2017 Turkish Referendum: Did Turkey's "better educated" vote "No"?

Ilhama GASIMZADE[1]

Abstract

On April 16, 2017, Turkey hosted a historical referendum which attracted everybody's attention to the referendum results. The aim of the referendum was to reveal Turkish population's opinion regarding the proposed constitutional amendments which are supposed to accelerate the shift of the country from parliamentary democracy to presidential autocracy. As the results of referendum carry historical importance, it is important to interrogate the voting behavior of Turkish people in this referendum. This paper investigates the relationship between 2017 Turkish referendum results and higher education level of population. Multiple regression model has been used to find out whether people's education level affected their votes in the referendum. This article is the first assessment of the plebiscite results by province. According to the analysis of referendum results, significant correlation has been detected between the number of "No" votes and the percentage of higher educated citizens in the provinces. Additionally, I also found out that party affiliation of the head of municipality had a considerable effect on the referendum results of the provinces.

Keywords: Turkish referendum, higher education, voting behavior, regression analysis.

Introduction

On 16th April 2017 Turkish people voted in a national referendum to amend 18 constitutional articles which transformed the country into a presidential republic. With 51.4% of voters' support, Turkey entered into a new political system. In other words, Turkey took one more step towards to autocracy moving away from democracy (Klimek et al. 2017).

In 2016 in the result of negotiations between Turkey's ruling party AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) and MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – Nationalist Movement Party) AKP submitted a new constitutional amendment proposal for essential change in the country's political system. This proposal calls for a presidency as an executive branch of power and extended power for the president at the expense of parliament. The proposed system introduces president as head of state and as head of executive with the autonomy to appoint ministers and substantial portion of judges and public officials without any approval from parliament. The proposal brings about considerable risks to democracy by concentrating a significant executive power in a single individual (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017). Venice Commission also reported that new Turkish constitutional

[1] Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree student, Central European University, Public Policy, E-mail: ilhama.gasimzade@gmail.com.

amendments grant more power to the president and include substantially reduced checks and balances between the legislature, judiciary and executive (Venice Commission 2017).

The constitutional amendments have changed the way of decision-making and policy-making in the country and it has had major implications on Turkey's national and foreign policies. Given the fact that Turkey has geopolitical importance in the region, the results of the referendum are also important in terms of Turkey's position in international affairs ("Turkish Foreign Policy after the Referendum" 2017). Taking this importance into account I looked at the role of higher educated people in the referendum outcomes who are more likely to consider all costs and benefits of the new system. There are few studies that looked at the voting patterns of Turkish citizens in the referendum (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017; Yurtbilir 2018). This paper provides the first assessment of the plebiscite results by province. In doing this, I used Multiple Regression coupled with the Table to visualize the main findings of my analysis.

This study examines the referendum results to find out whether people's education level affected their votes in the referendum. There is a hypothesis received much empirical support that education leads to more democratic politics (Barro 1999; Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008). Referring to these studies, I assume that higher educated people showed no support or less support to the constitutional amendments which are supposed to accelerate the shift of the country from parliamentary democracy to presidential autocracy.

Methodology and data

In order to answer formulated research question, I used quantitative method, namely multiple regression model. Referendum data were obtained from the official website of the Turkish Supreme Election Commission (Supreme Election Commission n.d.) The dataset contains the results of the referendum for each province in the Republic of Turkey. I only focused on the referendum results within Turkey itself, and it does not include election results from polling stations in other countries because characteristics of people eligible for voting were not defined outside of the country.

Dependent and independent variables

The dependent variable is the percentage of "No" votes for constitutional amendments. Independent variable, higher education is measured with the percentage of the population who hold at least Bachelor's degree (people with master's and PhD degree are also included to this number). The dataset about the education level of Turkish people by province is retrieved from the official website of Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat n.d.). However, this dataset

presents the number of people with higher education and does not contain the percentage. I used the following formula to convert the numbers into percentage.

$$HigherEdu\% = \frac{E_n}{V_n}\ X\ 100\%$$

Where V_n stands for the number of eligible voters (people above 18), E_n is the number of higher educated people.

Control variables

Income level, predominant political party, the proportion of young people (aged between 15-24), unemployment rate and urbanization level in provinces were also included as control variables because earlier studies have shown them to be related to the support for presidentialism in Turkey (Bilgin and Erdoğan 2018). Population's income level is shown with GDP per capita in national currency. The datasets about the income level, unemployment rate and urbanization level by province were obtained from the official website of Turkish Statistical Institute and contain the years of 2014, 2013 and 2014 statistics respectively (TurkStat n.d.).

The results of the municipal election in 2014 was used to define predominant political party in the provinces ("81 ilin belediye başkanları" n.d.). According to the results, the dataset includes Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP), Republican's People Party (Cumhuriyyet Halk Partisi), Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - MHP), Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi - BDP) or People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Parisi - HDP) [2] and Independent candidate categorical variables. Political parties were included with five dummies each coded from 1 to 5.

Analysis of referendum results

The 2017 constitutional referendum was a staggering event in Turkey as it brought about considerable change in Turkish politics. The results of the referendum are also interesting in terms of high-level turnout and distribution of votes across the provinces.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the referendum results within Turkey. Because of application of compulsory voting in Turkey, turnout rate is not very surprising and quite high (average 86%) comparing to other elections in the world (Taşkin 2015). Overall, 34 provinces

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[2] On April 28, 2014 BDP mayors joined Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP)("BDP Lawmakers Join Sister-Party HDP - Turkey News" 2014).

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voted against the constitutional amendments. Tunceli showed the highest percentage of "No" votes, just over 80% whereas Bayburt recorded a "Yes" vote of 81.70 per cent, the highest in the country (Supreme Election Commission n.d.).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of 2017 Referendum Results [3]

	Mean	**Std. deviation**	**Min**	**Max**
Turnout	86%	4.17%	71%	91%
Yes	54.50%	14.33%	19.59%	81.70%
No	45.31%	14.43%	18.30%	80.41%

Source: Data adapted from Supreme Election Commission.

My assumption was that the dependent variable, the percentage of "No" votes, depends on provincial characteristics, such as education level including the proportion of young people, income level, unemployment rate and urbanization level. In addition, I have also considered people's political party preferences in the provinces. The multiple regressions model can be written as:

$$No\ votes_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 HigherEdu_i + \beta_2 Young_i + \beta_3 Income_i + \beta_4 Unem_i + \beta_5 Urban_i + \beta_6 Party + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where independent variables are defined as:

- HigherEdu = percentage of Turkish with higher education qualification
- Young = percentage of young people
- Income = Gross Domestic Product per capita
- Unem = percentage of unemployed Turkish
- Urban = percentage of urbanization
- Party = preferred political party in the provinces
- The subscript i stands for each voting area, ε is the error term and the coefficient β_0 is the constant

To find the relationship between dependent and independent variables, 2 different regressions were performed using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) in Stata 15.1. Table 2 presents the results of multiple regression of referendum results. The number of observations is the same

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[3] The means of overall "Yes" and "No" notes are different from the official records. The data used in this paper were obtained from the official website of Turkish Supreme Election Commission. I assume that the difference may stem from the rounding of the numbers.

for both models. The second column is specified Model (1) mentioned above which includes higher education and related control variables. The first column excludes the prefered political party to test whether adding political parties variable to the full model changes the relation of "No" votes with higher education.

As can be seen in Table 2 including political parties makes a significant difference in the coefficient determinations. In column (1) lower R^2 (19%) shows that the level of predictability of "No" votes from dependent variables is low. In column (2) the greater coefficient determination (63%) signifies the goodness of fit of the model. Adjusted R^2 proves the significance of the model.

As predicted, *the higher education level of the population* has a positive impact on "No" votes, and relatively greater p-value (0.086) shows that the relationship is statistically significant at 90% confidence level. The coefficient for the higher education level remains positive and the same significance level for both models. In column (2) when I include political party dummy variables, the coefficient decreases, whereas the significance level increases (0.054). In point of fact, provinces with more higher educated people such as Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and Eskisehir voted "No" which have the percentage of higher education qualification 24,4%, 19,9%, 19,9% and 19,7% respectively. Conversely, in the dataset, we also see the example of provinces with more higher educated people that voted "Yes" (For example, Erzincan) and with less higher education that voted against the amendments (For example, Sirnak).

In column (1) it is seen that *unemployed* Turkish are more likely to vote "No". As "Yes" would consolidate the president's power and weaken the institutions in Turkey ("What Is at Stake in Turkey's Referendum" 2017), the choice of unemployed people who are not satisfied with the existing and consolidating one-man rule is plausible.

My regression analysis found out that there is a strong relationship between referendum results and predominant *political parties* in the provinces. In the regression, my reference category is AKP which was the main supporter of the constitutional amendments in Turkey.

"Yes" campaign was carried out by AKP, MHP, a right-wing and nationalist party and 2 minor parties. However, according to Table 2, MHP partisans voted for "No" in comparison to AKP partisans. The study shows that there was a 'core' partisan group of MHP, who voiced a significant level of opposition to presidentialism (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017).

Table 2. Relationship between referendum results and higher education		
Dependent variable is the percentage of "No" vote		
	(1)	(2)
Higher Education	1.306*	1.088*
	(.750)	(.556)
Young people (%)	-.857	-1.742***
	(.727)	(.616)
GDP per capita	-1.766	3.072
	(6.306)	(4.804)
Unemployed rate (%)	16.928***	2.405
	(5.091)	(4.014)
Urbanization level (%)	-8.374	-3.824
	(6.829)	(4.931)
MHP		11.178***
		(3.723)
CHP		14.449***
		(3.197)
HDP		34.837***
		(4.599)
Independent		29.160***
		(10.859)
Number of Observations	81	81
R^2	0.19	0.63
Adjusted R^2	0.13	0.58

Notes: Table reports results from OLS regressions. The dependent variable is the share of "No" vote in the referendum. The variable of interest is the percentage of the higher educated population. Political preferences of provinces (AKP, CHP, HDP and Independent) contains dummy variables and reference category is the ruling party, AKP. Coefficients are reported

with standard errors in brackets. ∗∗∗, ∗∗, and ∗ indicate significance at 1%,

5%, and 10% levels.

"No" bloc was composed of CHP, HDP and MHP dissidents. CHP with a social-democratic, secular ideology and HDP with roots in the Kurdish nationalist movement, the most left-wing stance in the Turkish political landscape were the two parties which strongly opposed to the new system (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017). Table 2 shows that HDP has a strong positive effect on the percentage of No votes which is statistically significant, and it recorded the highest coefficient among other parties. It is true that the population of the provinces headed by HDP are mostly Kurdish people who think that new constitutional amendments had no benefits or promises for them. HDP was also particularly concerned with the decreasing power of parliament and the increasing power of the president over the legislative and judicial branches (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017), As it can be seen in the table there is a significant relationship between CHP dominated provinces and the percentage of No votes. From the beginning, CHP severely rejected the AKP's claim about the benefits of the presidential system (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017). Study based on surveys held in the post-referendum period reports that the voters cast ballots along partisan lines. According to these reports, nearly 90% of AKP voters and almost 30% of MHP supporters were in favor of "Yes,". However, around 95 % of CHP and 90% of HDP supporters chose "No" (Bilgin and Erdoğan 2018). Among the municipalities of the provinces, there are non-partisan mayors. These provinces also showed a strong positive effect on No votes.

Additionally, Table 2 shows that there is an unexpectedly strong relationship between the proportion of young people and No votes. Examining the previous elections reveals that AKP usually gets support from young people. For example, in the 2015 general elections 39% of the young population (aged between 18 and 24) voted for AKP ("Gençler 7 Haziran'da Kime Oy Verdi?" 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, I tested whether higher education affects voters' support for presidentialism in Turkey. The results presented above challenged assumptions about the relationship between the percentage of "No" votes for constitutional amendments and the proportion of the higher educated population including other control variables in determining popular support for the new political system.

The first important finding is that as expected higher educated people are more likely to vote against the new constitutional amendments. In other words, higher percentage of higher education qualification is associated with a higher percentage of "No" votes. However, this

should be taken into account that this association is significant at 90% confidence level so that there is a 10% chance of error in this conclusion.

Another important finding is that the No votes are strongly correlated with the preferred political parties. All parties except AKP have a positive effect on "No" votes and it is statistically significant. HDP as a part of "No" bloc campaign has the highest association with the percentage of "No" votes.

The results also presented the clear relationship of unemployment rate and the proportion of young people with "No" votes. Unemployment rate is positively correlated with the percentage of "No" votes, while the percentage of young people has a strong negative effect on "No" votes.

It is probable that there are other variables that are associated with the referendum results such as religiosity. According to Bilgin and Erdogan's survey study (2018) religious voters overwhelmingly supported the proposal. However, this data is not available as the level of religiosity cannot be defined among population. Further research may explore other variables that can be related to the referendum results.

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