

Taking Sides: Determinants of Support for a Presidential System in Turkey

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Abstract:

A salient issue on the Turkish political agenda is transition to presidentialism, with a constitutional amendment proposal in place as of Winter 2016-17. While the positions of political elites are well known, we lack a detailed analysis of the electorate's views on such a transition. We present cross-sectional and panel data collected over the period from Spring 2015 to Winter 2015-16 to fill this gap. Partisanship emerges as the key factor shaping views on presidentialism, and reflections of the centre-periphery cleavage in Turkish politics are also visible. The shift of Turkish nationalist constituency's views in favour of presidentialism is a significant trend in the aftermath of June 2015 general elections.

Keywords:

Turkey; Presidentialism; Elections; Public Opinion; Partisanship; Erdoğan; AKP.

On 10 December 2016 Turkey's ruling party AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) submitted a constitutional amendment proposal for a radical change in the country's system of government by introducing an executive presidency. The proposal is a result of negotiations between AKP and MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – Nationalist Action Party) leadership, and calls for expanded powers to the president at the expense of the parliament and the elimination of the prime ministerial office. In the proposed model, the president will serve both as head of state and head of the executive, appointing the cabinet of ministers and a significant portion of high judiciary and senior public officials without any oversight from the parliament. The president will also be able to issue decree-laws, declare state of emergency, restructure all ministries and public institutions, and dissolve the parliament by calling new legislative and presidential elections which are to be held simultaneously.¹ As such, the proposal entails a significant shift of governing authority from the parliament to the presidency and concentration of executive power in a single individual.

An important background for the debates on a transition from parliamentary system of governance to a presidential one in Turkey is the twin election year of 2015, which has been a tumultuous period in Turkish politics. The general elections of 7 June 2015 witnessed the loss of the incumbent AKP's parliamentary majority for the first time in 13 years, together with the pro-Kurdish HDP's (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* - People's Democratic Party) passing of the 10 per cent threshold, again for the first time, and winning seats in the parliament.² The inability of parties in the hung parliament to form a coalition government led to the snap elections of 1 November 2015, as a result of which AKP secured a parliamentary majority and formed a single-party government. Meanwhile the country witnessed a significant upsurge in violence due to the renewal of armed conflict with the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* - Kurdistan Worker's Party) and attacks perpetrated by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Whether Turkey should transform its system of government to executive presidentialism was a rather persistently salient issue on the political agenda during this twin election period of 2015. Such a transition was strongly favoured by AKP and especially by the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who argued that a presidential system would better ensure political stability and an effective government that is essential for rapid economic development (Kemahlıoğlu 2015; Bardakçı 2016). In contrast, all the three opposition parties in the parliament took a stance against a move towards presidentialism during this period, considering it as a reflection of Erdoğan's ambitions of assuming ever more power.³

¹ See Hürriyet Daily News (2016) for the details of the proposal. Changes to the Constitution require the support of at least 330 MPs in parliament to be put to a popular referendum, and the AKP group in parliament needs the votes of at least 15 MHP MPs. MHP leadership declared that they will support the proposal.

² To get around the 10 per cent national threshold requirement, candidates from HDP used to run as independent candidates in previous elections.

³ The negotiations between AKP and MHP that culminated in the aforementioned constitutional amendment proposal were initiated by the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli in Winter 2016. At this point it is not clear why Bahçeli dropped its strong opposition to presidentialism and decided to enter negotiations with AKP, but we offer some thoughts on this in the concluding section.

While the positions of the political elites on this debate are relatively well known, to date we lack a detailed, systematic analysis of the Turkish electorate's views on presidentialism and whether and how they have been impacted by the twin election campaigns of 2015.⁴ This article fills this gap by presenting rich individual-level data on the public's view on presidentialism that are collected over the period from Spring 2015, prior to June 2015 elections, to the Winter of 2015-16, in the aftermath of the November 2015 snap elections. Specifically, we utilise data from two nationally representative cross-sectional samples that are interviewed about two months ahead of the June election (pre-June survey) and about a month after the November election (post-November survey), and from a three-wave panel where the same individuals were interviewed three times in the pre-June survey, about two months after the June election (post-June survey), and in the post-November survey. These rich data enable us to evaluate the overall levels of support for presidentialism and its individual-level determinants as well as how the dynamics of support have changed over the period of interest.

Considering the nature of the debate on presidentialism and the positions of the political elites, we expect individuals' opinions on a transition to a presidential system in Turkey to be shaped by partisan attachments. The implications of a transition to presidential system of governance are complex, fraught with uncertainties, and rather distant to the daily concerns of the average voter; therefore voters would be seeking cognitive shortcuts to form an opinion on this issue. Partisanship is a powerful heuristic in this regard, helping voters simplify complex political phenomena by inducing them to simply adopt the party line with which they identify (Campbell et al. 1960). In turn, we expect the stark division among the Turkish political elite across the incumbent vs. opposition camps to reflect itself in public opinion as well (Zaller 1992). Our empirical results largely support these predictions.

Debates around Presidential System in Turkey

While the calls for a transition to a presidential system of governance are not new to modern Turkish politics,⁵ the roots of the current debate can be traced back to the political crisis around the presidential election of 2007 (Çarkoğlu 2007; Gönenç 2008; Kalaycıoğlu 2015). At the end of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term in 2007 AKP nominated one of its founding leaders and then foreign minister Abdullah Gül for presidency, confident of his election given that the president was to be elected by the parliament with AKP holding the majority of seats. However, the candidacy of Gül provoked a strong reaction from the military and state elites due to his Islamist background, and after the first round of election the Constitutional Court annulled the process based on an appeal from CHP that the necessary quorum of members of parliament were not present. As a response, AKP proposed constitutional amendments that stipulated direct popular election of the

⁴ See Aytaç and Çarkoğlu (2015) for an analysis of Turkish public's support for presidentialism ahead of the June 2015 election.

⁵ Ergüder (2015) reminds that the former Presidents Demirel and Özal have made appeals for presidentialism in the 1990s.

president. The amendments were approved by a referendum on 21 October 2007. By this time, Gül was already elected as president by then newly-formed parliament, and thus the first direct presidential elections had to be scheduled at the end of his term.

These amendments represented an important turning point for parliamentary governance in Turkey since the combination of considerable powers bestowed upon the president by the 1982 Constitution with the direct democratic legitimacy provided by the popular election would inevitably lead to a dual authority structure within the executive branch (Lijphart 2004; Özsoy 2010). The impact of the introduction of direct popular election for president was already visible during the campaign for the first such election held on 10 August 2014. The strongest candidate for the office was then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who made it clear that the change of president's mode of election was not a simple, technical issue but the closure of a chapter in the country's history.⁶ He stated that he will not be an impartial, above-the-politics president but will be "on the side of the people," working together with the prime minister.⁷ These remarks hinted at a presidency with a strong executive role. Erdoğan was elected as president by getting 52 per cent of votes in the first round of the election. Since his election, Erdoğan has been repeatedly criticized by the opposition for not maintaining impartiality as stipulated in the constitution and for his assumed executive role.⁸ As a response, Erdoğan stated that he will not be a "customary" president and he had already declared this during his candidacy.⁹

While Erdoğan's support for a presidential system in Turkey predates the 2011 elections (Kemahlioğlu 2015), his promotion of a transition has intensified after being elected president, and especially on the eve of the June 2015 elections. Pointing at his election by popular vote in 2014, Erdoğan's calls hint at a frustration with the extent of his formal powers and the dual executive structure he had to share with the prime minister. Ahead of the election campaign period he declared that the presidential system is a necessity for a "harmonious relationship" between the government and the president, and it would also allow for faster decision-making while ensuring stability.¹⁰ Erdoğan organized mass rallies in more than a dozen of cities during the election campaign, under the pretext of official visits, and asked for "400 members of parliament," implicitly for AKP, so that constitutional amendments required for a presidential system could be made in the parliament with a qualified majority.¹¹

The Turkish party system was characterized by four major players ahead of the twin election period of 2015. The incumbent AKP, a conservative, pro-Islamist party, has been in power since 2002. Given Erdoğan's strong influence over AKP, it should come no surprise that the party formally committed itself to a transition to presidential system in its election

⁶ Sabah (2014).

⁷ Aljazeera Turk (2014).

⁸ Both CHP and HDP have filed complaints to the Constitutional Court in this regard ahead of the June 2015 election (Hürriyet Daily News 2015). Similar criticisms have been voiced by the leader of MHP as well (Erdem 2015).

⁹ TRT Haber (2014).

¹⁰ See, for example, Akşam (2015).

¹¹ Aljazeera Turk (2015).

manifesto, though with little details on the proposed institutional arrangements. Other major parties during this period were the main opposition party CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – Republican People’s Party) with a social-democratic, secular ideology; MHP, a right-wing, Turkish nationalist party; and HDP with roots in the Kurdish nationalist movement, having the left-most stance in the Turkish political landscape.¹² In contrast to AKP, these opposition parties adopted positions against a transition to a presidential system (Kemahloğlu 2015). It is safe to say that the debates on whether Turkey should adopt a presidential system of governance lacked substance. While Erdoğan’s and AKP’s promotion of presidentialism mostly consisted of criticisms of the current system pointing to cherry-picked periods of political and economic crisis and unsubstantiated claims on why presidential system is necessary for stability and rapid economic development, the opposition framed such a transition just as another phase of the creeping authoritarianism during the later periods of AKP rule and as a reflection of Erdoğan’s desire to further consolidate power.

Partisanship Shaping Support for Presidential System

Against this background on the debates about a transition to presidential system in Turkey, what can we expect as to how public opinion will be shaped? The complexity of the issue and the division of the political elites along party lines suggest that partisanship will be the key factor determining the views of individuals on presidentialism. The relative merits and drawbacks of different constitutional arrangements have long been among the subjects of contentious debates among the experts (e.g., Linz 1990; Stepan and Skach 1993; Lijphart 2004).¹³ Together with the uncertainties associated with a transition between different systems of governance and the abstractness and distance of the points of debates to the daily lives of the people, it would not be realistic for the average voter to form an informed opinion on this issue.

Our data confirm that Turkish voters have quite low levels of knowledge even on the rather simple, factual information on presidentialism in the world. In our representative survey of Spring 2015, we asked our respondents whether the following statement is true or false to the best of their knowledge: “Today, most democracies have parliamentary system of governance rather than a presidential one as in the U.S.” About 27 per cent of our respondents could not give an answer, and only about 6 per cent of them correctly pointed out that the statement was false. In another set of questions, we presented a list of six countries, three of them having a presidential system of governance (United States, Mexico, and Brazil) and the other three having a parliamentary system (United Kingdom, Japan, and the Netherlands). For each country, we asked whether the country employs a presidential system of governance. The average number of correct answers to these questions (ranging

¹² See Sayarı (2012) for more on the modern Turkish party system. AKP received 40.9 per cent of the votes in the June 2015 election, followed by a 49.5 per cent share in November. CHP’s vote shares were 25 and 25.3 per cent, MHP’s 16.3 and 11.9 per cent, and HDP’s 13.1 and 10.8 per cent in the June and November elections, respectively.

¹³ For a comprehensive overview of presidentialism vs. parliamentarism debate in Turkey see the essays in Akas (2015).

from 0 to 6) stood just at 1.6, and only 17 per cent of respondents had more than three correct answers.

Hence, we can expect voters to seek and use some heuristics, or cognitive shortcuts, to form opinions on the presidentialism debate. In this respect, partisanship is a powerful heuristic voters can use as a reference. It helps voters simplify complex political phenomena by inducing them to simply adopt the party line with which they identify. In addition, the “perceptual screen” created by partisanship leads voters to process information selectively, causing them to accept more easily what is favourable to their partisan orientations while resisting information that is in the opposite direction (Campbell et al. 1960). A reflection of use of partisanship as a heuristic is that when political elites are divided on an issue, individuals tend to follow the elites sharing their partisan predisposition (Zaller 1992).

While it is possible to make arguments for weak partisanship in Turkey given the high levels of party system volatility and frequent interruptions of democracy, scholars of Turkish politics highlight that the political scene is characterized by a major cleavage that pits the nationalist and secular elites of the “centre” against the ethnically diverse, lowly-educated, conservative, and religious non-elites of the “periphery” (Mardin 1973; Kalaycıoğlu 1994; Çarkoğlu 2012a). As such, instead of a class-based social cleavage, differences on the basis of value systems that are primarily shaped by formal education and religiosity characterise the major socio-political divide in the society. Despite several interruptions of democratic rule, major parties have continued to position themselves on one side of this central cleavage and newly established parties have traced their lineage to older ones. Therefore, partisan attachments could be transferred across generations – albeit under different party labels.¹⁴

Accordingly, our expectation is that individuals’ views on presidential system in Turkey will be shaped by partisan attachments, and it should be also possible to observe the reflections of the centre vs. periphery cleavage in the form of a divergence in preferences on the basis of education levels and religiosity. In the following, we first describe our data and then move on to our analyses.

Data and Measures

The Turkish Election Study 2015 (TES 2015) consists of a three-wave panel and two nationally representative cross-sectional samples.¹⁵ The first survey, the pre-June election survey, was conducted face-to-face with a nationally representative probability sample of 2,201 respondents between 19 March – 26 April 2015. After the June election, participants in the pre-June election survey were contacted again to participate in a post-election survey. About 49 per cent (N=1,081) of the participants in the first wave survey were successfully interviewed in this second wave, which we call the post-June panel, between 20

¹⁴ See Kalaycıoğlu (2008) for a similar argument on partisanship in the Turkish context.

¹⁵ All interviews were conducted by Frekans Research (www.frekans.com.tr). See the online appendix for details about the sampling methodology.

July 2015 – 6 September 2015. Finally, about 65 per cent (N=705) of the participants in the second wave were again successfully interviewed after the November election between 23 November 2015 – 10 January 2016. We denote this third wave as the post-November panel. Accordingly, our panel consists of 705 individuals who were interviewed in person three times before and after the June election and after the November election. In addition, we fielded another nationally representative cross-sectional survey after the November election. This post-November survey was conducted face-to-face with 1,289 respondents between 26 November 2015 – 10 January 2016. The sampling procedure for this survey was identical to the one used for the first wave survey. The structure of TES 2015 for the purpose of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Two nationally-representative, cross-sectional surveys with three-wave panel data provide ample opportunity to understand the dynamics of public support for presidentialism in Turkey over the period of two elections in 2015. First, we will use the pre-June and post-November cross-national surveys to compare the overall levels of support for presidentialism at the beginning and end of this period. Next, we will focus on the post-November survey to have a more detailed multivariate examination of the determinants of support that involves comparisons across partisan groups. This analysis of a nationally representative sample will enable us to delineate the individual-level determinants of support for presidential system in the period immediately after the November election. While the cross-sectional surveys are useful to provide a snapshot picture of support for presidentialism at a given period, they are not conducive to illuminate how this support has evolved during the period of consideration. For this reason in the third part of our analyses we use our three-wave panel data to explore whether, and how, the determinants of support for presidentialism have changed among the individuals whom we interviewed repeatedly.

A concern when using panel data is attrition – the dropout of some individuals in the panel who were previously interviewed. In our panel, we were able to conduct second-wave interviews with about 49 per cent of respondents who had participated in the first wave, and about 65 per cent of second-wave participants were successfully re-contacted for a third-wave interview. If the individuals who decide not to participate in the later waves of the panel are systematically different from those who are successfully interviewed, theoretically we cannot claim that the panel sample is representative of the target population. Nevertheless, a comparison of some observable characteristics of our panel respondents (N=705) with the pre-June nationally representative sample (N=2,201) suggests that there are no significant differences across the two samples (Table 1). Moreover, in order to make inferences about the voting population of Turkey we primarily rely on our two nationally representative, cross-national samples.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To construct our dependent variable, support for presidential system in Turkey, we asked our respondents in all surveys whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “A presidential system is a better system of governance for Turkey than a parliamentary one.” Answer choice ran from “I do not agree at all” (coded as -2) to “I agree completely” (coded as 2) in a five-point scale.¹⁶

We have employed several explanatory variables to predict support for presidential system. Demographic variables include respondents’ gender (*Female*), age in years (*Age*), years of formal education (*Education*), religiosity (*Religious*, measured by the frequency of prayer (*namaz*) during the past year, ranging from never --coded 1-- to more than once a week --coded 7--), and a binary variable for respondents who can speak Kurdish (*Kurdish-speaking*).

A second set of variables is related to respondents’ partisan preferences and satisfaction with their economic circumstances. We have identified partisans of the four major political parties (AKP, CHP, MHP, and HDP) by inquiring in an open-ended fashion whether our respondents favour, or are a “fan” of, a particular party.¹⁷ We have also asked how satisfied our respondents are about their current economic situation (*Satisfaction with Economy*), measured on a 0-10 scale with higher values indicating more satisfaction. It might be the case that those who are dissatisfied with their current economic circumstances might be more likely to support a change in the system of governance.¹⁸

A final set of variables considers whether support for presidential system is correlated with policy preferences. We asked our respondents to identify the most important problem facing Turkey today in an open-ended question, and created a binary variable for those who considered terrorism-related issues (*Most important problem: terrorism*) as such. The rationale behind the consideration of this variable is that as the period following the June election witnessed the renewal of the armed conflict with PKK, terrorism-related issues have become the modal answer given to this question by respondents in the post-June and

¹⁶ Nonresponses and undecided respondents are coded as 0. This coding decision does not have any impact on our results, yet discarding nonresponses would correspond to about 9 to 14 per cent decrease in the number of observations across different surveys.

¹⁷ As Kalaycıoğlu (2008) notes, it is hard to translate “party identification” into Turkish. He reports that focus group discussions suggested that the concept of “*tutmak*,” with its connotations of deep and intense feelings towards an object, best corresponds to the concept of party identification in Turkish. We adopt this concept to identify partisans in our sample.

¹⁸ Another potential explanatory factor could be favourability rating of President Erdoğan. We have such a measure which is highly correlated with partisanship, especially with AKP and CHP partisanship – the correlation coefficient between Erdoğan favourability rating and AKP and CHP partisanship in the post-November survey are 0.76 and -0.53, respectively. The favourability rating of Erdoğan is positively correlated with support for presidentialism after controlling for variables considered in the study as well. Yet the inclusion of this variable does not lead to a substantive change in any of our results (presented in the online appendix). We believe partisanship patterns reflect well views towards Erdoğan, and given the idiosyncratic nature of this explanatory factor and no substantive change in our results, we prefer not to include it in our specifications.

post-November surveys. We also asked whether the respondent would vote for or against European Union (EU) membership of Turkey if a referendum were held today, and indicated those respondents who would support EU membership of Turkey with a binary variable (*EU: Yes*).¹⁹ Lastly, as the discussions for a presidential system in Turkey often go hand in hand with the need for a new constitution, we identified those respondents who think that Turkey needs a new constitution (*New Constitution: Yes*).²⁰

Our models for the panel respondents also include a measure of respondents' level of knowledge on the prevalence of presidential system in the world. As described earlier, we presented respondents with a list of six countries and for each of them we asked whether the country employs a presidential system of governance. The number of correct answers to these questions (ranging from 0 to 6) is coded as the variable *Presidential Knowledge*. This way we can see whether knowledge about the prevalence of the presidential system in the world is associated with support for presidential system in Turkey.

Descriptive statistics for the variables employed in the analyses are presented in the online appendix.

Individual-Level Correlates of Support for Presidential System

We begin our analyses by a comparison of the overall levels of support for presidential system in Turkey in the pre-June and post-November cross-sectional surveys. Figure 2 presents the percentage of respondents supporting and opposing presidential system in the two surveys.²¹ In the period leading to the June election, 27 per cent of the Turkish voting population supported a presidential system while 45 per cent opposed. There seems to be an increase in the support for presidential system over time, as the percentage of those supporting presidential system rises to 34 per cent and the percentage of those who are opposed decreases to 41 per cent in the post-November period. Still, there were more people opposing a presidential system of governance in Turkey than those who supported in the aftermath of the November elections, though the gap between the proportion of supporters and opponents seems to have narrowed in comparison to the pre-June period.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

¹⁹ For the panel respondents, this question was asked only in the pre-June wave. Analyses of the post-June and post-November waves use the pre-June measurement.

²⁰ This question was not asked in the post-June wave of the panel. The analysis of the post-June wave employed the pre-June measurement.

²¹ The percentage of respondents who are unsure or do not respond to our question are the missing category in the figures, so that adding them to the two categories presented (support/oppose) would lead to 100 per cent for each group.

What are the individual-level correlates of support for presidential system, i.e., what characteristics distinguish supporters from opponents? To answer this question we focus on the post-November survey as it provides the most recent data that we have. First, a descriptive analysis highlights that the level of support for presidentialism exhibits significant differences across partisanship (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, partisans of AKP, which gathered half of votes in November election, had the highest level of support for presidentialism, and it was the only partisan group with more supporters than opponents (54 vs. 15 per cent). There was considerable opposition to presidentialism among the partisans of the three opposition parties. The highest level of opposition (83 per cent) was observed among partisans of CHP, which had 25 per cent vote share in November. The overwhelming majority (69 per cent) of MHP partisans and over half of HDP partisans (54 per cent) opposed presidential system as well. Support for presidentialism among the partisans of the three opposition parties hovered around just 10 per cent. There was more support for presidentialism among individuals who do not declare affinity to any party (non-partisans) compared to opposition partisans, yet there were considerably more opponents than supporters in this group as well (49 vs. 24 per cent).

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

This breakdown of views on presidentialism across partisan groups reveals a rift between partisans of the incumbent AKP and those of the opposition parties. In order to see whether this significant differentiation would hold if we account for several demographic and political factors that might be correlated with partisanship, we present a multivariate analysis with support for presidentialism as the dependent variable in Table 2.²²

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The multivariate analysis confirms the significant role of partisanship in views on the presidential system. Even after accounting for several demographic and political factors, AKP partisans were more likely to support presidentialism than nonpartisans (the excluded reference category in the model) and partisans of the opposition parties were less likely to support, though the coefficient for HDP partisans is smaller in magnitude than others and not statistically significant at conventional levels. Looking at demographic factors, we see that those with relatively less education and more religious individuals were more likely to support presidentialism. This result resonates with the centre vs. periphery cleavage in Turkish politics where there seems to be more support for presidential system in the “periphery” that is characterized by lower education levels and higher religiosity.²³ In

²² Analyses using multinomial logistic regression instead of the ordered probit regressions reported in the article yield no substantive changes in results, see the online appendix.

²³ These demographic characteristics overlap with the support base of AKP as well.

addition, older individuals were less likely to support presidentialism. This result might reflect the different political socialisation contexts of different age cohorts. Specifically, older individuals who have been socialized into politics in the 1970s, a period of a left-wing tide in Turkish politics, are less likely to be sympathetic to AKP's agenda than younger cohorts who were socialized in the post-1980 period, in an era of rising conservatism.

We also find that Kurdish-speaking citizens were more likely to support presidentialism than others. If we consider this finding together with the negative coefficient for HDP partisans and the fact that most HDP partisans are Kurdish-speaking,²⁴ the results suggest a differentiation within the Kurdish community with respect to support for presidentialism. In order to explore this possibility, we have considered the interactions of speaking Kurdish with HDP partisanship and religiosity in additional analyses (presented in the online appendix). The results of these analyses confirm a differentiation within the Kurdish community – support for presidentialism among Kurdish-speaking citizens of Turkey was confined to those who were relatively more religious and who were HDP partisans. As such, Kurds who did not feel affinity to the Kurdish nationalist movement and those who were devout Muslims, just as devout Turks, were likely to be more sympathetic to AKP and Erdoğan, and in turn more likely to support presidentialism. Speculatively, AKP might have a more favourable image among this considerable segment of the Kurdish population due to the initiation of the peace process, and they might be blaming the Kurdish nationalist movement for the collapse of the process.

The analysis reveals that satisfaction about personal economic circumstances (*Satisfaction with Economy*) is *positively* related to support for presidentialism. This might come as counterintuitive as one might expect dissatisfied individuals to be more likely to support a change in the system of governance. The fact that we observe quite the opposite is likely due to the fact that the proposal for change is coming from the incumbent AKP, and individuals who are economically satisfied are more prone to throw support behind the party's proposals even if they are not AKP partisans. Among the variables related to policy preferences, considering terrorism-related issues as the most important problems facing Turkey or support for membership in the EU do not exhibit statistically significant associations with support for presidentialism. Support for a new constitution, on the other hand, is positively associated with support for presidentialism, albeit weakly. This is not surprising as those political elites who push presidentialism often frame it around a need for a new constitution.

In short, as of late 2015/early 2016, those who supported presidential system constitute a minority of citizens at about 34 per cent, outnumbered by those who opposed presidentialism, though the gap seems to be narrowed compared to the period before the June 2015 election. Views on presidential system were largely shaped by partisanship, whereby AKP partisans had a positive view and partisans of the opposition parties a negative one. Among the opposition parties, CHP stood out with the largest percentage of opponents. The socio-demographic factors that are positively associated with support for presidentialism correspond well to the characteristics of the “periphery” in the centre vs.

²⁴ About 85 per cent of HDP partisans in our sample are Kurdish-speaking.

periphery cleavage in Turkish politics (Mardin 1973) and to the electoral support base of AKP (Çarkoğlu 2012b).

Dynamics of Change in Support from the pre-June to the post-November period

While the analyses so far provide us with a snapshot picture of support for presidentialism in Turkey, they do not reveal whether, and how, the determinants of support for presidentialism have changed during the period of interest. How did the tumultuous inter-election period from June to November influence individuals' support for presidentialism in Turkey?

In order to address this question we utilise our three-wave panel of 705 respondents in which view on presidential system was asked to the same individuals three times - before the June election, between June and November elections, and after the November election. In particular, we focus on whether, and how, the views of the partisans of the four major parties have changed during this period. To this end, we group our respondents according to their partisan identification as measured in the pre-June survey, and then track their views on presidentialism over time. For example, we identify the individuals who state that they feel affinity to MHP in the pre-June survey and measure their support for presidentialism in the pre-June, post-June, and post-November surveys. Some of these individuals, who are labelled as (pre-June) MHP partisans, might have changed their vote choice across these surveys, but they are still identified as MHP partisans in the presentation of the results due to their stated party identification in the pre-June survey. By measuring partisan identification only once in the pre-June survey, we can track how views of partisans have changed over time.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of supporters (top-panel) and opponents (bottom-panel) of presidentialism among the panel respondents, categorized by party identification and panel wave. This analysis reveals interesting dynamics. Except for MHP partisans, support for presidentialism decreased considerably after the June election but picked up again after the November election. The dip in support for presidentialism in the aftermath of the June election was particularly dramatic among AKP and HDP partisans. Only about 29 per cent of AKP partisans declared support for presidentialism in the post-June survey, down from 40 per cent in the pre-June survey, and support picked up considerably in the aftermath of the November election, reaching 47 per cent of AKP partisans. A similar pattern exhibits itself among HDP partisans as well (a dip in support for presidentialism in the post-June period), but the recovery in support in the post-November period did not reach pre-June levels.

The drop in the levels of support for presidentialism in the aftermath of the June election could be due to several factors. It could be the case that the dual election campaign conducted by not only Prime Minister Davutoğlu but also President Erdoğan simply backfired. As noted earlier, Erdoğan's active campaigning during this period polarized the electorate (Kemahlioğlu 2015), which might have contributed to the decline in AKP's vote share as well as the drop in support for presidentialism. Alternatively the state of affairs during the post-June election period, with repeated terror attacks in many parts of the

country, could be the driving force.²⁵ The considerable decline in support for presidentialism among AKP partisans, on the other hand, could be explained by theories that link individual self-interest of voters (e.g., Anderson and Guillory 1997; Rosset et al., 2016) and politicians (e.g., Bowler et al. 2006) to preferences for institutional arrangements.²⁶ These theories would predict increased support for presidentialism among AKP voters the more likely it appears that an AKP member is going to occupy the post of executive presidency should it be created. As such, the disappointing results of the June election from AKP's point of view might have led to a decline in support among AKP supporters, followed by a rebound after the better-than-expected November result. Our data at hand do not allow us to distinguish between these different hypotheses.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The dynamics of support for presidentialism differed considerably for (pre-June) MHP partisans in the panel sample compared to other partisan groups. For MHP partisans in the panel, we observe a steady increase in support for presidentialism accompanied by a steady decline in opposition from pre-June to post-November period. Here we should emphasise again that for the purpose of this analysis, partisanship is measured once in the pre-June survey. For example, in the top-panel of Figure 4, we see that 30 per cent of MHP partisans support presidential system in the post-November survey; these individuals are those who declared affinity to MHP *in the pre-June survey*. Support for presidentialism among individuals who declared affinity to MHP *in the post-November survey* is about 13 per cent, as indicated earlier in Figure 3.

These results indicate that at least for some of the individuals who identified themselves as MHP partisans in the pre-June period, the idea of a presidential system in Turkey has become increasingly attractive in the period following the June election. Further analysis of this group highlights that many of them have switched their vote choice from MHP to AKP and CHP in the post-June and post-November periods, and the increase in support for presidentialism that we observe in Figure 4 among MHP partisans is driven by individuals who have switched from MHP to AKP.

To see this, first consider Figure 5 where we present the vote intentions of our panel respondents during the period of interest that identified themselves as MHP partisans in the pre-June survey. In the pre-June survey, about 92 per cent of them indicated that they would vote for MHP, and just 2 per cent for AKP and 3 per cent for CHP. In the post-June survey we see that many MHP partisans have switched to other parties in terms of vote choice: Now only 67 per cent declared a vote for MHP, 18 per cent for CHP, and 13 per cent for AKP. This trend continued in the post-November survey, and there has been a significant increase in vote intentions for AKP. In the post-November survey, only 44 per

²⁵ Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım (2015) regard the effect of terrorism and ontological security concerns as the driving force behind the change from June to November election results.

²⁶ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

cent of those who identified themselves with MHP in the pre-June survey declared that they would vote for MHP, and about 38 per cent stated that they would vote for AKP.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Unsurprisingly, there was a stark difference in terms of support for presidentialism between (pre-June) MHP partisans who stayed with MHP and those who switched to AKP. In Figure 6 we see that among those who stayed with MHP (i.e., declaring a vote intention for MHP) in the post-June survey, only 18 per cent declared support for presidentialism, while the same figure was 50 per cent for those who switched to AKP. The difference is more dramatic in the post-November period: About 67 per cent of those who switched to AKP showed support for presidentialism while the percentage of supporters was just 11 per cent among those who stayed with MHP. Considering Figures 5 and 6 together, we see that some individuals who identified themselves as MHP partisans in the pre-June period did no longer see themselves as such in the aftermath of the November election, potentially due to dissatisfaction with MHP party leadership or due to satisfaction with Erdoğan's considerably more hawkish position in the Kurdish issue in the aftermath of June election. Such individuals have dropped their opposition to presidentialism over time, as can be inferred from the panel data. In contrast, those who still identified themselves as MHP partisans in the post-November survey constituted a more "core" partisan group of MHP, who still voiced a significant level of opposition to presidentialism.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Multivariate Analysis of Panel Respondents

In order to see whether the dynamics of support for presidentialism we observe in our panel sample using a descriptive analysis would hold if we account for demographic and political factors that might be correlated with partisanship, we proceed with a multivariate analysis of our panel respondents. Table 3 presents the same analysis conducted in Table 2 for our panel respondents in the pre-June (Model 1), post-June (Model 2), and post-November (Model 3) surveys. Our models for the panel respondents also include a variable on respondents' level of knowledge on the prevalence of presidential system of governance in the world as explained before.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Model (1) in Table 4 refers to the pre-June survey. Inspecting the effects of partisanship, we see that AKP partisans were more likely to support and CHP partisans were more likely

oppose presidentialism compared to nonpartisans. The coefficients for MHP and HDP partisans have negative and positive signs, respectively, though they fail to reach statistical significance. Among the demographic variables, only the indicator variable for Kurdish-speakers has a statistically significant and positive effect on support for presidentialism. Those who had higher levels of knowledge about presidential systems in the world were less likely to support presidential system. Finally, satisfaction about personal economic circumstances (*Satisfaction with Economy*) is *positively* related with support for presidential system. None of the variables related to policy preferences (considering terrorism-related issues as the most important problems facing Turkey, support for membership in the EU, support for a new constitution) exhibit statistically significant associations with support for presidentialism.

The results from the analysis of panel respondents in the pre-June survey resonate with what we have reported earlier – views on presidentialism are largely shaped by partisanship. Has there been a change in these conclusions in the post-June period? Model (2) considers the post-June wave of the panel. Recall that here we interview the same respondents but the variables on partisanship refer to the measurements in the pre-June survey. This way we can track how the views of the same partisan groups have changed over the period of interest. We note two changes in the post-June responses compared to the pre-June survey. First, the signs of the coefficients for (pre-June) MHP and HDP partisans have reversed: the coefficient for MHP partisans turned from negative to positive and for HDP partisans from positive to negative. Although the estimated effects are not statistically significant, they hint at MHP partisans getting warmer and HDP partisans getting colder to the idea of presidentialism in the post-June period.²⁷ The second change compared to the pre-June survey is that now religiosity is positively associated with support for presidentialism. This result can be once more interpreted as the peripheral forces in the centre vs. periphery cleavage getting closer to the idea of presidentialism. Other results from the pre-June survey hold in the post-June survey.

Finally, in the post-November wave (Model 3) we can make the following observations. In terms of partisanship, AKP and MHP partisans were the only two groups with positive views on presidentialism. The estimated coefficients for AKP and MHP partisanship increased substantially from the pre-June to the post-November period with the latter attaining statistical significance in the post-November survey. In contrast, being a CHP or HDP partisan was negatively associated with support for presidentialism, although the effects are not statistically significant. After controlling for HDP partisanship, Kurdish-speaking citizens continued to exhibit higher levels of support for presidentialism than other citizens, and the estimated coefficient in the post-November wave is considerably larger in comparison to earlier periods. Finally, while the estimated effects of knowledge of presidentialism and level of religiosity lose significance, the estimated negative effect of education on support for presidentialism attains statistical significance. Other results from the earlier waves hold in the post-November survey.

²⁷ The observation that HDP partisans have distanced themselves from presidentialism over the June election campaign period suggests that HDP elites' opposition to presidentialism had considerable effect,

The multivariate panel analysis confirms that views on presidentialism are largely shaped by partisanship and the centre-periphery cleavage in Turkish politics. A crucial take away from the panel is the increased support for presidentialism in the post-June period among individuals who identified themselves as MHP partisans in the pre-June period. The developments after the June elections seem to have led many (pre-June) MHP partisans to drop their opposition to presidentialism and actually to switch to AKP as their vote choice. In contrast, the same period witnessed a decline in support for presidentialism among (pre-June) HDP partisans.

Conclusions

Our analyses indicate that the overall level of public support for a presidential system in Turkey has increased during the turbulent twin-election year of 2015. Despite this rising appeal of a presidential system there still remained a larger group of opponents, however. We find that the public's knowledge concerning presidentialism was quite low, and partisan cues were largely responsible for how individuals formed opinions. Besides partisanship, it is possible to see the reflections of the centre-periphery cleavage in Turkish politics on views on presidentialism. Voters with "peripheral traits" of low levels of education, higher religiosity, and having Kurdish ethnicity were more likely to support presidential system than those voters with centrist traits. Finally, our panel data show how changes in the political context of the post-June election period, with rising security concerns and resumed militarized conflict with the PKK, have influenced the public's view. In particular, we observe that a significant group within MHP's nationalist constituency has shifted its views in favour of presidentialism and also switched their votes in favour of AKP.

These findings suggest that the discussions around a transition to presidentialism are unlikely to transform into a rational, information-based debate on the potential merits and drawbacks of such a move. The public's low levels of information about presidentialism can hardly change in the short term in the midst of an intensely polarized ideological debate. As the low levels of knowledge and the complexity of the issue increase voters' reliance on partisan cues, AKP has more incentives to keep the debate on partisan grounds and frame it as part of the continuing confrontation between the "centre" and "periphery" to mobilise the masses of the "periphery." Given the declining electoral support for MHP and the ensuing leadership struggles within the party, it is likely that a significant portion of the MHP constituency will continue to side with AKP and Erdoğan on the presidentialism debate. The decision of MHP leader Bahçeli to initiate negotiations with AKP on a transition to presidentialism, which culminated in a constitutional amendment proposal submitted to the parliament as of the writing of this article, could be seen as a response to this shift in MHP constituency to stem the further flow of MHP supporters to AKP. The consequences of this move for MHP's support base and its leadership are yet to be seen.

Another factor of relevance is the reaction of the Kurdish constituency towards presidentialism. Our results indicate that the HDP leadership, despite being under great stress during the post-June election period, was nevertheless able to maintain its core constituency mobilized against presidentialism. Nevertheless, Kurdish-speaking citizens

who are relatively more religious and who do not consider themselves as HDP partisans have had a consistently positive attitude towards presidentialism during this period. This rift within the Kurdish community is likely to continue as a source of tension for HDP leaders who have already been criticized by some intellectuals close to the Kurdish political movement for their vigorous opposition to presidentialism.²⁸ In all likelihood, appealing to the “Kurdish vote” will be a critical goal both for the supporters and opponents of presidentialism in the case of a referendum.

This picture suggests that a potential campaign for a transition to presidentialism in Turkey is likely to target Turkish and Kurdish nationalist constituencies and primarily be shaped by partisan ideological discourses. We can predict the constituency of the main opposition party CHP to remain rather marginal to this struggle, as they appear to be the most homogeneously opposed group to a system change. A polarized ideological debate is more likely to consolidate this group rather than reducing or growing it to make a difference in the competition. The ideological centre vs. periphery cleavage, the reflections of which seem to be central to the debates on presidentialism, has long been frozen with the centrist side in the minority.

The fenced out 15 July 2016 coup attempt is likely to consolidate the peripheral forces that will protectively defend the leadership of President Erdoğan, who is well-poised to use direct, populist appeals to the electorate and is expected to continue to promote this systemic change.²⁹ With a strong peripheral leadership behind the push for a transition to presidentialism, the dynamics that are reflected in our analyses are unlikely to change significantly in the short-to-medium term. Hence, it would not be surprising to observe the supporters of a presidential system of governance in Turkey to prevail in the probable case of a referendum.³⁰

Finally, from a larger comparative perspective our results shed some light on the dynamics of increased dominance of the executive witnessed in a number of countries including Russia, Hungary, and India. This type of governance fits closer to the “delegative democracy” characterisation of O’Donnell (1994) with strong individualism in constituting executive power and weak horizontal accountability. In Turkey, the appeal of the presidential system appears to have risen primarily as a result of rising ontological security concerns during the inter-election period of June-November 2015.³¹ As such, contexts where security concerns dominate the political landscape might present populist-leaning incumbents with opportunities to further concentrate power in the executive.

²⁸ See, e.g., Diken (2016).

²⁹ See Aytaç and Öniş (2014) on the populist aspect of Erdoğan’s rule.

³⁰ As mentioned earlier, the constitutional amendment proposal needs at least 330 votes in parliament to allow a referendum. While both the AKP and MHP leadership threw its support behind the proposal and the two parties’ combined number of seats in parliament is comfortably beyond the threshold of 330, the mandatory secret ballot procedure inevitably adds an element of uncertainty. Nevertheless, past experience has shown that parties have devised ways to circumvent the secret ballot procedures, and thus it is rather unlikely that the 330-vote requirement would be an obstacle for the proposal to be put into a referendum.

³¹ See Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım (2015) for a detailed account of this period.

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Table 1. Comparison of Some Characteristics of Panel Respondents with Cross-Sectional Survey Respondents

Variable	Pre-June Survey (Nationally Representative)	Panel Respondents
Female (%)	55.9	56.5
Median age	40	42
University graduate (%)	11.0	8.9
Urban resident (%)	79.5	78.5
Kurdish-speaking (%)	20.0	18.4
Religiosity score	5.6	5.5
AKP Partisan (%)	35.2	32.2
CHP Partisan (%)	18.3	20.9
MHP Partisan (%)	9.5	9.8
HDP Partisan (%)	8.5	9.2
<i>N</i>	2,201	705

Table 2. Individual-Level Correlates of Support for Presidentialism in the Post-November Survey

Variables	Post-November Survey	
	Coeff.	<i>SE</i>
Female	-0.014	(0.070)
Age	-0.006**	(0.003)
Education	-0.021**	(0.010)
Religiosity	0.094***	(0.019)
Kurdish-speaking	0.289***	(0.099)
AKP Partisan	0.681***	(0.088)
CHP Partisan	-0.535***	(0.128)
MHP Partisan	-0.427***	(0.141)
HDP Partisan	-0.197	(0.147)
Satisfaction with economy	0.139***	(0.015)
Most important problem: terrorism	-0.056	(0.068)
EU: Yes	-0.078	(0.068)
New Constitution: Yes	0.118*	(0.070)
Observations	1,233	

Ordered probit regression with robust standard errors in parentheses

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

Table 3. Determinants of Support for Presidentialism in Turkey – Panel Respondents

VARIABLES	(1) Pre-June	(2) Post-June	(3) Post-Nov.
Female	0.025 (0.097)	-0.148 (0.101)	0.064 (0.100)
Age	0.002 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
Education	-0.005 (0.013)	-0.008 (0.014)	-0.029** (0.014)
Religiosity	0.002 (0.023)	0.070*** (0.024)	-0.014 (0.023)
Kurdish-speaking	0.303** (0.143)	0.350** (0.159)	0.609*** (0.138)
Presidential Knowledge	-0.062** (0.031)	-0.156*** (0.032)	-0.023 (0.030)
AKP Partisan (measured pre-June)	0.487*** (0.120)	0.398*** (0.122)	0.641*** (0.114)
CHP Partisan (measured pre-June)	-0.433*** (0.151)	-0.370** (0.158)	-0.162 (0.141)
MHP Partisan (measured pre-June)	-0.086 (0.159)	0.157 (0.178)	0.294* (0.154)
HDP Partisan (measured pre-June)	0.236 (0.212)	-0.219 (0.217)	-0.270 (0.207)
Satisfaction with economy	0.113*** (0.022)	0.125*** (0.022)	0.181*** (0.020)
Most important problem: Terror	-0.093 (0.132)	-0.130 (0.093)	-0.002 (0.090)
EU: Yes	0.148 (0.091)	-0.078 (0.095)	-0.052 (0.091)
New Constitution: Yes	0.122 (0.094)	-0.060 (0.098)	0.038 (0.093)
Observations	668	666	672

Note: Partisanship variables indicate partisan identification with a party as measured in the pre-June survey. *Ordered* probit regression with robust standard errors in parentheses

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

Figure 1. Structure of Turkish Election Study 2015

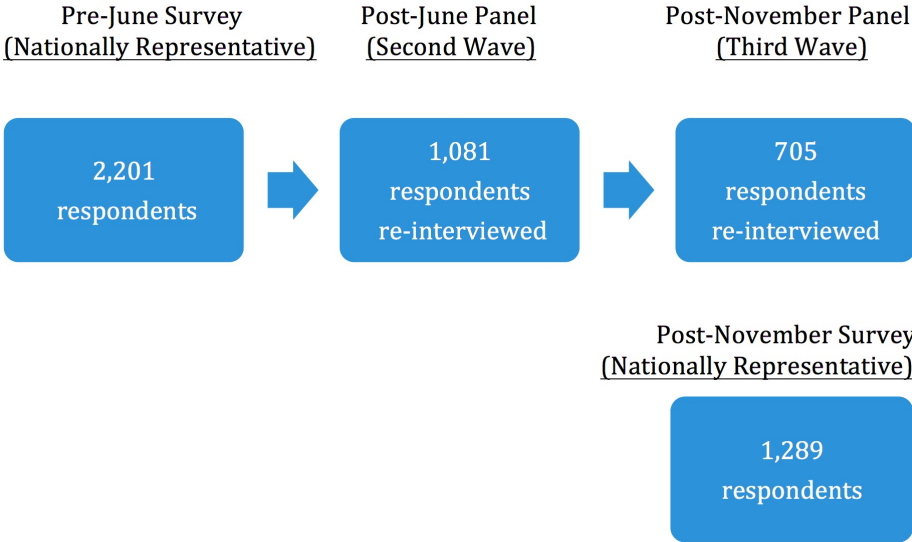
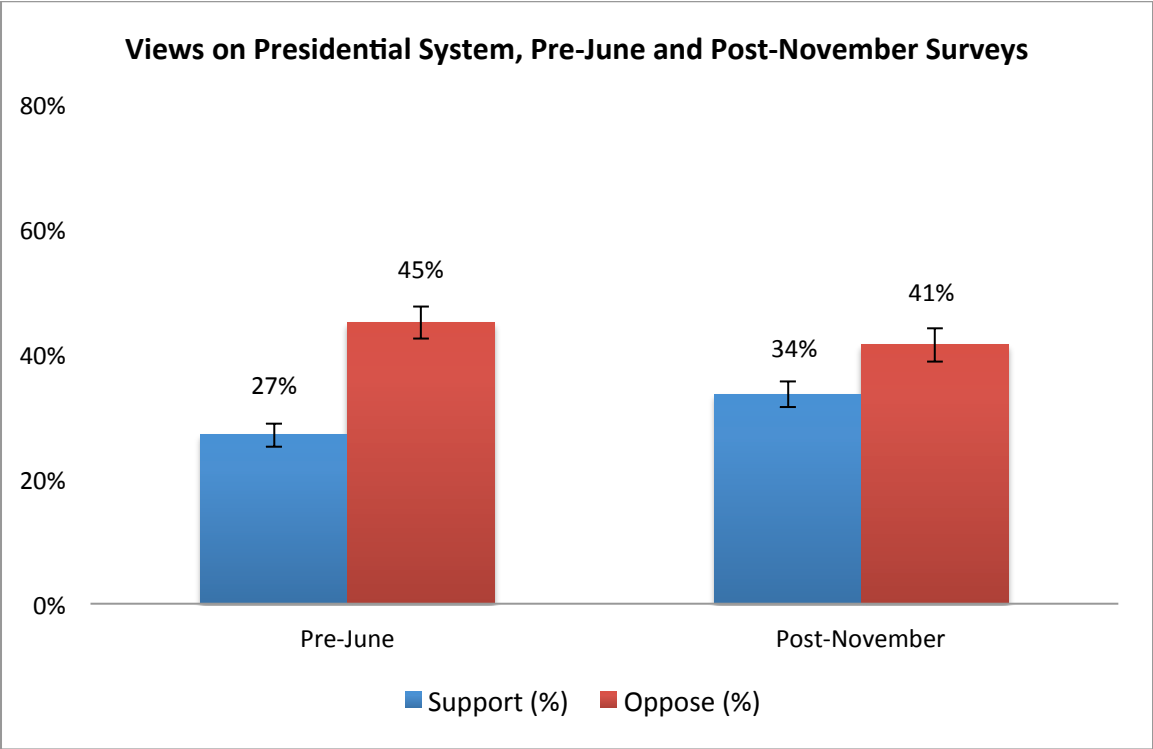
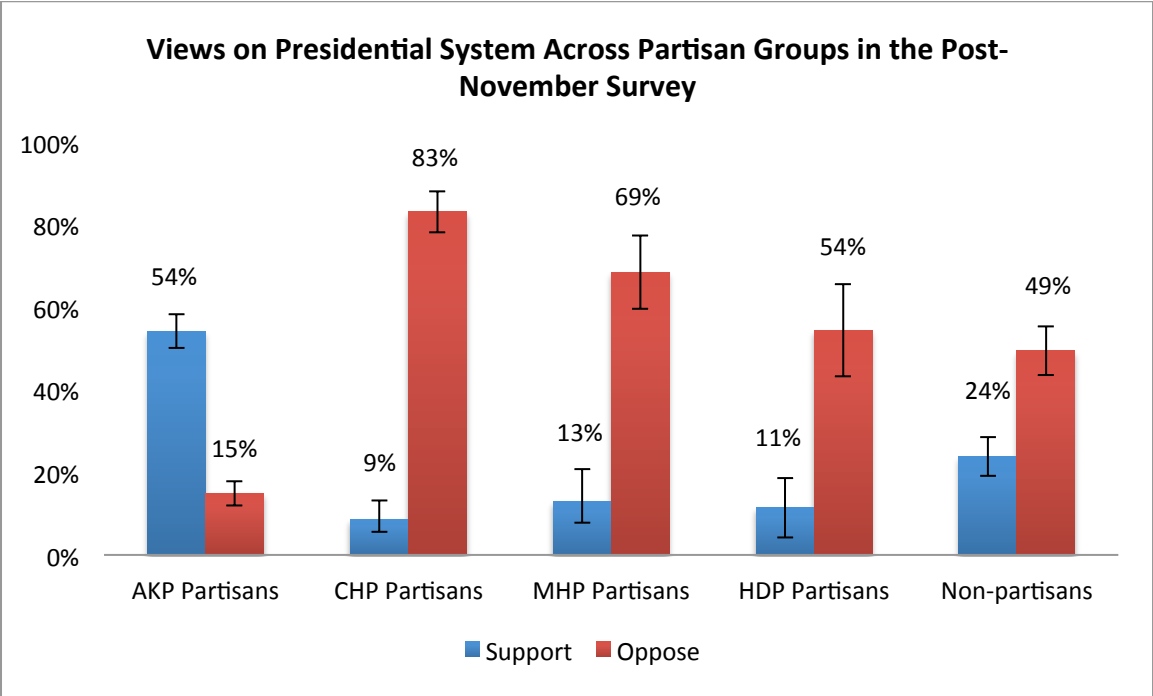


Figure 2. Support for Presidential System in Turkey in the Pre-June and Post-November Samples



Note: Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals around point estimates.

Figure 3. Views on Presidential System across Partisan Groups in the Post-November Survey



Note: Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals around point estimates.

Figure 4. Supporters (top-panel) and Opponents (bottom-panel) of Presidentialism among Panel Respondents

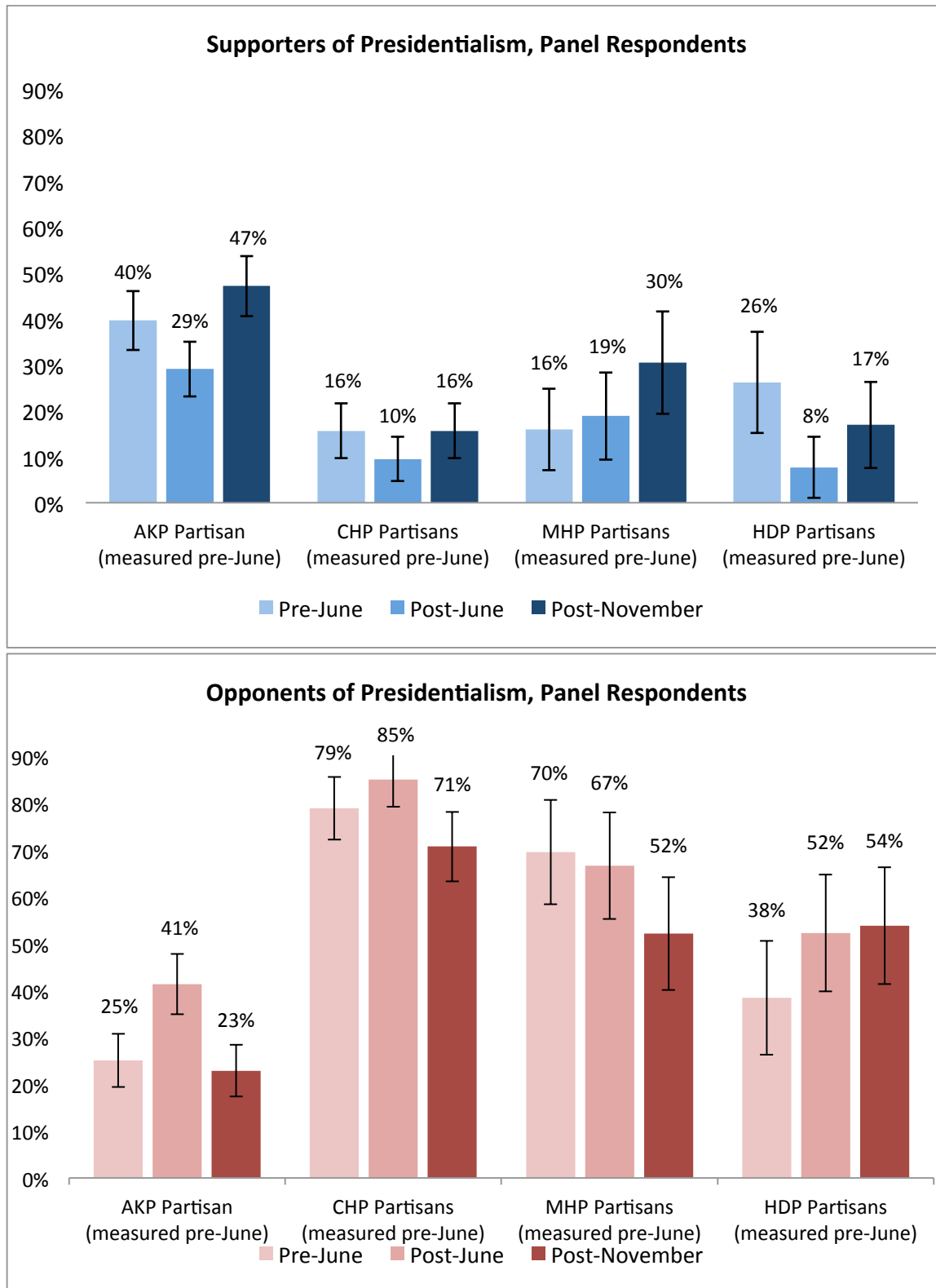
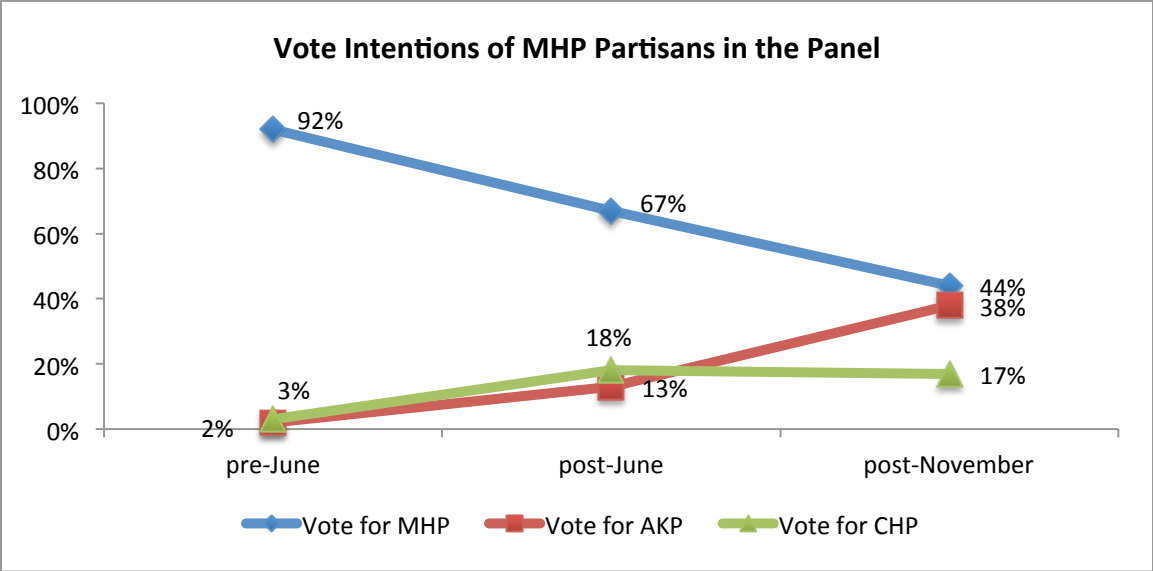
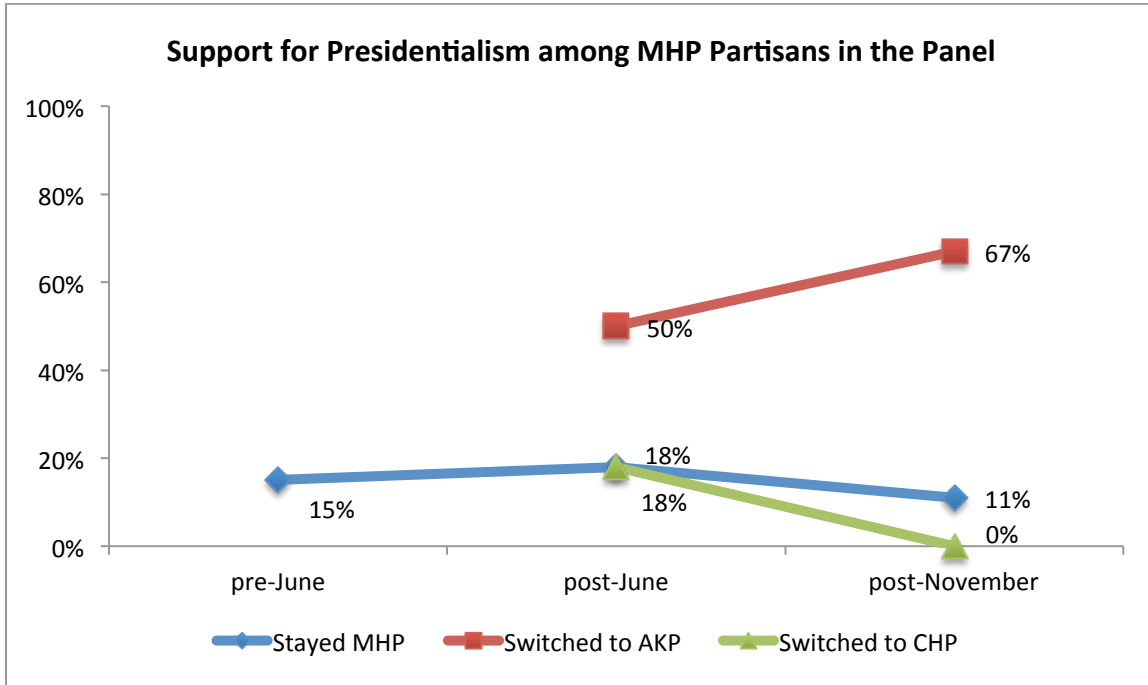


Figure 5. Vote intentions of (pre-June) MHP Partisans in the Panel for the pre-June, post-June, and post-November Waves



Note: MHP partisans in the panel refer to the individuals who declared identification with MHP in the pre-June survey.

Figure 6. Support for Presidentialism among (pre-June) MHP partisans in the Panel



Note: MHP partisans in the panel refer to the individuals who declared identification with MHP in the pre-June survey.