RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Influence of Anti-Immigration Attitudes on Voter Behavior and Its Limits: Turkish Politics and the Case of the Victory Party

Göç Karşıtı Tutumların Seçmen Davranışı Üzerindeki Etkisi ve Sınırları: Türk Siyaseti ve Zafer Partisi Örneği

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Abstract

Türkiye experienced a significant influx of migrants from Syria following the onset of the civil conflict in that country in 2011, subsequently accompanied by an additional wave of migration from other politically unstable regions over the past decade. Research shows that constituents of nearly all political factions within Turkish politics exhibit a distinctly negative disposition towards this surge of immigrants. While various political figures have articulated grievances within Turkish society concerning this matter to a certain degree, the first explicitly anti-immigration political entity, the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi – ZP), was founded in August 2021. Considering both the surveys assessing the views of Turkish society regarding refugees and immigrants and the electoral percentages attained by anti-immigration political parties in European countries experiencing immigration, the electoral achievement of this party has been markedly constrained, reaching only 2.23% in the general elections of May 2023 and 2.57% in the local elections of March 2024. This article focuses on and addresses the relative electoral underperformance of the party. By conducting a long-term analysis of Turkish politics using the process tracing methodology, it reveals that the cleavages that have been key in shaping Turkish party politics and the polarization built upon them—especially during the AK Party governments—have limited the party's electoral support by preventing immigration from being perceived as a primary concern by voters. Thus, the article makes a significant contribution to the existing literature by demonstrating that prevailing divisions and polarizations within a nation's political landscape serve a crucial constraining function in translating anti-immigrant sentiments into electoral outcomes.

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2011'de Suriye'de iç çatışmanın başlamasının ardından Türkiye bu ülkeden ciddi bir göçmen akınının hedefi haline gelmiş ve bunu son on yılda diğer istikrarsız bölgelerden gelen ek bir göç dalgası izlemiştir. Araştırmalar Türk siyasetindeki neredeyse tüm siyasi grupların seçmenlerinin bu göçmen dalgasına karşı belirgin bir şekilde olumsuz bir eğilim sergilediğini göstermektedir. Bu tarihe kadar çeşitli siyasi figürler belli bir ölçüde toplumsal şikâyetleri dile getirmiş olsalar da göç karşıtlığını siyasetinin merkezine oturtan ilk siyasi aktör olan Zafer Partisi (ZP) Ağustos 2021'de kurulmuştur. Hem Türk toplumunun mülteciler ve göçmenler konusundaki görüşlerini değerlendiren anketler, hem de yoğun göç alan Avrupa ülkelerinde göç karşıtı siyasi partilerin elde ettiği seçim yüzdeleri göz önüne alındığında, Zafer Partisi'nin seçim başarısı belirgin şekilde sınırlı kalmış ve parti Mayıs 2023 genel seçimlerinde %2,23, Mart 2024 yerel seçimlerinde ise %2,57 oy alabilmiştir. Bu çalışma, Zafer Partisi'nin görece olarak düşük kalan seçim performansını ele almaktadır. Süreç izleme metodolojisiyle Türk siyasetinin uzun vadeli analizini yapan bu çalışma, Türk parti siyasetinin şekillenmesinde kilit öneme sahip olan ayrışmaların ve özellikle AK Parti iktidarları döneminde derinleşen kutuplaşmanın, göçün seçmenler tarafından temel bir kaygı olarak görülmesini engelleyerek Zafer Partisi'nin seçmen desteğini sınırladığını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç Karşıtı Partiler, Mülteci Karşıtı Tutumlar, Göç Karşıtı Siyaset, Zafer Partisi, Türk Milliyetçiliği

1. Introduction

Anti-immigration attitudes and their political representation have garnered increasing attention in recent decades. One significant reason for this trend has been the unanticipated victories of anti-immigration parties in numerous countries. These parties have gained such prominence that they can become the second or third party in elections, even in Nordic countries known for their liberalism and tolerance, as well as in countries like Germany, France, and Italy (Zeisset, 2016). Consequently, numerous studies have aimed to examine the connection between immigration and the emergence of parties with anti-immigration positions, frequently described as radical or far-right (Abbondanza & Bailo, 2017; Edo et al., 2019; Harmon, 2017). The belief that mainstream political figures have inadequately addressed recent refugee crises has significantly contributed to this trend (Otto & Steinhardt, 2017).

Immigration has only recently emerged as a major political issue in Türkiye, in contrast to the majority of European nations. The influx of refugees resulting from the conflict in Syria in 2011 has gradually fostered the rise of anti-immigration attitudes and grievances within Turkish society. Although certain political parties and actors acknowledged these complaints and raised them on the political stage, the issue did not gain prominence on the main agenda until the 2019 elections. In August 2021, the first political party to prioritize an anti-immigration stance in its discourse was founded by Ümit Özdağ, a prominent figure in Turkish nationalist politics, who has been a vocal critic of Türkiye's refugee policies since the early stages of the Syrian crisis. The party established its ideological framework based on Turkish nationalism, following the principles outlined by Atatürk (Zafer Partisi, n.d.).

The ZP did not meet the threshold with a 2.23% vote rate in its inaugural election in 2023 (despite its presidential candidate securing a 5.17% vote rate in the first round) and was unable to elect any MPs to parliament. Subsequently, it could only achieve a 2.57% voter turnout in the March 2024 local elections. These results signify a relative failure compared to anti-immigration parties in Europe. Party leader Ümit Özdağ acknowledged that the party did not achieve its electoral objectives (Habererk, 2024).

The party aimed to attract anti-refugee voters, and research indicated a significant societal backlash regarding this issue, which was even observed among supporters of the ruling party (Karar, 2022). However, it largely failed to convert the negative perceptions and reactions to refugees in society into political success. In contrast to numerous studies in the literature that primarily focus on the success and emergence of anti-immigration political parties, this study seeks to identify the reasons for this relative failure by analyzing the social dynamics and voter behavior that influence Turkish politics. Thus, the conditions and factors that limit the translation of anti-immigration attitudes and sentiments into electoral support will be examined through the ZP case in Türkiye.

The study will first examine the Syrian refugee crisis and its effects on Turkish society and politics. Subsequently, the ideological stance, policies, and discourses of the ZP as Türkiye's first anti-immigration party will be analyzed in conjunction with this discussion. In the final stage, an analysis of the foundations, enduring patterns, and sociological dynamics of Turkish party politics will be conducted to uncover and address the causes of the party's underachievement.

2. The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Turkish Politics

The conflict that started in Syria in 2011 escalated into a civil war, leading to a significant migration movement towards neighboring countries and European nations. However, the country that received the most substantial influx of migrants among these is Türkiye. With a Syrian refugee population exceeding 3 million, Türkiye is considered "one of the largest refugee-hosting countries worldwide" (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d. a).

Largely due to its geographical position, Türkiye is not inexperienced in this regard, having faced migration waves before (Balta, Elçi & Sert, 2023; İçduygu, 2017; İçduygu & Kirişçi, 2009). Nevertheless, the recent refugee crisis has followed a different trajectory from previous ones in many respects. Türkiye adopted an "open door" policy from the beginning of the crisis, with the expectation that the civil war in Syria would end soon. Those arriving from Syria were initially considered "guests" in Türkiye. However, especially with the influxes in 2014-2015, this expectation began to change gradually (Akar & Erdoğan, 2019). In 2014, the refugee population was granted the status of "temporary protection." All individuals who entered the country through irregular or illegal means, who were identified by Turkish authorities, and who declared a valid reason for their entry or presence in the country, could access this status even if they could not present any identification documents from Syria. In 2016, legal regulations were enacted allowing refugees to

work. Thus, the temporary protection status came to encompass access to education, health care, social assistance, psychological support, and the labor market, among other benefits (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d. b). That same year, President Erdoğan began to mention the possibility of granting citizenship to refugees. With these steps and developments, the issue of refugees, which had not been perceived this way in the early years, began to become politicized (İçduygu, 2017).

As the Syrians' stay in Türkiye extended, societal reactions against them began to be voiced more loudly (Bayır & Aksu, 2020). As refugee camps became increasingly depopulated and were completely closed in 2019 (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019, p. 60), more refugees began to reside in metropolitan cities. These developments had significant reflections first in the social sphere and then in the political arena. Until 2017, among the four influential parties in Turkish politics, the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AK Parti) and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – HDP) maintained a moderate stance on Syrian refugees, while the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP), and the other major opposition party, the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – MHP), held a relatively negative stance. After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the MHP entered into an alliance with the ruling party, while the Good Party (İYİ Parti), founded by those who broke away from it, began to bring the refugee issue more prominently onto the political agenda. In December 2019, the Good Party organized a "workshop on the return of Syrian refugees to their country" in Ankara, where the party's leader, Meral Akşener, announced a "three-stage plan to ensure the return of Syrians to their homes" (Taşdemir, 2019). The issue of refugees began to gain much more attention in Turkish politics, especially with the 2019 local elections. Before the elections, key figures of the party, including Erdoğan, stated that the government's aim was to ensure the safe return of Syrians to their homeland and that Türkiye would not tolerate refugees disrupting public peace (Yavuz & Özcan, 2019). Following the elections, the opposition began to criticize the government's Syria policies more vocally. The Good Party's foreign policy authority, Ümit Özdağ, was at the forefront of those criticizing the government, assessing the issue in terms of national security and claiming that refugees were damaging the social fabric and creating security vulnerabilities in the country. CHP officials stated that the government's policies on this issue were not transparent and criticized the expenditures as unclear and uncontrolled (Yüksek, 2019). In this way, over the years, the refugee crisis has increased its visibility in Turkish politics.

3. The ZP as the First Anti-Immigration Party in Turkish Politics

Özdağ, the founder of the ZP, was a nationalist academic known throughout the country before entering active politics. In 2006, he ran against party leader Bahçeli in the MHP and was immediately expelled from the party. He returned to the MHP in 2010 by court order, was elected as a member of parliament from the party in 2015, and was appointed deputy chairman. However, shortly after that, he resigned from this position, called for a congress, and announced

his candidacy for party chairmanship. The congress planned for July 2016 did not take place, and Özdağ was expelled from the party again in November 2016.

After this, a group including Özdağ founded the Good Party under the presidency of Meral Akşener, who was also expelled from the MHP, in October 2017. Here, Özdağ made an effort to bring the refugee crisis to the party's and the country's agenda. However, he was expelled from the party at the end of 2020 due to conflicts he experienced with the party's senior staff and leadership in the following years. Although the expulsion was annulled by a court decision, he resigned from the party in March 2021, citing various issues, including the party's insufficient opposition to the refugee issue (Özden & Çimen, 2021). In the following months, Özdağ first organized a social movement under the name "Ayyıldız." Later, the movement became a party by submitting the foundation petition on the symbolically significant date of August 26, 2021, leading to the establishment of the ZP.

Within the bloc of nationalist parties, which have a combined vote of around 25% in Türkiye, the MHP reduced and softened its rhetoric about refugees after aligning with the ruling party under the umbrella of the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı). The Good Party, on the other hand, usually avoided harsh rhetoric to respect international humanitarian norms, collaborate with the CHP during elections, and appeal to broader segments of society. In contrast, the ZP has adopted a harsh anti-refugee and anti-immigrant rhetoric, distinguishing itself from other nationalist parties by openly advocating for the forced return of refugees to their countries (Secen, Al & Arslan, 2024).

The ZP's primary concern has been to bring the complaints of refugees and illegal immigrants in society to the political arena. However, by framing this issue within a larger context, the party claims that other actors are either indifferent to the plan that is the source of the survival problems faced by the country or are complicit in it. According to the party manifesto, the migration flowing into Türkiye is part of the war that imperialism has waged against the country (Zafer Partisi, 2021). Türkiye is being destabilized, dragged into civil war, and dismembered through migration. The ruling party, referred to as the "palace regime," is seen as instrumental in this plan. The main opposition party, the CHP, labeled the "yellow opposition," is no longer the party founded by Atatürk. Almost 90% of the Turkish nation is against this invasion, which they view as a plan of imperialism, but this stance is not represented in politics. In this scenario, the ZP positions itself as the only actor capable of translating the will of the Turkish nation into political action and putting a stop to this plan; it is regarded as the "last defense line" of the Turkish nation.

Beyond this overarching narrative, the party also presents immigration as the cause of the problems that citizens face in their daily lives. In addition to direct economic issues such as the increased tax burden on ordinary citizens, rising unemployment due to the influx of illegal and cheap labor, and citizens receiving a smaller share of social assistance, the party's rhetoric attributes problems like the re-emergence of previously unseen diseases and the increase in drug trafficking to refugees, illegal immigrants, and uncontrolled borders (Deniz & Aksu Kargın, 2024;

Koca & Saç, 2024). Furthermore, the ZP contends that the government trivializes the troubles experienced by citizens and ignores the severity of the problem. In this context, party leader Özdağ frequently states that the figures provided by the government do not reflect the truth, claiming that there are 13 million refugees and illegal immigrants in the country, despite the Presidency of Migration Management, affiliated with the Ministry of Interior, reporting a total of 4,449,333 foreigners with legal rights to stay in Türkiye, including Syrians (Serbestiyet, 2024).

Although the party has struggled to find space in mainstream media, Özdağ has effectively utilized social media for party propaganda, playing a significant role in bringing the issues of refugees and illegal immigrants to the forefront of the government and opposition agendas. However, field research indicates that the recent refugee crisis has created a serious anti-immigration atmosphere in Türkiye, with a strikingly negative attitude among the public towards refugees and illegal immigrants even before the foundation of the ZP. For example, in a nationwide survey conducted in August 2021, 58.9% of participants stated that they would be disturbed by Syrians moving into their apartments next door. This rate was around 49.3% among AK Party voters and as high as 79.8% among CHP voters. In the same study, when asked, "If you were the president, what would you prefer to do regarding Syrians?", 34.3% of participants chose the answer "I would send them back to their country, even if by force," 58.38% opted for "I would establish the necessary contacts with Syria and ensure that conditions are created for them to return to their country," and only 7.3% selected "I would focus on integration policies so that they can spend their lives in Türkiye." Notably, even 27.6% of ruling party voters chose the option "I would send them back to their country, even if by force" (Cumhuriyet, 2021). In another nationwide survey conducted in the same year (SODEV, 2021), the combined responses of "I would not want it" and "I would never want it" to the question "What would be your attitude to having a Syrian neighbor?" totaled 55.7%. The percentage of those who found the government's policies regarding Syrians "wrong" or "very wrong" was 66.7%, while this rate was 46.3% even among ruling party voters. Additionally, 75.6% of participants believed that refugees had a "negative" or "very negative" impact on the economy.

It is a fact that different political preferences and ideological attitudes create variations in the Turkish people's perspective on the refugee crisis. Previous studies have empirically shown that a negative view of immigrants increases the probability of voting for the CHP and the Good Party while decreasing the likelihood of voting for the AK Party (Elçi, 2022). However, there is a significant negative attitude towards Syrian refugees nationwide, albeit at varying rates depending on the political party. It was in this context that the ZP entered the political arena and conducted its political propaganda with a nationalist discourse centered on anti-immigration. Despite this, the party's vote rate remained at 2.27% in the general elections and 2.57% in the local elections.

So why was the party relatively unsuccessful in converting the anti-immigration sentiment and discontent in society into votes? The following section will attempt to provide a contextual explanation of the party's failure by analyzing Turkish party politics and its sociological dynamics.

4. Research Design and Theoretical Framework

In the previous section, it was discussed that the first party to emerge with an anti-immigration stance, despite the high anti-immigration sentiment among Turkish voters, experienced a failure in the elections, which was also acknowledged by its leader. First and foremost, numerous studies reveal how anti-immigration parties influence the discourses of mainstream parties, demonstrating that their impact extends beyond the votes they receive (Abou-Chadi & Krause; Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; van Spanje, 2010). However, examining this influence is beyond the scope of this study; here, "failure" largely refers to the percentage of votes obtained in the elections. Additionally, it is important to note that many other factors, such as leadership, organization, financial power, and media visibility, may affect the success of this or any other party.

This study will focus on the results achieved by the party within a framework that prioritizes party politics and its social dynamics in Türkiye, as the specific contextual factors of Turkish politics play a much more decisive role in the success or failure of parties. To this end, it will adopt a qualitative methodological framework and employ a process tracing approach supported by secondary sources and empirical data.

The process tracing approach seeks to explain the causal mechanisms that give rise to specific outcomes in particular cases by analyzing them within a defined process (Beach & Pedersen; Blatter & Haverland, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005; Mahoney, 2012). It is a suitable methodological approach for case studies that seek answers to "why" and "how" questions, as it aims to uncover the causal conditions, mechanisms, and configurations that lead to the focal outcome (Blatter & Haverland, 2014; Kay & Baker, 2015). Essentially, questioning the contextual reasons for the failure of a new party makes process tracing an appropriate approach for this study. The main argument of the study is that the sociological dynamics of polarization, shaped by cleavages in Türkiye, significantly limit the voter potential of new actors, which is the fundamental reason for the relative failure of the ZP. To test the validity of this argument, process tracing will be operationalized in the analysis within a defined period.

In process tracing, establishing a clear timeline is critical for analysis, as it helps to establish temporal evidence and determine the time interval to focus on for causes (Ricks & Liu, 2018, p. 843). However, it is worth noting that even the most justifiable time frame "can be subject to debate" (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, p. 26). In the first stage, the cleavages that shaped politics from the foundation of the republic and the critical junctures that affected politics until 2002, when the AKP came to power, will be examined. In the second stage, the discussion will focus on how and why the period of consecutive AKP governments brought these cleavages back to the center of party politics and how politics became polarized around them. In the final stage, the ZP's three-year political life will be analyzed, focusing on its relationship with these cleavages and polarization, as well as the sociological dynamics that determine its potential. As Collier (2011, p. 824) notes, the success of process tracing depends significantly on a "close engagement with case knowledge." In this context, the discussions in the previous sections regarding the refugee crisis,

Türkiye's response, and the foundation of the ZP can also be considered as case knowledge, which will be incorporated into and referenced in the analysis.

5. Evaluating the Potential and Limitations of the ZP through Social Dynamics and Cleavages of Turkish Politics

Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) thesis posits that national and industrial revolutions create social and cultural fault lines, conceptualized as "cleavages," in societies, and that these are the main determinants of party politics. This thesis was developed based on Western European countries. However, it is possible to observe divisions and groupings around historically structured cleavages in almost every country, although their level of influence on politics varies. In Türkiye, the national revolution that established the nation-state after the collapse of the empire played a leading role in the formation of such cleavages, and cleavage theory provides critical insight into understanding Turkish politics (Özbudun, 2013, pp. 6-7).

Although the effects of the cleavages (owner versus worker and land versus industry) created by the Industrial Revolution on political life in the country were limited, the cleavages produced by the National Revolution (center versus periphery and state versus church) had a significant impact on the politics of modern Türkiye. It is important to note that assuming cleavages are merely reflected in political systems is problematic; such an approach overlooks the fact that cleavages can be activated, channeled, reinforced, distorted, reshaped, or repressed by the actors and operators of a political system (Sartori, 1969, p. 209).

In Türkiye, the AK Party has been the political actor that reshaped the political landscape by activating the cleavages already present in society and polarizing both society and politics since coming to power in November 2002 (McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018). Nevertheless, cleavages represent dynamic entities that undergo continual transformation as political actors engage with them or formulate their policies in relation to them. Furthermore, contemporary research has indicated that socio-economic and demographic changes across the globe have precipitated the emergence of novel cleavages in numerous nations (Bornschier et al., 2024; Ford & Jennings, 2020).

It is imperative to consider these factors when analyzing the genesis of these cleavages and their significance in the political landscape of Türkiye, particularly in the context of evaluating the influence that an entity such as the ZP may exert on this political engagement.

5.1. Turkish Revolution and Emergence of Cleavages

The cadre led by Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Türkiye, embarked on sharp and rapid reforms in social, cultural, economic, and political life to establish the country as a secular Turkish nation-state within a single-party regime (Christofis, 2020; Haynes, 2022). One of the fault lines resulting from these reforms was ethnic in nature, leading to ethnic separatist

rebellions in the southeast of the country and the emergence of a Kurdish nationalist political line opposing nation-state politics. Initially, Kurdish nationalists continued their political activities within other leftist movements in the country. Following the 1980 military coup, a faction among them founded the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is now recognized as a terrorist organization by many international actors, and launched armed attacks against Türkiye. From the 1990s onwards, Kurdish nationalists entered the Turkish political scene with a series of parties established one after another (often as a result of previous parties being closed down by judicial decisions), sometimes collaborating with leftist movements and sometimes acting independently.

The second fault line emerged from modernization efforts that sought to completely transform a traditional structure in which religion was central to all spheres (Mardin, 2006). This rupture led to the gathering of conservative and religious circles that were distanced from the revolution and the secular order it envisioned (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019). In every attempt to transition to a multi-party system, these circles coalesced around newly established parties. Finally, in 1950, during the first multi-party election that could be considered free, the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti – DP) won against the founding party of the republic, the CHP, and came to power. In the elections of 1953 and 1957, a scenario emerged in which two parties representing the center and the periphery were the dominant actors. However, despite the CHP losing the elections, critical institutions—perhaps most importantly, the military—remained largely in the hands of republican elites. As a result, the DP's rule ended with the military intervention in 1960. Nevertheless, a cleavage, sometimes referred to as secular-conservative and sometimes as center-periphery, continued to significantly impact voting behavior in Türkiye. The fact that the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi – AP), the successor to the DP, and the CHP once again became the leading actors in the general elections following the 1960 Coup, with their votes varying between 70% and 90% of the total, clearly illustrates this situation. The CHP's transition to the "left of center," as Bülent Ecevit famously described it, also gave this cleavage the character of a right-left division in the 1960s.

Table 1. Votes of CHP, DP and AP in general elections between 1950-1980

Year	CHP (%)	DP (%)	AP (%)
1950	39.45	52.67	-
1954	35.35	57.51	-
1957	41.09	47.88	-
1961	36.73	-	34.79
1965	28.75	-	52.87
1969	27.36	-	46.55
1973	33.29	-	29.82
1977	41.38	-	36.88

Although there were political actors to the right or left of the two main parties, as discussed later, the primary division in politics was this cleavage. While the military government ended the activities of all existing political structures and actors in 1980, the parties and actors that

subsequently entered Turkish political life largely aligned themselves with one side of these cleavages.

The political arena diversified during the transition from military rule to civilian governance, with actors emerging on both the right and left wings. In particular, two parties—one advocating Turkish nationalism and the other promoting Islamism—gained power by eroding the voter bases of the center-right parties. On the left, the CHP, re-established in 1992, incorporated the Social Democratic Populist Party (Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti – SHP), which had been established earlier and was seen as the successor to the former CHP, in 1995. However, the party struggled to achieve unity on the left, as Bülent Ecevit, the CHP leader before the coup, had also founded the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti – DSP), resulting in a division of support among left-wing voters.

Table 2. 1999 Turkish general election results and number of seats won by parties

Political Party	Vote Percentage	Number of Seats
DSP	22.19	136
MHP	17.98	129
FP	15.41	111
ANAP	13.22	86
DYP	12.01	85

As a result of the large-scale economic crisis experienced by Türkiye in 2002 and the decision to hold early elections, this prolonged coalition period came to an end, with all parties in parliament falling below the electoral threshold. A new era began in which cleavages once again took center stage in Turkish politics.

5.2. AK Party Period: Cleavages and Politics of Polarization

The establishment of the National Order Party (MNP) in 1970 initiated a series of Islamist parties that were created one after another and subsequently closed down by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that they were associated with activities against the secular regime. With the closure of the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi – FP) in June 2001, those in the traditional National Outlook line founded the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi – SP), while the progressive wing established the AK Party. The founders claimed that they had changed and that the new party was not aligned with the National Outlook line. In the November 2002 elections, the AK Party received 34.28% of the votes. Since none of the parties in the previous parliament passed the 10% threshold to enter parliament, the AK Party secured a parliamentary majority and came to power alone. The second party was the CHP, with 19.39%. Thus, a party with Islamist roots dominated the new center-right, while the CHP became the leading actor on the left. The AK Party managed to emerge as the first party in every subsequent election. However, the policies that brought the party these victories and enabled it to maintain its position were heavily criticized for increasing polarization

in Türkiye to a very high level, undermining the foundation for democratic politics, and turning Türkiye into a country governed by an authoritarian regime (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016; Somer, 2016; Yeşilada, 2023).

Initially, the party's election victory was generally welcomed positively, with arguments that it was a step towards democratization or that it would initiate a process in this direction. The AK Party also advanced Türkiye's membership negotiations with the EU, passed legislative packages aimed at democratization, and restructured civil-military relations in line with this argument (Lord, 2018). The efforts of the Gülenist Islamist group, influential in various state institutions, to pacify the Turkish army through criminal cases filed on charges of planning a coup were seen by the government as part of the fight against Kemalist secular tutelage, and the rights violations committed in these plots against segments described as "nationalists" were not widely discussed. However, after the 2011 elections, the predominant party regime in the country and the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling party began to become apparent. The harsh approach to the Gezi Protests in 2013 was the most obvious sign of authoritarianism. Towards the end of the same year, the government began its struggle with the Gülenists, its former ally, and in 2015, Türkiye recognized this organization as a terrorist group. Subsequently, the failure of the peace process initiated for the resolution of the Kurdish question (Köse, 2017) and the coup attempt carried out by the Gülenists in the Turkish army in July 2016 ushered in a new period in which alliances would be re-established and politics would be reconstructed.

While Erdoğan claimed that the country's independence and integrity were at risk, the MHP entered a new era by positioning itself alongside the AK Party. With the support of the MHP, the ruling party first passed changes that would transition Türkiye to a unique presidential system in the Turkish parliament in April 2017 and then adopted this system through a referendum. However, this policy change created a serious division within the MHP, leading those who left the party to form a new nationalist party, the Good Party (İYİ Parti) (Gerim, 2023). Before the 2018 general elections, the People's Alliance was established, with the AK Party and the MHP as its main components, while the Nation Alliance was formed, with the CHP and the Good Party as its leading actors. Erdoğan claimed that the pro-Kurdish HDP was a secret member of this alliance, frequently voicing this claim in subsequent elections.

In addition, the ruling party framed the struggle between its alliance and the rival alliance as a conflict between a national alliance and the West (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2023). In fact, starting in 2022, the CHP and the Good Party cooperated with the Islamist SP, the Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi – DEVA), and the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi – GP), which were also founded by those who broke away from the AK Party. In January 2023, these parties officially joined the Nation Alliance. However, this did not reduce the polarization between the alliances in the country, and Turkish politics was reshaped around the old cleavages. Given Türkiye's current voter profile, this situation made it possible for the opposing alliance in the majoritarian system to appear in need of a pro-Kurdish party, allowing Erdoğan to recode the

permanent conservative-secular cleavage in his discourse within a framework of polarization based on having a national stance or not.

5.3. An Examination of the Potential and Limitations of the ZP

To better understand the potential and limitations of the ZP in Turkish politics and to evaluate its social response, it is critical to examine the ideological basis of the MHP, the most institutional structure of Turkish nationalism, and its place in Turkish politics. The MHP is a party that contains many contradictory ideological elements, such as nationalism, communitarianism, secularism, Ottomanism, Islamism, and militarism (Bacık, 2011). One of the most striking aspects of its ideological components is an understanding of nationalism that identifies the nation with the state. This statist stance, despite the party's general conservative discourse, also necessitated a certain degree of harmony with the dominant secularism in the state. For this reason, the MHP, which had displayed strong opposition to the government alongside the CHP until 2016, ended its opposition to the AK Party, which then appeared to have almost identified itself with the state (Gerim, 2023). The party was apparently convinced by the AK Party's argument that the state was in danger and began to offer unconditional support to the government. The MHP's alignment with the AK Party resulted in nationalists who did not wish to be associated with this side breaking away from the party. After this point, the MHP largely ceased criticizing the government on issues such as refugees and illegal immigrants, which were serious concerns among its base. The Good Party, founded by those who left the MHP, expressed its concerns on this issue in a cautious tone, positioning itself as a party trying to settle in the center. The party clearly stated that Syrian refugees created serious problems for Türkiye's security and posed demographic risks, as well as causing economic damage due to migration (Saylan & Aknur, 2023; Seçen, Al & Arslan, 2024). On the other hand, it emphasized solutions that included negotiations and diplomatic means instead of direct and collective deportations and expulsions (İYİ Parti Milli Güvenlik Politikaları Başkanlığı, 2022). One could argue that the Good Party's cooperation with the other five parties—particularly the CHP—within the Nation Alliance was crucial in preventing the party from adopting a more aggressive stance on the refugee issue and in maintaining its cautious approach. Consequently, this created space for actors like the ZP, who could express their opposition to immigration more directly. This was the general outlook on the nationalist side before the ZP entered the political scene a few years later.

It would not be incorrect to state that the ZP has played a noteworthy role in bringing societal complaints regarding refugee and illegal immigration issues to the political agenda. The party opposed the presence of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, which President Erdoğan attempted to alleviate with "Islamic brotherhood" (Yanaşmayan, Üstübici & Kasli, 2019), based on the discourse that Türkiye was the nation-state of the Turks and the homeland of the Turks. The party openly declared that if it came to power, it would end this process, which it termed a "covert invasion," and that it would send the refugees and illegal immigrants back to their countries by force if necessary. This stance created pressure on the other parties, forcing them to address this issue

and adopt a more open position. However, the party faces significant obstacles in translating the anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment in society into voter support, considering the cleavage structures and social dynamics discussed earlier.

First of all, the party appealed to the largely secular side of the electorate. The previously mentioned emphasis in the party's founding texts and discourse on Atatürk and founding values clearly highlighted this aspect. Considering that the Turkish right has traditionally been associated with conservative and religious voters, and that even the Good Party, which broke away from the MHP, has made efforts to appeal to conservative voters with occasional Ottoman references in its center-oriented politics, it can be inferred that this discourse, which is devoid of a religious tone and contains significant secular emphasis, poses a risk of significantly limiting the ZP's potential within the right-wing context. Furthermore, it can be argued that the ZP's support for CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu in the second round of the 2023 presidential elections will harm the ZP's claim to be an alternative for right-wing voters. Özdağ explained that his support for Kılıçdaroğlu was due to the acceptance of a consensus text that included seven conditions, such as sending all refugees back to their countries within a year in the event of election victory, not compromising on the national-unitary-secular state, and preserving the definition of Turkish citizenship in the constitution (Sayın, 2023). However, it is likely that his support for the leader of the left-wing opposition, whom he had previously harshly criticized and whose policies he claimed were a threat to the integrity of the country, created distrust among right-wing voters.

On the other hand, the ZP also faces challenges regarding the other side of the cleavage. Özdağ openly stated that the pro-Kurdish party, a de facto element of the opposition camp that united against Erdoğan, was related to terrorism and could not be accepted as a legitimate actor. Özdağ specifically targeted the CHP's close relations with this party, claiming that the CHP no longer followed the principles of the CHP founded by Atatürk. This objection may resonate with secular voters, a significant proportion of whom are considered Atatürkists. However, there is another problem in the context of left-leaning voters. As previously mentioned, in the 1960s, the main cleavages in the country evolved into a right-left polarization, which led to violent conflicts, especially in the 1970s. The MHP and its associated youth organization, the Ülkü Ocakları (Idealist Hearths), were widely regarded as responsible for the increasing violence during this period. Whether they have a pre-existing radical movement or network associated with them is a determining factor in the success of anti-immigration parties (Van der Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2005, p. 566). In this respect, Özdağ's past with the MHP has the potential to create a negative perception of him among a significant segment of left-wing voters. Moreover, the fact that Sinan Oğan, another well-known politician with a MHP background, who was nominated by the party in the May 2023 elections, supported Erdoğan in the second round of this election has further fueled suspicions among left-wing and secular voters against Özdağ and the ZP.

In addition to the two dimensions discussed above regarding cleavages and ideological voter bases shaping Turkish politics, a third dimension related to them is the political polarization that has intensified under AKP rule, which has also negatively impacted the ZP's performance.

Although it is difficult to claim that they fully coincide, the historical cleavage that has manifested as support for and opposition to the AKP in the country also leads to negative voting behavior. This can be expected to result in voters eventually turning towards the largest political party on their side. In other words, although there are serious anti-immigration concerns within each party base, as previously shown, these do not outweigh the influence of polarization among voters and do not become a primary concern. In a recent field study conducted by Ipsos (2022), only 3% of the Turkish public considered the refugee problem to be among Türkiye's most important issues, while 70% agreed with the statement, "Syrians should be sent back to their country." The percentage of those who view it as a primary concern is strikingly close to the rate of votes the ZP received. However, empirical data suggest that this rate may also tend to increase over the years. In a study conducted by a research agency, ASAL, in 2023, the percentage of those who see refugees as Türkiye's most important problem was 3.5% (Cumhuriyet, 2023), while in the same agency's 2024 study, this increased to 6.2% (Yaycılı, 2024). An important example of the consequences that this variability can create is provided in Muno and Stockemer's (2021) study on the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). They claim that, although critical attitudes existed in Germany in 2013, immigration was a secondary topic even among AfD voters. However, the large-scale crisis in 2015 and the government's inadequacy in responding to this crisis led to the rise of the AfD in 2017. In the case of Türkiye, how salient the issue will be and to what extent it will become a primary topic for voters is critical for the ZP's potential.

The last issue to be discussed is whether the cleavage between establishment and anti-establishment parties, which has begun to emerge in the West, will also manifest in Türkiye, apart from the obvious cleavages we have previously examined. As discussed earlier, cleavages are dynamic in nature, and new socio-economic and demographic developments have the potential to create new cleavages, especially in Western contexts. In addition to the traditional right-left cleavage, another division has begun to form between populist parties and traditional parties, with these parties finding support among young voters who work but face problems with the system, have economic grievances, dislike immigrants, and feel disconnected from religious institutions (Guth & Nelsen, 2019). In the Turkish case, it is too early to predict whether the ZP will be able to achieve such support. However, although the party's vote rate in the 2023 general elections remained at 2.27%, the fact that its candidate received 5.17% in the first round of the presidential election indicates the existence of a significant electorate that is protesting the prevailing atmosphere of polarization, even if we cannot justifiably argue that they identify with the ZP. Furthermore, research shows that the party's support among young people is higher than its general vote. In a recent nationwide survey conducted by the research agency KONDA (2024) on the political preferences of young people, the ZP was seen as the third party, with a rate of 5.1%, following the CHP at 24.1% and the AK Party at 11.2% among voters aged 18-30. In this survey, where 14.9% stated that they would not vote and 31.2% were undecided, another striking finding was that the ZP had the highest support among young voters compared to other nationalist parties, ahead of the MHP at 2.4% and the Good Party at 1.8%. This data suggests that the party's rhetoric, which is rooted in nationalist, republican, and Kemalist values, as well

as anti-immigration sentiments, is articulated more concisely and unyieldingly than that of other nationalist parties, garnering a substantial response among the youth in Türkiye and positioning it ahead of these parties in this respect. In support of this, the head of the ZP, Ümit Özdağ, consistently asserts that he understands this particular circumstance. It is significant to mention that in a declaration made in June 2024, he contended that the legal voting age in Türkiye ought to be lowered to 16, mirroring practices observed in several European nations (Özdağ, 2024). Another example of this situation is that Özdağ frequently contrasts refugees and Turkish youth in his discourse. His questions, such as "So what do you plan to do for Turkish youth?" referring to the government's spending on Syrians, are noteworthy in demonstrating that the ZP prioritizes this issue in its politics (Özdağ, 2022).

6. Conclusion

This study examines the electoral performance and relative underachievement of the ZP, which can be considered the first anti-immigration party in Türkiye, within the framework of Turkish party politics. It aims to reveal the contextual reasons for the party's relative failure to gain votes compared to its European counterparts, despite the high levels of anti-immigration attitudes and discomfort in Turkish society. Thus, it also contributes to the relevant literature on the role of anti-immigration attitudes in voter behavior. From a theoretical perspective, it is critical to reveal how permanent patterns and deep-rooted cleavages in a country's politics can overshadow new discontents in society.

The study argues that cleavages in Turkish politics and the polarization based on them significantly limit the voter mobilization and support for the ZP. By revealing the historical significance of these cleavages and polarization in Turkish politics through process tracing, it analyzes the potential of the ZP in this context. The analysis utilizes secondary sources and field studies from the relevant literature. As a result, it reveals that cleavages, which continue to direct politics in Türkiye and have become central to politics amid high polarization—especially during the AK Party governments—prevent anti-immigration attitudes from becoming the primary and decisive concern for voters. However, it also notes that a cleavage that may occur between established party politics and anti-system parties, as seen in the West in recent decades, could increase the potential of the ZP, which is perceived to appeal especially to young voters.

The ZP's emergence on the Turkish political scene has prompted established parties to include immigration in their agendas and policies. This is seen as crucial to preventing them from losing support to new parties. However, it should not be overlooked that the tougher immigration policies of mainstream political parties can boost the legitimacy of anti-immigration parties and increase their electoral potential (Dahlström & Sundell, 2012).

Lastly, it is important to note that a significant limitation of this study lies in its contextual analysis of the anti-immigration party's relative shortcomings and prospects, which are confined to the realm of Turkish party politics and its associated social dynamics. This narrow focus results

in the exclusion of critical factors such as leadership, organizational structure, and financial resources, all of which are vital in assessing party success. Future research that examines the interplay between anti-immigrant sentiments and the success of anti-immigration parties, while incorporating these elements, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the subject.

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