

Dynamics of Winning the Referendums: The Effects of Campaign Intensity and Referendum Issue

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Abstract

Why do governments put some of their proposals to the popular vote despite the uncertainties about the referendum results? Furthermore, under which conditions do they have a better chance of winning in referendums. This study argues that some variables related to the issues put to referendum and the campaigns conducted are more influential in determining the referendum outcome than structural conditions such as the economic situation and the quality of democracy. It has three hypotheses. First, the higher the intensity of campaigning by the parties in the referendum, the lower the probability that the government proposal will be approved. Second, the higher the level of complexity of the package put to a referendum, the lower the probability of approval. Third, if voters already have strong predispositions on the issue being voted on, the results of the referendum resemble the results of general elections, i.e. it is easier to predict the outcome of the referendum. These hypotheses will be evaluated by making a qualitative comparison of the campaigns in Türkiye's 2007, 2010, and 2017 referendums.

Keywords: Referendum, Campaigning, Democracy, Türkiye, the AKP.

Referandumlarda Kazanma Dinamikleri: Kampanya Yoğunluğu ve Referandum Konusunun Etkileri

Öz

Referandum sonuçlarına ilişkin belirsizliklere rağmen hükümetler neden bazı önerilerini halk oylamasına sunarlar? Ayrıca, hangi koşullar altında referandumlarda kazanma şansları daha yüksektir? Bu çalışma, referanduma sunulan konular ve yürütülen kampanyalarla ilgili bazı değişkenlerin referandum sonucunu belirlemede ekonomik durum ve demokrasinin kalitesi gibi yapısal koşullardan daha etkili olduğunu savunmaktadır. Çalışmanın üç hipotezi bulunmaktadır. Birincisi, referandumda tarafların kampanya yoğunluğu ne kadar yüksekse, hükümet teklifinin onaylanma olasılığı o kadar düşüktür. İkincisi, referanduma sunulan paketin karmaşıklık düzeyi ne kadar yüksekse, onaylanma olasılığı da o kadar düşüktür. Üçüncüsü, eğer seçmenlerin oylanan konu hakkında zaten güçlü eğilimleri varsa, referandum sonuçları genel seçim sonuçlarına benzer ve referandumun sonucunu tahmin etmek daha kolaydır. Bu hipotezler, Türkiye'deki 2007, 2010 ve 2017 referandum kampanyalarının nitel karşılaştırması yapılarak analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Referandum, Seçim Kampanyası, Demokrasi, Türkiye, AKP

1. Introduction

Türkiye has undergone seven referendums since transitioning to multiparty politics in 1946. Two of these referendums were about ratifying new constitutions in 1961 and 1982 amidst the authoritarian backdrop of military interventions. The remaining five referendums, which took place in 1987, 1988, 2007, 2010, and 2017, involved constitutional reforms proposed by the government, all during single-party rule. The first two were initiated by the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) governments, while the latter three occurred under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). This study focuses on the AKP referendums for two reasons. First of all, the frequency of referendums has increased under the AKP, and more are expected as the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made clear statements pointing at this. For example, Erdoğan stated on an issue about the European Union that the government can “go to the 81 million [referring to the Turkish nation],” and added: “we should get used to referendums” (“Erdoğan: Bu mantıkla,” 2018). Also, as a “personalistic plebiscitary leader” (Weyland, 2022), Erdoğan has occasionally called for a referendum on the constitutional amendments he plans to introduce. A typical example of this is when he said, “Let's go to a referendum if necessary” on the issue of constitutional guarantee for the freedom of headscarf. He continued: “The people speak the truth. Let's see what the nation says. They cannot accept going to the people. They know what might come out of the ballot box if they go to the people” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan,” 2022). Furthermore, after the 2023 elections, there have been proposals to draft a brand-new constitution or make some reforms to allow Erdoğan to compete in presidential elections for another term and be elected with a plurality of votes (“Erdoğan: “50+1 mecburiyeti,” 2023; “Kulis: Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinde,” 2024).

The second reason for analyzing the referendums during the AKP era is the notable decline in acceptance rates, despite all proposals being approved by the people's vote. The approval rate dropped from 68.9 percent in 2007 to 57.9 percent in 2010, and to a marginal win of 51.4 percent in 2017. This cannot be explained by the declining popularity of the party in government, as the AKP's vote shares in the most proximate general elections were 46.6% in 2007, 49.8% in 2011 and 42.6% in 2018. This constant decrease in the acceptance rates of government proposals in the referendums is significant considering the widespread acceptance in the recent literature that the AKP and Erdoğan are dragging Türkiye through authoritarianism (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Çınar, 2018; Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2015; Öniş, 2015; Özbudun, 2015; Sözen 2008; Taş, 2015; Ugur-Cinar, 2023). How is it that a government finds it increasingly difficult to win referendums, despite simultaneously tightening its grip on the political system, monopolizing state power, and skewing the electoral field to disadvantage the opposition? In a regular democracy, “a system in which parties lose elections” (Przeworski, 1991: 10), it may be commonplace for government proposals to be rejected in referendums. Yet, in the context of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) or competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010), the potential for the opposition to effectively challenge executive decisions is diminished by elected executives. In this case, analyzing the reasons why the AKP governments' constitutional amendment proposals are passing with increasing difficulty in referendums will help to understand the relationship between competitive authoritarianism and the use of referendums.

2. Theory and Methodology

The relationship between the use of referendums and the quality of democracy is a controversial topic (Qvortrup, 2017). Lijphart (1999: 217) famously argued that governments only submit issues to referendums when they are certain of winning. However, a democracy with “institutionalized uncertainty” (Przeworski, 1991: 10-14) is fairly open to surprises by definition. While incumbent advantage in winning is a law-like proposition in political science (Cuzán, 2015; Hibbs, 2000), the opposition always has a chance as long as the elections are free and fair. In that case, it can be argued that government proposals are more likely to be accepted in referendums in such settings where the freeness and fairness of electoral processes are manipulated by governments utilizing a wide range of legal and extralegal instruments, including state institutions, financial power, and media dominance. Especially populists or autocratic leaders often employ referendums in a plebiscitarian manner to legitimize the constitutional reforms for consolidating their power (Chambers, 2019). Nevertheless, usages and outcomes of referendums in weak or illiberal democracies are more complicated than the literature suggests (Altman, 2011; Qvortrup, 2017). To begin with, while there has been a remarkable increase in the use of referendums around the world, this rise is not due to populist agitations or authoritarian tendencies, but largely to constitutional limitations in democratic countries or the unwillingness of politicians to take responsibility for making decisions on some critical and polarizing issues (Qvortrup, 2017: 142). Furthermore, regardless of the regime type and how they are initiated, referendums more frequently function as “the people’s shield” against the “swords” of power-hungry leaders than as a means of consolidating executive power (Qvortrup, 2017: 151). Similarly, Altman (2011: 115) finds that there exists only a slight difference between the acceptance rates of top-down or citizen-initiated referendums, 54,2 percent and 50 percent respectively by analyzing Latin American countries.

These findings indicate that top-down initiated referendums are not always easily manipulated by governments. Gamboa (2022) also argues that when opposition actors use moderate institutional strategies, such as leveraging legal institutions to halt or modify antidemocratic reforms, the hegemonic aspirations of populist leaders are often thwarted. Following Gamboa’s argument, using a referendum as a moderate institutional strategy can provide opportunities for opposition actors to challenge incumbents, even in competitive authoritarian or fully authoritarian contexts. Indeed, there are cases where people played the veto power against rulers seeking to reinforce their executive authority not only in illiberal democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes (e.g. Venezuela in 2007), but also in full authoritarian settings (e.g. Chile in 1988, Malawi in 1993, Zimbabwe in 2000). Weyland (2024) provides a handful of cases such as Colombia’s Uribe, Argentina’s Menem or Honduras’s Zelaya where plebiscitary leaders could not fulfill their ambitious agendas through referendums unless very unusual conjunctural opportunities for boosting mass support are combined with institutional weakness.

Besides the effects of democratic quality, some short-term factors also influence the outcomes of referendums. The short-term factors consist of the political and economic context, the issues voted in referendums, and how competing parties frame these issues during the campaign process. First of all, the state of economy (e.g. per capita income, growth rate, unemployment, inflation) matters in voting outcomes. The voters hold incumbents responsible for the economic situation, and reward or punish them accordingly (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Mughan & Lacy 2002). In line with economic voting perspective, Jenssen (1998) and Leininger (2019) find

strong correlation between economic conditions/evaluations and voting preferences in referendums. In other words, voters often view referendums as an opportunity to express their desire for change or their dissatisfaction with the government.

Another short-term factor influencing the referendum outcome is the campaigning around the issue(s) at stake. The literature on referendum campaigns suggests that framing the issue by political actors may have relatively more influence on voter choices in referendums than they do in general elections because the messages from political parties may be ambiguous, parties may be internally divided over the issue being voted, or parties from the left and the right side of the spectrum may form unusual blocs in referendums (LeDuc, 2002; De Vreese & Semetco, 2004). Last but not least, the referendum issue may be multifaceted, and different aspects of the issue may trigger various reactions among various voters. Especially when the electorate deals with technical texts (e.g., international treaties, constitutional amendments, judicial reforms), summarizing and framing the referendum issue becomes a key component of the campaign (De Vreese, 2007: 2). On the other hand, sometimes packing different issues while launching a referendum creates a certain ambiguity (Anckar, 2018: 107). In some instances, where voters have limited information about the issue or in the case of uncertainty, No votes might be read as a demand for further information (Bowler & Donovan, 2000). As LeDuc (2007: 41) argues, when there is less partisan basis on the issues voted, citizens take more time to come to a decision, and that decision is highly unpredictable. In other words, the information provided to the voters in campaigns is more influential when the referendum issue is new and unfamiliar, parties are divided, or ideological alignments are unclear. However, if the issue voted reflects strongly held dispositions, voters are inclined to behave as in general elections in referendums (LeDuc, 2009). Overall, in the absence of strong predispositions, the outcome of the contest becomes more unpredictable. Analyzing the public opinion data from twenty referendums from Europe and Canada, LeDuc (2009: 154) finds that fourteen of them resulted in victory for the No side. This is a likely outcome especially when the second-order effects (e.g. associating the Yes vote with an unpopular leader or government), and populist rhetoric (e.g. “the people” against the elite/establishment) are in play.

Intensity of the campaign is another factor that may highly affect the outcome in referendums. LeDuc (2007) argues that when referendums turn into a partisan fight, the ruling parties stand a better chance of winning because they can mobilize their electorate, which constitutes the larger share of the voters. In some cases, however, the proponents of the referendum proposal may prefer a low-profile campaign since lower turnout may guarantee an easy win (Neijens et al., 2007: 156). Indeed, higher turnout in a referendum is a sign of intense campaign and high levels of motivation among the opponents of the proposal. In such cases, the opponents have the chance of raising doubts about the proposal, questioning the intentions of proposers, stimulating the fears of voters, or linking the proposal to other less popular issues or personalities rather than presenting an alternative proposal (LeDuc, 2007: 42). The French and Dutch referendums in 2005 are clear examples of how the intense campaigns favor the No vote.

It is also widely accepted in the literature that turnout tends to fluctuate more widely in referendums than it does in national elections, and campaign intensity remarkably increases turnouts. Measuring campaign intensity by looking at partisan polarization, media coverage and perceived closeness of the race, Hobolt (2007: 95-97) points to a strong relationship between

campaign intensity and turnout. For Hobolt (2007: 104-107), campaign exposure is positively and significantly related to the likelihood of voting, even when the relevant socioeconomic determinants of voting (education, income, age) are controlled.

This literature review suggests the following hypotheses:

H1- As the intensity of a referendum campaign rises, the likelihood of approving a government proposal decreases.

If the campaign period is intense and the voters are mobilized, it is highly probable that the opposition is motivated. The ruling parties are more likely to prefer low mobilization in referendums because it usually means an easy-win. However, if the opposition mobilizes voters, the governing party also responds to that, which in turn increases the intensity of campaign. An important indicator of referendum intensity is the level of turnouts. Beside the turnout rates, if both Yes and No campaigns are highly visible with their messages, ads, and rallies, then it is possible to define a campaign process as intense.

H2- If the complexity of a referendum proposal is high, the likelihood of its approval decreases.

Referendum issues may sometimes be very simple and familiar Yes or No questions. Yet sometimes, they are complicated and multilayered packages written with technical language. Furthermore, in some cases, the citizens are expected to give a Yes or No answer to a package consisting of more than one issue or constitutional articles. In such cases, voters may prefer to say No as a demand for further clarification.

H3- When there are strong predispositions on the issue voted, the outcomes of the referendum resemble the outcomes of general elections.

If a referendum reflects familiar political issues, then the voters align in accordance with their ideologies or political party identities. However sometimes the issues being voted are not about traditional divisions of political life, or parties may form blocs that go beyond the left-right axis. If political parties immediately take position in relation to the referendum issue without any significant intra-party division, then it can be argued that the issue sustains strong predispositions. An important indicator of predispositions is the aggregate vote share of Yes and No blocs in the most proximate general elections. It can be argued that predispositions are strong if the percentage of Yes vote is close to the aggregate vote share of Yes bloc political parties.

To test these hypotheses, this study qualitatively compares three referendum cases during the AKP governments in Türkiye. To this end, I search for the indicators of campaign intensity, issue complexity, and voter predispositions in 2007, 2010 and 2017 referendums, and analyze the mechanisms through which they affected the referendum outcomes. High levels of campaign intensity and issue complexity, and low levels of voter predispositions are necessary conditions, but each one in itself is not sufficient for the lower levels of electoral support for government proposals in referendums. To identify the indicators, this study qualitatively analyzes the contents of the referendum issues and the campaign processes for each referendum by making a newspaper review. Milliyet is chosen for this review since it has been one of the oldest and highly circulated mainstream newspapers in Türkiye.

3. Turkish Case

Before analyzing the referendums in the AKP era, it is necessary to overview the constitutional setting to hold a referendum and the general picture of referendums in Türkiye. The “People’s vote” was introduced by the 1982 constitution as an option to solve the conflict between the President and the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM) regarding constitutional amendments. According to Article 175, if a proposal receives at least a three-fifths majority support in the TBMM, the president either returns it back to parliament for reconsideration or takes it to the people’s vote. If a proposal receives at least a two-thirds majority, the president may approve it or takes it to the people’s vote. Since the 1982 constitution, the presidents have used the referendum option five times. As Table 1 demonstrates, Turkish people are likely to support the top-down initiations in referendums. Indeed, except for the 1988 referendum, all of them were approved by the people’s vote with an average of 59,4 percent. Nevertheless, if the 1961 and 1982 referendums are excluded as they took place under authoritarian settings of post-military rule, the average support rate drops to 52,6 percent (Kaya Osmanbaşıoğlu and Bekaroğlu, 2019: 13).

Table 1: Referendum outcomes in Türkiye

Year of the referendum	The voteshare supporting the government’s position	Turnout	Outcome
1961	61,7	81	Yes
1982	91,4	91,3	Yes
1987	49,8	93,6	Yes*
1988	35	88,8	No
2007	68,9	67,5	Yes
2010	57,9	77,3	Yes
2017	51,4	85,1	Yes
Average	59,4	83,5	
Average excluding 1961 and 1982	52,6	82,5	

* In 1987, the ruling ANAP government campaigned for No in a referendum on whether to lift the restrictions on politicians banned by the 1980 military coup.

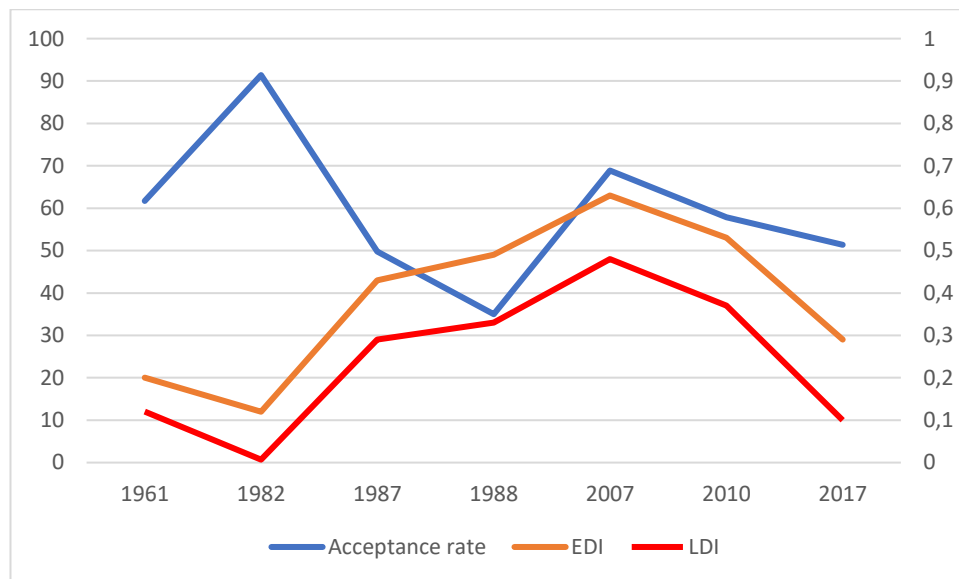
A preliminary examination of Table 1 reveals a negative relationship between turnout rates and support for the government position in referendums, excluding the years 1961 and 1982 (see also Figure 2). As turnout increases, the gap between the percentages of Yes and No votes narrows. The mechanisms underlying this relationship will be analyzed in the next section. However, before proceeding, it is important to consider whether structural factors, such as the state of the economy and the level of democracy, also play a role in shaping these outcomes, in order to gain a broader understanding of the issue. Table 2 indicates that referendum results are not strongly related to the overall economic situation. Only the inflation rate appears to be correlated with referendum outcomes. Other economic indicators, such as GDP per capita, GDP growth, and the unemployment rate, do not seem to influence voting behavior in referendums. For example, while GDP per capita slightly increased from 1987 to 1988, ANAP’s disappointment in the referendums even grew bigger. Similarly, support for the AKP government’s proposals in referendums decreased from 2007 to 2010, despite an increase in GDP per capita. Comparable inconsistencies are also observed in the relationships between referendum outcomes and the rates of GDP growth and unemployment. These observations suggest that in the Turkish context, the specific issues of the referendum, the campaigns, and

the particular circumstances surrounding the referendum may be more significant factors than the general economic situation.

Table 2: The acceptance rate of referendum proposal and the state of economy in Türkiye*

Referendum year	1961	1982	1987	1988	2007	2010	2017
Acceptance rate	61,7	91,4	49,8	35	68,9	57,9	51,4
GDP per capita	285	1402	1706	1745	9710	10672	10512
GDP growth	1,2	3,6	9,5	2,3	5	8,4	7,5
Unemployment rate	n/a	n/a	8,1	8,7	9,2	11,1	10,9
Inflation rate	4,9	28,2	33,6	69	6,2	7	11,9

* Data taken from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).



Note: EDI is Electoral Democracy Index and LDI is Liberal Democracy Index scores by Varieties Democracy Institution (https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/)

Figure 1: The acceptance rate of referendum proposal and the state of democracy in Türkiye, 1961-2017

As discussed earlier, the quality of democracy may also influence referendum outcomes. Figure 1 presents the acceptance rates in referendums alongside the state of democracy in Türkiye. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute's Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy indexes were used to assess the state of democracy. Figure 1 reveals that, interestingly, there was a negative relationship between the quality of democracy and support for government proposals in referendums before the AKP period. However, this relationship reversed during the AKP period. In other words, the decreasing scores in both the electoral and liberal dimensions of democracy have been accompanied by a decrease in support for the constitutional amendments proposed by the AKP. Particularly in 2017, the AKP government and President Erdoğan struggled to secure an easy win in the referendum, despite the electoral playing field being skewed against the opposition.

Finally, to complete the broader picture of referendum dynamics, it is useful to compare the outcomes with the general election performances of the parties in the Yes and No blocs of the referendum. Figure 2 displays the referendum outcomes alongside turnout rates, the aggregate votes of the parties that supported the government's proposal in the referendum, and the ruling party's votes. For the vote shares of the parties, I looked at their performance in the most

immediate general election. To begin with, the inverse movement of the referendum result and voter turnout curves is immediately striking. This pattern partially supports the first hypothesis of this study. High voter turnout is indicative of intense campaigns, suggesting that the race is competitive and that the opposition has a chance to win. However, as discussed above, in addition to turnout rates, it is crucial to examine whether both the Yes and No campaigns are highly visible through their messages, ads, and rallies. This aspect will be elaborated in the next section. Considering the vote shares of the ruling party and the bloc supporting the government proposal, the latter appears to be more closely related to the referendum outcome. Initially, it is possible to argue that in the Turkish case, voter behavior in general elections and referendums does not fluctuate significantly.

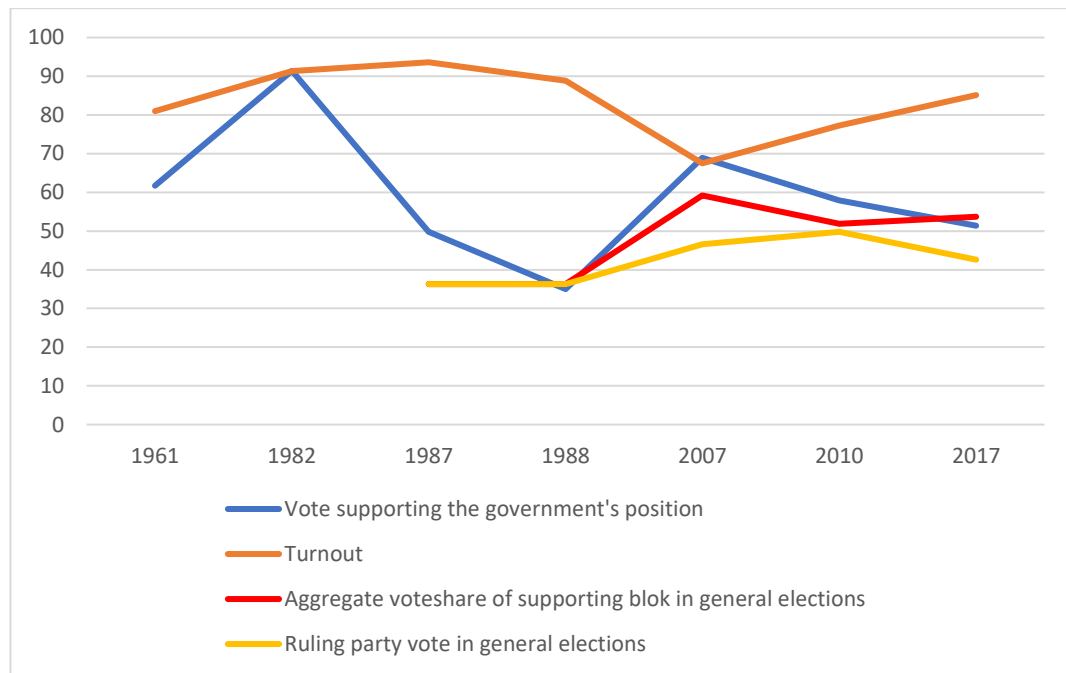


Figure 2: The acceptance rate of referendum proposal and vote shares of parties in Türkiye, 1961-2017

While these observations have the limitation of relying the aggregate level data, and therefore carrying the risk of producing ecological fallacy, they are still helpful to have an overall understanding of the play between macro level variables. Also, the lack of individual-level data on voter behavior in referendums in Turkey leaves no choice but to conduct an aggregate-level analysis. Overall, as the inflation rate and voter turnouts rise, it is very likely that public support for government proposals will decrease. On the other hand, the aggregate vote of the political parties supporting the government proposal is positively related to referendum outcomes. However, a deeper analysis of referendum campaigns is required to understand whether issue complexities and voter predispositions about the issues are at play. The three referendums initiated by the AKP governments provide ample material to evaluate the effects of these factors.

4. Referendums in the AKP Era

During the AKP governments, three proposals for constitutional reform have become the subject of referendums. The 2007 referendum concerned electing the president directly by a popular vote rather than by parliamentary vote. The 2010 referendum was a comprehensive

package mostly regarding judicial reform. Finally, the 2017 referendum changed Türkiye's government system from parliamentarism to presidentialism. As Table 3 displays, voter turnout raises to 85,1 percent in the 2017 referendum, reaching the average turnout rate in general elections in Türkiye.

Table 3: Outcomes of the referendums and the most proximate general elections, 2007-2017*

Referendum date	Referendum outcomes		The most proximate general election date	Aggregate votes of Yes and No blocs in the most proximate general election	
October 21, 2007	Turnout	67,5	July 22, 2007	Turnout	84,2
	Yes	68,9		AKP+DTP+others	59,2
	No	31,1		CHP+MHP+others	38
September 12, 2010	Turnout	77,3	June 12, 2011	Turnout	83,2
	Yes	57,9		AKP+SP+BBP	51,9
	No	42,1		CHP+MHP+(BDP**)+others	39,5 (with BDP 46,1)
April 16, 2017	Turnout	85,1	June 24, 2018	Turnout	86,2
	Yes	51,4		AKP+MHP+others	53,7
	No	48,6		CHP+HDP+İP***+others	45,6

* This table is a modified version of a table from an earlier study (Kaya Osmanbaşıoğlu and Bekaroğlu, 2017: 128).

** The BDP boycotted the 2010 referendum.

*** The Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İP) established by MHP dissidents, who during the referendum openly declared that they were against the package.

On the other hand, although the AKP has successfully formed winning blocs in referendums, the vote share of the support rates for the AKP proposals in referendums have continuously decreased from 68,9 percent to 51,4 percent. Interestingly, the AKP proposals had enjoyed support rates higher than the aggregate votes of Yes blocs in 2007 and 2010 referendums. Nevertheless, in the 2017 referendum, the proposal's 51,4 percent support rate dropped below the aggregate vote share of the Yes bloc. This implies that the referendum issues and campaign processes played significant roles in the referendum outcomes. Therefore, a further analysis focusing on the referendum issues and campaign processes is needed to understand the continuously decreasing support rates of the AKP proposals.

4.1. 2007 Referendum

The first referendum initiated by the AKP took place on October 21, 2007 after a series of political crises surrounding the presidential elections in Türkiye. The AKP's candidate for the presidency was Abdullah Gül, a prominent founder of the party and then the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Yet his nomination was fiercely opposed by the CHP because of his Islamist background and his wife's headscarf (Kaya Osmanbaşıoğlu, 2015: 402). The President, Ahmet N. Sezer, and the Chief of General Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, also made some hostile statements, which were in turn followed by mass rallies, popularly known as the "Republic Rallies." And finally, a very harsh military statement known as the "e-memorandum" targeting the AKP government's alleged anti-secular activities was published on the official webpage of the General Staff on April 27, 2007, the very first day of the presidential elections in the parliament. In the end, the Constitutional Court nullified the first round of presidential elections by arguing that the vote did not meet the quorum of the meeting - two thirds of the seats (367) in the parliament - to elect the president. In return, the AKP called for an early general election that took place on July 22, where the AKP increased its votes from 34,2 to 46,5 percent. After that, the AKP managed to elect

Abdullah Gül as the President of Türkiye on August 28 with the Nationalist Action Party's (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) help to secure the quorum in the TBMM.

Nevertheless, this crisis around electing the president in the TBMM led the AKP to propose a constitutional amendment to elect the president directly with a popular vote. This proposal was not accepted in parliament, yet it secured enough votes to carry it to a referendum. The amendment package predominantly included changes on presidential elections that proposed electing the president with a popular vote, decreasing the president's term of office from seven years to five years, and bringing a two-term limit to a president which was limited to one term before. It also proposed holding the parliamentary elections every four years rather than five years, and to establish the quorum needed for parliamentary decisions as one-third of elected members. The package was a clear answer to the crises over Gül's candidacy. Although this issue caused very intense political crises and polarization preceding the referendum, surprisingly the referendum campaign was low profile. The reason might lie in a dilemma: arguing against electing the president by popular vote in a referendum where the people would decide. Therefore, the CHP and MHP either said No or called the electorate to boycott the referendum but they did not justify their position by bringing arguments about the proposal's content, but by saying that package would cause confusion and systemic problems in the future because of its imprecise and rushed preparation. Three prominent objections to the package came from the President Sezer, the CHP and the MHP. The President and the CHP took the case to the Constitutional Court after Sezer vetoed the proposal arguing that it brought an "unheard system" that pulls Türkiye from the parliamentary model, yet it is not presidential or semi-presidential. According to Sezer this would "cause unease in the regime" itself ("Sezer'den veto," 2007). Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court, overruled the annulment claims brought by Sezer and the CHP with a majority verdict of six out of eleven judges ("Referanduma vize," 2007).

The MHP, on the other hand, issued a written statement on October 4, 2007. It was not only a clear expression of concerns such as those mentioned above, but also a proposal to the AKP to solve the issue within the Parliament. It argued that the constitutional amendment proposal was precipitately prepared in the crisis atmosphere of presidential elections, and because of that, it may breed new political crises especially concerning the legitimacy and office term of Abdullah Gül. The question was whether Abdullah Gül could have continued his term as the president if the proposal had been accepted in the referendum, and whether his term would be five or seven years. The MHP recommended that the AKP either withdraw the proposal entirely or make some changes in the package in order to end the debates about Gül's legitimacy (Bahçeli, 2007). The AKP followed the second path, and just five days before the referendum, on October 16, refined the original package with the support of the MHP and DTP ("Gül'ü rahatlatan yasa," 2007).

Although all the critics of the proposal argued that the changes were vital for Turkish democracy and further elaboration was needed, interestingly the political parties had not initiated big campaigns. There were some possible reasons for this low-intensity. First of all, as mentioned above, defending the No vote, in other words, telling the people that they cannot elect the president directly, was not a strategically plausible position for the opposition. Secondly, the year of 2007 had already been full of tensions and crises, after which both the actors and public might be tired. Thirdly, after the July 22 general elections, the main opposition party, the CHP,

had been struggling with internal issues where some leadership candidates were blaming Deniz Baykal for a failure to increase the party's votes. Finally, some internal and foreign policy issues got the upper hand in political agenda. The most significant of them were the increasing number of terrorist attacks in Türkiye, and the parliamentary vote on the authorization of military use in North Iraq.

Within this low-intense campaign, only the AKP held several meetings, and spread pamphlets and banners with the slogan "Elect the 12th president" (*12. Cumhurbaşkanını sen seç*), arguing that this constitutional reform would give unmediated power to the people to choose who would sit in Türkiye's highest office. Among the parties within parliament, the DTP supported the direct election of the president while the MHP declared that it was against the package. Yet neither the MHP nor DTP engaged the debates actively. The CHP, on the other hand, asked the voters to either boycott the referendum or vote No by engaging the media debates arguing that the legitimacy of the referendum was handicapped because of the AKP's imprecise manner. Among the extra-parliamentary political parties, The Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi, SP*) supported the Yes vote while The Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP*) called for a boycott. The lack of intense campaign especially from the opposition ended up with a low turnout (67,5 percent) and the triumph of the Yes campaign with 68,9 percent of the votes. This is the lowest turnout recorded in Türkiye's electoral history since 1950. The low turnout rate can be attributed to the success of boycott calls to some extent. Nevertheless, this argument misses the point that the voting behavior in 2007 referendum did not exactly coincide with the existing political cleavages, which had already been there and alive as the preceding quarrels and crises indicated. For example, the public opinion polls before and after the referendum showed that approximately 54,1% of the CHP voters supported electing the president by popular vote (Atıkcın & Öge, 2012: 459). Indeed, even in Türkiye's Western coasts, where the secular and anti-AKP sentiments were highest, the No vote was able to exceed the Yes vote in only seven cities and with small margins ("Sadece 7 ilde," 2007).

These findings regarding the 2007 referendum process support all our hypotheses. The low levels of campaign competition, intensity and turnout increased the support for the AKP proposal. The referendum issue was also not complex, and the opposition did not simplify or reframe it. As mentioned above, no party openly argued against electing the president by popular vote. Therefore, the second hypothesis was also confirmed for the 2007 referendum. Finally, there were no strong predispositions on the issue voted as it was indicated by the low-intense campaigns by the opposition parties and the significant levels of support to the proposal among the CHP voters. Hence, the third hypothesis was confirmed as well.

4.2. 2010 Referendum

The victories of the AKP in the 2007 general elections and referendum did not bring an end to the polarized and confrontational politics in Türkiye, but rather intensified it. The courts were the main battlefield of this confrontation, where the closure case of the AKP at the Constitutional Court and the "*Ergenekon*" case were two prominent manifestations of it. The former case filed by the chief public prosecutor on March 14, 2008, and decided by the Constitutional Court on July 30 with "no closure, but a serious warning" as a newspaper's headline briefly stated ("Kapatma yok," *Hürriyet*). Indeed, the Court decided with a majority vote (10 out of 11 judges) that the AKP was "the focus of activities against the secular regime," yet six judges voted against banning the party. The *Ergenekon* case, on the other hand, was a case mainly targeting active

and retired military officers along with some civilians. According to the indictment of July 14, 2008, a terrorist organization named *Ergenekon* was plotting a bloody coup against the government. For the AKP, the Ergenekon case was clear evidence of a plot against the government where the CHP, MHP and High Courts were acting in concert with the military. The opposition, on the other hand, was criticizing the case as a political trial that aimed at paralyzing the opposition. Accordingly, Baykal, the leader of the CHP, declared that he was the barrister for the defendants in the Ergenekon case while PM Erdogan responded that he was the prosecutor of the trial in the name of the nation.

In this atmosphere of judicial tensions, the AKP initiated an extensive constitutional amendment proposing reforms especially focusing on the formation of high courts. Indeed, the most disputed aspects of the amendment package were those concerning the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (*Hakimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu, HSYK*). It included changes that would increase the HSYK's number of members from 7 to 22 with new election procedures that gave the government certain advantages. It also proposed new election rules and 12-year term limits for Constitutional Court members. The remaining amendments were relatively minor proposals that aimed at drawing support from various social groups. Among them, the most symbolically significant proposal was the removal of the temporary articles of the 1982 Constitution that exempted the perpetrators of the 1980 coup from litigation. Other amendments included the individual appeals to the Constitutional Court, the introduction of the Ombudsman, the right of collective bargaining for the unions of state employees, strengthening the rights of women, children and other disadvantaged groups, right to privacy, right to travel abroad, changes in the loss of deputy status in the parliament, the judicial review for disciplinary decisions of state employees, and civilian judicial review on the decisions of the Higher Military Council.

During the parliamentary vote on the package, the CHP and HDP did not attend the voting while MHP deputies voted against the package. After the parliamentary vote, the package was sent to President Gül, who put the amendments to referendum on May 12, 2010. The referendum date was very symbolic: September 12, the anniversary of the 1980 military coup. Hence, this very complicated package was successfully reframed by the AKP as a retribute to the 1980 coup. So, a Yes vote, for the AKP, was equivalent to being anti-coup. Yet, different than the 2007 referendum, the opposition parties were highly motivated for campaigning against the package. The CHP and the MHP had actively campaigned for No vote while the BDP called its electorate to boycott the referendum arguing that the package did not include an amendment to decrease the 10 percent national threshold and a Yes vote would end up with postponing the realization of a real civil constitution ("BDP: 12 Eylül'de," 2010). From the extra-parliamentary parties, the SP and the BBP supported the package while the DP supported the No vote.

Strikingly, the debates that started long before the official campaign period touched the traditional fault lines of Turkish politics and many other issues rather than focusing on the amendment package per se. Relying on the fact that the majority of voters in Türkiye have right-wing and conservative inclinations vis-à-vis the secularist bloc (Çarkoğlu & Hinich, 2006, Çınar & Sayın, 2014: 380), the AKP wanted to assure that traditional fault lines would play a decisive role in the voting behavior. In a public meeting on July 26, Prime Minister Erdogan stated that "(...) bureaucrats and elites say no, (...) the supporters of status quo and tutelage say no, (...) those who humiliate the life styles and preferences of people say no." On the other hand, he

argued that "Those supporting democracy are saying yes." He presented the issue in very simple terms: "There is the coup constitution on the one side, and the people's constitution on the other side" ("Brütüs atışması," 2010). An influential position that helped the Yes vote was the "not enough but Yes" (*Yetmez ama Evet*) group that consisted of mostly liberal oriented journalists and public intellectuals. Their main argument was that the amendments were not satisfactory, and they had many aspects to criticize, but still the package was an improvement for Turkish democracy. According to some observers, the "not enough but yes" group was larger than the Yes group (Tezkan, 2010).

In response to these, the No front had employed various strategies to invalidate Erdoğan's reframing. CHP's new leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu preferred a social democratic discourse focusing on the economy rather than secularist sensitivities. Kılıçdaroğlu also needed to prove his leadership and mobilize his constituency for the upcoming general elections in 2011. Therefore, Kılıçdaroğlu tried to touch on many issues together with the amendment package for persuading the voter that his party could be a viable ruling alternative. In public meetings, he made challenging promises such as freeing the headscarf or solving the terror problem in a prospective CHP government ("Liderlerin referandum vaadleri," 2010), criticized the AKP government for corruption, bad economic management or making secret talks with PKK ("Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan Erdoğan'a," 2010), and opposed the content of the amendment package arguing that it would bring political tutelage on judiciary, and the proposal was much worse than the one the military imposed in the 1982 Constitution ("Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan Erdoğan'a çağrı," 2010). The MHP's campaign, on the other hand, mostly targeted the AKP's "Kurdish opening" policies rather than the amendments themselves. For the MHP, Erdoğan was trying to clear the way for Kurdish opening policies with the proposed constitutional amendments ("MHP'li Şandır," 2010).

Considering the package included changes in 27 constitutional articles regarding various issues, the large number of dissatisfied voters was an expected outcome. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the widespread dissatisfaction with the package and HDP's call for boycott among Kurdish voters did not lead electorate to abstain from the ballot boxes. On September 12, 2010, the turnout was 77,3 percent, and 57,9 percent voted in favor of the constitutional amendments. To explain this, Kalaycioglu (2012: 16) argues that "secular-religious *kulturkampf* and its ideological repercussions played a major role" to shape the outcomes. In other words, the voting outcomes more or less reflected the prevailing polarization along lifestyles in society. Atıkcın & Oge, (2012: 459-460) also found that the voters behaved more in line with party identities and pre-existing beliefs in 2010 although there were about the same levels of polarization in 2007 and 2010. They argue that "campaign matters" in a sense that "the way political actors frame the referendum debate determines the degree to which existing beliefs get reflected in the referendum vote" (Atıkcın & Oge, 2010: 463-464).

Indeed, reframing greatly mattered in 2010 as the issue was very complex. It seems that the AKP was more successful than the opposition to reframe the highly complex package in in this referendum. In the second hypothesis, we suggested that the electoral support for a referendum proposal decreases when it is a complicated package. Yet, the AKP managed to draw the support of the 57,9 percent voters. Although this outcome seems to weaken the second hypothesis, it should be noted that the percentage of Yes votes significantly dropped from 68,9 to 57,9. In other words, the more complicated package meant less support in 2010

compared to 2007. This implies that rather than the package complexity, reframing the package and predispositions played a greater role in 2010 referendum outcomes. In fact, the AKP successfully reframed the package by claiming that the Yes vote was a manifestation of rejecting the tutelage of civil and military bureaucracy. Thus, the AKP was largely successful to assure the right-wing and conservative citizens to vote in accordance with their predispositions.

4.3. 2017 Referendum

On August 10, 2014, the AKP leader Erdoğan became the first popularly elected president of Türkiye. When Erdoğan's popularity and leadership style were combined with the excessive presidential powers provided by the 1982 Constitution, Türkiye virtually became a semi-presidential system, which in turn called for a need for making a constitutional amendment to rearrange its government system (Alkan, 2013: 321; Alkan, 2018: 86). Since the beginning, Erdogan and the AKP openly declared their preference for the presidential system by arguing that Türkiye needed a strong leadership to deal with the upcoming global and regional turbulences. The failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 not only supported this argument, but also stimulated a collaboration period between the AKP and the MHP. In the end, these two parties brought a constitutional amendment package to the parliament that proposed changing Türkiye's government system from parliamentarism to presidentialism. On January 21, 2017, 339 deputies voted in favor of the package, passing the 330 threshold to take the amendments to referendum.

The amendment package included 18 articles that introduced a presidential system where the prime ministry is abolished and executive power is concentrated on a popularly elected president. Most of the amendments concerned the organizational structure and power dynamics of the new system but the package also proposed decreasing the age of candidacy for being a deputy from 25 to 18, changing the term of the parliament from 4 years to 5 years, increasing the number of deputies from 550 to 600, and abolishing the military courts.

The opposition in the parliamentary debate referred to the package as "a proposal that would destroy our century long tradition, and replace the sovereignty of the nation with personal hegemony" of a president who would be at the same time the leader of his/her political party, which would turn Türkiye into a "party state" ("Aklınızı kimseye emanet," 2017). The AKP replied to this accusation by stating that a "Partisan president is not something new for Türkiye. Was Atatürk, the founder of the republic, a member of his party? Yes, he was. Was he a member of parliament? Yes, he was. Was he the party leader? Yes, he was. İsmet İnönü was the same. So what? Was his neutrality injured? (...) What we are doing is returning to Atatürk constitutions" ("Adalet Bakanı Bozdağ," 2017).

As the above excerpts imply, the 2017 referendum has witnessed one of the most intense campaigns in Türkiye's recent political history. Both Yes and No fronts were highly motivated, employed very strong language towards each other, and used every means to mobilize voters. The AKP and MHP were the two main parties engaged in the campaign on the Yes bloc. The Turkish nationalist BBP and Kurdish Islamist *Hüda Par* also declared support for the proposal. Last but not least, in spite of neutrality debates, President Erdogan's office organized public meetings for the Yes campaign in coordination with the AKP ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan," 2017). The No bloc, on the other hand, consisted of highly diverse components such as the social democratic CHP, the Kurdish nationalist HDP, the Islamic oriented SP, the nationalist left

Homeland Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP), and the socialist left Labor Party (*Emek Partisi*, EMEP). Since the leaders and some significant representatives of the HDP were imprisoned, and the other smaller parties only had very limited impact, the CHP was the flagbearer of the No front. Although the Yes bloc presented itself as a grand right-wing coalition, it should be noted that there were many analyses before and after the referendum arguing that MHP voters were divided among the Yes and No inclinations. Furthermore, some expelled but influential MHP dissidents, who then formed the Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İP), such as Meral Akşener, Ümit Özdağ or Koray Aydın actively campaigned for No vote (“MHP’li muhalifler,” 2017). This latter component had made the No bloc even more diverse. According to President Erdogan, Prime Minister Yıldırım, and Bahçeli, the leader of MHP, these diverse colors were united and lined up with terrorist organizations like the PKK and Gülenists, and directed by a “mastermind” that was conspiring against a strong and stable Türkiye.

Indeed, from the early stages of the campaign, the Yes bloc continuously tried to establish a link between the political parties on the No bloc and terrorist organizations. For example, on February 8, PM Yıldırım stated that the "CHP has given the same picture as marginal groups. Since PKK and FETO¹ say no, we say yes to these constitutional amendments. (...) the CHP has got on board their boat" (“CHP’yi Allah ,” 2017). Similarly, Erdogan said that "Kandil [referring the PKK leadership] invites people to vote no. (...) If I vote no, my vote goes to Kandil. If I vote no, this country goes to instability. (...) Saying no equals the ‘pit’.”² Bahçeli also accused the MHP dissidents of being guided by FETÖ (“Bahçeli: Vesayet,” 2017). The CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu replied to these accusations by arguing that the AKP was using such rhetoric to divert people's attention away from the package: "It is a shame that a PM declares that all the no voters are terrorists. (...) They cannot defend the package. That is why they try to denigrate us" (“Hayırları çoğaltmalıyız,” 2017). Other than these kinds of debates, the CHP campaign mostly focused on the package. It did not even take the amendments to the Court as it had traditionally done in previous cases. Kılıçdaroğlu stated that the CHP trusted in "people's judgement and common sense" which will not allow a proposal that aims at annulling the sovereignty of the people (“Kılıçdaroğlu AYM’ye,” 2017). In public meetings, the CHP leader argued that the proposed system is like "a bus with no brakes" because it did not include checks and balances on the presidential power, and all the nation cannot be consigned to one person's judgement who might be wrong or deceived (“Kılıçdaroğlu ilk,” 2017). Kılıçdaroğlu also blamed the proposal for reducing the importance of the Parliament. He argued that the proposed system would not only deauthorize the parliament but also give one person the authority to annul it. For the CHP, this was not a change of government system, but rather a regime transition through authoritarianism (“Meclisle bütün,” 2017).

President Erdoğan and the AKP, on the other hand, stated that none of Kılıçdaroğlu's arguments were accurate. For Erdoğan, the amendments were not undermining the parliament's power, neither was it giving the president the power to annul parliament. He argued that parliament was not going to have the motion of censure power, which most of the time had caused political instability and short-lived governments, but the proposal was giving this right to the nation as

¹ This is the abbreviation for Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü (Gülenist Terror Organization), which was blamed for the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. After the July 15th, Gülenist community was commonly called as FETÖ.

² By “pit,” Erdoğan refers to PKK's new strategy to dig trenches in residential areas to fight Turkish security forces (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’dan,” 2017).

the principal authority ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Var," 2017). Both Erdoğan and Yıldırım had repeatedly argued that the new system was going to bring political stability, and thereby, a stronger Türkiye, which was needed more than ever because the region in which Türkiye is located was about to witness fundamental changes ("Başbakan Yıldırım: Artık," 2017). Bahçeli also emphasized throughout the MHP campaigning that the referendum was "a matter of survival" for Türkiye because the victory of No would make her enemies happy, which in turn would bring "chaos" ("Bahçeli açıkladı," 2017).

On April 16, the turnout was 85,1 percent, the highest of the referendums in the AKP era. It is a sign of a high level motivation and mobilization both in Yes and No blocs. The outcome also reflects a close race, where the 51,4 percent of the voters supported the amendments while 48,6 percent rejected. Interestingly, for the first time, the percentage of the Yes vote was lower than the aggregate vote of Yes bloc parties in the most proximate election while in 2007 and 2010, the Yes votes enjoyed higher percentages than the aggregate vote of the political parties supporting the amendments in question. Also, for the first time, the AKP could not get its desired outcomes in some major cities, especially in Istanbul and Ankara, where the No votes were slightly higher than Yes votes, 51,4 percent and 51,2 percent respectively.

According to a post-election poll ("Ipsos'tan CNN Türk'e," 2017), there were remarkable differences in voting behavior in terms of political party identities. The poll found that 73 percent of the MHP voters and 10 percent of the AKP voters were opposed to the amendment package in the referendum. Furthermore, among the No voters, the MHP and AKP electorate accounted for 16 percent and 9 percent respectively. This in part explains the inconsistency between the amount of the Yes vote and the aggregate vote of the political parties supporting the proposal. It seems that the MHP dissidents' campaign was influential among the MHP voters. Also, the AKP seems to fail to convince some of its voters for the presidential system. Indeed, the same poll also found that the No voters justified their preference by stating that they did not support a presidential system. Other than the influence of the MHP dissidents, a debate on federalism probably affected some undecided MHP voters through No. Just a few days before the referendum, an old commentary of Şükrü Karatepe, who arguably supported federalism in the presidential system, hit the media. Karatepe was not only a chief-advisor of President Erdoğan, but also known as a contributor to the amendment package. The debate inflamed especially after Bahçeli's reaction arguing that they were for unitary system, and this debate might change the MHP voters' decision because federalism was associated with Kurdish separatism in the Turkish context. Although Erdoğan and Yıldırım immediately made statements about their side with the unitary system, this debate just a couple days before the referendum had probably hurt the Yes bloc ("Eyalet varsa," 2017).

Another decisive factor on the referendum outcome was the preferences of Kurdish voters. Since June 2015, there had been clashes between Turkish security forces and the PKK in some southeastern towns, which caused major destruction in and mass exodus from these residential areas. The Kurdish Opening process, officially known as the National Unity and Fraternity Project (*Milli Birlik ve Kardeşlik Projesi*) initiated by the government in 2009, also came to an end in 2015. These clashes were accompanied by the arrests of Kurdish politicians, including the leaders, deputies and mayors of the HDP. Although there was an expectation that Kurdish voters would predominantly oppose the package, almost half of the voters in predominantly Kurdish cities voted Yes. In some of the HDP stronghold cities (e.g. Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Şırnak,

Batman), the No vote reached approximately 70 percent, but in some other cities like Bingol, Adiyaman or Sanliurfa, the outcomes were the complete opposite. On average, however, 46,2 percent of the voters supported the amendments while 53,8 percent objected in southeast Türkiye.³ For President Erdogan's speaker, it was a sign for the Kurdish people's confidence in Erdogan, who had been clearly differentiating between Kurds and PKK ("Cumhurbaşkanlığı sözcüsü," 2017). A prominent Kurdish deputy from the AKP also argued that Kurds would have given more support but the collaboration with the MHP was not well received ("Ak Partili Miroğlu'ndan," 2017).

Overall, the 2017 referendum campaigns and outcomes have important implications for our hypotheses. High levels of turnout and campaign intensity explain the marginal win of the Yes vote. Also, the low levels of predisposition regarding the presidential system among voters can account for the inconsistency between the percentage of Yes votes and the aggregate vote of the Yes bloc. Although the AKP and MHP made a tremendous effort in convincing voters to mobilize along with traditional fault lines, the referendum package could only secure a very marginal win. Therefore, this analysis supports the first and third hypotheses. The support rate for the government proposal decreased as the campaign intensity increased. Also, the resemblance of the outcomes between referendum and general elections decreased as the predispositions on the referendum issue were not strong. Considering the second hypothesis, the complexity of the referendum package ended up with lower support rate as suggested. Different than the previous referendums, however, the No parties were also successful in reframing and simplifying the package for the voters that partially explains the increasing share of No vote.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing the three referendums that took place in Türkiye in 2007, 2010 and 2017, this study suggests that the support rates for government-initiated proposals are likely to drop when the electorate is exposed to intense campaigns, when the referendum issue is complex, and when the referendum issue does not directly touch on voter predispositions. High turnouts and intense campaigns are indicators of high levels of motivation among the opposition. This is something a government would not desire, especially when the referendum issue is complex and unfamiliar for the voter. In that case, the voters with loose predispositions would be more receptive to the messages coming from the No campaigns, which run the risk of raising doubts about the government proposal without offering an alternative. In such referendums, reframing the referendum issue becomes crucial.

In the 2007 referendum, none of these dynamics were in play. The referendum issue was very plain: whether or not to elect the president by popular vote. The opposition could not outspokenly argue against this proposal. In the end, the low levels of campaign competition, intensity and turnout increased the percentage of the Yes vote. Reframing and simplifying the referendum issue, however, played a significant role in 2010 and 2017. The referendum package in 2010 was a highly complex proposal mostly focusing on judicial reform. Although the percentage of Yes vote dropped from 68,9 to 57,9 in 2010, the AKP successfully reframed

³ The cities included in the calculation and the percentages of the Yes and No votes are as following: Adiyaman (69.8/30.2), Agri (43.1/56.9), Batman (36.3/63.4), Bingol (72.6/27.4), Bitlis (59.4/40.6), Diyarbakir (32.4/67.6), Hakkari (32.4/67.6), Mus (50.6/49.4), Mardin (41/59), Siirt (47.8/52.2), Sanliurfa (70.8/29.2), Sirnak (28.3/71.7), Tunceli (19.6/80.4) and Van (42.7/57.3).

the meaning of Yes by associating it with saying No to the domination of civil and military bureaucracy in Türkiye. By that, the AKP tried to consolidate the right-wing and conservative voters who are traditionally reactive to the bureaucratic tutelage over elected authorities. The 2017 referendum package was, on the other hand, not only complex but also a proposal for a new government system. Deciding between parliamentarism and presidentialism was not a familiar debate among voters, who had to be convinced of the necessity and virtues of a presidential government. While the Yes bloc tried to mobilize voters along traditional fault lines, the proposal could only secure a very marginal win. Indeed, the 51,4 percent vote share of Yes was, for the first time in the AKP referendums, lower than the aggregate vote share of the Yes bloc parties.

Overall, this study can confidentially conclude that there is a negative relationship between the turnout rate in elections and the rate of support for the government proposal in the referendums as Figure 2 suggests. Turnout rate is an indicator of campaign intensity, which is a likely outcome of campaign motivation of opposition parties. However, turnout rate itself is not a sufficient factor. Figure 2 also indicates the importance of the aggregate vote share of the Yes bloc. One can argue that the more the aggregate vote share of Yes bloc parties, the higher the percentage of Yes votes when voters cling to their predispositions or are persuaded to do so by parties. The AKP has apparently been successful in forming winning coalitions in the referendums. It is also important to note that the AKP's vote shares in the most proximate general elections were always above 45 percent. So, it needed at most 5 more points to secure the majority of the votes in the referendums. Nevertheless, the marginal win in 2017 implies the importance of referendum issue and campaign intensity as well as the aggregate vote share of the Yes bloc. When the referendum issue is not a familiar element of political polarization, the No bloc may also form unusual coalitions, and carry out intense campaigns as was the case in the 2017 referendum.

These findings require a revision to our hypotheses, or perhaps an amalgamation of the second and third hypotheses. The complexity of a referendum proposal may be an advantage for the governments if the issue is successfully reframed to invigorate the political predispositions among the voters. This again implies the vital importance of campaigning in referendums especially when the electorate is forced to say Yes or No for a complicated and multi-layered package.

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