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Economic Voting in Turkey: Perceptions, Expectations, and the Party Choice

Cem Başlevent* and Hasan Kirmanoğlu

Department of Economics, İstanbul Bilgi University, Santral, Eyüp, 34060, İstanbul, Turkey

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Following a brief summary of macroeconomic developments since 2001 and a review of the economic voting literature in the Turkish context, we examine the effect of economic evaluations on the likelihood of Turkish voters to opt for the currently-ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). In addition to several socio-demographic characteristics and religiosity, our empirical model – estimated using micro data from a 2014 electoral tendency survey – includes both retrospective and prospective economic voting variables. Binary logit estimates provide strong evidence in favour of the idea that perceptions and expectations regarding the economy have a considerable impact on the party choice, especially when the voter holds the government responsible for the recent changes in economic conditions. Our findings also suggest that as long as the proportion of voters who are satisfied with their economic conditions is reasonably large, the AKP will remain at the centre stage of Turkish politics for at least another term.

Keywords: Economic voting; Turkey; Justice and Development Party; party choice; binary logit

Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power in Turkey in November 2002 by winning 34 per cent of the votes in the general elections. Due to the election system that imposes a 10 per cent national threshold for representation, the party won nearly two-thirds of the seats in the parliament and has repeated won the majority of the seats in the 2007 and 2011 elections, having increased its vote share to almost 50 per cent. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP has become an increasingly dominant force in Turkish politics during a period when there has been virtually no other contender for conservative centre-right votes. Nowadays, the AKP competes mainly with the secularist centre-left Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and the pro-Kurdish left-wing Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP).¹

At the time it came to power, the AKP was believed to be the recipient of a substantial amount of protest votes by those who were adversely affected by the gloomy economic conditions that existed in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis (Çarkoğlu 2002b). In other words, the party's success was considered as evidence of economic voting in the sense that the incumbent parties of the preceding decade were all punished by the electorate. After almost 12 years in power, the party's success is still attributed –

*Corresponding author. Email: cbaslevent@bilgi.edu.tr

among other things – to its performance on the economic front. Notwithstanding the commonly-voiced criticism that the AKP's economic policies have relied heavily on privatization revenues during the party's first term in power and foreign financial capital especially after the 2008–9 global economic crisis, improvement in the living standards of a considerable portion of lower and middle class households has translated into electoral success for the incumbent party. In other words, the AKP owes its success not only to its ability to appeal to the value systems of conservative masses, but also to providing rapid improvement in socio-economic welfare to those who otherwise would have a much smaller chance of upward social mobility (Kalaycıoğlu 2007).

Üçer (2014) argues that Turkey's macroeconomic journey over the past decade can be broken down into three periods. The first phase was the 2001–08 period where most macroeconomic indicators improved. In the aftermath of the global financial shock, the economy contracted sharply in 2008, but recovery was quick. However, inflation and the current account deficit (as a percentage of GDP) both remained high, at around 8 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively, during the past few years. Üçer believes that, as of 2014, Turkey had entered a third phase during which the growth rate is smaller and the economy is once again at the mercy of global developments. In accounting for the link between macroeconomic conditions and the AKP's enduring electoral success, Akarca (2015) reports that between 2002 and 2012, the growth rate of real GDP, in Turkish liras, averaged 5.1 per cent, and per capita GDP rose threefold in dollar terms, from \$3492 to \$10,504. During the same 10 years, the inflation rate dropped from 37.4 per cent in 2002 to 6.8 per cent in 2012. Furthermore, the Gini coefficient declined from 0.43 in 2005 to 0.40 in 2010. Perhaps more importantly, between 2002 and 2011, the share of education in the state budget increased from 10 to 15 per cent, and that of health expenditures increased from 2.6 to 5.8 per cent, suggesting that the AKP governments' social policies led to non-negligible improvements in public services that large masses of voters benefit from. Akarca (2015) also reports the vote share of the AKP in all nationwide elections held in Turkey since 2002 along with the values of key economic indicators (See Table 1). Even without the use of advanced techniques, these figures alone provide important clues regarding the impact of general economic conditions on election outcomes.

The purpose of the current paper is twofold. One is to summarize the theory of economic voting and the findings of empirical studies that have utilized it in the Turkish context. The other is to carry out an original empirical study to determine the impact of economic evaluations on the decision of individuals to vote for the AKP. Although this issue has previously been dealt with in the literature, we believe that the richness of the data-set used and the timing of the survey it was drawn from make the current study's

Table 1. The AKP's vote share in nationwide elections and economic indicators.

Date of election	AKP vote share (%)	Per capita real GDP growth (%)	Inflation rate (%)
Nov. 3, 2002	34.28	−0.6	46.4
Mar. 28, 2004	41.67	4.5	18.8
July 22, 2007	46.58	4.6	9.0
Mar. 29, 2009	38.39	−5.6	13.3
June 12, 2011	49.83	7.3	7.6
Mar. 30, 2014	45.51	3.3	7.0

Notes: The data source for the table is Akarca (2015). The GDP growth and inflation figures are those computed for the four quarters preceding the elections.

contribution a valuable one. The political tendencies survey we make use of was conducted two months before the 2014 nationwide local elections, around the time when the official unemployment rate had just reached double figures, and the Turkish Lira had depreciated to record levels against the Euro and the US dollar amid some political tensions at home and fears of deteriorating conditions in the global markets.

Economic voting and empirical findings in the Turkish context

Economic voting is a general concept that relates electoral support for incumbent parties to economic performance. Central to the economic voting argument is the idea that uncertainty about the future and the sincerity of the candidates (parties) make the past action the best guide for assessing the future utilities of candidates (parties). This argument goes back to Downs (1957) who makes the link between incumbency and vote intention. Empirical analysis involving economic voting may be carried out at the individual level to discover the determinants of voters' party choice or at the aggregate level to analyse election outcomes. At the individual level, sociotropic and pocketbook (or egotropic) voting are two approaches to modelling economic voting behaviour and so are the retrospective and prospective voting hypotheses (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000).

Retrospective pocketbook voting hypothesis is the notion that party choice is influenced by individuals' assessments of their personal economic situations in the recent past. If an individual feels that her or her household's economic situation has worsened (improved) under a given government, she will be less (more) likely to vote for the ruling party in the next election. Retrospective sociotropic voting, on the other hand, refers to the notion that voters' consider the state of the national economy when they decide which party to vote for. Taking into consideration the general economic situation does not necessarily reflect an altruistic thinking of the voter for the economic needs of others, but may be based upon the notion that a better macroeconomic situation benefits the individual.

Both types of retrospective voting imply that votes are cast on the basis of economic performance, rather than economic policy proposals and promises. Hypotheses of prospective voting, on the other hand, argue that party choice is based on the assessment of future economic prospects rather than the past. Prospective pocketbook voting refers to the consideration of individual economic expectations for the future while individuals who consider the larger national prospects are said to vote sociotropic prospectively. While considerable empirical evidence has been gathered on the presence of economic voting in Western democracies, similar studies on Turkey have also grown in number especially during the past decade.²

Examination of the relationship between economic performance and electoral success in Turkish politics goes as far back as the Bulutay and Yıldırım (1969) and Bulutay (1970) studies that made use of aggregate data. Examining the link between election outcomes and economic indicators, Çarkoğlu (1997) developed an aggregate vote function for Turkey that relates variations in electoral support for the incumbents in 21 elections during the 1950–1995 period to macroeconomic conditions, namely the percentage changes in consumer price index and real per capita GDP and the unemployment rate. The author found that 'rising unemployment and inflation rates lead to declining electoral support for the incumbents whereas higher per capita GDP growth rates lead to higher levels of support' (90). Akarca and Tansel (2006) used results from 25 general and local elections held between 1950 and 2004 to find that growth rate of the year before the election and inflation rates directly affect the incumbent party's vote share. In

subsequent papers, Akarca (2009, 2011) used this model to predict the AKP's vote share in the 2009 and 2011 elections. Toros (2011) is another study that makes use of time-series data to uncover the association between economic growth and the electoral success of incumbent parties.

Taking a different approach, Akarca and Tansel (2007) use province level data from the 1995 general elections to examine the association between the vote shares of political parties and economic growth. Their finding is that the major incumbent party benefits from a good performance at the expense of extremist parties in the opposition while the junior party in the coalition and the centrist opposition parties are unaffected by the economic conditions. Due to the lack of economic indicators at the province level for more recent years, similar studies have not been conducted for subsequent elections. An exception is the Yüksel and Civan (2013) paper where the authors get around this problem by complementing province level variables with regional ones and using the change in tax revenues as a proxy for the change in the income levels of provinces.³

Working with individual level data, the relevance of non-economic factors such as the level of education, religiosity, placement on the left-right ideological scale, ethnic identity, and region of origin (in the case of internal migrants) have been demonstrated in Kalaycıoğlu (1994, 1999, 2010); Esmer (2002); Çarkoğlu (2007); Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu (2007); Akarca and Başlevent (2009, 2010), and Toros (2014). Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000) made use of economic voting variables within binary logit analysis and found some support of the above-mentioned hypotheses. Başlevent et al. (2005, 2009) used survey data to demonstrate that all kinds of economic voting variables are significant determinants of the party preferences of voters not only when incumbents are being punished, but also when they are rewarded for a good performance. Çarkoğlu (2008) also found that evaluations of the government's economic policy performance are significant in shaping voters' decisions. Analysing the AKP's success in the 2011 elections, Yılmaz, Aygören and Özdemir (2012) show that as voters become optimistic about prospective economic evaluations, they tend to vote for that party. Çarkoğlu (2012), however, argues that the influence of economic evaluations has declined in 2011, and ideological commitments became dominant factors of voting behaviour.

Also working with data from Turkey, Erdoğan (2013) deals with a fundamental criticism that micro level studies of economic voting have received, namely that the economic evaluations of voters are affected by their partisan affiliations, and thus the observed relationship between the evaluations and the party choice may be spurious. Voters may prefer to avoid inconsistencies in their behaviours and attitudes and are likely to form their evaluations in consistency with their previously held beliefs (Anderson 2007; Pickup and Evans 2013). Erdoğan presents the findings of a field research conducted in İstanbul, prior to the general elections of 2011, which demonstrate that economic evaluations of Turkish voters suffer from an ideological bias. This, however, does not mean that the findings of papers that use conventional methods can be dismissed altogether. The reason for this is that economic voting is found to be present even if the ideological bias issue is dealt with using different types of data sets and different techniques (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Nadeau et al. 2013).

A micro-level empirical analysis

In our own empirical work, we use data drawn from a political tendencies survey to carry out a micro-level analysis of voting behaviour in Turkey to look for evidence of economic voting. The survey we make use of was conducted in February 2014 by

Konda Araştırma, one of the most prominent research companies in Turkey, in 31 out of 81 provinces of Turkey on a nationally representative sample. The original sample includes 2,543 individuals at or above the voting age of 18. The respondents were asked which party they planned to vote for in the March 2014 nationwide local elections and also which party they would vote for if general elections were to be held on that same day. With regard to the general elections, 1.9 per cent of the respondents gave no answer, 18.1 per cent stated that they were undecided about their votes, and 3.4 per cent stated that they would not vote for any of the parties. In the empirical investigations, we work on a sample of 2,494 individuals that includes these undecided and the 'no vote' cases. In the working sample, the share of intended AKP voters is just over 41 per cent, a figure very close to the actual vote share in the 2014 local elections once the shares are adjusted by excluding the 'no votes'.

The vote intention function we estimate is made up of both economic and non-economic factors. The economic factors included in the model are items that correspond to various variants of the economic voting theory discussed earlier. Retrospective evaluations are derived from the survey question on the evaluation of the changes in the economic conditions of respondent's household during the 12 months preceding the survey. This item was responded to on a 5-point scale ranging from 'much worse' to 'much better'. Due to the small sample shares for the two extreme categories, the five categories were aggregated to three by joining the 'much better' and 'better' and the 'much worse' and 'worse' responses. As reflected by the distribution of the 3-way response, the survey was conducted at a time when economic evaluations were mixed, but the share of those who respond negatively was about 10 percentage points greater than those with favourable views.

A follow-up question on whether the respondent holds the government responsible for the changes in the family's economic conditions reveals that respondents are more likely to attribute responsibility to the government when they believe that their economic conditions have worsened (80 per cent vs. 63 per cent among those whose economic conditions have improved). This item proves to be very relevant to our analysis as the variation in the AKP vote share across economic evaluation categories is observed only in the sub-sample of respondents who attribute responsibility to the currently-ruling government. This is in line with the Marsh and Tilley (2010) finding that attributed evaluations affect vote intention much more than unattributed evaluations. As presented in Figure 1, a respondent who holds the AKP government responsible for

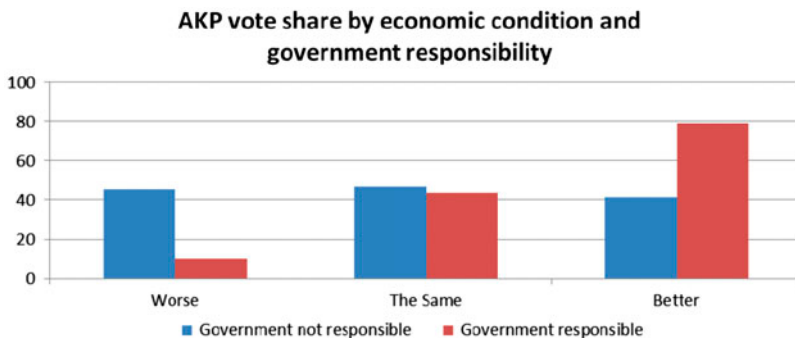


Figure 1. AKP vote share (in %) by economic evaluations and attribution of responsibility.

worsening economic conditions is highly unlikely to vote for that party whereas in the absence of responsibility attribution, the same probability is very close to the overall average.⁴ In order to categorize respondents based on their retrospective evaluations and the responsibility attributions that may or may not accompany them, we will generate ($3 \times 2 =$) six dummy variables and defined the 'no change & no government responsibility' category as the reference group.

There are two survey items that allow us to test for the presence of prospective economic voting. One of these inquires whether the respondent expects economic difficulties in his or her household during the upcoming year, and the other questions whether the respondent expects an economic crisis at the national level. Two dummy variables will be included in our model to identify those who do not expect difficulties. Figure 2 shows that both the pocketbook and sociotropic evaluations are strongly related with the intention to vote for the AKP. A noteworthy pattern observed here is that prospective evaluations are also closely linked with retrospective ones. While this makes more sense in the case of pocketbook evaluations, it is more surprising that evaluations pertaining to one's household influence his or her expectations for the general economy. This finding implies that perceptions of current conditions impact on expectations for the future and points to the importance of controlling for all types of economic evaluations in empirical modelling to avoid misleading results.

In addition to the retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, the survey also includes a question on the current financial situation of the respondent's household. The respondents answer this question based on whether they have the means to save some money, they can make ends meet, they have difficulty in making ends meet, or they have to borrow money to cover their expenses (See Figure 3). This information will also be entered into the model through a categorical variable.

The non-economic variables in the empirical model include standard socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, and education. The possible influence of age is controlled for using dummy variables for respondents in the 29 to 43 and 44+ age groups. Education is also entered in the model as a categorical variable that takes on values depending on the highest degree completed. Those who have completed elementary school (or less) make up the base category, and dummy variables are used for secondary school, high school, and university (or above) graduates. To control for the population size of the place of settlement, we use 'rural' as the base category and include dummy variables for respondents residing in urban and metropolitan areas. We also control for regional differences in voting patterns by using a 12-category variable

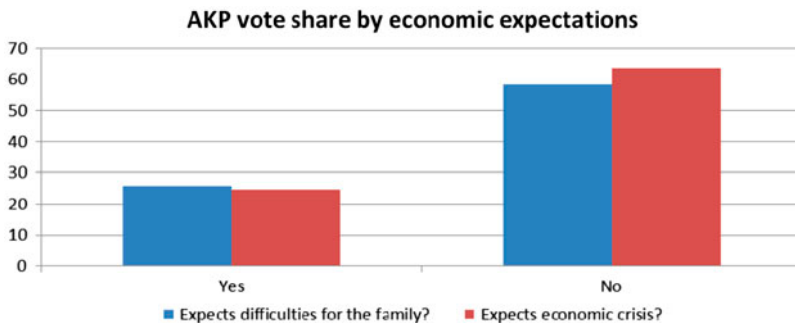


Figure 2. AKP vote share (in %) by prospective economic evaluations.

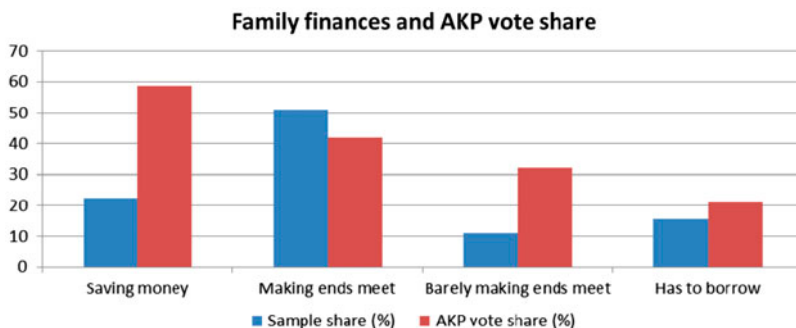


Figure 3. Distribution of family finances and AKP vote share by family finances.

defined in accordance with the statistical regions defined by TurkStat. The province of İstanbul, which – due to its large population and economic significance – is a statistical region on its own, is our reference category.

As in all predominantly Muslim countries, Islam plays an important role in Turkish politics, and a self-identified degree of religiosity has previously been found to be a significant factor of voter preferences (Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2000; Esmer 1995; Kalaycıoğlu 1999; Toros 2010). The survey question on whether the respondent is a believer and how closely he or she follows the rules of Islam is responded to on a 4-point scale. Using this item, we generated a dummy variable to identify the respondents who consider themselves religious. Finally, in an attempt to control for voting behaviour based on ethnic and sectarian identities, we use dummy variables for those who identify themselves as Kurds and Alevi Muslims. In our sample, 13 per cent of the respondents identify themselves as Kurds and 3 per cent as Alevis. An item on the self-placement of respondents on the left-right ideological scale is not available in the survey we are making use of. However, the use of this information would have been problematic anyway due to several reasons such as the high non-response rates observed elsewhere and the fact that left-right ideology in Turkish politics is reversed (Aydoğan and Slapin 2015).

We have mentioned earlier that conventional micro studies on economic voting have been subjected to the criticism that the economic evaluations on which they are based are ideologically biased. In order to address this concern, we will be estimating the empirical model not only on the full sample of respondents, but also on the subsample of individuals who respond to a survey item by stating that there is no political party that they would vote for ‘under all circumstances’. Among these respondents, who make up 55 per cent of the full sample, the share of those who claim to vote in line with their political views is only around one-fourth, whereas the share of those who vote based on parties’ election campaigns is about one-third. This is why we believe that even if the ideological bias problem is present in the full sample, it exists to a considerably smaller degree in the sub-sample of respondents who actually contemplate which party to vote for (and whose economic evaluations are more likely to reflect their genuine beliefs).

Econometric results

Binary logit results based on the full sample of respondents are reported in Table 2. In an effort to ensure that our findings are not dependent on model specification, we

Table 2. Logit results (full sample).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Female	0.045 0.678	0.051 0.641	-0.015 0.883	-0.026 0.801	0.071 0.487	-0.004 0.970
Age 18–28						
Age 29–43	0.203 0.148	0.218 0.117	0.166 0.217	0.199 0.135	0.164 0.217	0.050 0.688
Age 44+	0.272 0.074	0.302 0.047	0.263 0.070	0.311 0.031	0.128 0.369	0.038 0.779
Elementary sch.						
Secondary school	-0.344 0.033	-0.331 0.040	-0.347 0.024	-0.321 0.036	-0.348 0.020	-0.396 0.005
High school	-0.535 0.000	-0.486 0.001	-0.512 0.000	-0.426 0.002	-0.634 0.000	-0.719 0.000
University +	-1.208 0.000	-1.148 0.000	-1.264 0.000	-1.147 0.000	-1.070 0.000	-1.316 0.000
Religious	0.600 0.000	0.627 0.000	0.675 0.000	0.735 0.000	0.641 0.000	0.669 0.000
Kurd	-0.479 0.008	-0.472 0.009	-0.470 0.006	-0.454 0.008	-0.314 0.065	-0.284 0.077
Alevi	-2.406 0.000	-2.395 0.000	-2.597 0.000	-2.604 0.000	-2.278 0.000	-2.631 0.000
Worse & Govt. not resp.	0.297 0.155	0.274 0.185	0.007 0.970	-0.123 0.523		
Worse & Govt. responsible	-1.403 0.000	-1.436 0.000	-1.771 0.000	-1.927 0.000		
No change & Govt. not resp.						
No change & Govt. responsible	0.248 0.118	0.253 0.109	0.060 0.685	0.033 0.820		
Better & Govt. not resp.	-0.103 0.599	-0.065 0.737	-0.103 0.584	-0.038 0.838		
Better & Govt. responsible	1.394 0.000	1.461 0.000	1.521 0.000	1.625 0.000		
No difficulties expected	0.360 0.008	0.441 0.001			0.860 0.000	
No crisis expected	0.923 0.000	0.915 0.000			1.160 0.000	
Saves money						
Can make ends meet	-0.269 0.059		-0.366 0.005			-0.855 0.000
Has difficulty making ends meet	-0.080 0.715		-0.373 0.064			-1.336 0.000
Has to borrow money	-0.520 0.014		-0.905 0.000			-1.868 0.000
Constant	-1.848 0.000	-2.258 0.000	0.192 0.515	-0.290 0.271	-3.323 0.000	0.583 0.026
Sample size	2233	2240	2308	2318	2240	2308
Pseudo R^2	.270	.268	.237	.231	.191	.132

Notes: The dependent variable equals 1 if the respondent plans to vote for the AKP. The coefficients on the region and place of settlement dummies have been omitted from the output. The figures below the coefficients in each cell are the p -values of the two-sided tests of significance. Bold figures indicate significance at the 10 per cent level.

estimate six different versions of the empirical model, each of which excludes a subset of the economic voting variables. Our inferences summarized below are based on the

general patterns observed across the six specifications. In order to observe whether statistically significant findings translate into substantial probability changes, we also present the marginal effects computed by Stata. Table 3 presents the marginal effects computed not only from the estimates given in Table 2, but also estimates (not reported here) based on the sample that excludes those who would vote for the same party under all circumstances.

These figures represent the predicted change in the probability of voting for the AKP when the explanatory variable in question goes up by unit, or goes from zero to one in the case of dummy variables. Since the dependent variable is a binary variable that indicates intended AKP voters, the estimates reveal the differences between the characteristics of supporters of the ruling party and the voters of other parties.

As far as the socio-demographic variables are concerned, gender differences do not appear to be significant, but there is evidence that AKP is relatively less popular among

Table 3. Marginal effects for model 1.

	Full sample		Sub-sample of respondents with no definite party loyalty	
	dy/dx	p-value	dy/dx	p-value
Female	0.010	0.678	-0.047	0.156
Age 18–28	0.047	0.150	0.126	0.004
Age 29–43	0.064	0.076	0.098	0.041
Secondary school	-0.077	0.026	0.012	0.817
High school	-0.120	0.000	-0.116	0.005
University +	-0.235	0.000	-0.209	0.000
Religious	0.133	0.000	0.098	0.007
Kurd	-0.105	0.005	-0.013	0.845
Alevi	-0.330	0.000	-	-
Worse & Govt. not resp.	0.071	0.165	-0.088	0.129
Worse & Govt. responsible	-0.286	0.000	-0.250	0.000
No change & Govt. responsible	0.059	0.124	0.032	0.517
Better & Govt. not resp.	-0.024	0.594	-0.056	0.346
Better & Govt. responsible	0.335	0.000	0.258	0.000
No difficulties expected	0.084	0.008	0.051	0.208
No crisis expected	0.214	0.000	0.177	0.000
Can make ends meet	-0.062	0.059	-0.038	0.378
Has difficulty making ends meet	-0.018	0.713	0.018	0.783
Has to borrow money	-0.114	0.009	-0.087	0.131
West Marmara	-0.076	0.266	-0.057	0.498
Aegean	-0.046	0.332	-0.035	0.576
East Marmara	-0.112	0.010	-0.132	0.010
West Anatolia	-0.047	0.332	-0.021	0.725
Mediterranean	-0.117	0.006	-0.065	0.290
Central Anatolia	-0.039	0.576	-0.186	0.003
West Black Sea	0.022	0.740	-0.004	0.965
East Black Sea	0.169	0.045	-0.004	0.968
Northeast Anatolia	-0.015	0.888	-0.068	0.546
Centre-east Anatolia	-0.058	0.410	-0.089	0.280
Southeast Anatolia	-0.073	0.140	-0.072	0.333
Urban	-0.064	0.068	-0.105	0.021
Metropolitan	-0.019	0.636	-0.133	0.013

the youngest group of voters. The level of education turns out to be strongly associated with the choice between the AKP and other parties. Marginal effects computed for high school and university graduates are in excess of *minus* 10 and 20 percentage points, respectively. While the marginal effect of being religious is around 10 percentage points, estimates concerning the identity variables indicate that Kurds are less likely to vote for the AKP, and Alevi are even more unlikely to do so. The dummy variable indicating Kurdish voters is insignificant in the smaller sample probably because a considerable proportion of Kurds state that they would vote for the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP) under all circumstances.⁵ Once this group is excluded, the AKP is not unpopular among the rest of the Kurds. In fact, according to results not presented here, religious Kurds are more likely to vote for the AKP than the BDP.⁶ According to the marginal effects estimates, regional differences in the support for the AKP are also of a considerable magnitude. An examination of the likely macroeconomic and socio-cultural factors behind these differences, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷

As far as the economic voting variables are concerned, retrospective evaluations have a major impact on the likelihood of voting for the AKP when the respondent perceives a change in the family's economic condition *and* holds the government responsible for that change. Respondents who state that their household's economic situation has improved/worsened over the past 12 months as a result of government policies are more/less likely to vote for the AKP. The corresponding marginal effects are in excess of 25 percentage points for both positive and negative evaluations. Statistically significant coefficients for positive and negative evaluations are obtained (but not reported in the tables) also when the responsibility attribution information is ignored, but the current version of the model reveals the importance of distinguishing between the cases where retrospective evaluations are accompanied by an attribution and where they are not.

Prospective voting variables also turn out to be good predictors of the party choice such that people who do not expect economic difficulties at the household and national levels during the upcoming year are more likely to vote for the AKP. With a marginal effect on the order of 20 percentage points, the sociotropic evaluation is found to be more strongly associated with the party choice than the pocketbook evaluation. This is consistent with the Norpoth et al. (1996) statement that when both measures are included, sociotropic variables beat pocketbook variables in prediction power. That the coefficients on the prospective economic voting variables become much larger in magnitude when retrospective evaluations are excluded from the model is consistent with our earlier observation that the two types of evaluations are related with each other. This finding implies that, in the absence of retrospective evaluations, an empirical model is likely to over-estimate the influence of prospective economic voting.

Our findings also reveal that, in addition to recent changes in economic conditions and expectations for the near future, the current financial situation of their households also have an impact on the Turkish voters' party choice. Compared to respondents who come from households that can easily make ends meet, those who have to borrow money to cover their expenses have a 10 percentage points smaller probability of voting for the AKP. This result may be interpreted to mean that while voters do take into account improving or worsening economic conditions, the ability to make ends meet is another important criterion that makes them stick with the incumbent party.

Conclusion

The relevance of economic voting in the Turkish context was confirmed in an empirical analysis where we explored whether the economic perceptions and expectations of Turkish voters influence their likelihood of voting for the currently-ruling AKP. Binary logit estimates of our vote intention function implied that both retrospective and prospective economic evaluations play an important role in the party choice. Making use of a survey item on responsibility attributions, we found that the incumbent party is rewarded or punished for its economic performance only when the voter holds the government responsible for the recent changes in economic conditions. To address the criticism that economic evaluations are ideologically biased, the econometric work was repeated on a sub-sample of respondents with weaker partisan loyalties. Even though the marginal effect estimates tended to become smaller in magnitude, the observed patterns relating to economic voting variables remained mainly unchanged in this sub-sample, suggesting that ideological bias is not a major issue in the Turkish context. Nevertheless, more reliable results can be produced in future work by making use of surveys that also include items measuring, for instance, consumer confidence or more detailed information on household incomes (such as panel data from TurkStat's Survey of Income and Living Conditions) to ensure that the respondents are truthful about their economic conditions and evaluations.

On the whole, our empirical results can be interpreted to mean that economic voting is present in Turkey in the sense that both pocketbook and sociotropic evaluations are closely linked with the likelihood of voting for the incumbent party. What makes this result especially noteworthy is that it is obtained in an increasingly polarized political environment where many voters have little or no choice to make between the existing parties, given their socio-cultural backgrounds. With the exception of the Turkish nationalist MHP, the AKP is the only right-wing party with a realistic chance of surpassing the 10 per cent threshold. This appears to be the main reason why the AKP leadership strives to turn each election into a popularity contest between conservative and secular/modernist worldviews. With demographic divisions in its favour, the party has so far emerged as the winner every time.

Notwithstanding the dominance of socio-cultural issues, the AKP leadership seems to have realized the importance of economic perceptions and responsibility attributions even when the economy does not appear to be a salient issue. A central element of the AKP's campaign rhetoric is that worsening economic conditions are only temporary and are due to the efforts of external forces waging a war against the 'New Turkey' and its ruling party. Given the party's apparent success in conveying this message to its constituency in the presidential election of August 2014, and the June 2015 general elections, it might be a long time before major changes in the Turkish party system due to economic voting are, once again, the subject of academic work.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Papers focusing on the various aspects of the rise and the ideology of the AKP include Çarkoğlu (2002a, 2010); Güllalp (2004); Atacan (2005); Tepe (2005); Öniş (2006); Özbudun (2006); Sayarı (2007); and Yıldırım et al. (2007).

2. See Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2007, 2013) for reviews of the existing international literature on economic voting.
3. In the absence of reliable economic indicators at the province level, Başlevent (2013) has shown that the level of education, mean age, and internal migrant share can be utilized to great success both at the province and district levels to predict the AKP's vote share.
4. Rudolph (2003) and Tilley and Hobolt (2011) find that responsibility attributions are also shaped – to varying degrees – by economic ideology and partisanship, implying that the above-mentioned concerns about the endogeneity of subjective evaluations apply here as well.
5. At the time the survey was conducted, the BDP – which can be thought of as the predecessor party to the HDP – was in existence.
6. The 'Alevi' dummy drops out of the model in the smaller sample due to perfect multicollinearity.
7. Çarkoğlu and Avcı (2002), Dulupçu (2005), West (2005), Güvenç and Kirmanoğlu (2009), Akarca and Başlevent (2011), and Tezcür (2012) are some of the studies that deal with the geographical patterns observed in election outcomes in Turkey.

Notes on contributors

Cem Başlevent is a professor in the Department of Economics at İstanbul Bilgi University where he has been working since 2000. He received his PhD in Economics from Boğaziçi University in 2001. His applied research has been published in journals such as *World Development*, *Urban Studies*, *Social Indicators Research*, and *Regional Studies*.

Hasan Kirmanoğlu is a professor in the Department of Economics at İstanbul Bilgi University. He received his PhD in Economics from University of Paris-X – Nanterre in 1989. His articles based on the analysis of micro data have appeared in journals such as *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *Party Politics*, and *European Journal of Political Research*.

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