

# **When do Workers Support Executive Aggrandizement? Lessons from the Recent Turkish Experience**

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## **Abstract**

Following the 2017 constitutional referendum marked a major change under the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party-AKP) rule in Turkey, the constitutional reforms granted judicial and legislative powers to the head of the executive under a presidential system. Initial observations reveal that some blue-collar workers who are members of a historically progressive union have also supported these reforms. This is surprising since the union leadership has publicly opposed these changes. What explains this discrepancy? Why did some of these workers support reforms in favor of a powerful executive? Based on a sample from a major metalworking union, this paper finds that partisan identity mediates support for AKP's push for challenging the separation of powers. While we find that higher amount of debt may reduce worker support for stronger executive, this is conditional on the metal workers' pre-existing partisan commitments. Under these circumstances, highly indebted partisan workers do not diverge from the party line. These results also raise further questions for students of labor and regime change elsewhere in the developing world.

**Keywords:** organized labor, industrial workers, executive aggrandizement, private debt, Turkey

## Introduction

Following the 2017 constitutional referendum, the 2018 presidential elections in Turkey marked a major change that pushed executive aggrandizement under the Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party-AKP) rule in Turkey. Recent scholarship classifies this change as the beginning of authoritarian consolidation (Akçay 2020, Vdem references here). Initial findings reveal that even members of a historically progressive union—Birlesik Metal-Is—have openly supported these reforms.<sup>1</sup> This is surprising since the union leadership has publicly opposed these changes.<sup>2</sup> What explains this discrepancy? Why did some of these workers support Erdogan's bid for presidential system where power is concentrated in the executive?

We think this is an important question for two reasons. First, the size of the Turkish working class is not inconsequential.<sup>3</sup> This group constitutes a diverse, but politically important cleavage whose behavior influences electoral outcomes (Öztürk 2018).<sup>4</sup> In the industrial sector where

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<sup>1</sup> The research department of the union reported that around 38% of the workers supported the proposed reforms. See <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/310467/metal-iscilerinin-referandum-arastirmasindan-hayir-cikti>, accessed on June 30, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://gazetemanifesto.com/2017/adnan-serdaroglu-baskanlik-sistemi-turkiye-icin-bir-tehlikedir-80382/>, accessed on June 30, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The share of workers employed in the manufacturing sector with formal contracts is around 26%. This amount is estimated to be higher including those in the informal sector. Source: World Bank Economic Indicators.

<sup>4</sup> It must be emphasized that social cleavages in Turkey are multi-layered and have historically included secular-religious, center-periphery, Turkish-Kurdish and more recently, democracy-authoritarianism cleavage (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020).

manufacturing wages have grown yet received a lesser share of the pie, most workers have increasingly found themselves mired in debt as a result of policies that prioritized credit-driven growth.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the fact that even a sizeable percentage of rank-and-file members of historically progressive unions offer support for this change begs a more systematic explanation.

Much of the existing work that explores the link between unions and the political behavior of workers focuses on cases in advanced industrialized democracies. In the context of the US, most findings suggest that unions do not simply channel the political orientation of the rank-and-file but they also affect the policy choices of their members (Kim and Margalit 2017). Proposed mechanisms include greater political discussion in the workplace and the direct provision of information by the union management (MacDonald 2021). In particular, the traditional forms of communication between the union leaders and the members encourage workers to align themselves with the official line of the management when casting their vote for presidential candidates in the US (Juravitch and Shergold 1988). Other works based on evidence from Switzerland and the UK suggest that political transformation of the workers may well begin before becoming a member (e.g. via exchanges with union members and/or leaders), and the impact of the union may be more pronounced once the worker becomes a card-carrying member (Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020). However, these explanations are unable to account for the empirical puzzle at hand: among workers organized under Birlesik-Metal Is, the expected

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<sup>5</sup> For a decline in the wage share of manufacturing workers, see Onaran 2009. For a rise of debt among the Turkish workers, see Karacimen 2015.

convergence between individual political preferences of the rank-and-file and the union did not take place.

In this study, we seek to explore why rank and file members gradually begin to diverge from the official line of the union management by exploiting a unique and original dataset that includes granular information on randomly sampled workers who are organized under a major metal workers union in Turkey. In doing so, we follow recent studies (e.g. Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020) that put the focus on dynamics that affect the political preferences of the workers beyond the union. Based on this sample from Birlesik Metal-Is, this paper reveals that partisan identity mediates support for Erdogan's reforms among these workers.<sup>6</sup> While we find that higher amount of debt may reduce worker support for presidentialism, this is conditional on workers' pre-existing partisan commitments. Under these circumstances, highly indebted partisan workers do not diverge from the party line. These findings further speak to the growing literature that highlight partisanship as an electoral stabilizer in unstable democracies, where partisan polarization may further prevent voters from critically assessing early signs of democratic backsliding due to hardening of ideological positions (Cakir 2020, Graham and Svobik 2020).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first discuss the case of workers and their political behavior in Turkey, highlight an empirical gap and explain why problematizing the Turkish metalworking industry workers' political preferences are worthy of greater attention.

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, we define partisan commitment refers to an enduring commitment of voters to a political party as manifested in the voting behavior and the degree of overlap with the broader policy preferences as defended by the party leadership (Blais et al. 2021, Laebens and Ozturk 2021).

Next, we situate the debate among existing research and clarify the theoretical contribution of the study. This is followed by the presentation of our hypotheses and a separate section that includes the description of data and methodology. We then present and discuss our findings. The conclusion highlights the additional implications of our results and introduces new questions for further research.

## **Background and the Empirical Puzzle**

Birleşik Metal-İs was founded in 1993 thanks to a merger between two left-wing oriented unions with a commitment to democratic unionism and a history of labor militancy. These include Maden-İş and Otomobil-İş, which have organized notable strikes such as Kavel in 1963 and Netaş in 1986.<sup>7</sup> Workers affiliated with these unions were among the most severely repressed by the military regime, and the union leaders severely criticized the curtailing of labor rights unrolled by the government in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> In that sense, the union leadership has had a progressive agenda that staunchly defends labor rights as well as democratic values, and distinguishes itself from their nearest rivals on these grounds (Erdinc 2021).

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.birlesikmetal.org/tarih.htm>. Birlesik Metal Is is also a member of DISK, a confederation of historically left-wing unions and an ETUC member since 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Immediately after the coup on September 12, 1980, a total of 590 Maden-İs members were taken under custody and the formal arrests continued in 1981. Meanwhile, Turkmetal, a nationalist right-wing union, supported the coup. None of their members were arrested, and Turk Metal benefited from the post-coup environment to grow its membership base. See <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/210534/tornaciliktan-imparatorluga>. For a criticism of ANAP government by the activists of Otomobil-İs Union, see “Otomobil-İs Sube Kongreleri ve Beklentiler” *Gun Dergisi* April 1985, p.8.

At the same time, the political preferences of the rank-and-file members of Birlesik-Metal Is has exhibited variation, and the membership base also included conservative voters.<sup>9</sup> Earlier findings on the political preferences of the union members in 1999 general elections reveal that while the majority has voted for left wing parties during this period, around 11% of the workers voted for AKP's predecessor Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party) and another 12.2% voted for the ultra-nationalist Milliyetci Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Union Party) (Ozugurlu and Erten 1999, 55). Following the financial breakdowns of November 2000 and February 2001, the 2002 elections wiped out most these political parties in the parliament and the newly founded AKP formed a single party government (Cosar and Ozman 2004).<sup>10</sup> Under the AKP rule, the government pushed labor deregulation further with a new wave of reforms, targeting and reducing their structural capacity to organize and recruit workers (Özkızıltan 2019, Çelik 2016, Uckan 2013). These measures were met by staunch collective resistance from organized labor in later stages, especially in 2015 when workers began to mobilize demanding greater pay due to worsening economic circumstances (Erdinc 2020). For example, when the government effectively banned Birlesik Metal-Is members from going on a strike in January 2015 by invoking the law on public security and postponing it, the response was an even greater mobilization among the metal workers, leading to an even bigger wave of strikes. These events are publicly referred to as Metal Storm (*Metal Firtina*) (Çelik 2015, Tastan 2015). Anecdotal observation suggests that this group

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<sup>9</sup> According to the law no 6356, labor unions need to recruit more than 50% of the workers in a workplace in order to represent them and negotiate on their behalf. Because of this higher threshold, the union is compelled to recruit as many workers as possible, which explains why there is greater variation among the political preferences of their members.

<sup>10</sup> While there is anecdotal evidence of a major right-turn among the Turkish working class in these elections, there is limited data on the political behavior of Birlesik Metal-Is members in 2002.

included pro-AKP supporters as well as anti-AKP workers.<sup>11</sup> More recent findings on these workers' political preferences reach a similar conclusion, suggesting that union membership has not led to political congruence among the rank-and-file members (Öngel 2018).

As Turkish economy began to experience slower growth and associated problems, Erdogan campaigned intensely to concentrate political power in the hands of a stronger executive in 2017. This proposal was marked by abandoning the parliamentary system in favor of a very strong presidency with little horizontal accountability to the legislative and the judicial bodies. Indeed, a brief look at the content of the AKP campaign brochure reveals that the promoted benefits of centralized decision making under a strong executive are repeatedly emphasized, and there is very little concern about maintaining separation of powers.<sup>12</sup> More systematic analyses of the 2017 referendum campaign further identify populism as a major factor that helped AKP to justify its bid to concentrate powers in the hands of the executive (Ercetin and Erdogan 2021).<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the opposition parties framed AKP's campaign as a move towards authoritarian rule by highlighting the lack of accountability and transparency under the proposed changes.

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<sup>11</sup> See for example <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/387998/metal-iscileri-arasinda-akpden-kopus-hizlandi>, accessed on September 20, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> See *Kararimiz Evet*, available at <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/iste-ak-partinin-referandum-icin-hazirladigi-kitapcik?page=27>

<sup>13</sup> For example, AKP's campaign brochure frequently emphasizes the direct election of the president as essential to give power to the "people."

Before the referendum, Birlesik Metal-Is leadership openly opposed the proposed changes defended by the AKP.<sup>14</sup> Despite this official declaration, not all rank-and-file members shared the same political outlook: the research department of the union reported that around 38% of the workers supported the proposed reforms. According to the data collected by the union, most members were surprisingly conservative: a worker profile investigation in 2016 revealed that the majority support AKP and Milliyetci Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Action Party, MHP) while those who are partisans of Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party, CHP) or other opposition parties are estimated to be much less (Ongel 2017, 122). Given this diversity of political preferences across the members, along with the size, the sectoral significance of metalworkers and the union leadership's official line, Birlesik Metal-Is provides an opportunity to understand the discrepancy between the union leadership's political position and the individual preferences of the rank-and-file members.

### **Understanding the Political Preferences of Birlesik Metal-Is Members**

Among the existing explanations that problematize the political behavior of the working class, two groups stand out. A first group of researchers emphasizes cultural sensitivities as salient drivers of blue-collar support for extreme-right wing movements and parties with authoritarian agendas (Oesch 2008, Bornshier and Kriesi 2013). These findings are mostly based on evidence from Western Europe where cultural protectionism and defending national identity against

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-39481023>.



outsiders appear as core drivers of support for political parties with an anti-democratic stance. According to these authors, it is not the most vulnerable but workers with relatively stable jobs who vote for populist parties (Kürer 2019). Relatedly, others observe that individuals with higher education are likely to support these movements (Bornschier and Kriesi 2013, Ivarsflaten and Stubager 2013). A second group emphasizes the economic implications of immigration where local workers feel threatened by the newcomers who often agree to work with much lower salaries (Essletzbichler et.al 2018). For example, when large numbers of outsiders compete for limited number of jobs, insiders who worry about their job security may vote for parties that promise border closures and preferential treatment for the national workers. This support may further increase if low-skilled insiders with lesser education feel culturally threatened by the immigrants. The evidence in favor of this argument is also based on advanced industrialized countries in North America and Western Europe which are two most popular geographic destinations for economic immigrants. Arguably, the competition between insiders and outsiders following the economic liberalization reforms create a fertile ground for radical parties to recruit new followers, especially when perceived job insecurity is high (Mughan et.al. 2003). According to these perspectives, the competition over good jobs explains why radical and populist right-wing parties garnered substantial support from working class—to the point of posing a threat to democratic stability. At a first glance, these explanations may sound appealing to account the empirical puzzle at hand. However, Birlesik Metal-Is members were not influenced by a similar competition by incoming outsiders.<sup>15</sup> As such, there was limited external threat posing an

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<sup>15</sup> While Turkey welcomed a substantial number of refugees, which created some resentment and polarization among the larger population (Saracoglu and Belanger 2019), the integration of the refugees was heavily promoted by the incumbent party (AKP) rather than the opposition. Moreover, since most Syrian refugees do not have the sector-specific competencies and skills demanded by workplaces operating across different industries, including the metalworking sector (Erdoğan 2018, 845). Existing works reveal that many of the Syrian refugees were employed in low-paying jobs on temporary contracts or in the informal domain with no social security package (Tümen 2016).

immediate risk to the job security of unionized workers at Birlesik Metal-Is. This motivates us to consider alternative explanations.

Recent findings from the discipline of political science reveal that partisanship affects political and non-political behavior, and increasingly so (Gerber and Huber 2009, McConnell et al. 2018). According to these findings, workers may be driven by an ideological commitment to party agendas which may be quite different than the overall political orientation of the union leadership. Empirical findings from the Turkish context also resonate with these expectations: there, the landscape of organized labor is much more diverse, and includes unions that have members with extreme-right wing, nationalist orientation as well as others that have traditionally stood on the left (Bekmen et.al. 2020). Similarly, unions—including Birlesik Metal-Is—exhibit a politically diverse membership profile (Öngel 2014, 215).

At the same time, the level of economic vulnerability of workers may affect how they relate to the political parties they support (Altamirano 2019). Evidence from the context of Latin America reveal that when the perceived economic vulnerability of voters is high, they may be less likely to relate to the programmatic agendas of the political parties. Under these circumstances, the workers may be likely to diverge from the political line advocated by the parties they have voted for in the past. In a volatile economic environment, the perceived economic vulnerability may also be influenced by the rising amount of private debt (Becker et al. 2010, 228). In the case of Turkey, most workers have increasingly borrowed from private institutions to finance their large-

sum expenditures (e.g. mortgages, car-loans) since mid-2000s (Öngel and Kutlu 2018). Other studies find that as financialization began to accelerate, many workers were compelled to borrow to complement their already low incomes (Karaçimen 2015). During this period, household indebtedness has increased thanks to deflationist measures, which encouraged individuals to take on more loans.<sup>16</sup> Having experienced long periods of high inflation with unstable interest rates, especially during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Karaçimen 2015), heavily indebted workers may be more sensitive in the face of critical political decisions.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Theoretical Expectations and Hypotheses***

Research companies' findings prior to the Turkish referendum on presidentialism in 2017 signaled a tight competition: most pollsters estimated an AKP win by a small margin over 50%.<sup>18</sup> When political competition is close, voting takes place under great uncertainty. Under these circumstances, a proposal for a constitutional change in favor of presidentialism with stronger executive powers may be perceived differently depending on the subjective assessment of

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<sup>16</sup> Under a favorable international economic environment associated with low interest rates and foreign capital inflows, household borrowings from banks have considerably increased during the 2000s (Akçay and Güngen 2019).

<sup>17</sup> AKP's arrival on the scene has had a profound impact on the growth model pursued until then. While earlier administrations pushed for an export-led growth model during the 1990s, this policy has largely failed to transform Turkey into a net-exporter. Following the 2000 banking crisis and the subsequent economic downturn, consumption had also declined. Since export-driven growth was not a likely option in the short run, economic policy making under AKP first prioritized stimulating demand. In doing so, financial deepening reforms were rolled out at a time of global credit expansion. Built on a coalition that involves old economic elites and a diverse community of pious-conservative businessmen, this policy led to an auspicious period of economic growth thanks to the availability of cheap credit in international markets (Akçay 2021). Until 2008, this rather stable alliance enabled the government to promote financial inclusion and access to credit by encouraging banks to expand loans to private individuals to finance their consumption needs, including public housing sale campaigns that offered attractive mortgage plans (Karaçimen 2014). It must be added that prior to 2002, the share of consumer credit constituted only a very small share on the balance sheets of Turkish banks. Much of the credit extended by these institutions financed firms or government debt (Bakir and Öniş 2010).

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1463778-iste-anket-sirketlerinin-referandum-karnesi>

workers regarding the associated risks. Moreover, in contexts where market instability is common, the individual experiences of workers regarding their overall economic status may influence their cognitive capabilities as they evaluate potential outcomes of their decisions.

According to a leading theory of human behavior under risk (also known as cumulative prospect theory (CPT)), individuals are expected to avoid losses and refrain from making risky decisions when the future is blurry. Under these circumstances, insecurity and future uncertainty alter the opportunity costs of individuals and push them to reposition their appetite for risk-taking. CPT argues that in doing so, actors decide on the basis of a reference point, treat their gains and losses differently, being risk-averse to protect their gains and risk-prone if they experience major losses (Tversky and Kahneman 1992, 1046-7). In that sense, the political decision making is a cognitive process where environmental contingency in the forms of gains and losses interact with the individual tolerance for uncertainty (McDermott et al. 2008, Alesina and Passarelli 2019, 946). Recent findings in political science on voting behaviour also concur with these theoretical expectations that go against the utility maximization models. (Carreras 2019, Quattrone and Tversky 1988, Weyland 1996).

Building on this framework, we expect Birlesik Metal-Is members' self-perception of political uncertainty to interact with the subjective evaluation of their gains and losses and influence their political behavior. At the individual level, workers who fear potential losses should be risk-averse while workers who have nothing to lose to should be more likely to take risks. In settings that have experienced multiple economic crises in a short time frame, individuals not only consider their income, but also their debt status when assessing subjective gains and losses. For

example, if the amount of debt owed is too high and these individuals view themselves to have incurred too much loss by taking on large loans, workers may be more likely to take political risks by refusing to support executive aggrandizement. In the context of Birlesik Metal-Is, we expect these respondents to offer little support in favor of perceived political continuity that allows greater concentration of power in the hands of a strong executive. Thus, our first hypothesis is:

*H1: Workers with higher level of individual debt are less likely to support executive aggrandizement.*

At the same time, voter support for *executive aggrandizement* is contingent on their perceptions and ideational preferences which may be driven by partisan bias. Existing evidence on the role of partisanship and policy preferences reveal strong support for this link (Bartels 2002, Gadarian et.al. 2020), especially in the context of economic performance of the incumbents (Gerber and Huber 2009). Following on the first hypothesis, we expect the partisan preferences of the workers to mediate the negative impact of their individual debt levels. In particular, ideological alignment of worker preferences with the incumbent party may prompt them to underestimate the risks that they are exposed to, possibly hoping that a stronger executive may be better equipped to address partisans' economic hardship. Similarly, those who are ideologically opposed to the incumbent party may overestimate the risks and be further opposed to political reform agenda of the rulers, demanding greater accountability. This leads to the following

hypotheses:

*H2a: Non-partisan workers with higher amount of debt are less likely to support reforms for executive aggrandizement.*

*H2b: Partisan workers with higher amount of debt are more likely to support reforms in favor of executive aggrandizement.*

We expect indebted workers with partisan ties to the incumbent to be less inclined to change their political position when faced with uncertainty, because doing otherwise means taking a risk under a new government with a new and potentially different economic agenda. A change in economic policy may be perceived as a threat to their future income stream and/or job security, affecting their ability to repay the loan and thereby leading to expected losses. These perceived risks may be even higher when the amount of debt is quite high. Therefore, we expect pro-AKP workers with stable incomes but with higher debt levels to support the party line. Additionally, we expect indebted workers who have voted for the opposition parties to be more critical of proposals that favor political continuity under AKP and stand against proposed changes for executive aggrandizement.

## **The Data, Estimation Strategy and the Findings**

In order to test these models, we use an original survey that was conducted among blue-collar metal workers who are unionized under Birleşik Metal-İs and employed across medium and large businesses in the formal sector. The survey was completed in late 2016 and early 2017 before the actual referendum took place. The union is the third biggest in size in terms of membership across the metal working industry but remains the most vocal one in terms of mobilization and outreach.<sup>19</sup> The questions were sent to randomly sampled 1516 members across eight regional branches in late 2016 and early 2017.<sup>20</sup> The majority of the respondents are in the low-income category who work on relatively stable contracts but with flexible schedules. The survey was fielded after the July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 coup attempt but before the 2017 presidential referendum. The response rate was about 72% with responses from 1099 workers. The questions cover a wide array of issues, including the socio-economic background, education, demographic information, income, debt and political preferences of the respondents.

### *Dependent variable*

The dependent variable in our models measure support for autocratic consolidation by way of a proxy indicator: support for presidentialism. In 2016, then Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdogan

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<sup>19</sup> According to the official statistics of the Ministry of Labor, metal workers constituted the largest workforce in the manufacturing industry with 1.480.048 workers employed under official contracts. Among these, 188.103 are organized under TurkMetal Union, 35.784 are organized under pro-Government Celik-İs and 30.630 are organized under Birlesik Metal-İs Union. Source: Calisma Hayati Istatistikleri 2017 Yearbook.

<sup>20</sup> See the Appendix for a regional distribution of the participants and their response rate. Questionnaires were sent to randomly selected members whose name were printed on the envelope and handed over to the respondents by the respective workplace representatives. The forms were filled out by respondents within 7 days. Completed responses were handed back to the shopfloor representative anonymously. There were no enumerators and workers were informed about the purpose and scope of the research.

had been lobbying intensively for a presidential referendum where he called for a strong presidency in lieu of the parliamentary system. The proposal included measures that would formalize the ongoing executive aggrandizement, a process which started in 2008.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, electoral support for presidentialism is a reliable proxy for support for executive aggrandizement.

We use two questions to capture the latent and salient dimensions of respondents' support. From the different response categories of each question, we code a binary variable, indicating whether respondents support presidentialism as a measure of AKP's agenda of executive aggrandizement. First, we use a more general question about respondents' personal attitudes towards presidentialism to capture the latent dimension of support. Respondents were asked about their general thoughts on the presidential system with the following statement: "What do you think about presidentialism?" The response categories include "absolutely in favor", "indifferent" and "absolutely against". We code all respondents answering that they are "absolutely in favor" of presidentialism as in support of presidentialism, and all respondents indicating "indifference" or "absolutely against" as not in support of the proposed plans.

Second, to assess the salient dimension of respondents' support for autocratic consolidation, we use a second question, asking "If there is a vote on presidentialism today, how would you vote?" The response categories "No", "Yes", "Undecided" and "Boycott" indicate respondents' own assessments of whether they would actively support executive aggrandizement or not. We code

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<sup>21</sup> For a brief overview of these earlier measures that gradually concentrated power in the hands of the executive, see Bermeo (2016).



all respondents indicating that they would vote in favor of presidentialism as supporting executive aggrandizement, while all other response categories are coded as not actively supporting executive aggrandizement. Table 1 in the Appendix summarizes the distribution of our dependent variables across partisans and non-partisans in our sample.

### *Independent variable*

The main independent variable in our models is the total amount of debt owed by the respondents (in 1000 TL). Despite financial liberalization reforms since early 1980s, private debt levels remained rather low among this group well into the mid-2000s. However, thanks to the availability of cheap credit in international markets and a push for deepening financial reforms, individual indebtedness has been on the rise since 2006 as banks began to diversify their loan portfolios, extending credit for mortgage, automobiles and private consumption to individual borrowers (Akçay 2021). This policy enabled financial inclusion of lower middle-income households including workers as they now had access to larger sums of credit (Karacimen 2015).

To test for the moderation effect of AKP partisanship, we use a dummy variable indicating whether respondents would prefer to vote for AKP had there been an election on the day the respondents answered the questionnaire. We code all who would have voted for AKP as its partisans and all others, regardless of their party choice, as non-partisans. Table 2 in the Appendix shows the summary statistics for respondents' total debt and the distribution of AKP partisanship.

### *Control variables*

To control for alternative explanations that might influence respondents' amount of debt, and their support for AKP, as well as their support for presidentialism, we control for a broad range of social, economic and cultural variables. These include respondents' age, educational background, and current monthly income.<sup>22</sup> To capture ideological factors that could impact debt levels, AKP support and support for presidentialism, we include measures of political ideology—such as Islamism and conservatism—coded as dummies and exposure to government propaganda, captured by whether they read pro-government, neutral, and opposition newspapers. Finally, as the sample includes respondents from Turkish regions with substantial and systematic differences in their political, economic, social and cultural contexts, we include residence-city fixed-effects to account for the potentially confounding regional dynamics.

### *Model Selection*

We use logistic regression to estimate the effects of increasing debt on respondents' probability to support executive aggrandizement. Because we assume model error to be heterogenous across regions, we compute and report residence-city clustered standard-errors.<sup>23</sup> The results are presented in Table 1 below.

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<sup>22</sup> We control for currently monthly income since Birleşik Metal-İs has been a trend-setter for collective agreements in the sector before and after the Metal Storm. In 2017, the union was able to agree on a wage increase above the inflation rate (See: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/344433/sendikalarla-mess-anlasti-zam-oranlari-belli-oldu>). Despite the findings that show Birleşik-Metal workers' debt has also increased (Ongel 2017) it might be the case that these workers may have suffered less from wage stagnation in the mid-2010s because of their militant struggle.

<sup>23</sup> The results hold regardless of whether standard errors are clustered or not. See the Appendix for more information

In a first step, we use respondents' total debt (in 1000TL) as the dependent variable, to see whether there is an overall effect of debt that is in line with common theoretical expectations from the literature. In a second step, we split the sample in two, distinguishing AKP partisans from non-partisans and rerun the models to test our hypotheses about the heterogeneous effects of debt. In a final model, we introduce an interaction term, multiplying AKP partisanship and individual debt.

<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Support	Vote	Support	Support	Vote	Vote	Support	Vote
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Debt (1000TL)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01*** (0.005)	0.002 (0.01)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.04** (0.02)
Debt*AKP							0.03** (0.01)	0.03* (0.02)
AKP Partisan	2.77*** (0.33)	3.42*** (0.35)					2.24*** (0.41)	2.86*** (0.42)
Regular Income (1000TL)	-0.12 (0.32)	0.03 (0.33)	0.68 (0.51)	-1.05 (0.70)	1.68** (0.77)	-0.94 (0.63)	-0.01 (0.32)	0.13 (0.33)
Islamist	0.86** (0.36)	0.68* (0.37)	0.89* (0.49)	0.83 (0.68)	0.45 (0.54)	0.96* (0.57)	0.85** (0.36)	0.65* (0.37)
Conservative	0.75* (0.40)	0.82** (0.41)	1.20** (0.61)	-0.09 (0.90)	1.35** (0.67)	0.28 (0.85)	0.88** (0.40)	0.83** (0.41)

Gov. Newspaper	0.56 (0.34)	0.62* (0.34)	0.61 (0.57)	0.61 (0.55)	0.46 (0.57)	0.76 (0.52)	0.41 (0.33)	0.61* (0.34)
Neut. Newspaper	-0.78** (0.34)	-0.55 (0.33)	-0.75 (0.50)	-1.10* (0.62)	-1.26** (0.57)	-0.54 (0.52)		-0.53 (0.33)
Opp. Newspaper	-1.13*** (0.33)	-1.44*** (0.33)	-0.39 (0.52)	-2.46*** (0.60)	-1.01* (0.55)	-2.23*** (0.53)	-1.03*** (0.32)	-1.44*** (0.33)
Age	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Secondary Degree	-0.40 (0.37)	-0.68* (0.39)	-0.20 (0.54)	-0.98* (0.56)	-1.25* (0.67)	-0.54 (0.57)	-0.49 (0.38)	-0.80** (0.40)
Community College	-1.18* (0.65)	-0.86 (0.59)	-0.74 (1.01)	-18.89 (2,437.93)	-1.58 (1.04)	-1.24 (0.94)	-1.11* (0.63)	-1.04* (0.60)
BA, or equivalent	-0.20 (1.14)	-0.002 (1.16)	17.43 (4,369.21)	-19.56 (4,554.77)	18.04 (3,782.68)	-16.80 (1,685.90)	-0.59 (1.25)	-0.37 (1.20)
Observations	519	562	139	380	148	414	519	562
Sample	Total	Total	AKP	Non-AKP	AKP	Non-AKP	Total	Total
<i>Note:</i>						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

For the total sample without interactions, results are ambiguous. While there is no significant effect of debt on latent support for presidentialism, we find a weak but highly significant negative correlation between debt and voting for presidentialism.

Once we differentiate between the effect on debt on AKP partisans and non-partisans, we get a clearer picture. Only analyzing the subsamples of non-partisans of AKP in models 4 and 6, we find a significant and negative correlation between increasing debt and latent support for presidentialism as well as voting for presidentialism. When restricting the analysis to the subsamples of AKP partisans in model 3 and 5, we find a weak, but non-significant positive correlation between debt and general support for presidentialism, and a weak but non-significant negative correlation between debt and voting for presidentialism.

This is consistent with what we find when we introduce an interaction between AKP partisanship and debt in the total sample in models 7 and 8. Here – for non-partisans of AKP, we find a very significant negative association between debt and voting for presidentialism, while the association between supporting presidentialism in general and debt, is still significant at the 10% level ( $p = .0505$ ), as shown by the debt coefficient without the interaction term, which indicates the effect of debt among non-partisans.

Further, the impact of debt on AKP partisans is significantly different from the effect on non-partisans but sums up to be zero for the general support for presidentialism and close to zero for the vote for presidentialism. When the interaction variable coded in reverse (available in the supplementary appendix), we find that the effect on both variables is not statistically significant from zero among AKP partisans.

Overall, this provides support for our expectation that the effect of debt on support for executive aggrandizement is conditional on respondents' previous political alignment. In our sample,

increasing debt is not significantly associated with support for autocratic consolidation among AKP partisans. We find a significant and negative effect of increasing debt on support for autocratic consolidation only for respondents who are not classified as AKP partisans.

To check for the robustness of our findings, we conducted a range of tests which are reported in the Appendix. Our findings are robust to the exclusion of individual regressors, robust standard-errors, and to changing the residence-city fixed-effects to origin-city fixed-effects. Further we only find interaction effects for AKP partisans, whereas all other parties included as placebo interactions turn out insignificant. Therefore, our hypotheses are corroborated by our empirical results. However, the significance of the relation itself reveals little about whether it is also important. To allow for a more substantial interpretation, we take a closer look at the strength of the relationship. Since, there is no significant association between debt and support for executive aggrandizement among AKP supporters, we restrict this part of the analysis to non-partisans.

To assess the size of the association among non-partisans, we compute the expected changes in probabilities of latent and active support for executive aggrandizement for increasing amounts of debt. To this end, we assume different baseline odds for our dependent variables at debt equal to zero. We then assess the impact of debt, by computing how, keeping all else constant, the expected odds of supporting executive aggrandizement change with increasing amounts of debt. The results are depicted in Figure 1 below. To ease interpretation, the calculated odds are transformed into probabilities. The left plot shows changes in the probability of supporting presidentialism in general (model 4), the right one shows changes in the probability of voting for presidentialism (model 5). The graphs plot the changes in expected values over a range from no

debt to 30.000TL debt, which marks the upper quartile of debt among non-partisans of AKP. The vertical lines in the graph mark the lower quartile (4.500TL) and the median (15.000TL) of total debt among non-partisans of AKP. We calculate changes in expected probabilities starting from baseline probabilities of 15%, 7.5% and 5%. Grey areas mark the 95% confidence intervals. Note that there is no uncertainty at debt equal to zero as we assume baseline probabilities. Our approach further follows the actual process of AKP policies, which gradually opened access to credit, starting from very low levels to greater access for individual borrowers.

Figure 1

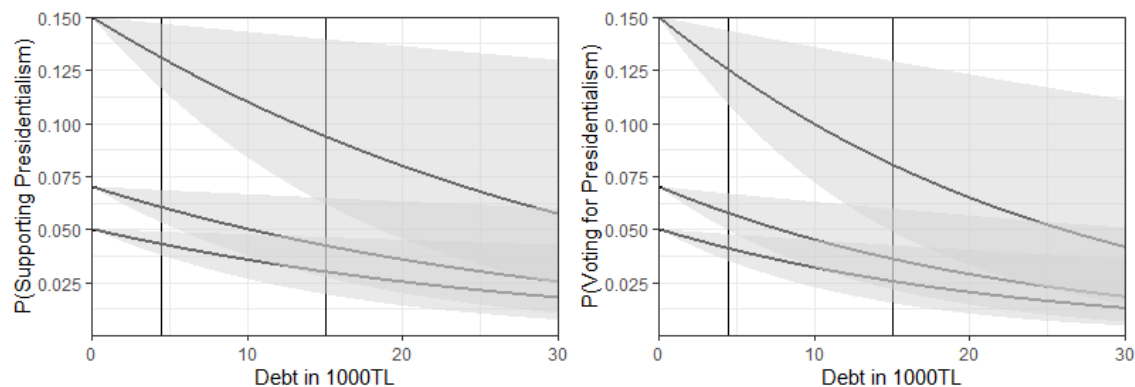


Figure 1. Expected probabilities of support for presidentialism and voting for presidentialism.

The association appears to be not only significant, but also quite substantial. Assuming a baseline probability of 15% for supporting executive aggrandizement at zero debt, the probability of being in favor of presidentialism drops to 13% at the lower quartile, 8% at the median and 5.7% at the upper quartile. Looking at the probability of voting for presidentialism, this drops from 15% at zero debt to 12.5% at the lower quartile, to 8% at the median and only 4% at the upper

quartile. With a starting probability of 7.5% at zero debt, the probability of supporting presidentialism drops over 6% at the lower quartile and 4.2% at the mean to only 2% at the upper quartile, whereas the probability of voting for presidentialism drops over 5.7% and 3.5% to merely 1.8% when debt reaches the upper quartile. Even when assuming a baseline probability of 5%, we still predict a substantial decline to a probability of 1.7% for supporting presidentialism and 1.2% for voting for presidentialism when debt is set to the upper quartile.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings based on the sample from Birlesik Metal-Is suggest that when political race over the future of a political regime is close, unionized metalworkers position themselves depending on the perceived risk of their gains and losses. First, we find that increasing private debt may reduce support for presidentialism with stronger executive powers. Second, our results suggest that this relationship is mediated by the partisan preferences of the workers. Specifically, when non-partisans have higher debt, they are more likely to oppose presidentialism. However, partisan supporters of the incumbent party do not have a similar experience, and their political preferences appear to be immune to any change in their personal debt levels. In our sample, pro-AKP workers exhibit a politically risk-averse behavior as they continue to support Erdogan's campaign. This finding is also in line with the predictive role of AKP partisanship on support for presidentialism across more general samples (Aytaç et.al. 2017, Laebens and Öztürk 2020). Going further, the results in the final model suggest that an interaction between amount of debt owed and the support for AKP translates into a positive and significant support for



presidentialism. This calls for a closer inspection of the mechanism that drives the tacit support for a stronger executive.

Going further, our findings based on this sample suggest that the class-status of workers is no guarantee for the blue-collar support for democracy.<sup>24</sup> As the analysis reveals, even workers organized under progressive unions may support measures that violate the separation of powers in favor of a stronger executive. Critically, the regime preference of rank-and-file members is strongly contingent on their perceived gains and losses under the influence of their debt status and partisan commitments. These results are also in line with Bellin's (2000) earlier findings on the role of labor in democratization in late-developers: Birlesik Metal-Is members are not driven by an idealistic commitment to democracy but better characterized as *contingent democrats* who take their material gains and losses into account when deciding on the future of a political regime. However, this process is not defined by a strictly utilitarian calculation. Rather, the evaluation of one's material status is very much influenced by subjective dynamics as predicted by the CPT. Very importantly, workers' perceived risk thresholds are conditional on their partisan commitments which prompts them to see their material gains and losses in a different perspective.

Additionally, the experience of Birlesik Metal-Is members suggests that financial inclusion and access to credit do not simultaneously translate into support for democratic parties that favor

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<sup>24</sup> There is a growing literature that problematizes the link between labor and regime outcomes by looking at the role of collective labor mobilizations as well as broad institutional and organizational dynamics. Existing studies reveal that organized blue collars may historically play a crucial role in shaping regime trajectories. (Rueschemeyer et.al. 1992, Dahlum et.al. 2019, Amat et.al. 2020).

separation of powers. Importantly, among metalworkers who are unionized, the number of conservative workers with a staunch commitment to Erdogan is not inconsequential. This is worthy of further exploration given the obvious contrasts between class-based interests and the increasingly authoritarian model that Erdogan defends. While these findings come from a limited sample of workers employed in the metal-working sector in a single country, our results also introduce new questions that could be tested across a larger sample that exhibit similar tendencies.

Moreover, these results raise additional questions not only for scholars of labor but also for students of social movements as well. One important consequence of our findings is the lack of a clear understanding of when individual experiences of the workers aggregate into collective mobilization outcomes, with explicit political demands. For example, in advanced industrialized countries like the US, high amount of personal debt is no longer an individual grievance but form the basis of a major campaign on debt cancellation. There, participants of this movement have reached a tipping point where their perceived risk threshold for mobilization has changed, transforming it into a social movement with a clear political agenda. Future studies on peripheral capitalist economies like Turkey need to focus on identifying the tipping point that alters the risk perception of the workers to mobilize and generate politically motivated campaigns.

Going beyond the Turkish experience, exploring the link between private debt, partisanship and support for stronger executive may also offer a useful analytical lens to understand more recent cases in peripheral capitalist markets with sizeable manufacturing sector, including in Hungary

and Poland, to name a few. In that sense, future research that tests our hypotheses across a larger sample would provide the necessary tools to verify the generalizability of these arguments. This agenda would also speak to a related field which unpacks the economic underpinnings behind the rise of right-wing populism not only in democratizing settings but also in established democracies.

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## Supplementary Appendix

Table 1

	<b>Non-Partisans</b>	<b>Partisans</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>(n=585)</b>	<b>(n=235)</b>	<b>(n=925)</b>
<b>Support for Presidentialism</b>			
0	486 (83.1%)	66 (28.1%)	602 (65.1%)
1	37 (6.3%)	150 (63.8%)	199 (21.5%)
Missing	62 (10.6%)	19 (8.1%)	124 (13.4%)
<b>Would vote for Presidentialism</b>			
0	535 (91.5%)	53 (22.6%)	641 (69.3%)
1	40 (6.8%)	176 (74.9%)	230 (24.9%)
Missing	10 (1.7%)	6 (2.6%)	54 (5.8%)

Table 2

<b>Total</b>	
<b>(n=925)</b>	
<b>Total Debt (in 1000TL)</b>	
Mean (SD)	27 (41)
Median [Min, Max]	15 [0.0, 480]
Missing	110 (11.9%)
<b>AKP Supporter</b>	
Non-Partisans	585 (63.2%)
Partisans	235 (25.4%)
Missing	105 (11.4%)