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

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ABSTRACT

A key issue on the Turkish political agenda concerns a transition to presidentialism, with a constitutional amendment proposal submitted in December 2016. While the positions of political elites are well known, we lack a detailed analysis of the electorate's views on such a transition. To fill this gap, we present cross-sectional and panel data collected over the period from spring 2015 to winter 2015–16. 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 the Turkish nationalist constituency's views in favour of presidentialism has been a significant trend in the aftermath of the June 2015 general election.

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 the result of negotiations between the leaderships of AKP and MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – Nationalist Action Party).¹ It calls for expanded powers for the president at the expense of parliament and the elimination of the prime-ministerial office. In the proposed model, the president will serve both as head of state and as head of the executive, appointing the cabinet of ministers and a significant portion of high judiciary and senior public officials without any oversight from parliament. The president will also be able to issue decree-laws, declare a state of emergency, restructure all ministries and public institutions, and dissolve parliament by calling new legislative and presidential elections, which are to be held simultaneously.² As such, the proposal entails a significant shift of governing authority from parliament to the presidency and the concentration of executive power in a single individual.

An important background to the debates in Turkey on a transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system of governance is the twin-election year of 2015. This was a tumultuous period in Turkish politics (see Çarkoğlu & Yıldırım 2015). In the general election of 7 June 2015 the incumbent AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 13 years, while the pro-Kurdish HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – People's Democratic Party) passed the ten per cent threshold, again for the first time.³ 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

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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. Erdoğan argued that a presidential system would better ensure political stability and an effective government that is essential for rapid economic development (Kemahlioğlu 2015; Bardakçı 2016). In contrast, during this period all three opposition parties in parliament took a stance against a move towards presidentialism, considering it a reflection of Erdoğan's ambitions to assume ever more power.⁴

While the positions of the political elites in 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 upon by the twin election campaigns of 2015.⁵ This article fills this gap by presenting rich individual-level data on the public's view on presidentialism collected over the period from spring 2015 (prior to the June 2015 election) to winter 2015–16 (in the aftermath of the November 2015 snap election). Specifically, we utilise data from two nationally representative cross-sectional samples that were 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 in which the same individuals were interviewed three times in the pre-June survey, about two months after the June election (post-June panel), and in the post-November panel. 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 a presidential system of governance are complex, fraught with uncertainties, and rather distant from 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 line of the party with which they identify (Campbell et al. 1960). Accordingly, we expect the stark division among the Turkish political elite across the incumbent vs. opposition camps to be reflected in public opinion as well (Zaller 1992). Our empirical results largely support these predictions.

Debates around a presidential system in Turkey

While the calls for a transition to a presidential system of governance are not new to modern Turkish politics,⁶ the roots of the current debate can be traced back to the political crisis around the presidential election of 2007 (Çarkoğlu 2007; Gönenç 2008; Kalaycioğlu 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, as its candidate for the presidency. The party was confident of his election given that the president was to be elected by parliament, where AKP held the majority of seats. However, Gül's candidacy provoked a

strong reaction from the military and state elites due to his Islamist background. After the first round of the election, the Constitutional Court annulled the process based on an appeal from the main opposition CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – Republican People’s Party) that the necessary quorum of members of parliament was not present. As a response, AKP proposed constitutional amendments that stipulated direct popular election of the president. The amendments were approved by a referendum on 21 October 2007. By this time, following a general election, Gül had been elected as president by the newly formed parliament. Thus, the first direct presidential election was scheduled at the end of his term in 2014.

The 2007 amendments represented an important turning point for parliamentary governance in Turkey. The combination of the considerable powers bestowed upon the president by the 1982 Constitution with the direct democratic legitimacy provided by 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 election of the president was already visible during the campaign for the first such election, held on 10 August 2014. The strongest candidate for the office was Prime Minister Erdoğan, who made it clear that the change in the mode of election of the president was not a simple, technical issue but the closure of a chapter in the country’s history (Sabah 2014). He stated that he would not be an impartial president, standing above politics, but would be ‘on the side of the people’, working with the prime minister (Aljazeera Turk 2014). These remarks hinted at a presidency with a strong executive role. Erdoğan was elected as president with 52 per cent of votes in the first round. Since his election, Erdoğan has been repeatedly criticised by the opposition for not maintaining impartiality as stipulated in the constitution and for his assumed executive role.⁷ In response, Erdoğan stated that he had already declared during his candidacy that he would not be a ‘customary’ president (TRT Haber 2014).

While Erdoğan’s support for a presidential system in Turkey predates the 2011 elections (Kemahlioğlu 2015), his promotion of a transition intensified after his election as president, and especially on the eve of the June 2015 election. Pointing to his election by popular vote in 2014, Erdoğan’s calls hinted at a frustration with the extent of his formal powers and the dual executive structure he had to share with the prime minister. Before the election campaign period, he declared that the presidential system was necessary for a ‘harmonious relationship’ between the government and the president, and would also enable faster decision-making while ensuring stability (see e.g., Akşam 2015). Erdoğan organised mass rallies in more than a dozen cities during the election campaign, under the pretext of official visits, and called for ‘400 members of parliament’, implicitly for AKP, so that the constitutional amendments required for a presidential system could be passed by parliament with a qualified majority (Aljazeera Turk 2015).

The Turkish party system ahead of the twin-election period of 2015 had four major players. The incumbent AKP, a conservative, pro-Islamist party, had 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 a presidential system in its election manifesto, though with few details on the proposed institutional arrangements. AKP received 40.9 per cent of the votes in the June 2015 election, followed by a 49.5 per cent share in November. The other main parties were CHP with a social-democratic, secular ideology; MHP, a right-wing, Turkish nationalist party; and HDP with roots in the Kurdish nationalist movement and the party with the most left-wing stance in the Turkish political landscape. CHP’s vote shares in the June and November elections were 25 and 25.3 per cent, respectively, while MHP won 16.3

and 11.9 per cent, and HDP 13.1 and 10.8 per cent. In contrast to AKP, these opposition parties adopted positions against a presidential system (Kemahlioğlu 2015). It is fair to say that the debates on whether Turkey should adopt a presidential system lacked substance. On the one hand, Erdoğan's and AKP's promotion of presidentialism mostly consisted of criticisms of the current system, highlighting cherry-picked periods of political and economic crisis and making unsubstantiated claims about why a presidential system is necessary for stability and rapid economic development. On the other hand, the opposition framed such a transition as just another phase of the creeping authoritarianism during the later period of AKP rule and a reflection of Erdoğan's desire to further consolidate power.

Partisanship shaping support for presidential system

Against this background to the debates about a presidential system, what can we expect with regard to the shaping of public opinion? The relative merits and drawbacks of different constitutional arrangements have long been subjects of contentious debate among experts (e.g., Linz 1990; Stepan & Skach 1993; Lijphart 2004).⁸ Taking these 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 to expect the average voter to form an informed opinion on this issue. The complexity of the issue and the division of the political elites along party lines suggest that partisanship will be the key factor determining individuals' views on presidentialism.

Our data confirm that Turkish voters have quite low levels of simple factual knowledge about presidentialism in the world. In our representative survey of spring 2015, we asked our respondents whether the following statement is true or false: 'Today, most democracies have a parliamentary system of governance rather than a presidential one as in the United States.' About 27 per cent of our respondents could not give an answer, and only about 15 per cent correctly pointed out that the statement was true. In another set of questions, we presented a list of six countries: three with a presidential system of governance (United States, Mexico, and Brazil) and the other three with a parliamentary system (United Kingdom, Japan, and the Netherlands). For each country, we asked whether its system of governance is presidential. The average number of correct answers to these questions (ranging from zero to six) stood at just 1.6, and only 17 per cent of respondents gave 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 that voters can use as a reference. It helps voters to 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 goes in the opposite direction (Campbell et al. 1960). A reflection of the use of partisanship as a heuristic is that when political elites are divided on an issue, individuals tend to follow the elites who share 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 have highlighted a major cleavage that pits the nationalist and secular elites of the

'centre' against the ethnically diverse, low-educated, conservative, and religious non-elites of the 'periphery' (Mardin 1973; Kalaycıoğlu 1994; Çarkoğlu 2012a). Thus, 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.⁹

Accordingly, our expectation is that individuals' views on a presidential system in Turkey will be shaped by partisan attachments, and it should also be possible to observe the reflections of the centre–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) consisted of a three-wave panel and two nationally representative cross-sectional samples. The first survey, the pre-June survey, was conducted face to face with a nationally representative probability sample of 2,201 respondents between 19 March and 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 July and 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 and 10 January 2016. We denote this third wave 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 and 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 and the details of the sampling methodology can be found in the online appendix.

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 the 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 get a more detailed multivariate examination of the determinants of support. This analysis of a nationally representative sample will enable us to delineate the individual-level determinants of support for a presidential system in the period immediately after the November election. While the cross-sectional surveys are useful to provide a snapshot of support for presidentialism at a given period, they are not conducive to illuminating how this support has evolved during the period under consideration. For this reason in the third part of our analyses we use our three-wave panel data to explore whether, and how, the

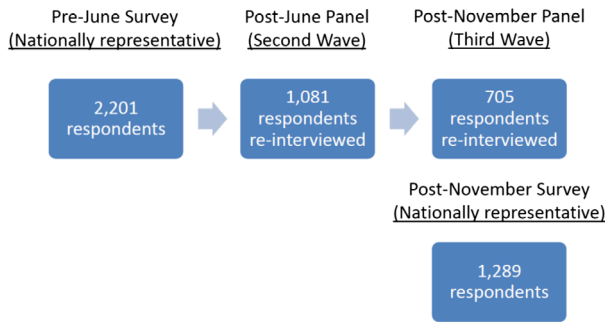


Figure 1. Structure of TES 2015.

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

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. About 65 per cent of second-wave participants were then successfully recontacted 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.

To construct our dependent variable, support for a 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.¹⁰

We 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 (*Religiosity*, 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 identified partisans of the four major political parties (AKP, CHP, MHP, and HDP) by inquiring in an open-ended fashion whether our respondents favoured, or were a 'fan' of, a particular party.¹¹ We also asked how satisfied our respondents were with their current economic situation (*Satisfaction with economy*), measured on a 0–10 scale with higher values indicating more satisfaction. It may be the case that those who were dissatisfied with their current economic circumstances were more likely to support a change in the system of governance.¹²

A final set of variables considers whether support for a presidential system is correlated with policy preferences. We asked our respondents to identify the most important problem facing Turkey in an open-ended question, and created a binary variable for those who considered terrorism-related issues (*Most important problem: terrorism*) to be 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 the PKK, terrorism-related issues became the modal answer given to this question by respondents in the post-June and post-November surveys. We also asked whether the respondent would vote for or against European Union (EU) membership for Turkey if a referendum were held that day, and indicated those respondents who would support EU membership for Turkey with a binary variable (*EU: yes*).¹³ Lastly, as discussions about a presidential system in Turkey often go hand in hand with ones about the need for a new constitution, we identified those respondents who think that Turkey needs a new constitution (*New constitution: yes*).¹⁴

Our models for the panel respondents also include a measure of respondents' level of knowledge about the prevalence of presidential systems globally. 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 zero to six) 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 a 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 a presidential system

We begin our analyses with a comparison of the overall levels of support for a presidential system in the pre-June and post-November cross-sectional surveys. Figure 2 presents the percentage of respondents supporting and opposing a presidential system in the two surveys.¹⁵ 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 it. Support for a presidential system seems to have increased over time, rising to 34 per cent in the post-November period while those opposed decreased to 41 per cent. Still, in the aftermath of the November election, more people opposed a presidential system than supported it, though the gap had narrowed since the pre-June period.

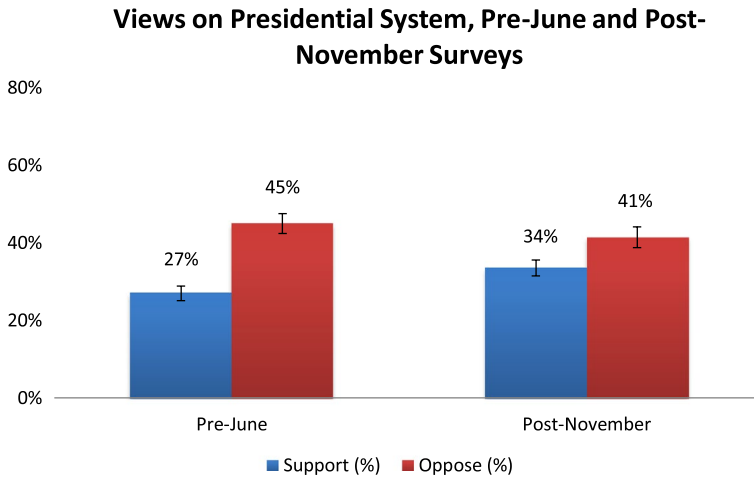


Figure 2. Support for presidential system in Turkey in the pre-June and post-November samples. Note: Vertical bars indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals around point estimates.

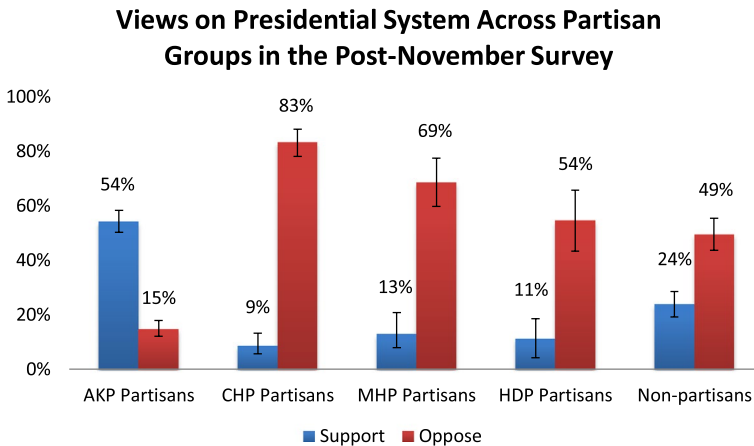


Figure 3. Views on presidential system across partisan groups in the post-November survey. Note: Vertical bars indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals around point estimates.

What are the individual-level correlates of support for a presidential system? That is, 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 won half the votes in November, had the highest level of support for presidentialism, and this 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 CHP partisans. The overwhelming majority (69 per cent) of MHP partisans and over half (54 per cent) the HDP partisans opposed a presidential system as well. Support for presidentialism among the partisans of the three opposition parties hovered around just ten per cent. There was more support for presidentialism among individuals who did not declare affinity to any party (non-partisans) than among opposition partisans, yet there were considerably more opponents than supporters in the former group as well (49 vs. 24 per cent).

Table 2. Individual-level correlates of support for presidentialism in the post-November survey.

Variables	Post-November survey	
	Coefficient	SE
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	

Notes: Ordered probit regression with robust standard errors (SE) in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

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 accounted for several demographic and political factors that might be correlated with partisanship, in Table 2 we present a multivariate analysis with support for presidentialism as the dependent variable.¹⁶

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 it, 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–periphery cleavage in Turkish politics, where there seems to be more support for a presidential system in the ‘periphery’ that is characterised by lower education levels and higher religiosity – demographic characteristics that overlap with the support base of AKP as well. In addition, older individuals were less likely to support presidentialism. This result may reflect the different political socialisation contexts of different age cohorts. Specifically, older individuals who were socialised 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 have been socialised in the post-1980 period, 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 (about 85 per cent) are Kurdish-speaking, the results suggest a differentiation within the Kurdish community with respect to support for presidentialism. In order to explore this possibility, we considered the interactions of the variable *Kurdish-speaking* with *HDP partisanship* and *Religiosity* in additional analyses (presented in the online appendix). The results confirm a differentiation within the Kurdish community, with support for presidentialism confined to those who were relatively more religious and who were HDP partisans. Thus, Kurds who did not feel affinity to the Kurdish

nationalist movement and those who were devout Muslims, just like devout Turks, were likely to be more sympathetic to AKP and Erdoğan, and in turn more likely to support presidentialism. Speculatively, this considerable segment of the Kurdish population may have a relatively favourable image of AKP due to its initiation of the so-called ‘peace process’ and may also blame the Kurdish nationalist movement for its collapse.¹⁷

The analysis reveals that satisfaction about personal economic circumstances (*Satisfaction with economy*) is *positively* related to support for presidentialism. This may seem 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 probably due to the fact that the proposal for change came from the incumbent AKP, and individuals who were economically satisfied were more prone to throw their support behind the party’s proposals even if they were not AKP partisans. Among the variables relating to policy preferences, considering terrorism-related issues to be the most important problems facing Turkey or support for membership in the EU not exhibit statistically significant associations with support for presidentialism. Support for a new constitution, on the other hand, was positively associated with support for presidentialism, albeit weakly. This is not surprising, as those political elites who pushed presidentialism often framed it around a need for a new constitution.

In short, as of late 2015/early 2016, those who supported a presidential system constituted a minority of citizens at about 34 per cent, outnumbered by those who opposed presidentialism, though the gap seems to have narrowed since the period before the June 2015 election. Views on a 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 as having the largest percentage of opponents. The socio-demographic factors positively associated with support for presidentialism correspond well to the characteristics of the ‘periphery’ in the centre–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 of support for presidentialism in Turkey, they do not reveal whether, and how, the determinants of support changed during the period of interest. How did the tumultuous inter-election period from June to November influence individuals’ support for presidentialism?

To address this question, we utilise our three-wave panel of 705 respondents, whose views on a presidential system were gathered three times – before the June election, between the 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 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 stated that they felt affinity to MHP in the pre-June survey and measure their support for presidentialism in the pre-June, post-June, and post-November panels. Some of these individuals, who are labelled (pre-June) MHP partisans, may 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, we can track how partisans’ views have changed over time.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of supporters (top panel) and opponents (bottom panel) of presidentialism among the panel respondents, categorised 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 poll. The dip in support for presidentialism in the aftermath of the June

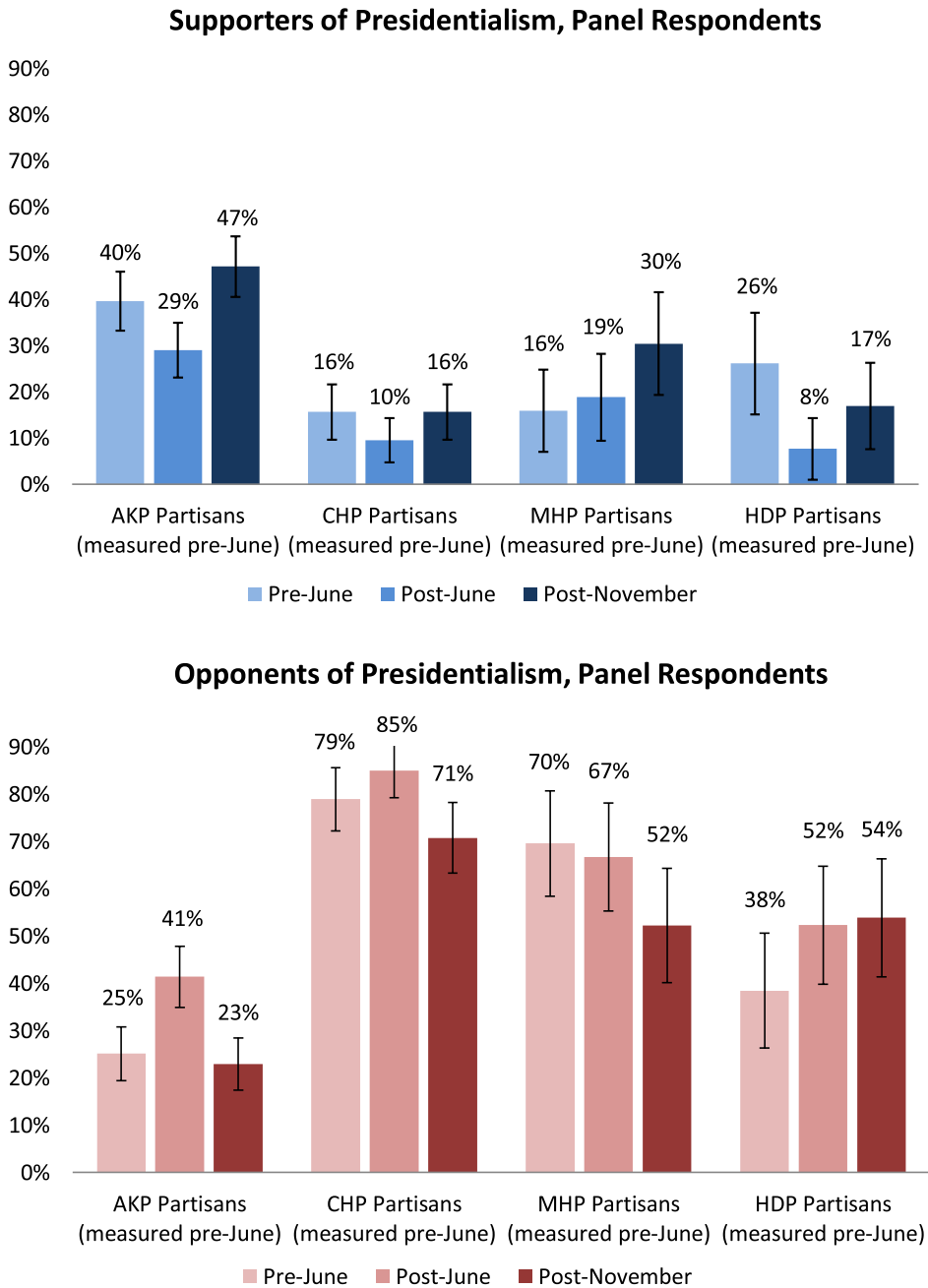


Figure 4. Supporters (top panel) and opponents (bottom panel) of presidentialism among panel respondents.

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 panel, 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 not only by Prime Minister Davutoğlu but also by President Erdoğan simply backfired. As noted earlier, Erdoğan's active campaigning during this period polarised the electorate (Kemahlioğlu 2015), which may 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 have been the driving force. The considerable decline in support for presidentialism among AKP partisans, on the other hand, could be explained by theories that link the individual self-interest of voters (e.g., Anderson & Guillory 1997; Rosset, Gier & Bernauer 2016) and politicians (e.g., Bowler, Donovan & Carp 2006) to preferences for institutional arrangements.¹⁸ 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 president should it be created. Thus, the disappointing results of the June election from AKP's point of view may 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.

The dynamics of support for presidentialism were considerably different for (pre-June) MHP partisans in the panel sample than for other partisan groups. For MHP partisans, we observe a steady increase in support for presidentialism from the pre-June to the post-November period. As already mentioned, partisanship was 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 supported a presidential system in the post-November panel; these are individuals who declared an 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 shown in Figure 3.

These results indicate that, at least for some pre-June MHP partisans, the idea of a presidential system became increasingly attractive in the period following the June election. Further analysis highlights that many of this group switched their vote from MHP to AKP or 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 those panel respondents who identified themselves as MHP partisans in the pre-June survey. Before the June election, about 92 per cent indicated they would vote for MHP, and just two per cent for AKP and three per cent for CHP. In the post-June panel, we see that many MHP partisans switched to other parties. Now only 67 per cent declared an intention to vote for MHP, 18 per cent for CHP, and 13 per cent for AKP. This trend continued in the post-November panel, and there was a significant increase in voting intentions for AKP. Only 44 per cent of those who identified themselves with MHP pre-June declared in the post-November panel that they would vote for MHP, and about 38 per cent stated they would vote for AKP.

Vote Intentions of MHP Partisans in the Panel

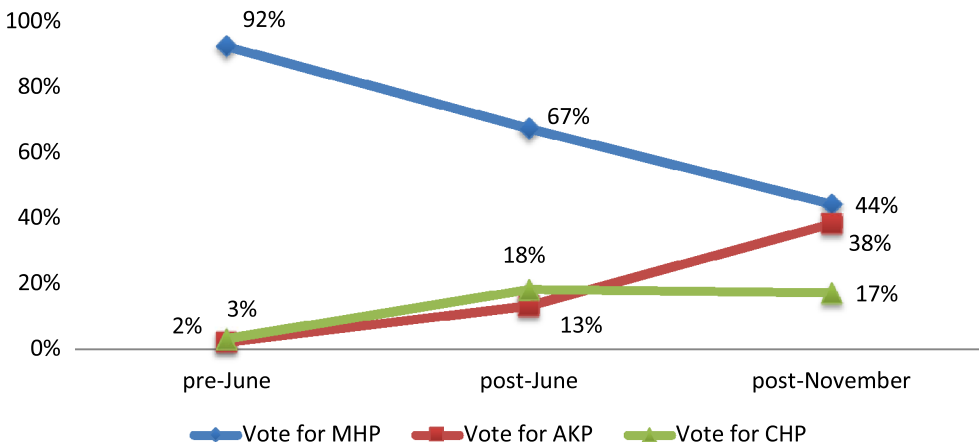


Figure 5. Vote intentions of (pre-June) MHP Partisans in the panel for the pre-June, post-June, and post-November waves.

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

Support for Presidentialism among MHP Partisans in the Panel

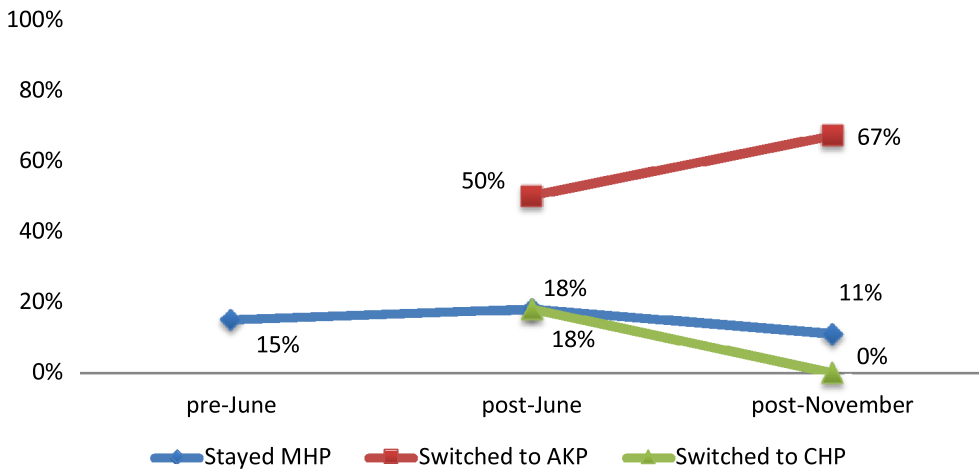


Figure 6. Support for presidentialism among (pre-June) MHP partisans in the panel.

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

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. declared a vote intention for this party) in the post-June panel, only 18 per cent declared support for presidentialism, compared with 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 supported presidentialism compared with 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 no longer saw themselves as such in the aftermath of the November election. This may potentially owe to dissatisfaction with the MHP party leadership or to satisfaction with Erdoğan's considerably more hawkish position on the Kurdish issue after the June election. Such individuals 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 panel constituted a more 'core' partisan group of MHP, who still voiced a significant level of opposition to presidentialism.

Multivariate analysis of panel respondents

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 respondents in the pre-June (Model 1), post-June (Model 2), and post-November (Model 3) panels. Our models for the panel respondents also include a variable on respondents' level of knowledge about the prevalence of the presidential system of governance in the world as explained before.

Table 3. Determinants of support for presidentialism in Turkey – panel respondents.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Variables	Pre-June	Post-June	Post-November
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

Notes: Partisanship variables indicate partisan identification with a party as measured in the pre-June survey. Ordered probit regression with robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Model (1) in Table 4 refers to the pre-June survey. Inspecting the effects of partisanship, AKP partisans were more likely to support and CHP partisans were more likely to oppose presidentialism compared with 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 a presidential system. Finally, satisfaction about personal economic circumstances (*Satisfaction with economy*) is *positively* related to support for a presidential system. None of the variables relating to policy preferences (considering terrorism-related issues to be the most important problem facing Turkey, support for EU membership, support for a new constitution) exhibited statistically significant associations with support for presidentialism.

The results from the analysis of panel respondents in the pre-June survey resonate with what we reported earlier – views on presidentialism are largely shaped by partisanship. Was there a change in these conclusions in the post-June period? Model (2) considers the post-June wave of the panel. Recall that here we interviewed 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 changed over the period of interest. We note two changes in the post-June responses compared with 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. The second change compared with the pre-June survey is that now religiosity is positively associated with support for presidentialism. This result can once more be interpreted in terms of the peripheral forces in the centre–periphery cleavage getting closer to the idea of presidentialism. Other results from the pre-June survey hold in the post-June panel.

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, the latter attaining statistical significance in the post-November panel. 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-speakers continued to exhibit higher levels of support for presidentialism than other citizens, and the estimated coefficient in the post-November wave is considerably larger than in 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 panel.

The multivariate panel analysis confirms that views on presidentialism are largely shaped by partisanship and the centre–periphery cleavage in Turkish politics. A crucial takeaway from the panel is the increased support for presidentialism in the post-June period among individuals who identified themselves as MHP partisans pre-June. The developments after the June election 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 increased during the turbulent twin-election year of 2015. Despite this rising appeal of a presidential system, however, there still remained a larger group of opponents. 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 reflections of the centre–periphery cleavage in Turkish politics in people's views on presidentialism. Voters with 'peripheral traits' of low levels of education, higher religiosity, and Kurdish ethnicity were more likely to support a 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 militarised conflict with the PKK, influenced public opinion. In particular, a significant group within MHP's nationalist constituency shifted its views in favour of presidentialism and also switched voting preference 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 polarised 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' in order 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 the constitutional amendment proposal submitted to parliament in December 2016, could be seen as a response to this shift in the MHP constituency, aiming 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 to a transition to presidentialism. Our results indicate that the HDP leadership, despite being under great stress during the post-June election period, was nevertheless able to keep its core constituency mobilised against presidentialism. Nevertheless, Kurdish-speaking citizens who are relatively more religious and who do not consider themselves HDP partisans 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 criticised by some intellectuals close to the Kurdish political movement for their vigorous opposition to presidentialism (see e.g. Diken 2016). In all likelihood, appealing to the 'Kurdish vote' will be a critical goal for both the supporters and the opponents of presidentialism in the event 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 that the constituency of the main opposition party, CHP, will remain rather marginal to this struggle, as they appear to be the most homogeneously opposed group to a system change. A polarised 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–periphery cleavage, the reflections of which seem to be central to the debate 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.¹⁹ 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 prevailing in a probable referendum.²⁰

Finally, from a larger comparative perspective our results shed some light on the dynamics of the 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. Thus, contexts where security concerns dominate the political landscape may present populist-leaning incumbents with opportunities to further concentrate power in the executive.

Notes

1. 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. The MHP leadership declared that they would support the proposal.
2. See *Hürriyet Daily News* (2016) for the details of the proposal.
3. To get around the ten per cent national threshold requirement, candidates from HDP ran as independents in previous elections.
4. The negotiations between AKP and MHP which culminated in the aforementioned constitutional amendment proposal were initiated by the MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli. At this point it is not clear why Bahçeli dropped his strong opposition to presidentialism and decided to enter negotiations with AKP, but we offer some thoughts on this in the concluding section.
5. See Aytaç and Çarkoğlu (2015) for an analysis of the Turkish public’s support for presidentialism ahead of the June 2015 election.
6. Ergüder (2015) reminds us that former Presidents Demirel and Özal made appeals for presidentialism in the 1990s.
7. Both CHP and HDP filed complaints to the Constitutional Court in this regard ahead of the June 2015 election (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2015). Similar criticisms were voiced by the leader of MHP as well (Erdem 2015).
8. For a comprehensive overview of the presidentialism vs. parliamentarism debate in Turkey, see the essays in Akaş (2015).
9. See Kalaycıoğlu (2008) for a similar argument on partisanship in the Turkish context.
10. 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 a decrease of about 9–14 per cent in the number of observations across different surveys.
11. 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 this concept in Turkish. We adopt this concept to identify partisans in our sample.

12. Another potential explanatory factor could be President Erdoğan's favourability rating. We have such a measure that is highly correlated with partisanship, and especially with AKP and CHP partisanship – the correlation coefficient between Erdoğan favourability rating and, respectively, AKP and CHP partisanship in the post-November survey are 0.76 and –0.53. 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 about 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.
15. 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.
16. 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.
17. In December 2012 Erdoğan announced that his government (through the National Intelligence Organization) had been conducting talks with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. These negotiations, which led to a declaration of a ceasefire by PKK in March 2013, were expected to culminate in a peaceful solution to the conflict. Yet this fragile peace process effectively ended in June 2015 and hostilities resumed. The reasons behind the collapse of the process have been the subject of much debate.
18. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.
19. See Aytaç and Öniş (2014) on the populist aspect of Erdoğan's rule.
20. As mentioned earlier, the constitutional amendment proposal needs at least 330 votes in parliament to allow a referendum. While both the AKP and MHP leaderships threw their 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 will be an obstacle to the proposal being put to a referendum.

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Appendix

An online Appendix is available for this article which can be accessed via the online version of this journal at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2017.1280879>