

Turkey PolTrack® Series

ELECTION 2019: POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS

VOL. 8
APRIL 2019



The Turkey PolTrack® series interprets Turkish public opinion on the basis of quantitative data compiled from Istanbul Economics Research's monthly public opinion survey.

The notes are prepared by the analyst team of Istanbul Economics Research with academic support.

For more detailed results and analysis, please contact our team at info@researchistanbul.com

It's mostly the economy

In our PolTrack issue Vol.6 (Volume 6: “Elections 2019: Assessing the Economic Down-Cycle”), we had sought to answer the question of who will ride the economic down cycle. Based on a comparative analysis of several economic markers in the lead up to previous elections, we had predicted that the worsening economic conditions, felt deeply across the country according to our August and December 2018 nationwide polls, could provide the opposition parties with an opportunity to rally voters around their candidates in the March 31st Local Elections.

Election results, albeit contested, indicate that the opposition has indeed managed to channel popular dissent caused by the impact of economic issues on the standard of living of an average citizen, to support for its metropolitan mayor candidates in cities that constitute the heart of Turkish economy. If the current recount procedure does not alter the unofficial results declared by the President of the Supreme Election Council , the opposition will now have control of cities that taken together around 65% of Turkey’s GDP, including the country’s top three cities, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. In light of the new political landscape and outlook that emerged from the ballot box, we considered it to be a good time to evaluate the validity of our prediction. To do so, we have analysed public opinion survey results from Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Mersin – four metropolitan municipalities whose electorate brought to power candidates from CHP after over 20 years of Ak Party or MHP rule.

Introduction

The March 31st local elections came at a pivotal time for several reasons. Firstly, the elections were expected to complement the Presidential and General Elections held back in 24 June 2018, whereby the citizens would select the official cadres that would govern all levels of authority until 2023 under the new presidential regime. President Erdoğan emphasized that there would be no other (as in, early) elections until 2023, which meant that the results could motivate rival parties on the national level to foster a spirit of genuine cooperation in local governments, if Turkey is to overcome the major challenges it is faced with today. Second, March 31st marked the first local elections where party alliances entered the race with joint candidates in most municipalities. Finally, local elections were held in the midst of increasing economic instability in the country, with growing inflation and unemployment rates, and

increasing foreign debt. Ak Party entered the race with the most negative economic outlook observed in the country since a decade – which led many to view the elections as a popularity test for President Erdoğan and the ruling Ak Party.

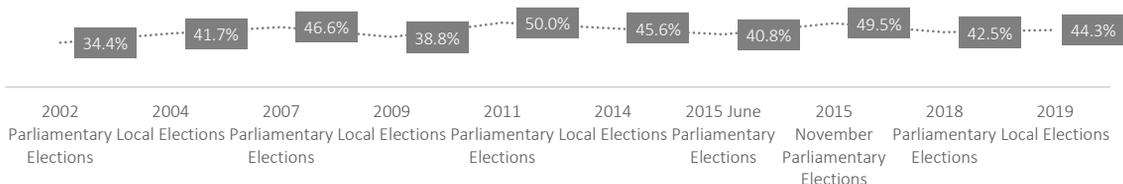
The Nation Alliance’s (Millet İttifakı) campaign rhetoric emphasized the economy, while that of the People’s Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) relied heavily on national security sentiment, with President Erdoğan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli repeatedly describing the elections as a matter of national existence. Effectively asked to choose between two interpretations of the worsening conditions in the country through the proxy of local elections, voters were thus able to calibre their messages to the national leadership of their respective parties without causing a drastic change in the overall governance of Turkey.

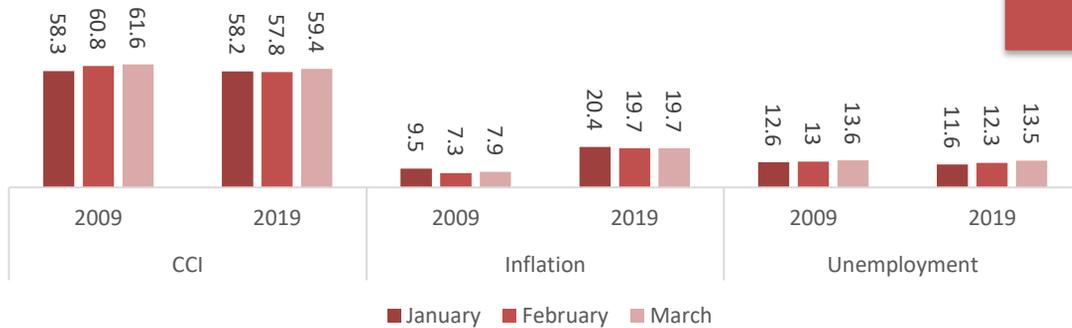
In a historical outcome, the Nation Alliance managed to win 20 city governments, including Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Mersin and Istanbul – cities that combined, account for over 60% of Turkey’s GDP. Ak Party lost the governance of 7 of the 12 main cities of Turkey to the opposition. We argue that this can be read as the prioritization of economic hurdles, in terms of weight carried on voter preferences.

Previous instances of economic voting in Turkey

Throughout its 18 years in power, Ak Party’s wins as well as relative losses have followed the economic cycles of the country, with decreasing support during times of stagnation and turbulence, and expanding voter base (which afforded the party uninterrupted victories) during periods of stable economic growth. In 2002, Ak Party rose to power on the back of an economic crisis which crippled the country and haunted the public’s collective memory ever since, and consolidated its constituency until 2007 with robust growth. In line with the deceleration of the economy in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (2008), the 2009 Municipal Elections saw the first challenge to Ak Party’s ever-increasing support base. During this time, Ak Party’s votes dropped from 46.58% to 38.80% in less than two years. A similar situation arose in the June 2015 General Elections, which resulted in the first-ever instant whereby Ak Party did not gain enough seats in the Parliament to form a single party government.

Ak Party votes since first election win





An analysis of three important economic markers that indicate the overall well-being of the economy and that have significant impact on household finances shows that the current state of the economy depicts a similar picture to that in the lead up to the 2009 Municipal Elections – a fact which our prediction was largely based on, coupled with measured public sentiment through multiple nationwide opinion surveys.

- **CPI is worse today than it was in 2009:** In the last 3 months before the March 2009 elections, consumer prices rose by 9.50%, 7.33%, and 7.89% compared to the same month of the previous year respectively, while in the three last months leading into the March 2019 elections, the same index rose by 20.35%, 19.67%, and 19.71% points.
- **In terms of Consumer Confidence Index, the 2009 and today's data are close to identical.** In January, February, and March of 2009 CCI was 58.3, 60.8, and 61.6; In the first three months of 2019 the CCI was 58.2, 57.8, and 59.4.
- **The unemployment rates were similar:** In the first three months of 2009, the unemployment rate was 12.6, 13.0, and 13.6 respectively while the most current data shows the unemployment rate at 11.6%, 12.3% and 13.5% in October, November and December of 2018.

There are clear similarities between the economic agenda Turkey debated going into the elections in 2009 and the current downcycle, with additional challenges prevailing in 2019 - further substantiating our conclusion that Turkey approached the elections in a favorable environment for a citizen reaction to be voiced in the ballotbox.

Perceptions of the economy in the lead up to March 31st

Four of the most important Turkish cities, which form the backbone of the country's economy and whose governance has changed hands after being ruled by either Ak Party (Istanbul, Ankara) or MHP (Mersin, Adana) for over two decades, provide a sound ground for further analysis of the factors that shaped voter preferences in the lead up to the elections. To this end, surveys were conducted during the first week of March with 1000 randomly selected individuals from Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Mersin, with the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) method. A deeper look into what the electorates of these cities perceived to be the most pressing issues faced by Turkey and by their respective cities in the lead up to March 31st, indicate that economic conditions have indeed had significant impact on their choices.

Istanbul

By March 2019, among Istanbul residents, 23% thought that the greatest problem faced by Turkey today were related to the economy, while 47.9% viewed economic troubles to be the second greatest challenge the country needs to resolve. 33.8% of the city's residents stated unemployment to be the biggest issue of Istanbul, while a further 28.4% responded with "the economy" in general. Dissatisfaction with the economic situation appeared to surpass political party affiliations, although being the most prevalent among Ak Party voters, and the least within the MHP electorate. 51.5% of Ak Party, 44.8% of CHP, 50.9% of HDP voters stated unemployment, inflation and poverty to be the second most urgent problem(s) faced by Turkey today. This rate drops to 31.4% among MHP voters.

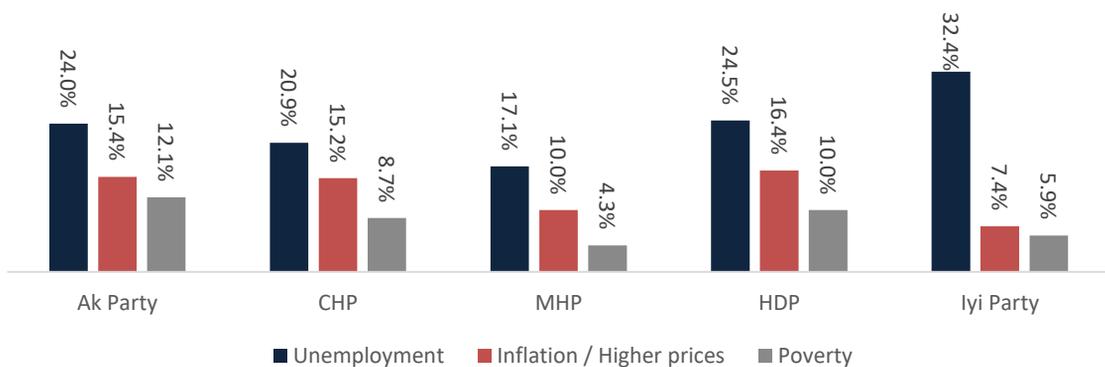
When read together, the numbers indicate that Istanbul residents feel the impact of worsening economic conditions, especially unemployment, which they place as not only a priority matter for Turkey as a whole, but for the wellbeing of their city of residence as well – in fact more urgently in the latter. Therefore, it is highly likely that for the Istanbul electorate, economy played an important role in voting choices.

Most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Foreign powers / Foreign countries	28.0
Education problem	14.0
High Inflation / Low purchasing power	9.7
Economic crisis / Economic problems	7.8
High interest rates	2.4
Cost of living / shortage of livelihood	1.8
Unemployment / Minimum wage	1.2
Poverty	1.7

The second most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Unemployment	24.8
Inflation / Higher prices	14.4
Security / Terror	12.2
Poverty	8.7

The most pressing issues of Istanbul	%
Transportation problem / Damaged roads	34.1
Unemployment	33.8
Economy	28.4
Traffic	27.5

The second most pressing issue faced by Turkey today



Ankara

In Ankara, economic conditions appear to be in the centre front for citizens in the race for metropolitan mayor. According to 55.4% of Ankara residents, the greatest problem faced by Turkey relates to the economy, with 44.8% directly stating “economic crisis” in response. When asked to select the second most urgent issue of the country, Ankara residents provided a more detailed account of what they previously defined as “economic crisis”, with unemployment (29.8), inflation / higher prices (19.6%) and poverty (9.9%) constituting the top four responses along with security / terror. For over half of the city’s residents, economic hurdles were the most prominent problem for Ankara as a city as well, with 28.5% claiming that unemployment is the most urgent challenge requiring a solution in Ankara. The breakdown of perceptions based on political party preferences in June 24th General Elections hints at a similar picture to that in Istanbul, whereby 56.2% of the Ak Party, 55.4% of the MHP, 56.7% of CHP and 44.4% of HDP electorates in Ankara prioritize the economy over all other matters. It is thus possible to conclude that for the Ankara electorate, economy played a role in voter preferences.

Most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Economic crisis / Economic problems	44.8
Other	10.9
Terror / PKK / Fetö	10.5
Unemployment / Minimum wage	8.4

The second most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Unemployment	29.8
Inflation / Higher prices	19.6
Security / Terror	10.3
Poverty	9.9

The most pressing issues of Ankara	%
Traffic	32.1
Transportation problem / Damaged roads	30.3
Unemployment	28.6
Economy	23.5

Most urgent issue faced by Turkey today	Ak Party	CHP	MHP	HDP	Iyi Party
Economic crisis / Economic problems	45.9%	44.7%	36.5%	44.4%	56.3%
High Inflation / Low purchasing power	1.4%	0.3%	1.4%		
High interest rates	0.7%	0.3%	1.4%		
Unemployment / Minimum wage	6.7%	8.5%	16.2%		6.3%

Adana

In Adana, 55.3% of residents stated economic matters to be the most pressing issues on the country's agenda. Over half of Ak Party (56.6%), CHP (55.4%), HDP (56.3%) and İYİ Party (67.3%) voters, as well as nearly half of the MHP electorate (44.4%) share this opinion. For Adana, priority matters within the country's economic distress are revealed to be unemployment and inflation. Unlike in the other three cities analysed, for Adana residents these two matters appear to come first and foremost.

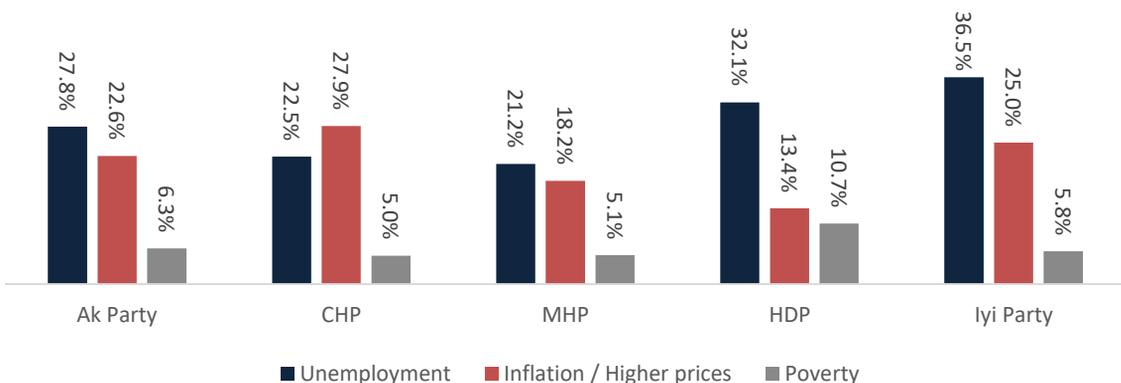
Here too, economic problems appear to have a spill over on the local agenda, with 30.5% choosing "economy" and 29% "unemployment" to be the most prevalent problems of Adana. Thus, it is highly likely that the economy was well present among the factors which contributed to the results of the election.

Most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Unemployment	27.9
Inflation / Higher prices	21.7
Security / Terror	12.1
Poverty	5.7

The second most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Foreign powers / Foreign countries	29.2
Education problem	24.2
High Inflation / Low purchasing power	9.0
Economic crisis / Economic problems	9.0

The most pressing issues of Adana	%
Transportation problem / Damaged roads	32.0
Economy	30.5
Unemployment	29.0
Traffic	29.0

The most pressing issue faced by Turkey today



Mersin

According to nearly 6 out of 10 Mersin residents, economic issues (ie. crisis, unemployment, cost of living) constitute the most urgent problem facing the country today (59.7%). 57.4% further state these issues to be the second most pressing problems as well. This view is shared by 42.8% of the Ak Party electorate in Mersin, while a striking 63.3% of CHP, 68.2% of HDP and 64.6% of MHP voters feel the same.

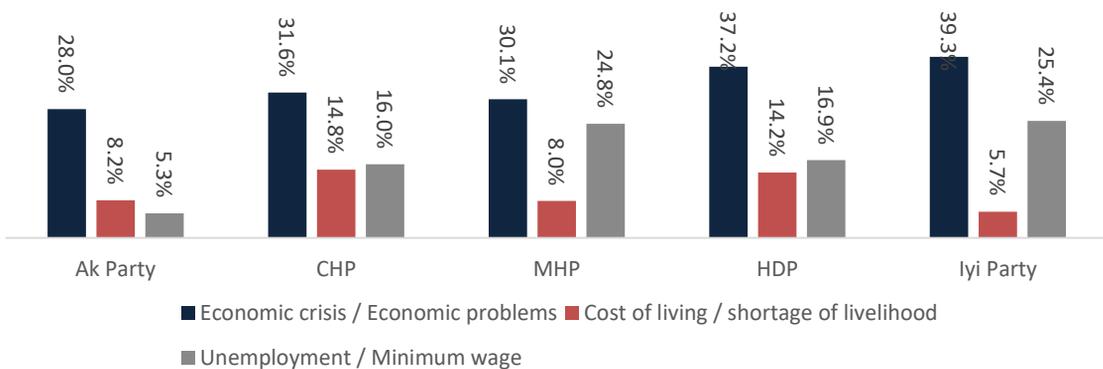
For one out of three Mersin residents, unemployment is the greatest challenge the city is currently enduring. This indicates the prevalence of economic troubles as the root cause of a range of other issues that come about as an off-shoot to the worsening conditions, in the eyes of the city's electorate. It is thus possible to conclude that the economy is a major topic in the agenda of the city, and that solutions are awaited avidly here, perhaps even more so than in Istanbul or Ankara.

Most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Economic crisis / Economic problems	34.5
Unemployment	15.6
Cost of living / shortage of livelihood	9.6

The second most pressing issue faced by Turkey today	%
Unemployment	25.5
Inflation / Higher prices	23.3
Security / Terror	14.0
Poverty	8.6

The most pressing issues of Mersin	%
Unemployment	31.2
Transportation problem / Damaged roads	30.3
Traffic	27.1
Economy	26.3

The most pressing issue faced by Turkey today





It is thus possible to conclude that, in combination with other factors that are beyond the scope of our report, economy did play a major role in the opposition's success. With this, the results also indicate that although the governance of the economy at large remains under the jurisdiction of national politics, citizens still expect a certain extent of economic relief through initiatives undertaken by their newly elected local governments and governors, as per the spill over of economic troubles into the greatest issues faced by cities, and not just the country as a whole.

Conclusion

In our December 2018 nationwide survey 60.1% of participants agreed with the statement that in general elections, they always vote based on party identity but that in municipal elections, local candidates shape their voting preferences. The relatively ideology-independent and less consequential nature of local elections appear to have provided a safe space for citizens to express their discontent with the current direction of the country. The importance placed on the urgency of the worsening economic conditions and the growing impact of these conditions on household finances, coupled with the successful choice of local candidates by CHP and the smooth transition of votes from opposition parties to these candidates, seem to have provided the means to success for opposition parties, especially in metropolitan cities where an important part of the country's economic weight is centred. Things were further complicated for the ruling coalition by the commonly held perception that local elections present a good opportunity for citizens to convey dissatisfaction with their respective party's national leadership without causing major impacts on national governance. In many ways, Ak Party and MHP electorates sent out a clear message to their leaders, similar to the March 2009 Local Elections, that while they don't trust anyone other than President Erdogan to solve the major problems of the country, their preferences could shift if they don't see results.

Despite the increasingly pressing conditions, it is important to note that the ruling Ak Party – MHP alliance still managed to win the majority of the nation-wide votes on March 31st, with a tally of a little over 51% demonstrating President Erdogan's strong political resilience. However, another important result of the December 2018 survey with implications that will be weakened or exacerbated in the next five years is the question of how the voting preferences of the 29% of Ak Party voters who stated that they might vote for another party if the downward trend in the economy continues will be shaped. While the current picture will not lead to any major changes in the political landscape in the near future nor to any real pressure for early elections, if the opposition parties manage to sustain the momentum imparted by the election results and if the prevailing political figures continue to rally the public and offer themselves as a sound alternative to the current governance, it is possible to predict that the trajectory of the economy in the next five years will be the major determinant of how the 2023 Presidential Elections will go. A failure to generate a sound rebound in the



wake of the current slowdown would be likely to create more popular dissatisfaction with the current leadership. For President Erdogan and Ak Party, this shows the need for a commitment to providing the conditions required in a free market economy and to undertaking the necessary structural reforms, as the President promised in his traditional “balcony speech” after the elections. To what extent these promises will materialize will be a key factor in determining whether the President will be able to carry Turkey through his 2023 goals.

While the economy certainly played a major role in voter preferences, it is important to revisit the campaign message of the ruling alliance and assess to what extent the rhetoric of «national survival» resonated with its electorates. The results of the election shows that this rhetoric, where it was espoused, benefited MHP, the traditional home of Turkish nationalism, more so than Ak Party. The alliance partners entered the race with a joint candidate in 51 of 81 cities. In 9 out of 11 cities where MHP candidates were elected the city mayor, they were competing against Ak Party candidates. Put in a different manner, in a third of the cities where MHP and Ak Party joined the race separately, MHP candidates prevailed as the winner and took over 7 cities from Ak Party rule across the country. As such, MHP appears to have been successful in presenting itself as an acceptable alternative for discontent conservative votes. This further shows that in places where national security concerns did prevail, the electorate rallied around MHP.

In addition to economy, the fact that opposition candidates were able to appeal to the both sides of aisle helped their chances of winning. At times of dissatisfaction with their national leadership, Ak Party voters often express their stance by not participating in the elections, rather than voting for other parties. This time around, this habit appears to have been broken with opposition candidates who managed to collect votes beyond their natural support base. It appears that neither the Kurdish, nor the conservative votes refrained entirely from voting for opposition candidates, indicating that the nomination of non-intimidating characters by Millet İttifakı (Nation Alliance) in key cities paved the way for the alliance to enjoy wider support. While a certain level of cooperation existed between HDP and Millet İttifakı, evidenced by the HDP leadership’s decision not to present candidates in Western cities, this spirit of cooperation for a common cause only materialized on voter level owing to the successful choice of nominees. Across the country, tactical Kurdish votes further helped the opposition candidates, and in Istanbul, they may even bring Imamoglu to the finish line.

For the opposition, the implication is to not only sustain but to expand this new voter base by proving their governance capabilities in local governments they now rule and by continuing to represent a more unifying, solution-oriented and less conflictual politics on the national level. The unparalleled success in these local elections have provided the opposition with an important platform that can be leveraged for electoral gains in the future. The opposition alliance now has potential candidates who were able to garner an appeal beyond their core constituencies and they are likely to contribute to the shaping of Turkish politics in the future.

ISTANBUL ECONOMICS RESEARCH

Turkey PolTrack® Series

VOL. 8 / APRIL 2019

ELECTIONS 2019:

POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS