compare the AKP government with other re-elected governments based on a simpler model.[3]

Data

In Turkey, competitive elections have been held since 1950, although there have been three military interventions (1960-61, 1971-73, 1980-83) that disrupted the institutionalization of the party system and cycle of regular elections. Data sources include election data from the Turkish Statistical Office (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu or TÜİK) and economic data from the Central Bank of the Turkish Republic (Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası or TCMB).

There are 23 data points for lower house (general) elections, upper house (senate) elections, and general local elections. The upper house existed between 1961 and 1980. Since upper house elections were held for one-third of the seats and vacant seats, only when the preceding or following election was a lower house election, it is possible to calculate change in vote percentage by comparing the vote percentages in lower and upper house elections for only those constituencies where the upper house election was held.[4] Thus, only two upper house elections that met the above condition were included in the sample. For general local elections, change in vote percentage in the Provincial

General Council (İl Genel Meclisi) was used because it represents national trends according to the convention in Turkey (Çarkoğlu 1997; Akarca and Tansel 2006). All by-elections for the lower or upper house as well as for local governments were excluded.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable was vote swing (*S*) or change in vote percentage between two consecutive elections (V_t-V_{t-1}), for the incumbent party/parties.[5] Also in terms of time series analysis, it was appropriate to use the vote swing instead of the vote because the latter displays a sign of strong serial correlation (Figure 4). The Augmented Dickey-Fuller unit-root test that included an intercept and a linear trend resulted in a failure to reject the null hypothesis that the incumbent vote was stationary at the 0.05 level of statistical significance (*t*=-3.53, *p*= 0.06, *N*=22).

Figure 4. Aggregate Vote Percentage for Incumbent Parties: Turkey, 1950-2011
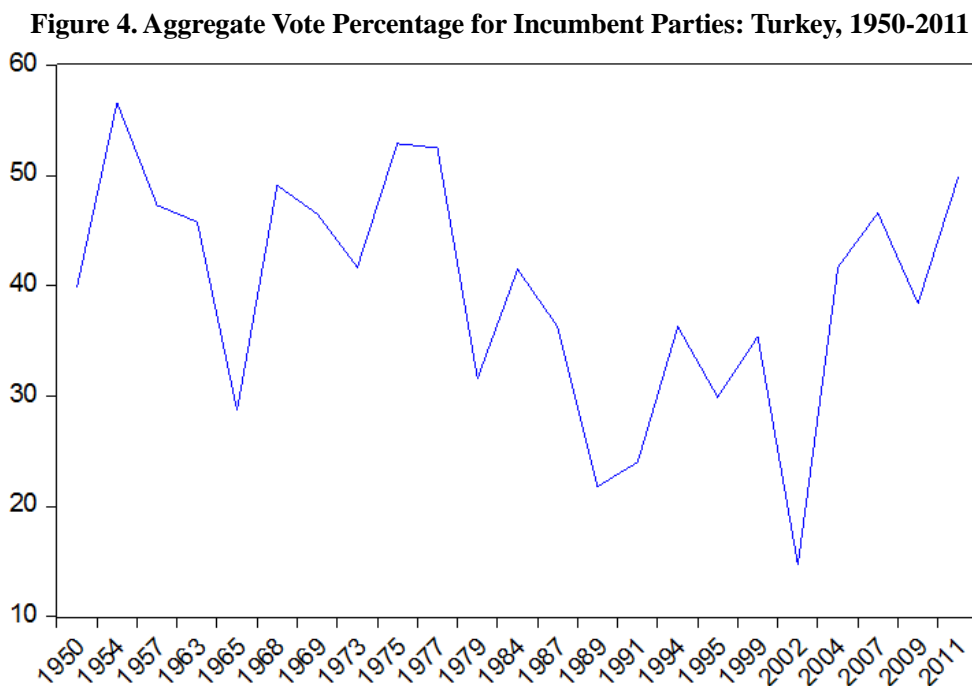
Source: Compiled by the author from Appendix 1.

Independent variables

First, the two-year mean per capita real GDP change prior to the election (G) was defined as $(G_t+G_{t-1})/2$. If the election were held in the n-th month of the year t, then

$G_t =$ per capita real GDP percentage change in the year $t \times n/12$ + per capita real GDP percentage change in the year t-1$\times (12\text{-}n)/12$

$G_{t-1} =$ per capita real GDP percentage change in the year t-1 $\times n/12$ + per capita real GDP percentage change in the year t-2$\times (12\text{-}n)/12$

Second, the variable for the incumbency period (D) was defined as the number of months (1) between two consecutive elections (of any type of legislature) if the major incumbent party does not change, (2) between the inauguration of the successive government and the nearest following election (of any type of legislature) if the major incumbent party has changed, and (3) between the inauguration of the new prime minister and the nearest following election if the prime minister has changed while the largest incumbent party remains the same. If the government is in coalition, the incumbency period is weighted by the share of the prime minister's party in parliamentary seats.

Third, the coalition variable (C) was a dummy variable taking a value of 1 for coalition and 0 for single-party government.

Fourth, the inclusion of different types of elections in the time series requires control for the effect of election type on voter tendency to blame the incumbent. In second-order elections (or non-general elections), which do not directly bring about

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change of government, even voters who prefer the continuation of the current government may express warnings or protest by not voting for the incumbent party. There is evidence from Germany, the United States, Canada, and England that parties in the national government lose votes in sub-national elections (Kedar 2006), especially if they also control the sub-national government (Rodden and Wibbels 2011; Boyne et al. 2009).[6] The more severe punishment of the incumbent in second-order elections has been interpreted in the literature as voter behavior of moderation or balancing. Akarca and Tansel (2006) reported that in Turkey parties in the national government received weaker support in local (but not in upper house) than in lower house elections.

The warning effect by reluctant supporters of the incumbent was controlled for by a warning variable (*W*) that gives different weights to different combinations of election types found in any two consecutive elections. Adopting the method of Akarca and Tansel (2006), the warning variable took: (1) a value of 1 when a local election followed a lower or upper house election, (2) a value of 0 when both consecutive elections were local elections or lower (or upper) house elections, and (3) a value of -1 when a local election preceded a lower or upper house election.[7]

Fifth, the AKP variable (*AKP*) was a dummy variable taking a value of 1 if the election was run under the AKP government and 0 under other incumbent parties. There have been three re-elected (same time single-party) governments other than the AKP government: the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti (DP), 1950-60), the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi (AP), 1965-71), and the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi (ANAP), 1983-91). All of these were oriented toward the center-right. Because these re-elected single-party governments may also have had particular strength, separate dummy variables *DP*, *AP*, *ANAP* were assigned for them.

Model

The current analysis used the following time-series regression model as the base model (Model 1):

$$S = b_0 + b_1G + b_2D + b_3C + b_4W + e \quad \text{(Model 1)}$$

where S is the swing, or change in the incumbent vote percentage between two consecutive elections, b_0 is the intercept, G is the two-year mean per capita real GDP change in percentage during two years prior to the election, D is the incumbency period in terms of months, C is the coalition government dummy, W is the warning effect of general local elections, b_1 through b_4 are multiple regression coefficients, and e is the error term.

Model 2 adds to Model 1 the AKP dummy variable that measures the electoral strength particular to the AKP government.

$$S = b_0 + b_1G + b_2D + b_3C + b_4W + b_5AKP + e \quad \text{(Model 2)}$$

Alternatively, Model 3, Model 4, and Model 5 replace the *AKP* variable with the *DP*, *AP*, and *ANAP* variables respectively.

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<div align="center">**Results**</div>

Table 1 shows the results of time-series regressions of the base model (Model 1), the AKP model (Model 2), and three other single-party government models (Model 3 though Model 5). First, as expected, the results of Model 1 demonstrate that three out of the four independent variables exert significant effects on vote swing. The incumbent loss of vote appears to be larger to the extent that (1) the two-year mean per capita real GDP growth prior to the election is lower, (2) the incumbency period is longer, and (3) the previous election is a lower or upper house election and the current election is a general local election. Although the coalition variable was not statistically significant, this finding is consistent with evidence for emerging democracies (Vowels 2010; Roberts 2008). Specifically, when the two obvious contextual variables, incumbency period and election type, are controlled, economic performance determines change in incumbent support in Turkey.

<div align="center">**Table 1   Determinants of Incumbent Vote Swing, 1950-2011 (N=23)**</div>

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Economic Growth (G)	2.79***	2.70***	2.71***	2.61***	2.76***
	(0.62)	(0.58)	(0.65)	(0.66)	(0.60)
Incumbency Period (D)	-0.36***	-0.34***	-0.40***	-0.35***	-0.40***
	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Coalition (C)	-2.59	-0.77	-2.33	-3.14	-4.30
	(3.14)	(3.06)	(3.22)	(3.21)	(3.26)
Warning (W)	-4.51**	-4.58**	-4.61**	-4.42**	-4.49**

|	(1.82)	(1.70)	(1.86)	(1.83)	(1.77)
AKP (AKP)		7.13[*]			
		(3.67)			
DP (DP)			3.61		
			(6.02)		
AP (AP)				-3.57	
				(3.93)	
ANAP $(ANAP)$					-5.75
					(3.95)
Intercept	-2.65	-5.60	-1.98	-1.60	0.28
	(-0.71)	(-1.57)	(-0.51)	(-0.41)	(0.07)
Adjusted R^2	0.60	0.65	0.59	0.60	0.62
Durbin-Watson Stat.	1.61	1.94	1.55	1.54	1.71

Source: Compiled by the author.

Notes: The dependent variable is change in the percentage of the incumbent vote between two consecutive elections. Entries are multiple regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. [*]$p<0.10$, [**]$p<0.05$, [***]$p<0.01$.

Does this economic performance sufficiently account for the vote swing for the AKP? The results of Model 2 indicate that it does not. Even though economic performance is part of the explanation, a sizable part of the residual in Model 1 can be accounted for by the AKP variable. Estimated multiple regression coefficients indicate the following: (1) a one-percentage point increase in the two-year mean per capita real GDP growth rate appears to increase the vote swing for any incumbent by 2.70 percentage points, and (2) if the incumbent is the AKP, the vote swing is 7.13 percentage points greater than if the incumbent is not the AKP. The adjusted R^2 value

which measures the overall fit of the model increased from 0.60 for Model 1 to 0.65 for Model 2.

The above indications are graphically presented in Figure 5 and Figure 6 that correspond to Model 1 and Model 2 respectively. Figure 5 reveals a linear relationship between economic growth and incumbent vote swing when incumbency period, coalition, and warning are controlled. The regression line indicates positive impact of economic growth on vote swing, but the vote swing for the AKP is always overestimated (or estimated with positive errors). In other words, even when other independent variables are controlled, variation in economic growth cannot sufficiently account for the AKP's vote swing. Figure 6 shows the same relationship when the AKP dummy variable is added to the three control variables mentioned above. The regression line is a better fit to data points than in the previous figure, and the vote swing for the AKP government is also estimated with smaller error and bias.

Figure 5. Model 1: Without AKP Dummy

coef = 2.7941023, se = .62228715, t = 4.49
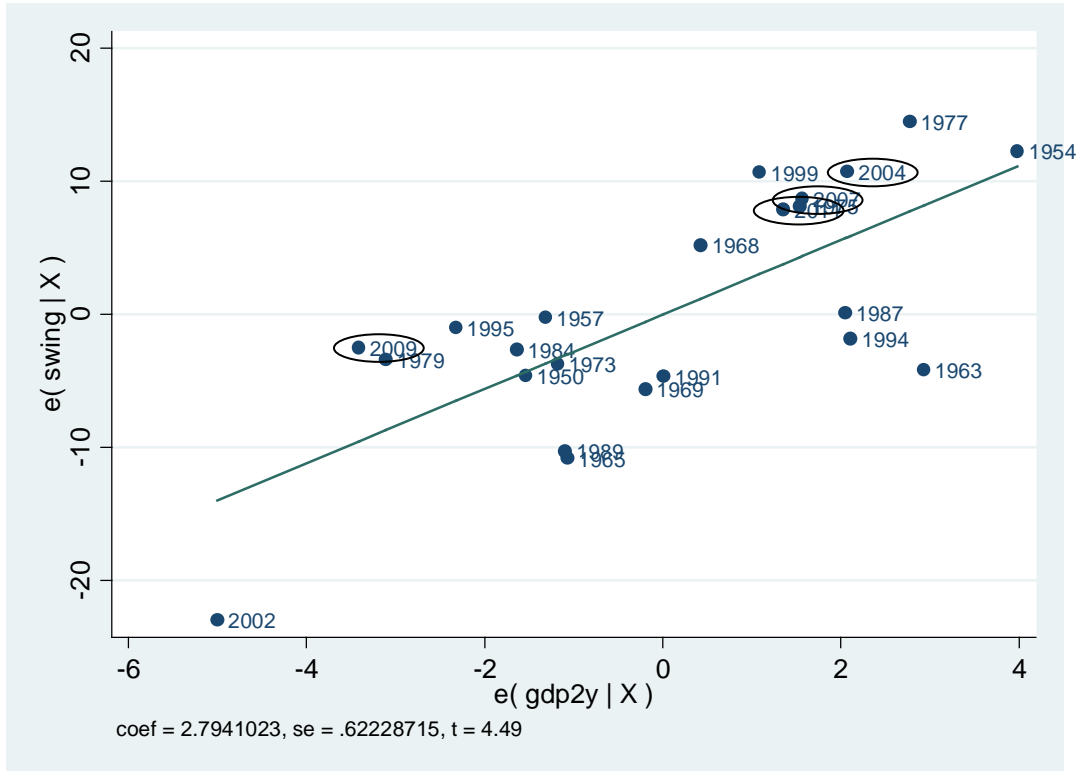
Source: Compiled by the author from the results of Model 1 in Table 1.
Notes: The Y axis shows the vote swing for the incumbent when independent variables other than economic growth rate are controlled ($S \mid X$). The X axis shows the economic growth rate when the other independent variables are controlled ($G \mid X$). Years indicate election years, and those circled were held under AKP incumbency.

Figure 6. Model 2: With AKP Dummy

coef = 2.6968571, se = .58132337, t = 4.64
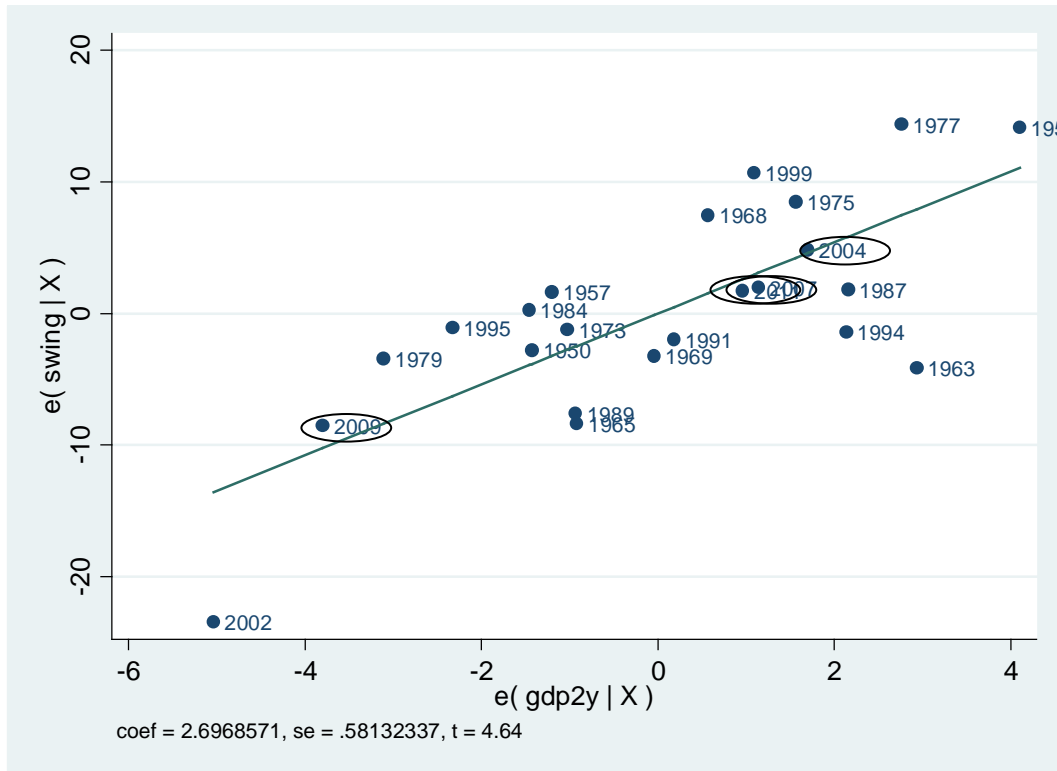
Source: Compiled by the author from the results of Model 2 in Table1.
Note: See Figure 5.

The three re-elected single party governments other than the AKP were also tested for their strength associated with non-economic performance in Models 3, 4, and 5 in the same way as in Model 2. Results show that none of the incumbent dummy variables (*DP*, *AP*, and *ANAP*) were statistically significant. The finding that only the *AKP* variable had a significantly positive regression coefficient indicates that among the long-serving governments, only the AKP government has had particularly strong political support that cannot be accounted for by economic performance (and other obvious contextual variables) alone. In other words, the AKP's electoral strength defies conventional explanation.

Conclusions

The most pressing agenda for an incumbent party in an upcoming election is how to minimize decline in its vote. The AKP government has been far more successful than previous Turkish governments in retaining its electoral support. Results reported in this paper demonstrate that even among Turkey's long-serving governments, the AKP government has particular electoral strength that cannot be adequately explained by economic performance (and other obvious contextual variables such as incumbency period, clarity of responsibility, and type of election). If economic growth is a good but not sufficient predictor of incumbent support, the remaining explanation lies at least partly in income (re)distribution that benefits median voters or lower-income citizens.[8] The evidence is only suggestive but still congruent with recent arguments relative to Turkish politics that the AKP has carried out reforms that have addressed major interests of the masses. Further studies are needed to determine if and which (re)distributive policies have contributed to strong electoral support for the AKP government.

Endnotes

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[1] In developed economies, it is reasonable to use the economic growth rate in the previous year of the election alone (without the second-to-last year growth rate) as a measurement of economic performance. Their current economic growth rate is auto-correlated, thus reflecting its previous value (Hazama 2007, 108-109).

[2] Vowels (2010) demonstrated that while voters in advanced democracies hold the government with fewer parties more accountable than those with more parties, voters in emerging democracies have no such tendency.

[3] The dependent variable in this research is *change* in support for the *entire* government (all incumbent parties), whereas the primary dependent variable for Akarca and Tansel (2006) was the *level* of support for the *largest* party in the government. Their results showed that both economic growth and inflation in the previous year of the election affected the vote for the largest incumbent party when many other contextual variables were controlled. Alternatively, when they used aggregate vote for all the incumbent parties as the dependent variable, economic growth did not have a significant effect.

[4] Change in the incumbent vote between lower and upper house elections was obtained as follows: First, the percentage of the total incumbent vote to total valid votes in the upper house election (which is held each time for one-third of the seats as well as vacant seats) was calculated. Second, the percentage of the total incumbent vote to total valid votes in the preceding (or following) general election, but only for the constituencies where the above senate election was held, was calculated. Third, the vote swing was obtained as the difference between the first and second (or second and first) results.

[5] If the government prior to the election was a care-taker government, then the vote swing of the previous incumbent party/parties was used.

[6] Japan's long-term incumbent party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), received a consistently lower voter percentage in upper than in lower house elections (Reed and Brunk 1984, 59).

[7] When an alternative formulation of the warning variable that divided election type to general and non-general (local and upper house) was used in regressions, it showed a slightly weaker effect than the first formulation.

[8] For the role of (re)distributive policy in sustaining the popularity of the left-wing incumbent in Brazil, see Hunter and Power (2007) and Bohn (2011).

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Appendix 1. Dataset for Time Series Analysis: 1950-2011

Year	Month	Day	Incumbent[†]	V_t	V_{t-1}	S_t	G_t	G_{t-1}	G	D	W	C
1950	5	14	CHP	39.9	53.9	-14.0	-2.4	7.1	2.4	45	0	0
1954	2	5	DP	56.6	53.4	3.2	7.1	8.8	7.9	44	0	0
1957	10	27	DP	47.3	56.6	-9.3	3.8	1.4	2.6	44	0	0
1963[*]	11	17	CHP, CKMP, YTP	45.8	64.4	-18.6	6.7	3.3	5.0	25	1	1
1965	10	10	CHP	28.7	36.2	-7.5	0.8	2.9	1.9	15[d]	-1	0
1968[*]	6	2	AP	49.1	52.9	-3.8	2.6	6.0	4.3	31	1	0
1969	10	12	AP	46.5	49.1	-2.6	2.3	3.4	2.8	16	-1	0
1973	10	14	AP[a]	41.7	46.5	-4.8	2.5	1.7	2.1	17[e]	0	0
1975[**]	10	12	AP, MSP, CGP, MHP	52.9	49.8	3.1	2.9	1.0	2.9	6[f]	0	1
1977	6	5	AP, MSP, CGP, MHP	52.5	52.9	-0.4	4.3	4.8	4.6	19	0	1
1979[**]	10	14	CHP, CGP, DkP	31.6	44.5	-12.9	-2.2	-0.5	-1.4	21[g]	0	1
1984[*]	3	25	ANAP	41.5	45.1	-3.6	2.4	0.9	1.6	4	1	0
1987	11	29	ANAP	36.3	41.5	-5.2	7.2	4.2	5.7	44	-1	0
1989[*]	3	26	ANAP	21.8	36.3	-14.5	-0.7	5.5	2.4	15	1	0
1991	10	20	ANAP	24.0	21.8	2.2	-0.2	5.6	2.7	3[h]	-1	0
1994[*]	3	27	DYP, SHP[b]	36.3	47.8	-11.5	2.7	4.9	3.8	9[i]	1	1
1995	12	24	DYP, CHP	29.9	36.3	-6.4	6.1	-7.8	-0.9	20	-1	1
1999	4	18	ANAP, DSP, DTP[c]	35.4	34.2	1.2	-0.9	6.6	2.8	21[j]	0	1
2002	11	3	DSP, MHP, ANAP	14.7	53.4	-38.7	3.5	-9.0	-2.8	42	0	1

2004[*]	3	28	AKP	41.7	34.3	7.4	5.2	5.9	5.5	12[k]	1	0
2007	7	22	AKP	46.6	41.7	4.9	4.4	5.7	5.1	39	-1	0
2009[*]	3	29	AKP	38.4	46.6	-8.2	-2.0	2.4	0.2	20	1	0
2011	6	12	AKP	49.8	38.4	11.5	7.9	0.7	4.3	14	-1	0

Sources: Compiled by the author from DİE (various years), TÜİK (various years), TCMB (various years), and Tuncer (2003).

Notes: Results of general elections. [*]General local elections. [**]Upper house (senate) elections.

[†] AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi. ANAP: Anavatan Partisi. AP: Adalet Partisi. CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi. CKMP: Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi. DP: Demokrat Parti. DkP: Demokratik Parti. DSP: Demokratik Sol Parti. DTP: Demokrat Türkiye Partisi. DYP: Doğru Yol Partisi. CGP: Cumhuriyetçi Güven Partisi. MHP: Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi. MP: Millet Partisi. SHP: Sosyal Demokratik Halkçı Parti. YTP: Yeni Türkiye Partisi.

[a] The AP that governed between 1969 and 1971 was regarded as the incumbent. After the coup by memorandum on March 12, 1971, technocratic above-party governments ruled until the 1973 general election. The corresponding G was calculated beginning on March 12, 1971. The AP vote in 1973 includes the vote for the DkP that split from the AP.

[b] Includes the vote for the CHP that split from the SHP.

[c] Because the DTP that split from the DYP did not exist at the time of the 1995 general election, its vote in the 1999 general election (0.6%) was excluded.

[d] Resigned on February 20, 1965 after its budget bill was rejected by the parliament. The succession government was the AP-YTP-CKMP-MP coalition government, and this was excluded from analysis because it was a care-taker government (Ahmad 1977, 225; Kara 2004, 100).

[e] Resigned due to the coup by memorandum on March 12, 1971.

[f] Inaugurated on March 31, 1975 following the resignation of the previous government. Because the incumbent changed less than two years before, the corresponding Gm was calculated as G, not as $(G+G')/2$.

[g] Inaugurated on January 5, 1978 following the resignation of the previous government.

[h] Inaugurated on June 23, 1991 with Mesut Yılmaz as Prime Minister after he was elected chairman of the ANAP.

[I] Inaugurated on June 25, 1993 with Tansu Çiller as Prime Minister after she was elected chairman of the DYP. The DYP chairmanship had been vacated after Süleyman Demirel was elected President of the Republic.

[j] Inaugurated on June 30, 1997 after the resignation of the previous government.

[k] Inaugurated on March 14, 2003 with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as Prime Minister after he replaced Abdullah Gül.