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Forecasting Turkish local elections

Emre Toros*

Atılım University, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Kızılcaşar Mahallesi, 06836 İncek Gölbaşı, Ankara, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The literature on political forecasting is large, although the main focus of this literature is limited to a number of countries. Nevertheless, and despite the major differences between political systems, scientific forecasting work has proved to be broadly possible, with noteworthy extensions to new countries. This article extends the literature further by developing a new forecasting model for local elections in Turkey. The basic motivation of this article is to test the usefulness of political forecasting in the contexts of alternative democratic settings. Turkey, in that sense, seems to be an interesting case for a number of reasons. First, the Turkish Republic has been a multi-party democracy since the mid-1940s. Although it has been interrupted by three military coups, the party and election system in Turkey has brought real alternations in the government starting from very early years of the multi-party system. So, it is plausible to argue that Turkish voters have the tradition of evaluating the performances of political parties, as in any other Western-type democracy. That is to say, the dynamics of evaluations of political parties in Turkey follow a similar pattern to other contemporary democracies, being driven by economic and political forces. The main contribution of this analysis is the introduction of an explicit model, which can forecast the impact of economic and political variables across local elections in Turkey by using reliable, public, and macro-level data. In particular, this study offers a new forecasting model which tries to forecast the Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) vote share in 81 cities.

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1. Introduction

Since political forecasting has proved its strength, with its powerful theoretical foundations and accurate estimations, the amount of interest in this relatively new academic area has increased significantly. A simple *topic search* on the Web of Science database for political and/or electoral forecasting returned 898 articles in September 2011. A refined search within the same database produced 189 articles which have something about electoral and/or political forecasting in their *titles*. This number increased to a total of 1130 articles when using the default *subject term* search in EBSCO Host database, which covers both academic and non-academic journals. It is also interesting

to note that 685 of these articles were written between 2001 and 2011. These numbers display the increased interest in the subject of political and electoral forecasting.

Although these forecasting models have been remarkably successful, within this huge body of literature only a few countries have been analysed: of the 1130 articles in the EBSCO Host database, the United States has the biggest share, with 783 different studies. The United Kingdom and France follow, with 79 and 16 articles respectively. Even though such is the case, prominent scholars of the subject have shown more recently that, despite the big differences between political systems around the world, scientific forecasting work has proved to be broadly possible, with noteworthy extensions to new countries (Lewis-Beck & Jérôme, 2010). Based on this suggestion, the following article develops a new forecasting model for local elections in Turkey.

The basic motivation behind this article is to test the forecasting theory and methods in a new setting, in

* Tel.: +90 312 586 8619.

E-mail address: toros@atilim.edu.tr.

order to contribute to the related literature. Considering the growing interest in election forecasting, there has still been relatively little study of its usefulness in the context of alternative democratic settings. In that sense, Turkey seems to be an interesting case for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Turkish Republic has been a multi-party democracy since the mid-1940s. Although it has been interrupted by three military coups, the party and election system in Turkey has brought real alternations in the government from the very early years of the multi-party system. Thus, it is plausible to argue that Turkish voters have the tradition of evaluating the performances of political parties, as in any other Western-type democracy. That is to say, the dynamics of the evaluation of political parties in Turkey follow a similar pattern to those of other contemporary democracies, being driven by both economic and political forces.

It could be argued that all of these facts indicate fertile ground for forecasting studies. However, though a number of studies have focused on elections and voting behaviour in Turkey,¹ studies with the sole purpose of forecasting are relatively scarce (Akarca, 2009; Bulutay, 1970; Bulutay & Yıldırım, 1969; Çarkoğlu, 1997; Toros, 2011). The main contribution of this analysis is the introduction of an explicit model which can forecast the impact of economic and political variables across local elections in Turkey by using reliable, public, macro-level data.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it presents the literature on the theoretical premises of political forecasting. Then it offers a new forecasting model, which tries to forecast the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, *AKP*) vote share in 81 cities. Following that, the article continues with the diagnostics of the model proposed, and ends with a number of concluding comments.

2. Theoretical background

This study is based on four theoretical premises: first, the voters reward or punish parties according to their performances in relation to the macroeconomic conditions at the local level; second, incumbency is a highly important factor for re-election; third, right-wing voting is the dominant form of voting behaviour in Turkey; and fourth, the performances of the political parties in general elections affect their performances in local elections in Turkey.

2.1. The economy

The impact of the economy on voting behaviour has been analysed extensively in a number of studies (Alvarez & Nagler, 1998; Anderson, 2000; Fair, 1978; Kiewiet, 1983; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2007; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, & Bélanger, 2010). These studies, under the

general heading of the “Responsibility Hypothesis”, argue that the macro-economy has a considerable influence on electoral outcomes. According to this argument, a voter monitors the economy, judges how it is functioning, finds out who is responsible, and decides on his/her vote, meaning that voters are making their decision retrospectively (Kiewiet, 2000). In line with this theoretical argument, this study will also argue that voting behaviour in Turkey is highly bounded within the retrospective evaluation of macroeconomic conditions (Başlevent, Kirmanoğlu, & Şenatalar, 2005; and Hazama, 2006, p. 15).

The key macroeconomic variable in this study is the unemployment rate at the local level. There are a number of reasons for this. Regardless of the government or time period, unemployment has always received a lot of attention within the Turkish economy. Since the 1960s, the Turkish labour force has displayed a declining trend of participation and an increasing trend of unemployment. This is due mainly to the ongoing urbanization and industrialization. The average unemployment rate was around 3% until the 1960s. It then steadily increased over the following two decades, reaching 8% in 1980. At the same time, the labour force participation rate decreased from 70% in 1960 to 60% in 1980. Both urbanization and industrialization continued at an even higher rate after 1980, with new industrial centres emerging all around the country, partly as a consequence of abandoning import substitution policies and opening the economy to free trade (Filiztekin, 2009). This situation also created disparities between regions and cities, which helped make unemployment an important variable for voting behaviour at the local level.

According to the 2009 household labour survey of the Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK), the unemployment rate in Turkey increased to 13.6% in December 2008, a three percentage point increase compared to the same month in 2007. According to the same survey, unemployment in December was 17.3% in urban areas, compared to 10.7% in rural areas. In total, the number of unemployed in Turkey grew to 3.27 million, an increase of 838,000 relative to December 2007. Although the Turkish economy has experienced a number of crises in the past, it has never faced such high unemployment rates. One of the worst crises, which had a great effect on jobs, was back in 2001. As a result of this major crisis, the unemployment rate increased from 6.5% to 10.3%. The most recent data reveal that the current situation is worse than the 2001 crisis. Unemployment is most common among young urban dwellers. According to the TUIK report, the official unemployment rate in this age group was 25.7% in December 2008. In 2000, the rate of youth unemployment was 13.1%, and it jumped to 19.2% in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis. All of these figures show that unemployment is a very relevant macroeconomic variable within the Turkish economic and political systems, at both the national and local levels.

2.2. Incumbency

The second theoretical argument links incumbency with electoral success. A considerable body of literature

¹ The examples that used micro-level data have tended to focus on voter profiles and field work carried by private research companies; among others, see Esmer (1995, 1999, 2002); Erder (1996, 1998, 2002); and Başlevent, Kirmanoğlu, and Şenatalar (2004). Although these studies are highly illuminating, they do not aim to forecast elections.

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