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Comparative Analysis of Voting Participation: The Case of Turkey's 2009 Local and 2011 National Elections

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Abstract

This study comparatively analyzes voting participation through population sizes in local and national elections in Turkey. By equating and dividing the constituencies of 2009 local elections and 2011 national elections into 13 categories according to the number of voters, the study attempts to test hypotheses, such as local elections are carried out under the influence of national politics; and voters perceive local elections as less important than national elections. The study finds a steady decline in turnout rates in local elections, but not in national elections, while turnout in metropolitan areas is higher in national than local elections.

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1. Introduction

A review of the literature on election studies demonstrates that there are much fewer studies on local elections than national elections. For example, Oliver and Ha (2007, p. 393) argue that “nowhere is this information gap greater than with respect to local elections”. They maintain that considering the fact that local “elections arguably represent the most immediate democratic experience for a majority of Americans, political scientists have little understanding of what determines vote choice in these settings” (Oliver & Ha, 2007, p. 393). This is especially significant for Oliver and Ha (2007, pp. 393-394) because “such micro-elections may be the ‘schoolrooms of democracy’ the place where citizens learn the basics of collective decision making”. Bayraktar (2011, p. 10) similarly points out that the scarcity of the studies about local elections is because of the fact that such studies have focused on the total gains of national political actors through either candidates or political parties. In much the same way, Morlan (1984: 468-469) asserts that “citizens in all countries studied perceived national elections to be more important than local ones”. This is caused by “vastly greater publicity” of national elections and by “party mobilization efforts”. However, Stewart (1996) considers relatively less interest in local politics as a result of the view that sees local governments as administrations providing some services rather than as political institutions (as cited in Çitçi, 2005, p. 35).

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Another reason for relatively less interest in local elections is the low levels of voting participation or turnout rate in local elections compared to national elections (Lipson 1984; Zimmermann, 1986; Stroker, 1988; Çitçi, 2005). Çitçi (2005, pp. 34-35) says that the first and foremost of the focus of the studies on local elections is on turnout rate. It is generally accurate that turnout level at the local elections has been below the turnout level at the national elections in Turkey. According to Turan (1986, p. 90) this is because national elections get more attention than local elections due to their high impact on political power and the power of tutelage of the national governments over local governments (as cited in Çitçi, 2005, pp. 34-35). Similarly, Sabuncu and Şeker argue that although there may be some local factors, the results of local elections present the support of national political parties (as cited in Çitçi, 2005, p. 37). Therefore, Çitçi states that local elections are rarely considered as voting for local governments. This is defined as nationalization of politics which means people's political behavior is determined by national political parties and issues at elections are put forward by national media (Çitçi, 2005, p.37). In fact, Çitçi (1989) and Sabuncu and Şeker (1996) argue that voters make their choice in local elections according to their political party preferences. According to Kiriş and Gül (2008) and Akbulut (2004), the nationalization of local elections stems from the existence of disciplined nation-wide political parties contesting at local elections. However, the empowerment of the local governments since the 1980s and increased cleavages in party system after the 1989 local elections, among others, in Turkey led to a rise in the interest of national and local actors in local politics (Akbulut, 2005, pp. 3, 6).

Many researchers assert that local elections are perceived by voters as a response to national political actors. According to Leonard and Mortimore (2005, p. 155), “many voters use local elections as means of passing judgment on the performance of the national government, and to ‘send a message’ to Westminster, rather than voting on the basis of which parties and candidates they would prefer to run their local council”. Norris and Evans (1999) as well as Harrop and Miller (1987) also consider the results of local elections as a message to party in government (quoted in Çitçi 2005, p. 34). Akbulut (2004, p. 1) states that when local elections are held before national elections, the local ones are considered as public opinion poll for national political parties; when local elections are held after national elections the local ones are considered as a vote of critique. Accordingly he maintains that local elections are taken as a reflection of national political attitude. In addition, national elections are considered as a sign of party system, political stability/instability, and of social and political transformation in a country.

The examination of the studies on local elections presents the causes of this study. The studies on local elections are scarce and mostly related to national politics or political actors. In the case of Turkey studying local elections are more significant, because such studies are rare. With the developments of local governments in Turkey since 1980 the necessity for such studies becomes more apparent. This study therefore starts with a detailed examination of turnout rates according to population size, because turnout is considered as one of the most important aspect of political participation.

2. Voting participation at local elections

Although some liberals argue against the necessity of voting participation in the name of democracy, turnout is widely considered as a sign of participation and the functionality of democracy. Higher turnout shows greater interest in politics whether local or national. Apart from presenting interest in politics, high turnout rates are also an indication of the representation of the different groups. An increase in turnout rates can be considered as voting participation of diverse groups of people. For example, in their analysis of the consequences of turnout in local elections, Hajnal and Trounstein (2005, p. 530) conclude that an increase in turnout rates “could substantially reduce black underrepresentation at the local level” in the United States. It can therefore be argued that turnout rates are important for people's interest in politics/democracy, and in turn their representation at local / national politics.

There have been arguments explaining the causes of low turnout in local elections comparing with national elections. In the case of Britain for example, Leonard and Mortimore (2005, pp. 154-155) assert that participation rate in national elections has been 70 to 85 per cent while it has been about 40 per cent in local elections. The difference of local politics from national politics, according to Kiriş and Gül (2008, pp. 106-107), in the United States of America and Great Britain arises from the existence of long lasting local government traditions and the

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