



**CLIENTELISM AND ETHNICITY AS CONSTRAINTS TO  
PARTY ORGANIZATION CHANGE: THE AKP IN  
TURKEY AND CHANGE IN DISTRICT PRESIDENCIES**

**KLİENTELİZM VE ETNİSİTENİN PARTİ ÖRGÜTÜ  
DEĞİŞİMİNE KISITLAYICI ETKİSİ: TÜRKİYE'DE AKP  
VE İLÇE BAŞKANLIKLARI DEĞİŞİMİ**

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on the existing literature, the study tests the relevance of electoral and intra-party alliance concerns on party organization change for the AKP in its 2017 District Congress. We believe that both the electoral and intra-party alliance concerns the party faced in 2017, make it a suitable case to test the basic hypothesis of the study. The dataset used in the analysis consists of secondary data on 971 districts present in Turkey. District presidency change is employed as the key independent variable to estimate organization change. The result of the logistic regression indicates that the effect of increasing percentage of swing voters and members of the former alliance, despite being valid, have moderate positive effects on the AKP's decision to change its organization. The insignificance of the electoral safety of the party in the district reveals that in 2017 the AKP changed its organization regardless of the nature of the electoral competition it faces. Interestingly, results indicate that socioeconomic development

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and ethnic presence in districts are also significant factors that constrain organization change in the AKP. Based on these results we suggest that change in party organization becomes a more difficult issue in parties with strong clientelistic networks where political parties built electoral support through the conditional distribution of resources to voters. Similarly, ethnicity also acts as a constraint due to the peculiarity of the relations political parties develop with these groups. As such clientelism and ethnicity seem to have constraining effects on the abilities of parties to change their organizations. The results highlight the necessity of further research to generalize the validity of the effectiveness of clientelism and ethnic groups on political parties' organization change on different settings.

**Keywords:** Political Parties, Party Organization, Clientelism, Ethnic Mobilization, the AKP.

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, var olan literatür bağlamında seçim ve parti içi ittifak kaygısının AKP'nin 2017 ilçe Kongrelerinde meydana gelen parti örgütü değişimi üzerindeki etkisini ölçmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Partinin bu kongreler öncesi karşı karşıya kaldığı seçim ve ittifak kaygıları, çalışmanın temel hipotezlerinin test edilmesi için uygun bir vaka olarak ele alınabileceği kanaatini güçlendirmektedir. Bu amaç için kullanılan veri seti Türkiye'deki 971 ilçenin ikincil verisinden oluşmaktadır. Çalışmada kullanılan bağımlı değişken, ilçe başkanının değişimidir. Uygulanan lojistik regresyonun sonuçları ilçede yüzer seçmenlerin ve bir önceki koalisyon üyelerinin oranındaki artışın AKP'nin örgüt değişimi olasılığı üzerindeki etkisinin geçerli ve pozitif ancak sınırlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Seçim desteği açısından partinin güveninin istatistiki açıdan önemli bir faktör olarak ortaya çıkmaması AKP'nin 2017'de örgüt değişimini seçim rekabetinden bağımsız olarak değerlendirdiğine işaret etmektedir. Analizin ilginç bir sonucu ilçelerin sosyo-ekonomik gelişmişliğinin ve ilçelerde etnik grupların varlığının parti değişimini anlamlı bir şekilde etkilediğidir. Bu sonuçların ışığında, çalışma, parti örgütü değişiminin partilerin oy desteklerini, kaynakların

seçmenlere şartlı dağılımı üzerine kurulu olan ve güçlü klientalist ağlar kullanan partiler için daha karmaşık bir süreç olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Benzer şekilde, partilerin bu seçmenlerle geliştirdikleri ilişkilerin özelliği sebebiyle bir etnik grubun varlığının kısıtlayıcı bir etkisi olduğu öne sürülmektedir. Bu çalışma, bu iki değişkenin parti örgütü değişimi üzerindeki etkisinin genelleştirilebilmesi için farklı kurgularda test edilmesi zorunluluğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyasal Partiler, Parti Örgütü, Klientalizm, Etnik Mobilizasyon, AKP.

## INTRODUCTION

Why do political parties change? Studies on the organization change of political parties focus on three different dimensions. The first dimension, which is outside of our scope, focuses on analyzing systemic change in party system. The studies that analyze change in parties themselves comprise the two other dimensions. While the second dimension analyzes major organization or ideological changes (Duverger, 1954; Kirsheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1995), the third dimension observes more minor changes such as the change in the party's cadres at different levels of the organization structure, mostly the members of the parliament (Kalaycıoğlu, 1995; Turan, 1994; Sayarı and Hasanov, 2008, Ecevit and Kocapınar, 2018). Although each dimension reveals different aspects of party change, the factors that they underlie in affecting political parties' decision to change are similar: Exogenous factors such as electoral concerns or indigenous factors such as change in the leadership, in the intra-party alliance of a party. Political parties may decide to change their party organization either because of electoral concern with a desire to punish unsuccessful members or increase their votes, or because of a change in the intra-party alliance of the party organization where the new intra-party alliance reshapes the organization structure to increase its control over the party apparatus.

Based on the existing literature, this study concentrates on the incumbent political party, the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi–Justice and Development Party) for understanding the major factors affecting the party leaders' decisions to change the party cadres in its 2017 District Congress. We believe the organization change the AKP underwent in 2017 provides a suitable case in testing the significance of the existing hypothesis on political parties' organization change in the literature since the series of Congress of AKP in 2017 have been vital for the party as it faced a pressure for change in the party organization both in intra-party

alliance and electoral terms. In order to test the significance of these arguments on the Turkish case, the study conducts a district level logistic regression analysis where it tests the role of electoral, intra-party alliance as well as other possible factors in the change of the district presidents of AKP in its Party Congresses of 2017.

Results indicate that in addition to the significance of electoral and intraparty alliance concern, socioeconomic development and ethnic presence in districts also appear to be significant factors that constrain organization change in the AKP. Based on these results we suggest that change in party organization becomes a more difficult issue in parties with strong clientelistic networks where political parties built electoral support through the conditional distribution of resources to voters. Similarly, ethnicity also acts as a constraint due to the peculiarity of the relations political parties develop with these groups. The use of clientelism by AKP has been highlighted by a large number of studies (Kemahlıoğlu, 2012: 1012; Aytaç, 2014; Aytaç, Çarkoğlu and Kemahlıoğlu, 2014; Çarkoğlu and Aytaç; 2015; Marschall, Aydoğan and Bulut, 2016; Yıldırım, 2017; Kemahlıoğlu and Bayer, 2020), which among them, especially micro level studies (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark-Yıldırım, 2017; Yıldırım, 2020; Arslantaş and Arslantaş, 2020) indicate the importance of the local party organization in establishing these linkages, especially for the mobilization of members of the Kurdish ethnic group (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Kemahlıoğlu, 2022; Yıldırım 2022).

As such, clientelistic linkage can act as a constraint against a party's desire to change its organization due to electoral or intra-party alliance concerns. This constraint may become even more important, when, clientelistic or not, mobilization is applied for the electoral support of an ethnic group. We believe our analysis helps to understand why organizational change may not always be possible in clientelistic political parties. Based on the general argument in the literature that clientelism necessitates a strong party organization (Kitchelt and Yıldırım, 2020; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark Yıldırım, 2014), this study suggests that especially for political parties having long-term relational clientelistic linkages, change in the local party organization is not always possible even when this change is a necessity. Since the party organization especially at the lower ranks is the key agent that provides the necessary structure to form a long-term clientelistic linkage especially among the swing voters, change in these ranks may damage the linkage between the voters and the party, and results in a decrease in the electoral support of the party - a risk, that political parties may not always want to take. Furthermore, the presence of an ethnic group should put more constraint on organization change since ethnic representation is even more important in the mobilization of ethnic groups especially under circumstances where the party faces a strong competition with an ethnic party such as the AKP faces the HDP (Halkın

Demokrasi Partisi–Peoples’ Democratic Party) in the case of Turkey (Chandra, 2004; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014). These factors may provide an answer to the difficulty such a party faces in moments where change becomes a key for incumbents’ survival.

As such, this study has three major contributions to the existing literature. First, different from the existing literature, it introduces the use of clientelism and the mobilization of an ethnic group as possible constraints to the decision of the party leader’s to change their cadres. Second, by testing the effect of existing and proposed variables on party change through the statistical analysis of large N data from Turkey, it reinforces the main arguments of the existing literature mostly performed through small N case studies. Third for the Turkish case, it gives a possible answer to why the AKP is unable to change its local cadres even if the leaders have such a desire for their self-interest. For this aim, the first part of the paper, based on the literature, develops the main hypothesis of the study and their theoretical background. Then, it gives a brief account of the Turkish context, focusing on the electoral and intra-party alliance concerns that the party faced in 2017 and its clientelistic mobilization efforts of the Turkish and Kurdish voters. The third part reveals the data the study uses and the methodology it adopts to test the hypothesis. The last part comprises of, first, the introduction of the results and then, their discussion based on the main hypothesis.

## **1. THEORY: CHANGE IN LOCAL PARTY ORGANIZATION CADRES – THE IMPACT OF CLIENTELISM AND ETHNICITY**

The major aim of this study is to reveal the factors affecting the decision of the leaders of a political party to change the local cadres of their organization. For this purpose, the study bases its theoretical foundations on three different sets of studies. First group of studies, classified under the political parties’ literature, comprises of the ones that try to identify the factors triggering change in a political party. These studies find the effect of exogenous factors, such as electoral performance, and indigenous factors, such as leadership or intra-party alliance change on party change. The second set of studies incorporated in the study is the existing literature on clientelistic mobilization of political parties. Although these studies mainly focus on the role of clientelism in mobilizing voters, they provide valuable information on how clientelistic mobilization can effect change in parties’ cadres. The last set of studies comprises of the one that focuses on the mobilization of ethnic groups, either clientelistically or not. They indicate the importance of ethnic representation in the party organization in mobilizing the members of an ethnic group. How each of these set of studies is incorporated in our theoretical model and the main hypothesis are explained in detail below.

### Source of Change in Party Organization

While investigating the factors explaining party change the existing studies adopt a complex definition of it. Change in these studies is measured both in terms of ideological and organizational change (Janda, 1990; Harmel and Janda, 1994, 274; Harmel and Tan, 2003, Harmel et al, 1995, Müller, 1997). For instance, Harmel et al's (1995) measurement covers both ideological /issue position and organizational change, such as political tactics, organizational complexity, nationalization of power, and distribution of power within the party organs. Similarly, Harmel and Janda (1994) define party change in terms of changes in party rules, structures, policies, strategies and tactics. In this sense, they differ from our study's definition of change which limits itself only to one aspect of party change namely, the party cadres. Still, these studies provide important information in identifying the factors that may explain change in a party's organization.

The existing literature gives two different answers to the basic question; why do political parties change? Political parties may change either due to exogenous factors such as electoral performance or indigenous ones such as leadership or intra-party alliance change (Duverger, 1954; Kirsheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988; Janda, 1990, Harmel and Janda, 1994; Harmel, 2002, Muller 1997, Harmel and Tan, 2003). Both causes may not be mutually exclusive and change may occur as a result of either of these factors or their combination (Harmel, 2002). Although some studies take leadership and intra-party alliance change as intervening variables (Pannebianco, 1988; Deschouwer, 1992) suggesting the decision of a political party to change after an external shock is based on the leaders' decisions and perceptions, other studies mention leadership and intra-party alliance change's independent effect on parties' organizational change (Müller, 1997, Janda 1990; Harmel and Janda, 1994 Harmel et al, 1995, Harmel and Tan 2003). Harmel et al (1995), Müller (1997), Harmel and Tan (2003) find that inner party change such as leadership and intra-party alliance change triggers change in the party independently from external shocks. In their analysis of 6 political parties from the United Kingdom and Germany, Harmel et al (1995) and Harmel and Tan (2003) come to similar results. So are the findings of Müller (1997) in his analysis of SPÖ in Austria, who argues that leadership and the dominant intra-party alliance change and electoral defeat independently play a role in party change. These studies, provide evidence that both electoral performance, intra-party alliance change can independently explain change in local party organization cadre.

Now suppose that a political party faces electoral and intra-party alliance concern at the same time, both requiring to formulate opposing strategies. For example, while the electoral concern pressures the political party to continue with its present organization but intra-party alliance change forces the party to change

its organization. What kind of a strategy is this political party expected to formulate? Electoral concern may act as a constraint to organizational change due to intra-party alliance change, or organization change may occur regardless of electoral concern. We believe the decision of a political party under such pressure is based on the priority given to each of the concern. For political parties who prioritize electoral victory we should expect organizational change only under circumstances they are electorally safe. Alternatively, for political parties that prioritize intra-party alliance concern, we should witness change regardless of the electoral situation. The existing literature does not provide any answer to such kind of a puzzle. So, the study, has the aim to test the independent effects of electoral concerns and intra-party alliance on organization change.

### **Clientelism as a Constraint to Organization Change**

Why cannot political parties change their party cadres even if such a change seems to be necessary? As Janda (1990) points it out, based on the organizational theory, the basic fact that prevents organizations to adjust to their environment is that organizations by nature are conservative structures and they resist change. On the other hand, resisting change may also be a rational decision of political parties as a part of strategies they formulate in their competition with other political parties. In fact, a common feature of the existing studies is that they mostly do not differentiate between the strategies of political parties functioning through different voter-party linkages. Given the fact that programmatic linkage is not the only one where political parties mobilize voters, how clientelistic voter-party linkage effects these strategies is an equally important question to be answered<sup>1</sup>. We argue that the possible effects of clientelism on the change of a party's cadres is very much related to the nature of the relationship between a political party and the voters, and the role of the party organization in developing this relationship.

The literature basically defines clientelism as the conditional distribution of benefits or resources for electoral purpose (Stokes, 2005; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt, 2011). The literature specifies certain circumstances for clientelism to be used as a strategy for political parties. Differentiating between the supply and demand side of clientelistic distribution, studies argue that the political parties should not only have access to the benefits to be distributed but also there should be voters willing to exchange their votes for those benefits. Although benefits to be distributed may not always be material in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the definition of programmatic and clientelistic linkage look, Kitschelt, H. (2000). Linkages between citizens and politicians in democratic polities. *Comparative political studies*, 33(6-7), 845-879; Kitschelt, H., and Wilkinson, S. I. (2007). Citizen-politician linkages: an introduction. *Patrons, clients, and policies: Patterns of democratic accountability and political competition*, 2007, 1-49.

nature, but also immaterial such as know-how benefits (Auyero, 2000; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014), material ones still comprise much of the benefits that are distributed by political parties clientelistically. On the supply side, political parties with access to resources are expected to enter more in clientelistic exchange. Within this respect, incumbency seems to be an advantage since it provides considerable access to and control of the state resources (Kemahlıoğlu, 2012; Kemalioğlu and Bayer, 2020; Kitschelt and Yıldırım, 2020). Although centralized state resources are not the only resources available to political parties since some of them are distributed at lower levels of governmental institutions, in which local governments comprise an important one, national incumbency comprises still the most important material resources for clientelistic distribution.

On the demand side, studies reveal that clientelistic linkage is very much related to the elasticity of the voters (Stokes 2005, Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007, Arıkan Akdağ, 2014). One source of elasticity is the socio-economic condition of the voters. In most works, the poors are identified as the prime target of the political machines. Due to the decreasing utility of revenue, the selective distribution of incentives to low income citizens is a more effective strategy (Kitschelt, 2000, Schady, 2000; Esteves et al, 2001; Penfold-Becerra, 2007, Calvo and Murillo, 2004; Nichter 2008, Ark-Yıldırım, 2017, 475). Poorer voters would have a greater incentive to sell their votes in exchange for benefits. And for the parties it would be a cheaper strategy since poor voters will sell their votes at a lower price. That's why we expect, clientelism to be used more frequently among low-income groups.

Yet, the possible effect of clientelism on organization change, we believe is conditional to the type of clientelism a political party develops with the voters. The literature defines two different types of clientelism. While some authors define clientelism as a short-term exchange, other highlights its long-term aspect. Kitchelt and Yıldırım (2020) identify two different types of clientelism that they name as vote buying and relational. While the first coincides more with short-term clientelism, which usually covers one interaction between the broker and the voter (Stokes, 2005; Brusco et al, 2004), the second coincides to a long term relationship between the broker and the voter with multiple interactions (Güneş-Ayata 1994, Auyero, 2000, Rutten, 2001, Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007, Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark-Yıldırım, 2017, 476). This long-term linkage is identified by Auyero as a *'problem solving network that links clients, brokers and political patrons,'* (2000, p. 58). Using the classification of Kistchelt and Yıldırım, relational clientelism is more effective in assuring the compliance of the voters (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Kistchelt and Yıldırım, 2020; Nichter, 2018).

Since relational clientelism is a more effective strategy, so it should be more oftenly used by political parties. Yet, relational clientelism necessitates a repeated



and intense personal interaction between the broker and the voters, a condition which is mostly fulfilled by parties with strong local organizations (Kitchelt and Yıldırım, 2020; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark-Yıldırım, 2017, Kemahlioğlu and Bayer, 2020). As Ark- Yıldırım argues, “*relational clientelism may follow national patterns but it must be created and maintained at the local level*”, and as a result is “*subjected to local variation*” (2017, 474). So, relational clientelism is expected to be more oftenly used when the party has a strong local organization and when the party members regularly contacts with the voters. In fact, Kitchelts and Yıldırım’s (2020, 23, 24) study, empirically demonstrates that especially relational clientelism is mostly used by political parties when they have strong party organizations. As such, although relational clientelism is a more efficient strategy in electoral terms it can act as a constraint to organization change. Since relational clientelism necessitates a repeated course of interaction between the party and the voter through regular networks - a function that is fulfilled by the local party organizations, then change in the local organization cadres can break these regular networks (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark-Yıldırım, 2017; Yıldırım 2020), resulting in a possible decrease in the electoral support for the political party, in fact, Ark-Yıldırım (2017) argues that, it is more difficult to change party cadres in relational clientelism since the members of the organization have a previous relationship with the voter as their neighbor, friend etc... once this relationship is broken through change so does the established networks. This why according to Ark-Yıldırım (2017), “the pyramidal clientelist organizational structure and the territorial deployment of party organizational capacity need to be protected in practice in order to secure the communication between clients and patrons” (477). So, we expect that political parties that mobilize low-income voters with long-term clientelistic linkage performed through a strong local organization will be less inclined to change their party cadres.

### **Ethnic Mobilization as a Constraint to Organization Change**

The studies that link the mobilization of an ethnic group to party organization are limited in number, but they provide valuable information on the importance of the party organization in mobilizing these groups especially under high polarization and the presence of an ethnic party as a strong competitor. What make mobilization of an ethnic group different from the mobilization of other groups is very much related to the way in-group/out-group relations are defined. First of all, ethnicity, mostly, can easily be detected through physical traits (Chandra 2004). In the presence of a high ethnic consciousness, the incorporation of co-ethnics in the party signals voters of this ethnic group that their demand will be met and their interest will be pursued by the party. Representation is especially important when a multi-ethnic party faces an ethnic party as a strong competitor. Chandra’s analysis on Indian politics reveals the relationship between ethnic representation and electoral success. The success of an ethnic party is very much

related to the representation of this ethnic group in the competing multi-ethnic parties. Put it differently, support for multi-ethnic parties increases when this group is represented within the party's cadres. Although ethnic representation is important for both programmatic and clientelistic mobilization of an ethnic group, studies show that its importance is even greater for the latter especially under circumstances where the multi-ethnic party is programmatically unable to fulfill the interest of an ethnic group but has, at the same time, to compete with an ethnic party (Chandra, 2004; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014). The characteristics of the intergroup relations is also very important in understanding why the mobilization of ethnic groups differs from other groups. Especially, as intergroup relations get more polarized, mobilization of an ethnic group through non-ethnics becomes more difficult, as both sides define each other with opposing interest. In her study, Arıkan Akdağ (2012b) shows how it is impossible to mobilize voters of an ethnic group with non-ethnic activists when group relations are polarized. In contrast, mobilization of these groups becomes easier as co-ethnic members are incorporated in to the party.

Studies on ethnic clientelism highlight the importance of clientelistic linkage in the mobilization of the ethnic groups (Çandra, 2004; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014, Kemahloğlu, 2022; Yıldırım, 2022). Identifying India as a patronage democracy, Chandra's research shows that the incorporation of the members of an ethnic group into the party organization increases the support of this party among voters of this ethnic group. Similarly, concentrating on the Turkish case and the mobilization of voters of the Kurdish origin, Arıkan Akdağ (2014), finds that in its competition with the pro-Kurdish party, the DTP, the AKP is successful in gaining the support of these voters through their long-term clientelistic mobilization via the network it creates by incorporating co-ethnics in its local organizations. According to Akdağ, the polarization of the relations between different groups prevents the formation of personal ties with members of an ethnic group by non-ethnic activists. By analyzing the Turkish case Kemahloğlu (2022) reveals that multi-ethnic parties increases the clientelistic mobilization of the members of an ethnic group when confronted with high electoral competition. She also highlights the importance of strong party organization for the effective targeting of ethnic groups. Similarly, Yıldırım (2022) highlights the importance of clientelistic mobilization among dense ethnic networks combined with high ethnic identity. Based on these studies we argue that the continuity of the party organization cadre is especially important for the continuity of the electoral support of the members of an ethnic group. As a result, the presence of an ethnic group is expected to be a constraint to change of the local organizations cadres.

Based on the existing literature the study aims to test the validity of 5 hypotheses stated below:

H1: There will more likely be organization change when the number of swing voters in the former elections are high.

H2: There will more likely be organization change when the local organization comprises of the members of the former intra-party alliance.

H3: There will more likely be organization change when the party is electorally safer.

H4: There will less likely be organization change when there is a relational clientelistic linkage.

H5: There will less likely be organization change when the party mobilizes an ethnic group.

## 2. AKP: THE TURKISH CASE

The political context before the General Congress of the AKP in 2017 provides a good example for not only understanding the role of electoral and intra-party alliance concern but also the role of clientelistic and ethnic mobilization in in political parties' organization change. In the electoral front, the first event the party faced before the general congress was the relatively unsuccessful results of June 2015 general elections which alerted the party that its incumbency may easily be at risk. Gaining 40, 87% of the votes the AKP was unable to acquire the necessary number of seat to form the government on its own and after unsuccessful attempts to form an intra-party alliance government, the president Erdoğan decided to resolve the parliament and repeat the general elections in November 2015. As a result of an electoral strategy based on security and survival of the Turkish state, the party has again been able to attain the necessary parliamentary seats to form the government on its own by gathering 49,50% of the votes. Yet, Erdoğan's declaration that the results of the June general elections was in a part a consequence of the "fatigue of the organization" and his call to the organization to work harder for the November elections indicates that the party organization was seen at least as one of the responsible units of the decrease in the vote shares. The ratification of the referendum in April 2017 on the constitutional amendment that changed the state system from a parliamentarian to an "*a la Turque*" presidential system by 51.41% of the votes was also a signal for the party that its safety was at risk, especially for the forthcoming presidential elections in June 2018 where the party might not be able to gain the presidency in the first round of the elections. These developments showed the leaders that increasing their electoral support should be a priority.

The situation was even more disturbing in terms of intra-party alliance concerns. The electoral success of the AKP in 2002, 2007 and 2011 general elections was greatly influenced by the changing intra-party alliances. The

composition of the party greatly changed with the incorporation of members from the *Gülen* Movement (Özbudun, 2014; Martin, 2020) and former center right parties (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014) in the party. The change of leadership in the party after Erdoğan's presidency in 2014 presidential elections was also an important factor changing the composition of the party. As Davutoğlu became the new prime minister and leader of the party, the number of new members rapidly increased in the party. The deteriorating relations of the AKP and the *Gülen* Movement<sup>2</sup> on one hand, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu<sup>3</sup> on the other was perceived by Erdoğan as a decrease of control of the party organization. After the 2017 referendum when Erdoğan once again became the leader of the party, the elimination of the supporter of these groups was seen as a necessity. So, Erdoğan asserted that he will regain the control of the organization and continue with the members that believe in the AKP cause, while cleaning the party from other groups. As such, the General Congress of 2017 gave Erdoğan the chance to remove the members of the former intra-party alliances from the party's different ranks and to reorganize its cadres.

Clientelism is a very common mechanism used by the AKP for electoral support. There is a huge increase in the number of studies that analyze the use of clientelistic linkage for electoral purpose, generally in Turkey (Özbudun 1981; Sayarı, 2014) and more specifically by the AKP. These studies can be divided into two different groups. The first group consists of quantitative studies that test the use of such a mechanism by political parties such as the AKP, the CHP or the HDP (Kemahlıoğlu, 2012; 2022; Aytaç, 2014, Aytaç, Çarkoğlu and Kemahlıoğlu, 2014; Gümüşçü et al, 2014; Çarkoğlu and Aytaç; 2015; Marschall and Aydoğan and Bulut, 2016; Yıldırım, 2017; Kemahlıoğlu and Bayer, 2020). The second group of studies is rather micro level attempts that focus on the nature of the clientelistic network the AKP forms in different shantytown neighborhoods, mostly concentrating on Istanbul (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Tafolar, 2014; Ark-Yıldırım, 2017; Yıldırım, 2020; Arslantaş and Arslantaş, 2020).

Among quantitative studies, the research of Çarkoğlu and Aytaç are striking in successfully revealing the use of clientelism by Turkish political parties. Based on a survey data, they find that 35, 3 % of voters in Turkey has been targeted for

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<sup>2</sup> The relations with the *Gülen* Movement began to deteriorate when a number of politicians were blamed and detained due to the Corruption and Bribery investigation of a state prosecutor in December 2013 involving the general director of a major state bank, three cabinet ministers' sons and some businessmen and bureaucrats (Özbudun, 2014; Martin, 2020). But the real strike to this partnership was the coup attempt to the government in July 2016. After the coup attempt, the government, so to speak, declared war to the movement members where lots of individuals were detained and imprisoned, soldiers, academics, teachers and civil servants were removed from their posts, many schools including universities were closed.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of the deteriorating relations between the two, in 2016 Ahmet Davutoğlu called the party for a General Congress which resulted with the election of Binali Yıldırım.

vote buying during the 2011 general elections. This percentage was higher among the AKP supporters with 47,1 % and lower among the voters of the main opposition party the CHP by 19,6%. In another study, analyzing the conditional cash transfer program, Aytaç shows that the AKP channels strategically more resources to districts with a high ideological challenger. The research of Kemahlioğlu (2002, 2012) reveals the clientelistic distribution of green cards given by the government for citizens who have no health insurance. The research of Kemahlioğlu and Bayer (2020) highlights the importance of a strong party organization in increasing the efficiency of clientelistic distribution of green cards.

One of the most important contributions of the micro level studies concerning the nature of the clientelistic network, is their findings of the intense use of relational clientelism by the AKP due to its ability to form long-term clientelistic networks through its local organizations among neighborhoods with low socio-economic conditions. Based on her field research in 2011 in four neighborhoods in Istanbul, Arıkan Akdağ (2014) highlights the relational aspect of the clientelistic network where neighborhood party activists, who reside in the same neighborhood, are in constant relations with the voters in the neighborhood through their daily activities. Similar observations were made by Ark-Yıldırım (2017) and Yıldırım (2020). Ark-Yıldırım (2017) shows how AKP was successful in increasing its votes between 2009 and 2014, by building an intensive grass-roots presence in a neighborhood in Istanbul that would develop a relational clientelistic exchange with the voters, instead of relying on vote buying through local brokers. After identifying the presence of long-term clientelistic network, Yıldırım (2020) shows how through these networks clientelistically mobilized voters tend to ideologically identify with the party.

There is also a large number of voters of Kurdish origin that forms an important ethnic minority where the AKP and the pro-Kurdish Party HDP compete for (Sarigil, 2010; Arıkan Akdağ, 2016; Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018). The Kurdish voters mostly comprise of conservative but ethnically conscious voters. Although the conservative ideology of the AKP positions the party closer to these voters, the increasing Turkish nationalist tone of the AKP retrains the party to programmatically mobilize ethnically conscious Kurdish voters. As a result, the party's strategy is to mobilize these voters through clientelism as an alternative voter/party linkage. As such, these clientelistically mobilized voters not only comprise an important electoral base for the AKP but also an opportunity to increase its electoral base. Studies indicated the use of the clientelistic linkage for the mobilization of the Kurdish voters by the AKP. Especially two studies reveal the importance of clientelistic ties for the AKP in gaining the support of the Kurdish voters. The study of Arıkan Akdağ (2014) provides a very strong evidence of the mobilization of the Kurdish voters through clientelistic ties and the

importance of the presence of co-ethnic in the party organization for the successful mobilization of these voters. Kemahlıoğlu (2022) gives evidence that the voters of Kurdish origin are targeted by the AKP through the distribution of green cards and social spending when faced with the HDP as a strong challenger. As such, the developments prior to the 2017 Congresses make the AKP a suitable case in testing the effect of electoral, intra-party alliance concern, clientelistic mobilization and the presence of an ethnic group on party change.

### 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand the factors affecting political parties' decisions to change their local party organizations. Based on the literature, it first tests the effectiveness of electoral and intra-party alliance concerns in changing the cadres of their local organizations. Then, it analyzes the constraining effects of clientelistic linkage and the mobilization of an ethnic group on the formulation of these strategies. For this purpose, the study focuses on the series of Congress elections at the district level made by the AKP in 2017. As revealed in the previous section, the peculiarity of these series of congress is that they were made in a period where not only the AKP's electoral vote shares fluctuated across the elections, but also the party experienced what can be called as a change in the dominant intra-party alliance of the party organization as Erdoğan tried to regain total control of the party by expurgating members of former coalition. After testing the effect of these strategies on the party's decision to change the cadres of its local organization, the study also reveals the constraining effect of the clientelistic linkage and the mobilization of an ethnic group. In this section, the collection of the data, the proxies used to measure the main variables and the method adopted to test these hypotheses are evaluated in detail.

The Congress series in 2017 have been realized for district, provincial and national level organizations. Among these, the level of analysis used in this study is the district level organization with a special focus on the change of the district presidency as the unit of analysis. The decision to focus on the district is due to the basic fact that relational clientelism necessitates a regular relationship between the voter and the party at the lowest level of the organization structure. In Turkish political parties' neighborhood organizations comprise the lowest level where the party meets the voters. In fact, micro level studies on the AKP reveals the importance of the neighborhood president and its organization in the formation of the clientelistic linkage with the voters through the daily activities they perform in the neighborhoods, especially, the woman neighborhood organizations<sup>4</sup> (Arıkan Akdağ, 2012a; Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Ark Yıldırım, 2017). Yet, they are

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on how the neighborhood organizations perform Daily activities in the neighborhoods, see Arıkan Akdağ (2012a, 2014) who provides a detailed account of how they develop the clientelistic network through these activities.



not defined by the law as legal party structures, that's why their members are not elected but appointed by the district organization, especially the district president. Nevertheless, unfortunately there is no publicly available systematic information on the change of the neighborhood organization. That is why, for the dependent variable we have decided to use the change in the district presidency, as among the district organization it comes out as the most important post. It is the owner of this post that selects the members of district, neighborhood committees and the delegates for the provincial elections. One possible criticism may be the argument that district presidency change may not result with neighborhood organization change, especially in neighborhoods with strong clientelist relations. Unfortunately, it is impossible to systematically track such a relation. The only exception is Arıkan Akdağ's research (2014) that illustrates the important role of the district presidency change in the party's ability to increase its clientelist network through the incorporation of new activists in the organization. She reveals that change in the neighborhood organizations was mostly possible with change in the district presidency. In fact, interviews conducted with district and neighborhood level party activists during 2012 general elections, indicate that presidency changes mostly resulted with parallel changes in the neighborhood organizations in the districts like Beykoz, Beyoğlu and Sancaktepe in Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> These interviews revealed that the cause of such a change has to be understood on the basis of how benefits from the distribution of the resources. Each president has a tendency to control the distribution of resources by appointing loyal activists to the party important post. While the informal nature of the neighborhood organization which selection is effectuated through appointment makes this change easy for the district president, the importance of the post as the main decision maker of who will benefit from the resources makes its change vital for controlling its distribution. As a result, each president comes with his/her own team, a situation which mostly triggers change in the different units of the district and neighborhood organizations (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014). As such, change in district presidency mostly means a change in the party's local organization cadre. Although officially, the district president is selected by the delegates of the party among different candidates, practically there is only one candidate who runs the elections and is determined by the party's leaders.<sup>6</sup> So, for our dependent variable, we analyze whether the district president has been re-nominated or changed in the party's District Congresses of 2017. Our dependent variable is a dummy categorical variable where change and re-nomination are the two categories. Given the categorical nature of our dependent variable, the relationship is tested

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<sup>5</sup> These are districts comprise of neighborhoods with low socioeconomic development where the party's neighborhood organization is clientelistically strong.

<sup>6</sup> Running the elections with one candidate is nearly a rule in the AKP to such extent that we witness the cancellation of congress elections by the party's central organs and the appointment of the district president supported by the center when other individuals put their candidacy.

through a binary logistic regression that would inform us on the significance of the relationship and its direction<sup>7</sup>. The dataset used in the analysis consists of secondary data on 971 districts present in Turkey that have been collected by the official website of the AKP and publicly available statistical data released by the Turkish Statistical Institute (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu). The validity of the proposed hypotheses is tested through the analysis of the data via SPSS software.

The measurement of electoral concern derives from the basic assumption that political parties may increase their votes by gaining the support of swing voters. According to our first hypothesis, we expect political parties to be more tend to change their organization when the number of swing voters are high so as to gain latter's support.<sup>8</sup> To calculate the number of swing voters for each district we have created a variable of swing voters where we have added the vote shares of the right wing parties –namely the ultra-nationalist party, the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), the Islamist party the SP (Saadet Partisi)– and the pro-Kurdish party the HDP (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi) since the last is the main competitor of AKP among Kurdish voters (Arıkan Akdağ, 2014; Arıkan Akdağ, 2016) for June 2015 General Elections. Since the AKP had its lowest vote share in this election, this variable provides information on not only the swing voters that have not supported the party in November elections and the party wants to target but also the voters that have switched their votes to the AKP in November elections but may change their decisions in the next elections. Organization change may be the result of the party desire to increase its support among the former or consolidate its support among the later through incorporating them into the organization.

The effect of intra-party alliance concern on the change of the local party cadres is the second hypothesis to be tested. The cause of change is expected to be the function of a change in the party's dominant intra-party alliance where the leaders of the new intra-party alliance replace the local cadres of the former intra-party alliance in order to increase their control over the party apparatus. Measuring the presence of local cadres of the former intra-party alliance is a more delicate process since there is no publicly available data on the subject. Given the fact that this period coincides with the increasing power of the *Gülen* Movement, center-right politicians and Davutoğlu, the difference in the electoral support of the party between 2007 and June 2015 general elections may indicate the amount

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on the use of binary logistic regression for categorical dependent variables see Long (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Another electoral concern that may be tested is the change in the organization as a result of the poor performance of the party cadres from one election to the other. Yet, increase in the vote shares of the party is very much related to the number of potential swing voters. In fact, June 2017 and November 2017 general elections indicate a high correlation between percentages of swing voters and electoral performance, a situation that creates multicollinearity in the analysis. That's why we have decided not to test the possible effect of electoral performance of the party activists on party organizational change.



of the members of the former intra-party alliance in the organization. Studies show that when the AKP was formed in 2001 it has inherited the local organizations of its predecessors the RP (Refah Partisi) and the FP (Fazilet Partisi) whose activists mostly comprised of the ideologically oriented members (Arikan Akdağ, 2014, Ark-Yıldırım, 2017). With the AKP's increasing electoral support across the country, the party incorporated new activists in the districts where its electoral support was low in an attempt to increase its electoral vote shares<sup>9</sup>. These new entering members were mostly the members of the new groups that the party leaders wanted to replace in 2017. We expect members of these groups to be still in the organization where AKP's electoral support is relatively low in 2007 but increased in June 2015 general elections. As such, the difference in vote shares of AKP between 2007 and June 2015 general elections has been included in the regression as a proxy of the amount of the members of the former intra-party alliances.

Based on the literature, the third hypothesis rests on the basic argument that political parties' organization change is the result of electoral concerns. We hypothesize that political parties prioritizing electoral concerns would only change their organization due to when they are electorally safe. If this is not the case then change would occur regardless of the electoral safety of the party. We create an electoral safety variable by subtracting the vote shares of the AKP in June 2017 general elections from its first competitor (Kemahloğlu, 2022), so it also captures the magnitude of the electoral competition the party faces.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth hypothesis relates to the presence of a relational clientelistic linkage between the party and the voters. Since relational clientelism necessitates a strong local party organization, we argue that the presence of relational clientelism is expected to decrease change in the local party organization. The disruption of the clientelistic linkage may result in larger loss of votes. One basic problem with clientelism is its difficulty in being measured. One way to measure clientelism is the socioeconomic conditions of the districts. Since the literature suggests that poor people are more targeted through clientelistic linkage by political parties, clientelism is expected to be used more frequently in districts with residents of low socioeconomic conditions. Given the fact that micro level studies on the AKP demonstrate that the AKP uses relational clientelism through its local organization to mobilize these voters, the socioeconomic status of the district can

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<sup>9</sup> For example, for more information on the incorporation of new members mostly from the center-right parties on the local cadres in districts where the electoral vote shares of AKP were low, see Arikan Akdağ (2014).

<sup>10</sup> A potential coalition between the opposition parties may decrease the reliability of such a proxy. Yet, the opposition parties the AKP faced in that period were CHP, MHP and HDP; three political parties with contrasting ideological positions that do not have the potential for coalition. This is why, we expect this Proxy to be reliable at least for these elections.

be used as a proxy for the presence of relational clientelistic linkage. The only publicly available data at district level to measure the socio-economic level of voters is education. In fact, it has been used by a large number of studies in the Turkish case for this purpose (Arikan Akdağ 2014, Kemahlioğlu and Bayer 2020, Yıldırım and Kocapınar, 2019). Although, some of these studies (Yıldırım and Kocapınar, 2019) have used the average education years, we prefer to use the university graduate percentage as we believe it is a better indicator. The average years of education has the potential to omit the deviation in the distribution of the socioeconomic level of the voters which is not uniform within the district especially in the Turkish case where shanty towns and high level private residencies are side by side in the same district. Çarkoğlu and Aytaç's research has revealed the low percentage of university graduates to be clientelistically targeted by political parties (2015, 557). The high percentage of university graduate is expected to indicate the percentages of voters who are in better economic condition and bear less probability of being clientelistically mobilized. Whereas low level of University graduates indicates the percentage of voters that are more probable to be targeted clientelistically.

Based on the existing literature our last hypothesis argues that presence of an ethnic group decreases the probability of organization change (Chandra, 2004; Arikan Akdağ, 2014; Kemahlioğlu and Bayar, 2020). In order to test the effectiveness of this hypothesis, we have included a dummy variable for Kurdish populated districts<sup>11</sup>. The size of the district has also been incorporated into the analysis as a control variable since the party activists are expected to more easily contact voters in smaller settings. In contrast, it will probably be harder for a party organization to reach voters in large population districts than in low population ones. The results of the binary logistic regression conducted at the district level are discussed in the next section.

#### 4. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics on the change of the district presidency shows that among 956 (14 missing values) valid cases, 459 coinciding with 47,3 % of the presidents have changed in the district Congress in 2017. Table 1 indicates the results of the logistic regression where several patterns for the AKP's 2017 Congress emerge. A total of 878 cases have been included into the regression due to the missing values of some cases for the variables whose effects are tested. Among the variables included in the regression we see that the magnitude of swing voters, which measures electoral concern is a significant factor at the 95%

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<sup>11</sup> These districts are from the provinces of Ağrı, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Tunceli, Van, Batman, Şırnak, Iğdır. This selection is based on the studies of Bayer and Kemahlioğlu (2020) Kemahlioğlu (2022) who also used these provinces.

significance level. A similar observation is also valid for the presence of the former intra-party alliance measured in terms of the difference of the voter shares of AKP between 2007 and June 2015 general elections. These results indicate that both electoral and intra-party alliance concerns are significant in effecting the probability of organization change. An interesting result concerns the present study's electoral safety variable, which is not significant in affecting organization change. This does not support the study's argument that for the AKP the party's electoral safety is taken into consideration when the party changes the organization due to intra-party alliance concern in 2017. It seems that at least for the 2017 Congress the party decides to change its district president regardless of its electoral safety signaling that the party prioritizes intra-party alliance vis-à-vis electoral concern, at least for the 2017 Congress. When the effect of relational clientelism is analyzed we see the districts socioeconomic condition measured in terms of percentage of university graduates is statistically significant. Similarly, presence of an ethnic group measured in terms of whether the district is situated in the Kurdish populated region is also statistically significant. The results confirm our argument that the electoral, intra-party alliance, clientelistic and ethnic concerns have an impact on political parties' decision to change their local party case for AKP in the 2017 Party Congress. Whereas electoral safety seems to have no effect on the party decision to change its organization.

Each of the relationship is in the expected direction for our significant factors. In the case of the electoral concerns, we see that the AKP leaders take into account, the shares of the swing voter. The positive sign indicates that their probability to change the district president increases as the percentage of swing voters increases. This situation can simply be evaluated as a move to gain the support of the swing voters and use presidential change as a signal to these voters that their demand will be taken into consideration.

**Table 1: Binary Logistic Regression Predicting District Presidency Change**

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Swing voters (MHP, SP and HDP vote shares in June 2015 general elections)	,026	,008	,002	1,026
Member of the former coalition (difference in the AKP's vote shares between 2007 and June 2015 general elections)	,023	,009	,016	1,023
Electoral safety (difference between vote shares of the AKP and its closest competitor)	,002	,003	,447	1,002
University graduates (ref cat: 0: not University graduate)	,352	,164	,032	1,422
Kurdish populated region (ref cat: 0: Kurdish populated region)	1,051	,390	,007	2,860
Population in 2017	,000	,000	,262	1,000
Constant	-2,901	,728	,000	,055

The results sustain the direction of the relations between change in presidency and intra-party alliance concern. The positive sign signifies that the probability of change increases as the difference in the vote shares increases. Given the expectation that members of the former intra-party alliance entered the party's local organizations in the districts where the party's support was low in that period to increase the party support, the results successfully sustain our hypothesis that the party is more probable to change its district president when the presence of the members of the former intra-party alliance increases

When we analyze the two significant variables measuring clientelistic concern we observe that the direction of their relationship with presidency change is as expected, sustaining our hypothesis. As the percentage of university graduates who are less probable to be mobilized through relational clientelistic network increases the probability of change in the district presidency increases. This provides evidence to our argument that the party prefers not to change its local organization that provides the necessary network to clientelistically mobilize socioeconomically poorer voters. This also confirms the argument of micro level researches conducted in socioeconomically poor districts that the AKP consolidates its support in these districts with the distribution of material benefits through the party's long-term organization network. An interesting result of the regression is the relatively strong relationship between change in district presidency and Kurdish populated districts. The positive relationship sustains the fact that organizational change is less likely in the AKP's local districts, which are predominantly populated by Kurds than it is in elsewhere. This is probably due to the party's high competition with the pro-Kurdish party HDP in the region. In the 2017 Congress, the party might not have wanted to risk potential vote losses with changing the organization and desires to maintain the existing network in period where the party clientelistically mobilizes these voters and programmatically it has an opposing nationalist tone.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our major aim in this study has been to contribute to the existing literature on party organization change by testing the major factors affecting the decision of the AKP to change its local organization cadres in its 2017 Party Congress. We have tested the significance of the factors highlighted in the literature namely, electoral and intra-party alliance concern, for the Turkish case. Based on the results of our analysis, we have provided two further contributions to the existing literature. First, we have incorporated into the model the constraining effect of clientelism in change of the local organization cadres. Second, we have questioned whether the presence of ethnic group under high polarization act as a further constraint to the change of the organization cadres.

In order to test these hypothesis, we have focused on the AKP's General Congress Elections in 2017. We believe the AKP provides a suitable case as a clientelistic party that also mobilize voters of Kurdish origin through its organization cadre. Furthermore, the 2017 congress elections have been effectuated in an environment where the party faced electoral as well as intra-party alliance concerns. We have decided to perform a district level analysis where the presidency change in AKP has been selected as the unit analysis of our dependent variable. The binary logistic regression not only confirms that electoral and intra-party alliance concerns have been effective in AKP's decision to change its party organization in 2017, but also it confirms that the presence of clientelism and an ethnic group has acted as constraints to this change. As such, our study sustains the existing literature that electoral and intra-party alliance concerns may independently affect leaders' decision to change their party organization. It also introduces two further factors that have not been taken into consideration in the literature but may be effective for a more detailed understanding of party organization change in parties that use clientelism and mobilize ethnic groups.

The analysis only focuses on the AKP and its 2017 general congress. Although the results are promising, we believe for the Turkish case, further research that tests the hypothesis through different congresses should be conducted both for the AKP and other political parties. To be able to evaluate a more general theory on party organization change, the effectiveness of clientelism and ethnic presence should also be tested for other clientelist political parties mobilizing ethnic groups in the world. This study can be considerate as a first step of such kind of a larger research. Furthermore, the results of the study may be developed through the incorporation of individual level data of the district presidents into the regression since their individual characteristics is expected to be also important in the party decision to change or re-nominate them. These potential steps may constitute the base of further research on the factors affecting organization change and the generalization of the tested factors.

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