

“Yes” or “No”: An Analysis of the 2010 Referendum in Turkey

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Abstract

Referendums are used as last-ditch devices to resolve issues in certain contexts. This was the case in Turkey, as the current Justice and Development Party government decided to hold a constitutional referendum on September 12, 2010 to amend the current Constitution of 1982, ratified by the military junta of 1980-1983. At the end, 58% of the voters voted “Yes”, as opposed to 42% of “No” votes. However, despite its enormous political and social impact, the subject remains under-researched and in need of explanation. This study gives a snapshot and evaluation of the 2010 referendum campaign according to relevant theories of psychology and political science. Accordingly, this study denotes eleven interrelated factors of crucial importance in similar referendums and discusses their representation in the context of referendum, thus, contributes to the literature in terms of explaining both psychological and political factors in the referendums.

Introduction

In many modern democracies, a great number of elections, referendums, and voting processes take place every year in order to enable the voters to shape their future on the basis of their decision and will. In this process, while some of the voters value for certain aspects of a candidate, party or ideology, some vote in an irresponsible manner. The latter case is more common in the cases of referendums in some countries, as voters are generally little informed of what or who they vote for. Even though politicians usually dislike referendums (Butler and Ranney 1994), there is an optimistic suggestion that voters’ political interest and engagement, along with their political knowledge, will increase as a function of more frequent use of the referendum (Qvortrup 2005).

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In some occasions, it is a common practice for political party leaders to refer to referendums as *ultimum remedium* for resolving issues. This was the case in Turkey in the recent past, as a constitutional referendum was held on September 12, 2010. The main reason for referring to a referendum was that the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth AKP) government, amidst objections of the opposition parties in the parliament, wanted to amend the current Constitution of 1982, which was ratified by a popular referendum during the military junta of 1980-1983. In this context, the AKP government decided to hold a referendum as a last resort solution to achieve its goal(s) in a legitimate and democratic way.

To this end, the AKP conducted a very comprehensive and successful campaign. Despite the political and psychological significance of this successful campaign, however, the subject remains under-researched and in need of explanation. This study aims to evaluate the AKP's 2010 referendum campaign for a new constitution that would include 26 amendments regarding the equality before the law, right to privacy, freedom of movement, children's rights, right to organize labour, right to petition, loss of membership in parliament, administration of parliament, recourse to judicial review, public service, inspection of judicial services, military justice, constitutional court, supreme council of judges and prosecutors and economic planning in Turkey from psychological and political perspectives. In addition, the study will try to explain what factors are of crucial importance in similar referendums, and thus, contribute to the literature in terms of understanding both psychological and political factors in the referendums.

In accordance with that, in the first section of the study, a background of the referendum will be given. Following this, the campaign activities and how the AKP won the referendum will be evaluated by incorporating different theories, models, and study results in a concise yet comprehensive manner.

Background

On September 12, 1980, Turkish Armed Forces staged a military coup and two years later prepared a constitution, which was indeed not a civil constitution, for ratification. The AKP was the first political party to amend that many articles at once, partly because of being the first political party to rule the country without a coalition since the military agreed to pass the government to the Motherland Party in 1983. The AKP, as well as the main opposition party Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*,

henceforth CHP) aimed to change the Constitution of 1982 on the grounds that the country was in dire need of a new, civil constitution and the “people” were expecting a change after almost three decades.

With that aim in their mind, the AKP conducted a serious referendum campaign and gave the clear message to the electorate regarding the necessity to amend the Constitution of 1982. In this process, the AKP and some other right-wing parties such as the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) and the Great Union Party (Buyuk Birlik Partisi) supported the “Yes” for the constitutional change, while the opposition parties such as the “social democrat” CHP, the “far-right” Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetci Hareket Partisi, henceforth MHP), and other impotent left-wing parties supported the “No” campaign to these amendments in the referendum. Throughout the referendum process, the AKP emphasized that the constitutional amendments would make Turkey a more democratic and stable country. In return, the CHP claimed that the AKP had a hidden Islamist agenda to set up their own cadre in constitutional court to violate the judiciary independence, change Turkey’s republican regime in the future, and challenge the secular foundations of the country. On the other hand, pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi, henceforth BDP) boycotted the referendum on the grounds that the changes in the new constitution were irrelevant to Turkey’s democratization process. Amidst such debates, the AKP won the referendum at the end of the process, as the 58% of the voters voted “Yes” and 42% voted “No”. The following section will try to evaluate the factors behind this success.

Evaluation

Indeed, there are numerous factors for the victory of the AKP. Under the light of the political and psychological theories, models, and results of the previous studies, it can be suggested that these factors of success include (1) active leadership, (2) mass commercialization, (3) social influence, (4) unity and articulate messages, (5) effective use of the media, (6) effective use of popular figures and organizations, (7) use of negative emotions to influence opinions, (8) positive and negative advertisement, (9) financial support and huge election budget, (10) religion, and (11) expert power. Below, each one of them will be discussed in a concise, yet informative manner.

Active Leadership

According to Bean and Mughan (1989), political party leaders are increasingly at the heart of party struggle in democracies. Specifically with the media's ever more significant role in the dissemination of political information and the structuring of political discussion, party leaders are among the primary means by which political parties project themselves and shape popular images. Similarly in the literature, it is generally indicated that the active leadership is needed for good teaching both in the schools and projects. In line with that, it is arguable that the party leaders need to perform active leadership in order to "teach" the issue at hand and transfer information.

This was what Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan aimed to do during the referendum campaign. He visited 36 out of 81 different provinces in Turkey, including Istanbul, Ankara, Bingöl, Malatya and Bursa in order to effectively run the referendum campaign in a short period of time. He not only attended the mass meetings in provinces, but also participated in the "iftar tents", where people break their fast in the evenings during Ramadan in 2010, to be in closer interaction with the electorate. In these meetings, he and his member of parliaments (MPs) had close contacts with the local people and explained them why casting the "Yes" vote would be in their and Turkey's best interest. To further influence the voters, Prime Minister Erdoğan engaged in demagoguery at times. For instance, he cried in the parliament for people who were executed because of their left/communist political leanings after another coup in 1971. He pretended to take the revenge of these people in the referendum, even though his and his party's ideology were quietly opposite of them. Apparently, through this, he aimed to show that he and his party felt sorrow for all people, regardless of their political views, and shared their grief. In addition, he indeed aimed to get support from the electorate from the left-wing.

Mass Commercialization

According to the mere exposure theory, if a person experiences a new/simple stimulus repeatedly, it brings about more positive affect for the object, idea, or phenomenon at hand (Atkin and Heald 1976). The AKP exposed their "Yes" campaign to almost every person in the public through the effective and widespread use of billboards, cloth banners, flags, and brochures with their slogans and ideas on them. During the campaign, a person, whether at home or out, was bombarded with the AKP's messages conveyed through pamphlets, TV programs, radio shows. To illustrate, during the above-mentioned mass meetings, the AKP distributed t-shirts, cloth bags, badges, car air

fresheners, stickers, bottle waters, hand fans and hats with their referendum slogans on them. These were quite important materials for the people at that time, as the referendum campaign was in August, arguably the hottest month in Turkey. In addition, large billboards were rented by the AKP to inform the public about their campaign. The slogan of the AKP, “Our love is people; our decision is yes”, was visible at all times during the campaign. In other words, the AKP endeared itself to the electorate by exposing more and more.

Social Influence

Social influence theory posits that public compliance can be created “through normative social influence, where people conform essentially to be liked by their peers” (Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 2007). Moreover, another study result interested in Canadian Referendum in 1992 shows that, according to the consensus estimates, the more a voter is exposed to friends and family members who supported the “Yes” campaign, the higher the estimates of the “Yes” vote in the eyes of that voter. Hence, it is more probable that the voter will support and vote on the “Yes” side (Koestner et al. 1995). This phenomenon is called “false consensus bias”. According to Koestner et al. (1995), “the referendum context ensured that there was a built-in contingency between the behaviour of the reference group and the individual making the estimate.” Therefore, if the estimate results of referendum are similar to their estimates, they are more likely to vote on the “Yes” sides.

This was the case in Turkey, as well. The results of the public opinion surveys conducted before the referendum were generally showing that “Yes” votes were ahead of “No” votes. Furthermore, the survey companies that were supportive of the AKP displayed the results more biased as “Yes” was by a great amount ahead of “No”. When the voters believed that their friends and the people in their environment supported one party or one ideology which was also supported by survey opinions, they were more likely to support it in order not to be ‘out of group’. The AKP was very successful on showing to the public that there was a high consensus on supporting “Yes”, even though it was not totally reflecting the reality regarding the results. Through that tactic, the AKP might have increased the possibility for the electorate to vote for “Yes” by showing there is a high support for “Yes”.

Unity and Articulate Messages

In order to better communicate with the electorate and show its unity and team-spirit for better results, the AKP prepared a guide to direct the entire party members in their local branches. To this end, a guidance of 23 rules that included suggestions towards the simplicity and visibility of the conveyed messages was distributed. It was strongly recommended that the discourses were adapted to the understanding levels of people. This phenomenon can be explained by the elaboration likelihood model (Dainton 2004), which argues that there are two possible routes or methods of influence which are centrally routed messages (more complex) and peripherally routed messages (less complex). Elaborated messages are ineffective when targeted participants are incapable of receiving the message. Therefore, such campaigns use peripherally routed messages that are incomplex. The results after the referendum demonstrated that there was a negative correlation between the educational level and the inclination to cast “Yes” vote. Given that, it was understandable that the AKP refrained from using centrally routed (complex) messages and adapted the discourses and messages according to the level of understanding of the electorate.

Effective Use of the Media

In the literature of psychology, it is argued that national elections in most societies have become oriented toward candidate-centred media campaigns (McAllister 2001). It is further argued that party leaders packaged and presented through the electronic media and this type of canvassing produces tangible electoral gains. Similarly, Hillygus (2005) shows that mobilization, specifically among voters who previously not planning to cast their votes, increases with high exposure to campaign advertising and personal vote persuasion. The results of the referendum demonstrate that the AKP was very successful in using the media and advertisements as a tool to influence and persuade the electorate, as well as to explain its goals and ideology. Especially in terms of appearance, Prime Minister Erdoğan and cabinet members were almost always on mainstream TV channels during the campaign process, and always prepared to discuss their prospects with the opposition parties. Moreover, specifically Prime Minister Erdoğan paid extra attention in order to prevent the media from spoiling the essence of his and his party’s campaign messages. To illustrate, at one occasion when Erdoğan encountered a difficult question on a very popular TV program, *Siyaset Meydani* (Political Arena) on August 23, 2010, he refrained

from answering a challenging question. Instead of trying to answer the question, he scolded the moderator for asking such a question.

Effective Use of Popular Figures and Organizations

The above-mentioned elaboration likelihood model (Dainton 2004) indicates that simple messages are more preferable for voters to understand the issue better. Accordingly, using agents such as popular figures and organizations to convey messages in a simple form instead of a complex form greatly helps the electorate body comprehend the gist of any message and party's goals. In line with that, The AKP used popular writers, columnists, singers, and the presidents of very popular non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey during the campaign. These figures explained what they would vote for in the referendum to support the AKP. Even one of the arabesque singers composed a rhythmic song to explain why he votes "Yes". Also, Erdoğan visited a great number of NGOs and associations including TÜSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) and asked—even forced—them to explain their position. As the president of TÜSİAD did not want to reveal the organization's position, Erdoğan went too far to and stated that people who decided not to vote would be neutralized and people who voted for "No" would be "Coup-lovers". In a similar vein, Egemen Bağış, the current minister for the European Union affairs and Turkey's chief negotiator with the EU, stated that the mental health and patriotism of those whose vote is "No" to the amendments in the referendum should be questioned. The results suggest that these popular figures and organizations helped the AKP spread their referendum campaign messages out and increase their "Yes" votes at the end of the process.

Use of Negative Emotions to Influence Opinions

Jerit (2004) suggests that in order to mobilize their party's base and also attract the support of the uncommitted voters, political candidates have the incentive to refer to arguments that evoke emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger. Evoking these emotions gives political candidates the opportunity to underline consensual values. According to one of the social judgment theories, attitudes affect behaviour since, your attitude toward a candidate will influence whether you vote for him/her (Dainton 2004). The theory argues that there should be "latitude of acceptance" which includes all ideas that are acceptable for the person to be persuaded.

Under this light, it is fair to argue that the AKP induced fear and anxiety during campaign activities. As mentioned before, the Party labelled those who would vote for “No” in the referendum as “Coup-lovers”. This was an informed choice, as the 1980 coup was staged on the very same day, September 12, and had very negative connotations for the majority of people in Turkey. As countless number of people, regardless of their political leanings, were killed or tortured due to the 1980 coup, nobody would normally like to remember this day in Turkey. Bearing this in mind, Prime Minister Erdoğan reminded the voters in many occasions that they had to vote for “Yes” in order not to face a similar catastrophic coup again. In other words, the idea and fear of “another coup” was used as a political weapon to garner the support of the people who suffered from the past coups. Therefore, the AKP’s campaign was well designed according to social judgment theory, as, in the referendum context, the idea of not facing a new coup fell within the border of latitude of acceptance for people who suffered from 1980 coup.

Positive and Negative Advertisement

King and McConnell (2003) argue that positive advertisement is effective in winning the case for the sponsoring candidate, while negative advertisement is effective in creating a less favourable image of the candidates and minimizing the likelihood of voting for the targeted candidate. In this context, even though there is the high risk that negative political advertising can produce a boomerang effect that may create more negative feelings toward the sponsor rather than the target, Prime Minister Erdoğan not only conducted a positive campaign for himself and his party, but also did a negative advertising for opposition party leaders. He fiercely attacked Kemal Kilicdaroglu (the leader of the CHP) and Devlet Bahçeli (the leader of the MHP), especially during mass meetings. Erdoğan’s move was not only successful in terms of increasing the “Yes” votes, but also increasing the election turnout (77%), as, according to the mobilization hypothesis (Martin 2004), negative information attracts attention, people pay more attention to negative information than positive one, therefore, turnout rate in the election is increased by the negative stimulants.

Financial Support and Huge Election Budget

The public choice theory (Brody and Thompson 1993) suggests that most of the voters behave in self-interested (private-regarding) ways, rather than in selfless (public-regarding) ways. Supporting this, the study results of Bullock, Gaddie, and Ferrington

(2002) show that when more money is spent for the campaign, there is more stimulated environment. In accordance with that, the more the environment is stimulated, the more a political party gets participation. As is well known, the AKP granted the voters with low socio-economic levels coal and food supplies, as it did in every election process. Additionally, the municipalities of the AKP allowed everyone to use big buses and minibuses—covered by the campaign slogans—for free to attend their mass meetings. These municipalities even employed the supporters. With full awareness that the more they give financially to the electorate, the more votes they will win, the AKP spent 25.282.162 TL (approximately £10.826.986) for the campaign activities, accordingly to parliamentary documents (2010). In brief, there was a highly stimulated environment all around Turkey and the voters were inclined to vote “Yes” due to their short-term betterment in financial conditions.

Religion

Religion affects political behaviour of large groups of voters (Powell and Self 2002). The AKP is widely defined as a conservative democrat party with Islamic roots or leanings. The Party’s nature paved the way for the emergence of a close connection between the AKP and the controversial Gulen Movement, whose goal is to teach a moderate form of Islam worldwide under the teachings of the exiled Islamic theologian/preacher Fethullah Gulen. During the campaign, Gulen himself addressed his followers in millions and explained the importance of casting a “Yes” vote in the referendum by stating that he wished they had a chance to raise the dead people from their graves and urge them to cast 'yes' votes at the referendum. In a similar vein, one of the Turkish Islamist opinion leaders, Abdullah Büyük, stated that if people vote “yes” with faith, they would deserve a place in the heaven. In this context, the AKP successfully influenced the voting behaviour of the electorate through linking religion and politics, as well as using powerful, credible, and popular people to affect masses.

Expert Power

Social influence theory can be explained as the process by which individuals make real changes to their feelings and behaviours as a result of interaction with others who are perceived to be similar, desirable, or expert (Rashotte 2007). Research on political persuasion also demonstrates that the effectiveness of a message depends largely on the

credibility, authority, and likability of the message source (as cited in Hillygus 2004). In other words, in close relation with the factor above, people can easily be influenced by the expert power, which depends on the target's attributing superior knowledge and experience to the agent or person. In the context on the relationship between religion and voting behaviour in the referendum, it can be argued that the followers of the Gulen Movement or other devout persons found these religious figures/experts credible, believed in them, and casted their votes accordingly. Thus, the AKP used very prominent figures in Turkey including politicians, experts in economy, and religion and public opinion leaders to influence big masses through their expertise, credibility, authority and likeability.

Conclusion

This study gives the snapshot of the 2010 referendum campaign in Turkey and evaluates it according to relevant psychology and political science theories, models, and previous study results. In the light of the findings, it can be argued that the AKP and Prime Minister Erdoğan together were quite successful in the referendum campaign in terms of meeting the expectations of the voters and taking the sociological, psychological, political, and economic realities of the country into account prior to formulating the campaign strategy. The results of the referendum, with 58% in favour and 42% against, are supportive of this claim as well.

This study indicates that the AKP has better understood the dynamics of the Turkish society and political life and formulated its policies and election/referendum strategies accordingly. This crucial factor brought victory to the party on September 12, 2010, as it did previous election victories in the past decade. It appears that in different occasions and context, other political parties in different countries or of different political leanings would implement certain strategies and tactics the AKP has implemented so far. Last, but not least, taking the theories drawn from the areas of politics and psychology into account to understand why and how a political party succeeds or the factors behind the high turnout rate would generously help.

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