January 2016

Turkey Divided and Conquered:
How the AKP Regained Power

The landslide victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey’s November 1 election came as a shock to many. Turkish pollsters had predicted the outcome would mirror that of the June 7 election—when the AKP lost its parliamentary majority—with nominal gains resulting in either a razor-thin majority or another hung parliament.

The latest election result, however, comes as less of a surprise when placed in the context of Turkey’s increasingly tumultuous environment and after deciphering President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s divisive and fear-driven campaign strategy.
Erdoğan’s AKP regained its parliamentary majority and surpassed voting predictions by a large margin, earning 49 percent of the national vote—a 9 percent increase from June 7—and gained 317 seats in parliament, meeting the 276-seat requirement. The Nationalist

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**Table 1. Turkey’s Parliamentary Election Results: June 7, 2015 vs. November 1, 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AKP</th>
<th>CHP</th>
<th>MHP</th>
<th>HDP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 7 Vote Share</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1 Vote Share</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 7 Seats</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1 Seats</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Turkish Pollster Predicted Vote Gain/Loss</td>
<td>+1.3%</td>
<td>+2.2%</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPC’s Predicted Vote Gain/Loss</td>
<td>+4.5%</td>
<td>+1.2%</td>
<td>-3.4%</td>
<td>-4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Vote Gain/Loss</td>
<td>+8.6%</td>
<td>+0.3%</td>
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Number of Seats to Secure Parliamentary Majority = 276
Movement Party (MHP) suffered a dramatic 4 percentage-point loss, earning 11.9 percent of the vote, and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) lost over 2 percentage points with 10.8 percent of the vote, barely surpassing the 10 percent election threshold. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) vote share, however, remained the same, hovering around 25 percent.

The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) forecast was close to the mark after analyzing the June 7 election breakdown to determine major shifts in voting patterns and where the AKP would need to win back voters. In an earlier report, we predicted that Erdoğan and the AKP’s divide-and-conquer strategy would garner enough support to regain a parliamentary majority.²

This report looks at voting patterns in Turkey’s November 1 election and highlights five distinct trends, including where the AKP’s calculated gains came from:

- **Voter Turnout Increased**
  November’s overall voter turnout of 85.2 percent was 1.3 percentage points higher than in June, which saw a turnout of 83.9 percent. This translated into roughly one million more votes, increasing the AKP’s potential voter pool and contributing to a share of its total gains. Overall, voter turnout increased mostly in Anatolia and the Black Sea region as well as in urban provinces. Higher voter turnout was likely motivated by Turkey’s fomenting political and economic instability.

- **AKP Picked up Votes in Every Province**
  The AKP picked up votes in every single province—a stark contrast to the June vote, in which it declined in almost every province—including areas in the western and southern coasts that have historically shown little AKP support. The overall uptick in vote share is an indicator that Turks across the board were disillusioned with the failed coalition-building process and, seemingly out of options, voted pragmatically for the largest party in the November election.

- **AKP Regained Nationalist Votes**
  The AKP regained a substantial amount of MHP votes in Anatolia and the Black Sea region, which tend to divide support between the AKP and MHP, and in urban provinces. This is demonstrative of the success of Erdoğan’s calculated strategy of stoking nationalist tensions and renewing an offensive against the Kurds.

- **AKP Recouped Lost Kurdish Votes**
  The AKP regained a number of votes in the Kurdish region, which almost unanimously supported the HDP in the June 7 election. Escalating violence alienated conservative Kurds, who, seeming to blame the PKK and not Erdoğan for the fighting, switched back to the AKP.

- **AKP Gained Third-Party Votes**
  Lastly, but not insignificantly, the AKP gained a share of third, independent, and “other” votes (TIOs) in Anatolia and the Black Sea region. The TIOs’ vote share accounted for roughly 4.9 percent in the June 7 election and dropped to 2.5 percent in the November snap election. A portion of this vote-share loss went to the AKP. Erdoğan had focused part of his election strategy on generating last-minute, backdoor alliances with smaller Islamist parties and groups, which paid off in the end.³

Several lessons emerge from this most recent election:

1. The AKP is the largest party in Turkey and has consistently garnered significantly more votes than any other political party for over a decade now.
2. Turkish society is deeply and almost evenly polarized. There is little indication that there will be any shift in the balance of support between the AKP and other parties, barring a change in Turkey’s demographics.

3. Even amid Turkey’s deeply polarized political environment, swing voters do exist and their decisions will continue to prove decisive.

4. Despite a growing consensus that a political solution is required for Turkey's Kurdish question, there remains a considerable nationalist constituency eager for military responses as well.

5. For the AKP, one lesson from the election will almost certainly be that national crisis can translate into electoral opportunity.

Turkey’s stability and security, however, will only be tested further under AKP leadership. Creeping authoritarianism and the Islamization of Turkish society, a reeling economy, an escalated Kurdish conflict, the mounting Syrian crisis, and the risk of further Islamic State attacks in Turkey will challenge the AKP as it balances continued provocation and fear-mongering with reconciling the deep divisions in society. It remains to be seen how the AKP will respond to these critical issues moving forward, but stability in Turkey and the surrounding region hinges on it.

**Analyzing the AKP Win**

**Erdoğan’s Divide-and-Conquer Strategy**

In Turkey’s June 7 election, the AKP’s unprecedented loss of its parliamentary majority was largely due to nationalist voters who switched to the MHP as well as Kurdish voters in the southeast who voted for the Kurdish-led HDP. Many saw it as a repudiation of the AKP’s increasingly authoritarian mandate and a chance for Turkish politics to course-correct.

For more than two months after the June election, Turkey remained in a political deadlock. Erdoğan—who, as president, is meant to stay above party politics—and the AKP appeared to purposely delay the coalition-building process in order to force a snap election in the hope of regaining a parliamentary majority. Erdoğan attempted this by implementing a divide-and-conquer formula, wagering that a divisive, crisis-driven strategy would win back enough votes.

In order to maintain the façade of coalition-building and compromise, the AKP engaged in negotiations with rival parties, particularly the CHP, though, unsurprisingly, they failed. The AKP’s ostensible willingness to participate in the coalition-building process also served to highlight opposition parties’ unwillingness to work together and Turkey’s inability to form a coalition government. This drew further support to the AKP.

MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, for example, hampered the coalition-building process and alienated supporters by publicly refusing to compromise. He denied being a part of a coalition government with the AKP and dismissed the CHP’s offer to make him prime minister of a coalition government or to establish a minority government between the CHP and the MHP. The MHP’s poor showing in the November election is demonstrative of the fact that voters lost confidence in the party.

Simultaneously, Erdoğan began launching a two-pronged offensive against the PKK—which for its part seemed happy to return to fighting—and against the Islamic State, which Erdoğan allegedly turned a blind eye to initially in the fight against Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. While analysts and critics saw these escalations as an attempt by Erdoğan to cultivate a climate of fear and crisis in the months leading up to the election, swing voters believed these problems to have been caused by the absence of strong, single-party rule.
Drawing from a similar religious, conservative constituency, Erdoğan and the AKP began to unrepentantly pursue the MHP voters they lost in the last election by renewing strikes against the PKK and launching a smear campaign against the Kurdish-led HDP. While some extreme nationalists saw the renewed violence as proof that Erdoğan’s earlier, more accommodating policies had been naïve, if not treacherous, Erdoğan and the AKP newly aggressive tack nonetheless succeeded in winning back nationalist votes.

The offensive against the PKK and the HDP was also an attempt to divide the Kurdish voter base and draw Kurds back into the fray. Religious and conservative Kurds, many of whom have supported the AKP in the past, are largely opposed to the PKK’s hard-line tactics and presented another base of defectors that Erdoğan sought to win back. Erdoğan’s virulent campaign against the HDP, and the ease of drawing ties between the party and the PKK, successfully garnered Kurdish votes for the AKP. The AKP even revised its candidate lists ahead of the November election, nominating nationalists in the Western part of the country and candidates esteemed by locals in the Kurdish east and southeast in order to drum up support.⁶

At the same time, Erdoğan began a war against the Islamic State following the deadly July bombing in the Turkish border town of Suruç that claimed 31 lives. Erdoğan exploited the resulting sense of crisis and danger to the Turkish state, using the opportunity to cast himself and the AKP as the strong leaders the country needed. To demonstrate ramped-up efforts, Erdoğan launched airstrikes against Islamic State targets, increased intelligence-sharing with Western powers, and granted the United States access to its Incirlik air bases located in close proximity to the Syrian border.⁷ The subsequent Ankara bombing in October, which killed more than 100 people, further reinforced Turkey’s deep-seated fear of terrorism and its belief in the need for strong and unified leadership during a time of crisis.

Turkey’s sputtering economy, which relies heavily on foreign investment and the devaluation of the lira—both worsened by the failed coalition-building process—was also drawing negative attention worldwide.⁸ In the midst of a two-front war against the PKK and the Islamic State, as well as an economic downturn, Erdoğan was restrained in the run-up to the election. He focused less on polarizing topics like he did for the June 7 election (e.g., a new constitution and the institution of a super-presidential system) and instead pivoted his platform toward economic promises and safeguarding the country. Erdoğan and the AKP used the uncertain and tumultuous environment as an opportunity to fear-monger and to appeal to Turkish voters’ fundamental desire for, above all else, stability and security.

However, Erdoğan’s strategy of “orchestrated chaos” and his success in casting himself and the AKP as the country’s saviors derives in part from the government’s control over the media. While Turkey’s elections are widely regarded as being free, allowing voters to cast their ballots uninhibited, they are not considered fair. Erdoğan and the AKP have systematically manipulated the media over the years and
stemmed the flow of objective and unbiased information. During campaign season, for example, opposition leaders received very little airtime or impartial media attention. Erdoğan not only engineered the destabilized political environment but also the media that covers it.

**Where Votes Came From: Quantifying AKP Gains**

BPC analyzed the ways in which Erdoğan and the AKP successfully employed a divide-and-conquer strategy to win back support but, equally important, is understanding where that support materialized. This section breaks down vote transfers between parties according to functional regions in order to determine where large shifts occurred and where the AKP regained the most votes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONAL REGIONS</th>
<th>VALID VOTES CAST ON NOVEMBER 1 (AS % OF NATIONAL TOTAL)</th>
<th>AKP VOTE SHARE GAIN (AS % OF AKP TOTAL)</th>
<th>AKP SEAT SHARE GAIN (AS % OF AKP TOTAL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RURAL ANATOLIA AND THE BLACK SEA REGIONS</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WESTERN AND SOUTHERN COASTS</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URBAN PROVINCES</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KURDISH PROVINCES</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS:</td>
<td><strong>102.6%</strong></td>
<td><strong>99.7%</strong></td>
<td><strong>98.27%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not total to 100 due to rounding

* BPC analyzed party vote shares for the four major parties—AKP, CHP, MHP, and HDP—broken down by functional regions and how they shifted from Turkey’s June 7, 2015, parliamentary election to the November 1, 2015, election.

To identify which regions and demographics saw a significant transfer of votes from one party to another and where, specifically, the AKP gained votes, BPC conducted statistical analyses on the change in vote share, comparing all four parties based on functional regions. Functional regions were divided into four categories in order not to skew the data. The groupings consist of provinces with similar demographics and party affiliations located in Anatolia and the Black Sea region, the western and southern coasts, urban provinces and their core peripheries, and Kurdish-majority provinces.

To determine the likelihood that voters switched support from one party to another, for each functional region, BPC graphed regression lines measuring all four parties against each other. For the purposes of analysis, graphs that bared weak or insignificant correlations were not included in this brief.

To calculate the share of the AKP’s overall vote gain by functional region, BPC subtracted AKP total votes per respective region in the November election by AKP total votes per respective region in the June election to yield “a.” BPC did the same calculation for AKP total valid votes in the November election by AKP total valid votes in the June election to yield “b.” BPC then divided “a” by “b” and multiplied by 100 to yield “c,” the percentage of AKP vote share gains per functional region.

To calculate the AKP’s percentage gain in seats by functional region, BPC subtracted AKP total seats per respective region in the November election by AKP total seats per respective region in the June election to yield “x.” BPC did the same calculation for AKP total seats in the November election by AKP total seats in the June election to yield “y.” BPC then divided “x” by “y” and multiplied by 100 to yield “z,” the percentage of AKP seat-share gains per functional region.
• **Anatolia and the Black Sea Region:** Rural, conservative provinces in the Anatolian countryside and the Black Sea region that are heavily composed of MHP and AKP supporters.

• **The Western and Southern Coasts:** Left-leaning coastal provinces in the west and south of the country and overall CHP strongholds.

• **Urban Provinces:** Turkey’s largest cities and core peripheries with a mixed Turkish-Kurdish population.

• **Kurdish Majority Provinces:** Largely Kurdish or significant Kurdish minority provinces in the country’s southeast.
These 39 provinces are overwhelmingly rural and sparsely populated. Though geographically varied, they have long supported Islamist candidates and are more or less homogenously Turkish. Considered to be fairly flexible, Turkish conservatives generally prioritize economic issues over social ones and tend to be more nationalistic.

Drawing from a similarly conservative, right-wing constituency, the MHP picked up a sizable share of votes from disaffected AKP supporters in the June 7 election, which catapulted the party to an overall 16 percent vote share. In the November 1 election, however, the AKP was able to regain most of the lost votes in this region, which accounted for almost 25 percent of valid votes in the November election (see Table 2). Anatolia and the Black Sea region comprised the AKP’s second-largest vote-share gain at around 30 percent and the party’s largest seat-share gain at around 40 percent. Overall, this helped the AKP win significantly.

It is also important to note that voter turnout in this region increased, on average, by 1.3 percentage points, which provided an opportunity for the AKP to pick up more votes across the board.

### Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Rural Anatolia and the Black Sea Region

In rural Anatolia and the Black Sea region, the graphical comparison showed a fairly strong negative correlation, meaning it is highly probable that AKP gains translated into MHP losses here (see Appendix A1). According to BPC calculations, almost 60 percent of the MHP’s total vote loss came from these provinces, resulting in large gains for the AKP. This demonstrates the overall resiliency of the nationalist voter base in the region and the ease with which the party could win them back.
Fast-growing and more politically diverse than the rest of the country, these nine provinces constitute the urban cores and suburban peripheries of Turkey’s five largest cities: Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, and Adana. Gains from the MHP in this region helped the AKP, due to the population density in this region and the sheer number of votes cast. Making up almost half of the country’s valid votes at 47 percent, urban centers comprised the AKP’s largest vote-share gain at almost 45 percent and the second-largest seat-share gain at around 24 percent (see Table 2).

Voter turnout in this region also increased, on average, by 1.3 percentage points, which provided an opportunity for the AKP to pick up even more votes across all nine provinces.

Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Urban Provinces and Suburban Peripheries

True to national trends, in the urban provinces and their suburban peripheries, the graphical comparison between AKP and MHP votes shows a very strong negative correlation, suggesting MHP losses translated into AKP gains in this functional region (see Appendix A2). According to BPC calculations, the MHP lost approximately 11 percent of its vote share in the urban provinces, most of which likely went to the AKP.
Composed of left-wing voters who have typically supported the CHP, these 15 provinces drew higher-than-average support for the AKP in the November 1 election. Even in the predominantly CHP-controlled coastal provinces, conservative voters exist, albeit in smaller numbers. Making up almost 20 percent of the total vote share, the region contributed to about 17 percent of the AKP’s seat-share gain in November. It accounted for the MHP’s second-largest vote-share loss at 15 percent.

The chart below shows that, in both elections, the AKP and MHP have experienced relatively low support in this region. Even so, the AKP gained over 1 percentage point in vote share after the November election, whereas the MHP declined by 0.7 percentage points.

**Table 3. June 7 vs. November 1 Vote Share for the AKP and the MHP in the Western and Southern Coasts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AKP</th>
<th>MHP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>JUNE 7 VOTE SHARE</strong> (AS % OF TOTAL VALID VOTES)</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NOVEMBER 1 VOTE SHARE</strong> (AS % OF TOTAL VALID VOTES)</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Western and Southern Coasts**

True to national trends, the graphical comparison showed a negative correlation between loss of MHP votes and gains in AKP votes meaning that, more than likely, the loss in MHP votes translated into AKP gains (see Appendix A3).
In the June 7 election, the AKP lost more than 15 percent of its vote share from southern and eastern Turkey, which contain Kurdish majorities or sizable Kurdish minorities. While the region overwhelmingly backed the HDP in the June election, the AKP has previously enjoyed moderate support there due to its stated commitment to the Kurdish peace process.

Ahead of the snap election, Erdoğan and the AKP attempted to court a portion of religious Kurds back by casting the Kurdish-led HDP as a PKK sympathizer. The ease with which the AKP was able to draw ties between the HDP and the PKK successfully divided Kurdish voters in the region, many of whom are opposed to the PKK’s violent tactics.

The AKP, which blamed its underperformance in June on “list mistakes,” also overhauled its candidate list, replacing 53 out of 258 members of parliament. The most significant reshuffling occurred in this region due to the AKP’s competition with the HDP, which surpassed the 10 percent threshold for the first time ever. The AKP transferred candidates esteemed by Kurdish locals to the country’s east and southeast, such as Beşir Atalay, an AKP heavyweight known for his role in initiating the Kurdish peace process.

Erdoğan’s strategy was successful, as a portion of religious Kurds who had previously backed the AKP returned to the fold in the November election.

Provinces highlighted in light yellow denote areas in which the AKP won a majority of the votes both in the June 7 and November 1 elections, and, therefore, were excluded from the graphical comparison so as not to skew the analysis.
Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in CHP Vote Share in Kurdish Provinces

Consistent with BPC analysis, the graphical comparison shows a strong negative correlation in terms of loss of HDP votes and gains for the AKP (see Appendix A4). Though representing only 11 percent of valid votes cast in the November 1 election, the region constituted almost 17 percent of the AKP’s seat gains, according to Table 2. Erdoğan’s divisive strategy to win back the Kurds worked, at least in part, and enough to bolster the AKP’s landslide victory. The ongoing conflict between government forces and the PKK also affected turnout in the Kurdish region to some degree, likely further depressing HDP votes.

**Transfer of Votes from the CHP to the AKP**

**Urban Provinces:**

Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in CHP Vote Share in Urban Provinces

It is also possible that the CHP, which suffered a decline in vote share in Bursa, Eskişehir, Kocaeli, and Konya (a total 1.7 percentage-point deficit) lost voters to the AKP in urban provinces. The graph shows a strong negative correlation, suggesting that CHP losses translated into AKP gains (see Appendix A5).

This indicates that a portion of CHP supporters abandoned their political leanings and voted pragmatically in the November election by switching to the AKP. Discouraged by the failed coalition-building process and seemingly out of options for any sort of functional government absent of majority rule, some CHP voters may have felt that the AKP was their only viable option. This is further demonstrative of the success of Erdoğan and the AKP’s strategy of “governing by crisis” in a direct appeal to voters’ overall desire for stability.
Consistent with the analysis above, the CHP also experienced a decline in vote share in four provinces in the region: Burdur, Çanakkale, Hatay, and Karaman (a total 3.1 percentage-point deficit). The strong negative correlation in the graph suggests that, by and large, these lost votes went to the AKP (see Appendix A6).
The AKP also gained a share of TIOs in Anatolia and the Black Sea region in the November election. Erdoğan had focused part of his election strategy on generating last-minute, backdoor alliances with smaller parties and groups. The Felicity Party, for example, reportedly offered 11th-hour support and backing to the AKP prior to the November election, which likely propelled constituents to vote for the AKP.

This calculated and covert strategy garnered extra votes for the AKP, not including a sizable share of the TIOs—2.5 percent of unrepresented votes that automatically go to the largest parties. Together, this vote share accounted for roughly 4.9 percent in the June 7 election and dropped to 2.5 percent in the snap election.

Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in TIO Vote Share in the Anatolian and Black Sea Region

The graphical comparison shows a strong negative correlation in terms of loss of TIO votes and gains for the AKP (see Appendix A7). It is likely that the AKP picked up votes specifically from the Felicity Party and from the Great Unity Party, both far-right Islamist parties, which experienced a decrease in their electorate by almost half.
**Major Trends**

**Table 4. Summary of AKP Gains**

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<thead>
<tr>
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Overall, the BPC analysis of the November 1 vote breakdown points to five distinct dynamics that contributed to the AKP’s sweeping victory. These trends not only help to understand the AKP win but also the voting behaviors and preferences of the Turkish electorate.

**Voter Turnout Increased**

A factor of the AKP win was the 1.3 percentage-point increase in voter turnout in November compared with June. June’s overall voter turnout was 83.9 percent whereas November’s turnout was 85.2 percent. This translated into roughly one million more votes, which increased the AKP’s potential voter pool and contributed to its overall vote-share gain. Specifically, voter turnout increased in Anatolia and the Black Sea region, where the AKP already enjoys sizable support, as well as in urban provinces, which contributed to the AKP’s largest vote-share gain at almost 45 percent.

Higher turnout was likely motivated by the fomenting crises in Turkey brought on by the lack of a functional government, an economic downturn, escalated PKK violence, and the threat of the Islamic State. What’s more, Erdoğan effectively capitalized on Turkey’s instability to cast himself and the AKP as strong leaders that could navigate the storm. This not only drew more voters to the polls but also attracted them to the AKP.
AKP Picked up Votes in Every Province

In contrast to the June vote, wherein the AKP lost voters in almost every province, the party experienced an increase in votes across all 85 provinces, even in places with historically low AKP support. The western and southern coasts, for example, which are generally considered to be CHP strongholds accounted for an almost 17 percentage-point gain in seat share for the AKP. BPC’s graphical comparisons further indicate that the CHP—which saw a decline in votes in parts of the western and southern coasts as well as in urban provinces—in fact lost voters to the AKP.

The overall transfer of votes to the AKP, even in the western and southern coasts where the party experienced a 1 percentage-point increase in votes, is indicative of Erdoğan’s success in cultivating a broad-based climate of crisis. Turks across the board became disaffected by a failed coalition-building process and fearful of heightened instability, prompting them to vote for the largest and, seemingly, strongest party.

AKP Regained Nationalist Votes

The AKP’s damaging loss in June came in part from a sizable base of conservative voters that defected to the MHP, having been disenchanted by the AKP’s poor economic record and its attempt to reconcile with the PKK. However, the AKP was able to recoup these lost votes in the November election.

Erdoğan’s calculated strategy of stoking nationalist tensions by renewing an offensive against the PKK was enough to win back conservative Turkish voters.

The graphs strongly indicated that a substantial amount of MHP votes, which experienced a 4.4 percentage-point loss in vote share in November, transferred back to the AKP in Anatolia and the Black Sea region and in urban provinces. Drawing from a similar right-wing, conservative constituency, the AKP experienced its second-largest vote-share gain in Anatolia and the Black Sea region, and its largest vote-share gain in the politically diverse urban provinces due to the sheer number of voters.

AKP Recouped Lost Kurdish Votes

The AKP also regained a number of votes in Kurdish-majority provinces, which almost unanimously supported the HDP—the first ever Kurdish party to run—in the June 7 election. The Kurdish region accounted for an almost 35 percentage-point seat-share loss for the AKP in June, representing a critical base of disaffected voters for the party to win back.

The AKP’s strategy of casting the HDP as tied to the terrorist-designated PKK alongside the PKK’s decision to escalate violence, alienated religious Kurds worked; many switched back to the AKP in the November election. The BPC graph, for example, shows a strong correlation between the loss in HDP votes and gains for the AKP in the Kurdish region, which contributed to an almost 17 percent seat-share gain for the AKP.
AKP Gained Third-Party Votes

Lastly, but importantly, the AKP gained a share of third-party, independent, and “other” votes (TIOs). Erdoğan had focused part of his election strategy on generating last-minute, backdoor alliances with smaller parties and groups, which paid off in the end. This secret strategy earned extra votes for the AKP, not including a sizable share of the TIOs—2.5 percent of unrepresented votes that automatically go to the largest parties.

The TIO vote share accounted for roughly 4.9 percent in the June 7 election and dropped to 2.5 percent in the November snap election. According to the graph, it is likely that a portion of this vote-share loss went to the AKP in Anatolia and the Black Sea region.

While often overlooked in major elections, Turkey’s independent parties represent an additional base of voters from which to draw from, though it seems Erdoğan and the AKP were the only ones to take advantage.

Why Pollsters and Analysts Missed the Mark

Table 5. November 1 Election Result (Predicted vs. Actual)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>CHP</th>
<th>MHP</th>
<th>HDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JUNE 7 VOTE SHARE</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOVEMBER 1 VOTE SHARE</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE TURKISH POLLSTER¹ PREDICTED VOTE GAIN/LOSS</td>
<td>+1.3%</td>
<td>+2.2%</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPC’S PREDICTED VOTE GAIN/LOSS</td>
<td>+4-5%</td>
<td>+1-2%</td>
<td>-3-4%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTUAL VOTE GAIN/LOSS</td>
<td>+8.6%</td>
<td>+0.3%</td>
<td>-4.4%</td>
<td>-2.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While more than a dozen reputable polling companies exist in Turkey, many of which frequently polled the snap election, not one accurately predicted the AKP’s steep 8.5 percentage-point rise in the November vote. The average Turkish pollster predicted a 1 to 2 percentage-point vote-share gain for the AKP, and BPC’s prediction, which was closer to the mark, projected a 4 to 5 percentage point-gain.

BPC’s prior analysis of the June vote breakdown to determine where, specifically, the AKP lost votes made it easier to decipher Erdoğan’s divide-and-conquer strategy ahead of the snap election and determine where he would attempt to win back support. BPC predicted that this divisive and crisis-driven strategy would allow the AKP to regain its parliamentary majority, though not by the margin with which it did.

¹ The exception was Turkish pollster A&G Research, which came the closest with a forecast of 47.2 percent for the AKP.
There were a number of factors that BPC, other Turkey analysts, as well as Turkish pollsters did not necessarily account for, which could explain the landslide victory. The first was the higher voter turnout, 85.2 percent compared with 83.9 percent in the June 7 election, which translated into a 1.3 percentage-point higher voter turnout and roughly one million extra votes. Overall, voter turnout increased mostly in Anatolia and the Black Sea region and in urban provinces, both of which experienced the largest AKP gains (see Table 2).

According to an Al-Monitor article, which interviewed Turkish pollsters in the election’s aftermath, there was also a sizable portion of undecided voters, about 5 percent overall, who waited until the last minute to make a decision. As such, it was difficult to predict which way these voters would lean as the election neared, especially since it is illegal to conduct polling ten days before an election in Turkey. No last-minute swing-voter preferences were tracked.

Finally, part of the AKP’s gains came from TIOs—third-party, independents, and “others”—which were largely overlooked by analysts and pollsters, including BPC. According to Al-Monitor, “The third factor apparently leading pollsters astray was that there were last-minute alliances between the AKP and small but effective groups that motivated voters.” The AKP attempted to form allegiances with smaller, right-wing Islamist parties like the Felicity Party—which later endorsed the AKP—and the Great Unity Party in order to court their voter bases. Al-Monitor added, “There were few if any signs available to the pollsters about these backdoor and last-minute alliances of small yet effective groups with the AKP.” This surreptitious strategy appears to have paid off in the end, at least marginally.

**Lessons Learned**

First, the AKP is the largest party in Turkey and has consistently garnered significantly more votes than any other political party for over a decade now. This is an indisputable fact. While reasons for its victory can be argued or explained away, it must be acknowledged that a sizable portion of the Turkish population authentically supports the AKP’s Islamist ideology and conservative platform. Moreover, if some of the AKP’s supporters are concerned by the party’s authoritarian drift, they do not seem sufficiently concerned to withdraw their support.

Second, Turkish society is deeply and almost evenly polarized. Although the AKP wins resounding victories over other parties at the ballot box, it has never won an outright majority of votes cast in a parliamentary election. At best, it has the support of virtually half of voters (winning 49.83 percent of the vote in 2001 and 49.50 percent in November 2015), leaving half of Turkey opposed to its rule. Just as importantly, the half of Turkish society that is arrayed against the AKP is also riven with major political, ethnic, and sectarian divisions, preventing the emergence of a unified opposition to the AKP. There is little indication that there will be any shift in the balance of support between the AKP and other parties, barring a change in Turkey’s demographics. With ever more segments of Turkish society—Kurds, secular urban elites, media—feeling oppressed, or worse, by the AKP government, such demographic change through migration is not unthinkable.

Third, even amid Turkey’s deeply polarized political environment, swing voters do exist and their decisions will continue to prove decisive. Moreover, these swing voters showed themselves to be largely conservative, willing to support the stability of continued AKP rule over seemingly more risky alternatives. In the face of mounting risks, many concluded that whatever its faults the AKP was the solution to rather than the cause of the country’s problems. Whether and how the AKP continues to hold onto these votes—not more than nine percent of the electorate—will largely shape Turkey’s near-term future.
Fourth, despite a growing consensus that a political solution is required for Turkey’s Kurdish question, there remains a considerable nationalist constituency eager for military responses as well. To some extent, the AKP has always sought to secure the Kurds’ loyalty without compromising the enduring vision of a strong centralized state and a cohesive Turkish identity, although their vision of what that identity should entail—Islamic faith first and foremost—differs sharply from that of the nation’s founders. The party’s success in winning back some conservative Kurdish voters appears to have bolstered its belief that, armed with religious rhetoric and some cultural concessions, it can cultivate Kurdish support while ignoring the HDP and the PKK completely. At the same time, the HDP’s inability to straddle the divide between its traditional Kurdish nationalist base and its new liberal supporters reveals just how deeply divided public perception on Turkey’s Kurdish question remains.

Finally, for the AKP, one lesson from the election will almost certainly be that national crisis can translate into electoral opportunity. On the one hand, Erdoğan made a tactical concession after the disappointing result on June 7, stepping back from the campaign trail and dropping references to his prized presidential system. At the same time, Turkey spiraled into disarray. A hung parliament, a faltering economy, and a two-front war against both the PKK and the Islamic State left Turks disillusioned, distrustful, and afraid following the June 7 election. To whatever extent the AKP consciously chose to make conflict a part of its campaign strategy, it was vindicated by the results. In short, while the November vote may have remedied Turkey’s governing crisis by putting the AKP back in power, it will not easily resolve the country’s deep-rooted tensions or its looming threats.

**What Four More Years of AKP Rule Could Mean**

Four more years of the AKP could prove to be a double-edged sword for the party. Erdoğan and the AKP drew greater support by stoking instability, but that support is fragile and largely based on fear. If the threats subside, or the AKP is unable to deliver on their promises to bring stability and prosperity, voters could once again grow disillusioned with the party.

In particular, Erdoğan and the AKP will confront this dilemma between continued provocation and reconciliation in three critical areas: rule of law and civil liberties; the Kurdish issue; and foreign policy, particularly in terms of the Islamic State and the mounting Syrian crisis.

Now that Turkey has a united, single-party government, Erdoğan and the AKP have a renewed sense of mandate and will be freer to pursue their policies unilaterally. This could mean a continued authoritarian trajectory of imposing greater limitations on civil liberties and stifling what is left of the independent media. As part of rolling back Turkey’s democratic gains, the AKP has also shaken up its secular foundation. Erdoğan and the AKP’s increasingly radical and Islamist rhetoric has pervaded the socio-political scene, moralizing on anything from traditional women’s roles to alcohol consumption. Under AKP rule, Turkey will likely experience further creeping authoritarianism and Islamization of society.

Though widely unpopular, it is also likely that Erdoğan will continue to pursue a new constitution and a super-presidential system as a way to further cement his grip on power. While he needs a supermajority of 367 votes to change the constitution unilaterally, Erdoğan’s growing influence and systematic weakening of state institutions—control over the bureaucracy, judiciary, parliament, and media as well as curtailing the military—has played into his strategic calculus of cultivating a de facto presidential system. The question is, how will he use these next four years to somehow legalize or legitimize it?
Being only 13 seats shy of the number of votes (330, while the AKP holds 317 seats) needed to call a constitutional referendum, it is likely that Erdoğan will seek popular approval of the strong presidential system that he has long aspired to. However, he would still have to find a way to attract those 13 additional votes from another party and, then, not only maintain the support of all those voters who supported the AKP in the November election but also gain another half percentage point to exceed 50 percent in the referendum. The experience of the inter-election period strongly suggests that Erdoğan will not pursue these additional votes through political horse-trading, but rather by continuing to foster a climate of fear.

The second issue for the AKP to tackle is the Kurdish question, yet, it remains unclear as to how exactly the AKP will proceed. Will Erdoğan seek to put the Kurdish peace process back on track and return to the 2013 cease-fire, or will he step up the military campaign that has killed an estimated 2,000 PKK militants in the last two months? Though the AKP’s campaign rhetoric was aggressive against the PKK in an effort to win back nationalist and conservative Kurdish votes, it is possible that a revitalized AKP government will want to tamp down instability in the country and return to the peace process.

The alternative to this would be grim. If attacks against the PKK continued and peace talks ceased, Turkey could encounter more turmoil with the Kurds and experience an uptick in violence under AKP rule. What’s more, Turkish Kurds and the PKK could push harder for Kurdish autonomy, seeking the help of connected groups in neighboring Syria and Iraq. Ultimately, an emboldened, and possibly transnational, Kurdish movement would further destabilize Turkey’s security, which is already reeling from the effects of Islamic State militants along its border.

Finally, it remains to be seen how Turkey’s foreign policy will shake out over the next four years. Despite being a member of NATO and an ally of the United States, U.S.-Turkey relations have cooled over the years as Erdoğan has become increasingly unpredictable on the domestic and foreign stage. It appears Erdoğan and the AKP have begun to pivot away from the West, focusing instead on becoming a “stand-alone Middle East power that works with Washington only when such cooperation serves their interests.”

Turkey and the United States have butted heads, for example, over their diverging priorities in the region, specifically in response to the Syrian crisis. While Erdoğan views the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the semi-autonomous Syrian Kurds to be his biggest threats, U.S. priorities have focused heavily on fighting the Islamic State, which has exploited chaotic conditions in the region. Erdoğan explicitly underscored that “the PKK poses a primary threat, whereas ISIL is a secondary threat.” A BPC analysis further found that Turkey has conducted a disproportionate number of strikes against the PKK and affiliated Syrian Kurds compared with minimal operations against the Islamic State.

The deadly Islamic State attacks in Ankara, Beirut, and Paris (among other cities) demonstrate that the Islamic State is a well-oiled machine and now an even more sophisticated threat. An inflamed conflict with the Kurds would only destabilize the economy, threaten Turkey’s security, and hamper its ability to effectively combat the Islamic State. It would also complicate U.S. counterterrorism efforts, which rely heavily on Kurdish involvement in fighting the Islamic State on the ground, and further chill U.S.-Turkey relations.

However, with the November election demonstrating that generating crises can yield electoral victories, a major question going forward is whether Erdoğan and the AKP will continue fostering a climate of instability in Turkey and the region as it seeks to cement their control of the Turkish state and society. There already exist a host of domestic and regional factors poised to threaten Turkey’s stability. The danger is that a slight miscalculation by Erdoğan, already well known for his combative style, could spark an international confrontation graver
than intended or push domestic tensions beyond the point of no return. Should such a unilaterally created crisis spiral out of its control, Ankara might look back to its NATO allies for assistance and support. This would put Washington and Brussels on the horns of a difficult dilemma: whether to bail out a prodigal partner or allow it to reap the bitter harvest it had sown.

How Erdoğan and the AKP decide to use their renewed power on these key issues—and whether U.S. and European policymakers have the will and ability influence those decisions—will determine whether they can begin to heal the deep divisions that have taken root in recent years, both inside the country and between Turkey and the United States.
Endnotes


14 “Turkish Polls: The November Rolling Average.”
Appendix

A1 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Rural Anatolia and the Black Sea Region

A2 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Urban Provinces and Suburban Peripheries

A3 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in MHP Vote Share in Western and Southern Coasts
A4 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in HDP Vote Share in Kurdish Provinces

A5 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in CHP Vote Share in Urban Provinces and Suburban Peripheries

A6 Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in CHP Vote Share in Western and Southern Coasts
Change in AKP Vote Share vs. Change in TİP Vote Share in Anatolia and the Black Sea Region

\[ R^2 = 0.18447 \]
Founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole and George Mitchell, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a non-profit organization that drives principled solutions through rigorous analysis, reasoned negotiation and respectful dialogue. With projects in multiple issue areas, BPC combines politically balanced policymaking with strong, proactive advocacy and outreach.

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