DOES DOMESTIC PRESIDENTIAL TRAVEL HAVE AN IMPACT ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TÜRKİYE?[1]

TÜRKİYE'DE CUMHURBAŞKANININ YURTİÇİ ZİYARETLERİNİN CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI SEÇİMLERİNE BİR ETKİSİ VAR MI?

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ABSTRACT

The election of the president in Türkiye has always been prone to crisis due to its significance. Türkiye began electing the president through a popular vote in 2014 in the parliamentary system period, thanks to the amendment in the constitution through a referendum held in 2007, following a crisis because of a memorandum issued by the chief of general staff on the official website of the Turkish Armed Forces on 27 April 2007 regarding the following presidential elections. Türkiye moved to presidential system through another popular referendum held in 2017. Thanks to the amendment in the constitution in the same referendum, the president can be reelected directly by the citizens. Hence, the incumbent president and presidential candidates engage in political activities, such as traveling to provinces. This study argues that the number of President Erdogan's travels to metropolitan provinces positively correlates with the share of the president's votes in these provinces in the elections.

Keywords: Domestic presidential travels, presidential elections in Türkiye, metropolitane provinces, non-metropolitan provinces

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ÖZET

Türkiye'de cumhurbaşkanı seçimi, taşıdığı önem nedeniyle her zaman krizlere açık olmuştur. Genelkurmay Başkanlığı'nın 27 Nisan 2007 tarihinde Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri'nin resmi internet sitesinde cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerine ilişkin yayınladığı bir muhtıra nedeniyle yaşanan krizin ardından 2007 yılında yapılan referandumla anayasada yapılan değişiklik sayesinde Türkiye 2014 yılında parlamenter sistemde cumhurbaşkanını halk halk tarafından seçmeye başlamıştır. Türkiye 2017 yılında yapılan bir başka halk oylamasıyla başkanlık sistemine geçmiştir. Aynı referandumda anayasada yapılan değişiklik sayesinde cumhurbaşkanı doğrudan vatandaşlar tarafından seçilebilmektedir. Bu nedenle, görevdeki cumhurbaşkanı ve cumhurbaşkanı adayları illere seyahat etmek gibi siyasi faaliyetlerde bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın büyükşehirlere yaptığı ziyaret sayısının, cumhurbaşkanının seçimlerde bu illerde aldığı oy oranı ile pozitif ilişkili olduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Cumhurbaşkanının yurtiçi ziyaretleri, Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimleri, büyükşehir statüsündeki iller, büyükşehir statüsünde olmayan iller*

1. INTRODUCTION

Representation is one of the most important pillars of democracy. Election is the most essential instrument for representative democracy. The executive chiefs in democracies, whether as the prime minister in a parliamentary system or as the president in a presidential system, are elected to govern the country. Whereas there can be more than one stakeholder, such as coalition parties' leaders in the government within a parliamentary system, there cannot be a coalition or stakeholder in the executive branch of a presidential system. The President is empowered to administer the country in accordance with the Constitution. Hence, the president is accountable for the performance since the president is the chief executive.

Public presidency is a crucial aspect of modern presidential systems in democracies. The main goal of the public presidency is to bolster electoral success. Additionally, public support helps presidents to govern effectively.[3] Presidential speeches, presidential visibility, press conferences, and presidential trips in the country and abroad are various forms of public presidency. Campaign appearances are also one way to gain public attention. In this context, presidential travel is part of the permanent campaign, a concept first articulated in 1976 by Pat Caddell, a top aide to then-President-elect Jimmy Carter.[4] Presidential travel is a significant resource at the president's disposal for mobilizing the party base and constituents' support. Additionally, it is a valuable tool for controlling the agenda as well.

Many factors influence voters' decisions to cast their ballots. There are many studies examining these factors (ideology, education, the transmission of party identification from parents, economic conditions, international crisis, etc.) in the literature of political science. Although conventional wisdom suggests that presidents are primarily concerned about their electoral success, research on the presidency rarely examines what presidents do throughout their terms to secure reelection.[5] To fill this gap, there are some attempts to examine empirically the factors mentioned above. One of these attempts is to determine whether domestic travel by the incumbent president as an activity affects their electoral success. For instance, one study examines the effects of presidential campaign visits on Senate election results.[6] Another study in the literature examines the impact of US presidential travel on presidential approval ratings.[7]

3 Jeffrey E. Cohen, "Building Public Support from the Grassroots Up: The Impact of Presidential Travel on State-Level Approval", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, C.35, S.1, s.14.

4 Brendan J. Doherty, "Elections: The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College: 1977-2004", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, C.34, S.4, s.751.

5 Jeffrey E. Doherty, "Elections: The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College: 1977-2004", s.752.

6 Jeffrey E. Cohen– Michael A. Krassa– John A Hamman., "The Impact of Presidential Campaigning on Midterm U.S. Senate Elections", *American Political Science Review*, C. 85, S. 1, s.165.

7 Jeffrey E. Cohen – Richard J. Powell, "Building Public Support from the Grassroots Up: The Impact of Presidential Travel on State-Level Approval", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, C.35, S.1, s.11.

Baum and Kernell refer to the period from the late 1950s through the 1970s as the "golden age of presidential television" in US politics.[8] Similarly, the terms of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency mark the golden age of a president's domestic travel to provinces. There is no research on the linkage between the presidential travel to Turkish provinces and the share of votes for the Turkish president or his political party in these provinces in presidential and parliamentary elections in the literature. For the first time in literature, this study attempts to measure the linkage in Turkish politics through a quantitative analysis.

2. PRESIDENCY IN TÜRKİYE

Presidency, either in parliamentary or presidential system periods, has been a significant position in Turkish politics. The President is not only an individual or an actor but also represents an institution that has an impact on the public, as the presidency symbolizes the state itself. Hence, the election of the president in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey has always been prone to crisis due to its significance. Turkey began electing president through a popular vote in 2014 in a parliamentary system, thanks to the amendment in the constitution through a referendum held in 2007, following a new crisis because of a memorandum (called the e-memorandum since it was issued on the General Staff's website)[9] issued by the Chief of General Staff on 27 April 2007 regarding the presidential election process in the GNAT. In this memorandum, the chief of General Staff emphasized the importance of truly adhering to the values of the republic. In fact, the emphasis on this adherence was a direct reference to the secular feature of the state. After the referendum, for the first time, the election of the president was through a popular vote in 2014. President Erdoğan is the first president to be elected directly by the voters. After the election, a discussion erupted among politicians and journalists regarding a potential conflict of authority between the president and the prime minister, as both hold authority over governmental affairs. The amendment to the constitution was proposed in the 2017 referendum for transitioning from parliamentary to presidential system.

Domestic travel is a common practice for modern presidents.[10] Domestic presidential trip was not a very common occurrence in Turkey, in terms of frequency and regularity, until President Erdogan's style of going public. It can be asserted that Turkey did not adopt presidential system of government until the 2018 elections; therefore, the domestic presidential trip was not a common feature of Turkish politics before that time. Yet, President Erdoğan began traveling around the nation before the introduction of the first presidential system of government in 2018.

8 Matthew A. Baum - Samuel Kernell, "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?", *American Political Science Review*, C.93, S.1, s.311.

9 The official document of this memorandum is not available in open sources due to its removal from Turkish Armed Forces' official website.

10 Andrew Barrett - Jeffrey S. Peake, "When the President Comes to Town", *American Politics Research*, C.35, S.1, s.3.

A political scientist can measure whether presidential travel to Turkish provinces affects the rate of his votes. This study examines the impact of presidential travel to provinces on the share of votes in the election through a quantitative analysis.

3. PRESIDENT ERDOĞAN'S VISITS TO PROVINCES

David Mayhew argues that reelection is the primary goal of members of Congress. Like members of Congress, the president of Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seeks reelection. In this regard, the President engages in activities such as presidential travel to provinces to increase his share of votes in elections. Like presidents may aim to boost their job approval in the USA,[11] President Erdoğan aims to enhance his reelection prospects. As a key player, the president's main aim is to persuade the public to support him in the next election. Like the influence of presidential statements and rhetoric on politics,[12] presidential travel to Turkish provinces is one of the tools the Turkish president uses to influence the public. To this end, President Erdoğan visits provinces to get more support from voters in the provinces he visits.

Utilizing the communication potential of technological innovations for meetings is a requirement for politics and governance.[13] U.S. presidents believe that favorable news coverage helps build and maintain public support.[14] Presidents can target constituencies in provinces and voters nationwide synchronously, thanks to technological developments such as national television and social media. As President Erdoğan travels around the nation, many Turkish television channels broadcast his speeches live, as do wire services, and on social media, influencers frequently refer to the main topics in his speeches.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

Going public is one of the activities that presidents undertake to gain an advantage in politics.[15] Presidential travel is one of the types of presidential activities that have a significant impact on the nation's politics, in general, and elections, in particular. This study aims to investigate whether the travel of Turkish presidents affects the outcome of Turkish presidential elections.

11 Cohen – Powell, "Building Public Support from the Grassroots Up: The Impact of Presidential Travel on State-Level Approval", s.13.

12 Andrew B. Whitford – Jeff Yates, *Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, s.16.

13 Diana Owen – Richard Davis, "Presidential Communication in Internet Era", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, C.38, S.4, s.

14 Cohen – Powell, "Building Public Support from the Grassroots Up: The Impact of Presidential Travel on State-Level Approval", s.14.

15 Samuel Kernell, Going public: New strategies of presidential leadership, *Congressional Quarterly Press*, 2007, s.5.

4.1. Hypothesis

President Erdoğan is strategic in selecting the provinces to visit. More visits to the most populated (metropolitan) provinces mobilize core constituents and lead to a larger share of votes in those provinces than in less populated provinces.

In this regard, I hypothesize that the more frequently President Erdoğan visits Turkish metropolitan provinces, the higher the share of presidential votes in these provinces will be in the elections.

4.2. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is the year. I counted the visits per year starting from 2014 to 2023. This period covers three presidential elections held in 2014, 2018, and 2023. I exclude the 2014 presidential election from my measurement, as presidential travel data became available after the 2014 elections. My count measure helps to calculate the average number of visits per year. This count also shows presidential visits to provinces in election and non-election years.

4.3. Equation

I use a simple regression analysis (OLS) to measure whether Turkish presidential travel to metropolitan provinces affects the share of votes in presidential elections. The equation in my model is below.

Mean of Vote Share of President in Presidential elections = $\beta 0 + \beta 1$ (Presidential Travel) $+\varepsilon i$

Independent Variable: The number of Turkish President's travels to provinces.

Dependent Variable: Mean of vote share in presidential elections.

Control Variable: Change in GDP per capita in provinces

4.4. Data

In this study, to test my hypotheses, first, I count presidential travel. To measure the relationship requires counting the visits according to provinces and constructing a data set. To build this data set, I examined the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey.[16], which includes information about President Erdoğan's visits (including the name of the province and the date of the visit) as an official record. I constructed an Excel file of presidential visits to the provinces based on this record. I only exclude Ankara, the capital province, and Istanbul from the provinces, as the data related to President Erdogan's travels to provinces does not include any data concerning visits to Istanbul.

16 The Official website of Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/receptayyiperdogan/yurticiziyaretler/, Erişim Tarihi: 05.10.2023

I use event-count analysis as the methodology. Data focuses on the number of visits. I count the number of presidential visits in each year. I also coded the year as an election year if there was an election (general election, presidential election, municipal election, or referendum) in that year. Additionally, I examine the vote share of President Erdoğan in presidential elections. This study spans nine years, encompassing the terms of both the first and second administrations of President Erdoğan.

I have operationalized my independent variable as follows. I sum up the number of visits to a specific province in a particular year and record the total number of visits to that province in that year in an Excel column titled 'TOTVISIT'. I also coded election years as a dummy variable. If there is a presidential travel in the year of the election, I code this year as 1.

The dependent variable's code in the study is MEANVOTE. I have operationalized my dependent variable by constructing a column that indicates the mean vote share of the president gained in each province during the two presidential elections. More concretely, it is the mean of the share of votes of President Erdoğan in the 2018 and 2023 presidential elections, according to provinces.

I also use data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) concerning income per capita in provinces. The data on income per capita in provinces is an indicator in political science that accounts for the success of incumbent presidents in elections. I calculate the mean of GDP per capita for the years 2015-2021 in provinces as a control variable, titled GDPERCAP, in my study, as there is no available data for the years 2022 and 2023. I have added this variable representing provinces' economic conditions, as it can affect public attitudes toward the president.

5. FINDINGS

Table 1 provides information on the observation numbers, means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for the variables. According to Table 1, the number of observations for the dependent variable is 28 (excluding Istanbul and Ankara, the metropolitan provinces), and there are no missing observations. The observation for the share of votes ranges from 27.9% to 75%. The mean value of the dependent variable is 52.95%. The mean value of the dependent variable in this model is approximately equal to the national average vote for President Erdoğan in the 2018 elections.[17] (52.59%) and in the 2023 elections[18] (52.18%). Whereas the average of President Erdogan's share of votes in non-metropolitan provinces is 56.88% in these two elections. Table 2 shows that the mean vote for President Erdoğan in non-metropolitan provinces is nearly 4.5% higher than the mean vote nationwide.

17 The official website of Supreme Election Council of Türkiye, https://www.ysk.gov.tr/doc/dosyalar/docs/24Haziran2018/KesinSecimSonuclari/2018CB-416D.pdf, Erişim Tarihi: 11.10.2023.

18 The official website of Supreme Election Council of Türkiye, https://www.ysk.gov.tr/doc/dosyalar/docs/14Mayis2023/KesinSecimSonuclari/2023CB-TumSecimSonuculkinciTur.pdf, Erişim Tarihi: 11.10.2023.

Table 1 displays the mean vote share and total visits in 28 metropolitan provinces. The minimum number of total visits to metropolitan provinces is five, and the maximum number is 17. The mean of total visits in metropolitan provinces is 10.43. The minimum vote share is 27.9% and the maximum vote share is 75%. The mean vote share of President Erdoğan in metropolitan provinces is 52.95%.

Table 1: Metropolitan Provinces

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
meanvote	28	52.94643	14.75618	27.9	75
totvisit	28	10.42857	2.974317	5	17

Table 2 displays the mean vote share and total visits for 51 non-metropolitan provinces. The minimum number of total visits to non-metropolitan provinces is 0, and the maximum number is 18. The minimum vote share is 16.04% and the maximum vote share is 82.3%. The mean vote share of President Erdoğan in non-metropolitan provinces is 56.89%.

Table 2 Non-metropolitan Provinces

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
meanvote	51	56.88824	16.03084	19.2	82.3
totvisit	51	3.588235	2.913256	0	18

Table 3 displays the results of regressing the share of presidential votes on political variable, total visits to metropolitan and non-metropolitan provinces, and the economic variable, GDP per capita in these provinces. The main effect in metropolitan provinces (28) is positive and statistically significant, whereas the main impact on non-metropolitan provinces (51) is positive and not statistically significant.

Table 3

VARIABLES	meanvote	meanvote
TOTVISIT	2.369**	0.838
	(0.856)	(0.805)
GDPERCAP	-0.000862	0.000273
	(0.000855)	(0.00125)
Constant	35.17***	51.99***
	(11.46)	(9.992)
Observations	28	51
R-squared	0.256	0.022

Standard errors in parentheses

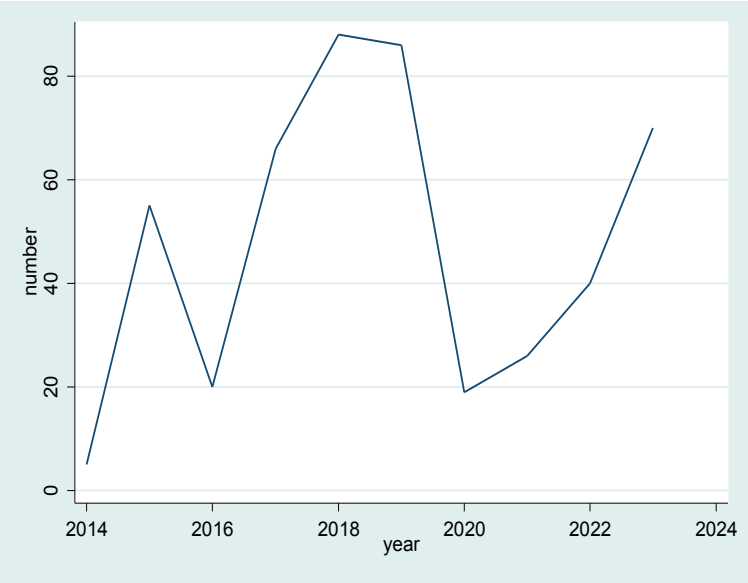
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The results for metropolitan provinces in Table 3 are presented in the following equation. Mean of vote share=35.17+2.37 number of visits-0.0009GDP per capita. In this case, the presidential visit has a significant impact on the share of the vote for President Erdoğan in metropolitan provinces in the presidential elections. As shown in Table 3, GDP per capita in Turkish metropolitan provinces is not a statistically significant variable in explaining the share of presidential votes.

Figure 1 displays the number of presidential visits to Turkish provinces from 2014 through 2023. Data related to presidential visits does not include visits before the 2014 presidential election (10 August 2014). Hence, the 2014 data on presidential travels covers only 4.5 months. In this period, parliamentary elections were held on 7 June 2015, 1 November 2015, and 24 June 2018 and 14 May 2023, presidential elections were held on 24 June 2018 and 14 and 28 May 2023, a constitutional referendum was held on 16 April 2017, and local elections took place on 31 March

2019. Within these 8 years, there were no elections, only in the years 2016, 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Figure 1



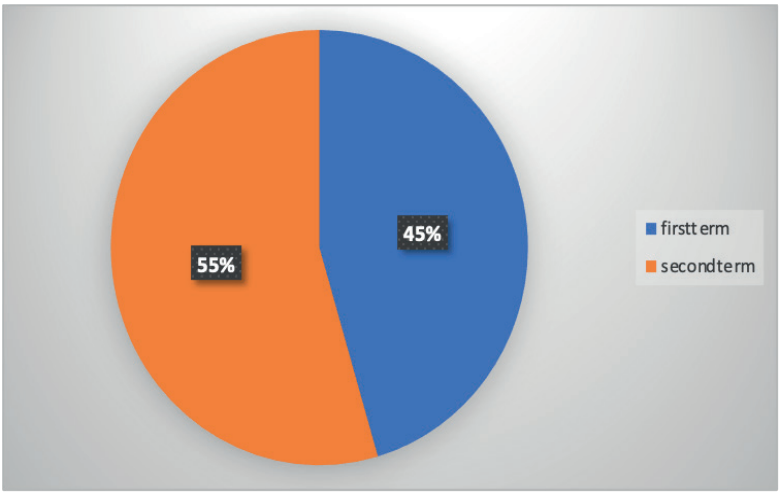
President Erdoğan made 475 visits to the provinces of Turkey from August 10, 2014, to May 28, 2023. These counts exclude all presidential travel to Istanbul, the historical capital of the Ottoman Empire, and to Ankara, the capital province of Turkey, since there are no data related to Istanbul, and travel to Ankara is not considered domestic travel.

In 2014, the President made five visits after his first presidential election. In subsequent years, the exact number of presidential visits to provinces is as follows: 5 in 2014, 55 in 2015, 20 in 2016, 66 in 2017, 88 in 2018, 86 in 2019, 19 in 2020, 26 in 2021, 40 in 2022, and 70 in 2023. The year 2020 is notable for being an exceptional year due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. An average of 53 visits per year means that President Erdoğan visited one of the provinces every week.

5.1. The First Term versus the Second Term

President Erdogan's first presidential term covers the period from August 10, 2014, to June 24, 2018. In this first term, the number of presidential travels is 216. The second term is 259. There is a balance between terms.

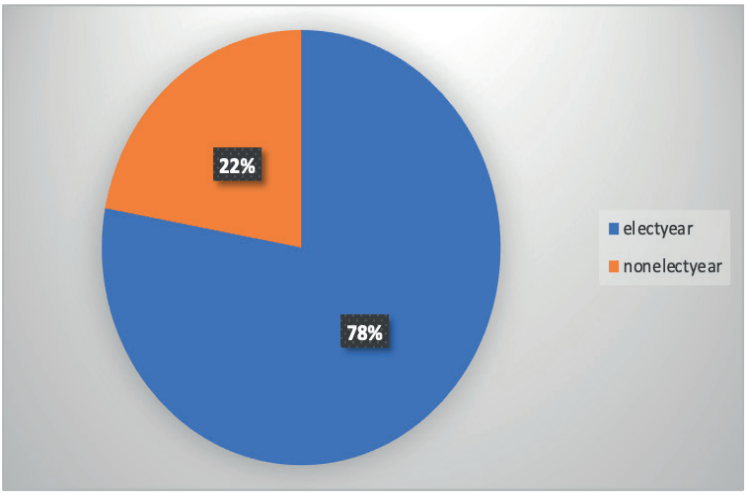
Figure 2



5.2. Election Years versus Non-Election Years

Presidents not only consider the location but also the timing of the visits. As elections approach, presidents travel more around the nation. As Figure 3 displays, there are sharp increases in presidential travel to the provinces in presidential election years, such as 2018 and 2023. In addition, Figure 3 shows a more detailed comparison between the number of visits in election and non-election years. The number of visits in election years (370) is 3.5 times higher than the number of visits in non-election years (105).

Figure 3



5.3. The Most Disproportionately Favored and Unfavored Provinces

The total number of visits from January 1, 2015, to May 28, 2023, is 475. The data does not include the visits to Istanbul, the most populous province. The most favored province is President Erdogan's hometown, Rize. President Erdoğan visited Rize 18 times in this period. On the other hand, the most unfavored province is Tunceli. President Erdoğan had not visited Tunceli during his first two presidential terms. Tunceli is known for hometown of political leader of as the hometown of the political leader of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, at the time this study was conducted. Besides, the number of presidential travels to eight provinces is one. This means that only 10% of the provinces have a very low number of visits.

Turkey has been fighting against the PKK's terrorism since 1984. Presidents' (prime ministers in the parliamentary system period) and ministers' visits to the provinces in which the PKK terrorist organization carried out terrorist acts have always been assigned special significance in Turkish politics. President Erdoğan made 137 visits to the eastern and southeastern Anatolian provinces, in which the PKK terrorist organization has carried out acts of terror. There are 23 provinces located in eastern and southeastern Anatolia. The ratio of the number of these provinces to the total number of provinces is 28,85%. The mean of votes for President Erdoğan in the eastern and southern provinces is 47.98% and 4.25% lower than the nationwide votes.

Table 4

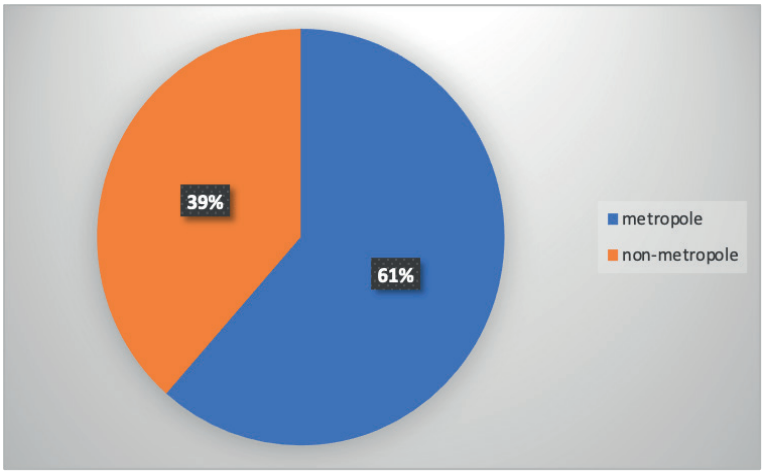
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
meanvote	23	47.97826	18.88804	19.2	82.3
totvisit	23	5.956522	4.247762	0	17

5.4. Metropolitan Provinces versus Small Provinces: Effect of Presidential Visits

Province size and the election cycle are contextual effects (Cohen & Powell, 2005, p. 20). The US presidents are more likely to travel to large states, especially during election periods (Cohen & Powell, 2005, p. 20). There are 81 provinces in the Turkish administrative structure. There are 30 provinces with metropolitan municipalities in Turkey. The required population for a metropolitan municipality is 750.000 according to the Law on Metropolitan Municipalities (Law No: 5216). This study considers 28 metropolitan provinces, excluding Ankara and Istanbul.

Figure 4 shows a comparison of the domestic travel of President Erdoğan to metropolitan provinces and non-metropolitan provinces. President Erdoğan made significantly more visits to Turkish metropolitan provinces than to small provinces: 292 vs 183. 61% of the presidential visits were paid to metropolitan provinces. This means that nearly two-thirds of the visits were paid to big provinces.

Figure 4



CONCLUSION

Examining the linkage between presidential travels and the share of presidential votes in the elections serves as a valuable indicator for measuring constituency preferences. It also serves as a cue for understanding presidential activities. This study is the first one to offer an explanation in Turkish politics regarding the impact of domestic presidential travels on the share of votes in presidential elections.

Future research can make a comparison among the presidents when data becomes available for subsequent presidents in Turkey. Future research can also examine factors such as competitive races and/or natural disasters that may influence a president's decision to visit a particular province, as well as the linkage between these factors and the share of presidential votes.

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