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### Socio-demographic determinants of the support for Turkey's Justice and Development Party

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#### Abstract

Using official census data for the province of Istanbul, we identify the determinants of the support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has been in power in Turkey since 2002. District-level socio-demographic indicators such as the gender gap in education and the mean age - which are expected to proxy for social conservatism and the fertility rate, respectively - perform remarkably well as predictors of the party's vote share. The econometric findings are in line with the hypothesis that the AKP has benefited from the existing living conditions of the urban population, especially in peripheral metropolitan areas, and has been particularly successful in identifying the worldviews and addressing the needs of conservative voters many of whom are first or second generation migrants.

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## 1. Introduction

According to 2012 population census figures, Turkey has a population of 75.6 million, just over three-quarters of which lives in urban locations, i.e. province and district centers, while the rest resides in villages and rural municipalities. With an official population of 13.8 million, the Istanbul province is not only Turkey's most populated province, but it also stands out from the rest of the provinces with an urbanization rate of 99 percent and a population density of 2,666 people per square kilometers. During the past six decades, Istanbul – like many western provinces of Turkey – has received millions of internal migrants from the rest of the country, especially from the north and east where employment opportunities have been more limited. Although up-to-date figures on the share of those born outside the province are unavailable, the share of those whose population registry is in another province gives a rough idea of the predominance of the migrant population. According to 2012 figures, only 16 percent of Istanbul residents are listed in the Istanbul population registry. Due to its unique characteristics, the Istanbul province promises to be an appropriate setting to observe whether political outcomes are dependent on quantifiable socio-demographic characteristics of the different areas that make up the province.

Migration from rural to urban areas in Turkey, particularly to Istanbul, has been the subject of a large body of research in many areas of social sciences. While economists have focused on socio-economic implications from a macro perspective, sociologists have mainly examined the life styles of internal migrants, their patterns of integration, as well as their influence on the cultural structure of the recipient localities. Political scientists, on the other hand, have devoted much of their attention to political implications such as the impact of migrants on election outcomes and the political economy of the urbanization process. A common theme of these studies is that the political assimilation of internal migrants is hardly ever complete since they who hold on to much of the cultural values acquired in their origins, and they differ from the 'natives' in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, economic endowments, and - in many cases - ethnic backgrounds (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). It is this distinction that has made it difficult for political parties to strike a balance between the needs and wishes of the native and migrant populations. In fact, their skillfulness in appealing to the underprivileged and conservative urban masses has been seen as one of the main reasons behind the dramatic rise of the pro-Islamist parties in Turkey during the past two decades.

The main purpose of this study is to carry out simple descriptive and econometric analyses to identify the socio-demographic determinants of the electoral success of the currently-ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The reason for the choice of focusing on the AKP is that it has been the dominant party in the Turkish party system since 2002, and also that it is the latest to come in the line of pro-Islamist parties that are believed to have benefited the most from the existing living conditions of the urban population, especially in the metropolitan areas. While the local administrations led by centrist-parties (mostly until the mid-1990's) were overwhelmed with, or reluctant to address the needs of the rapidly growing urban populations, pro-Islamist political parties have proven to be much more adept in serving especially the lower class segments of the population. One reason why the rise of political Islam in Turkey is unique and interesting for academics is that the gradual increase in the support for pro-Islamist parties took place within the democratic multi-party system. In addition to their satisfactory performance on the economic front, long-term socio-economic developments,

demographic and cultural changes, and interventions to the democratic system by the military and the judiciary have all been cited as key factors in the success of the pro-Islamists. Our main goal, therefore, is to produce empirical findings that might provide some new clues regarding the importance of socio-demographic factors.

## 2. Background information on Turkish politics and internal migration

Turkey is a large country that exhibits a great deal of diversity in terms of demographic, economic, social, ethnic, and cultural characteristics, and consequently, in terms of political tendencies. Commonly referred to as “a bridge between the East and the West” and “a cradle of civilizations”, it borders European Union countries Greece and Bulgaria on one end and Iran, Iraq, and Syria on the other. A recent study by Akarca and Başlevent (2011) deals with the regional patterns in political outcomes in Turkey as well as the association between party choices and the disparities in socio-economic indicators across the country. The authors use cluster analysis to identify the provinces that have similar voting patterns in terms of the vote shares of the main political parties. They find that, for each of the five elections between 1999 and 2009, a 3-way partition of the provinces captures much of the variation in voter behavior across the country and also that many of the provinces remain in the same cluster election after election, in a period of major political turmoil.<sup>1</sup> The cluster of (mostly central and northern) provinces where social conservative right-wing parties including the Justice and Development Party have the highest support is also the one where most internal migrants are originally from.<sup>2</sup> Province level data on socio-demographic indicators further reveal that the three clusters are distinct from each other not only in terms of political outcomes, but also socio-economic characteristics. The observed link between political outcomes and the socio-demographic characteristics suggests that there could be much to learn from a multivariate examination of these factors.

In November 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won two-thirds of the seats in the Turkish parliament with only 34 percent of the votes, due to the election system that imposes a ten percent national threshold for representation.<sup>3</sup> The rapid rise of the AKP, which was only founded a year earlier following the dissolution of the pro-Islamist Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*) by the Constitutional Court of Turkey, was seen as “another step in the electoral collapse of centrist politics in the country” (Çarkoğlu, 2002a). Nevertheless, the AKP, considered by many as a pro-Islamist party until the elections, was known to have received votes from other sections of the constituency, especially the center-right, at a time when the existing center-right parties were highly unpopular as a result of widely-believed allegations of corruption and poor performances when in power. The AKP has also been the recipient of a substantial amount of protest votes by large masses who have been adversely affected by the dismal economic conditions that prevailed in Turkey after the former ruling coalition led the country into its worst

<sup>1</sup> Çarkoğlu and Avcı (2002), Dulupçu (2005), West (2005), Tüzün (2007), Güvenç and Kirmanoğlu (2009), and Tezcür (2012) are some of the other studies that deal with the geographical patterns observed in election outcomes in Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Akarca and Başlevent (2010) have found a strong region-of-origin effect on the party choices of internal migrants in Turkey. This finding implies that the migrants are more likely to support conservative parties at their destinations as well.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed analyses of the 2002 elections, see also Açikel (2003), Özel (2003), Tosun (2003), Bacık (2004), Turan (2004), Akarca (2008), and Başlevent and Akarca (2009).

ever economic crisis. The charismatic AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's successful image since his days as the mayor of Istanbul (1994-1998) and his moderate rhetoric also made the AKP attractive to a "diverse array of voters ranging from Islamists to rural nationalists and moderate urban voters" (Çagaptay, 2002). Since 2002, there have been many unprecedented developments in Turkish politics, one of the most remarkable of which is that the ruling party has managed to increase its vote share further in the two subsequent general elections with shares of around 47 and 50 percent in 2007 and 2011, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

In the year 2000, 61 percent of Istanbul's population was born in another province. In view of this extraordinary figure, it is natural to expect that the urbanization process has been a challenging one in many respects and also that migrants have had a strong influence on the local and national political-economic affairs. In fact, there is a large body of literature which offers a specific and comprehensive description of the web of relations that account for the political behavior of Turkey's urban population, especially that of internal migrants. These studies provide convincing explanations as to why the political assimilation of migrants is especially unlikely in the Turkish context (Pınarcıoğlu and Işık, 2009; Kurtoğlu, 2005; Hersant and Toumarkine, 2005).

Narlı (2002) argues that the failure of centrist political parties in the past two decades has to do with their inability to 'mobilize' urban voters while the informal and formal networks among migrants have provided the suitable setting for the grassroots politics that pro-Islamist parties have engaged in to great electoral success during the past two decades. Kalaycıoğlu (2007) claims that the AKP owes its success not only to its ability to appeal to the value systems of conservative masses, but also to "providing for rapid improvement in socio-economic welfare" to those who otherwise would have a much smaller chance of upward social mobility. Öniş (2000) also notes that such informal networks provide a rudimentary form of welfare provision, and that they are crucial to the understanding of the volatile electoral politics in Turkey.

According to Narlı (2002), it is mainly through the above-mentioned links that people are able to make economic gains ranging from finding jobs to obtaining construction permits or title deeds to the pieces of land that they illicitly occupy. Ayata (2008) also argues that the place of origin plays a significant role in community formation and land occupation around the city especially in the early stages of migration. Assuming that the majority of internal migrants lack the financial means to purchase proper housing, it makes sense that their political choices are likely to be affected by their prospects of becoming a part of this redistributive process. In an empirical study of electoral outcomes, Özler (2000) finds that the pro-Islamist Welfare Party fared better in the 1995 national elections in neighborhoods with larger shares of illegally built housing units. Yalçınhan and Erbaş (2003) also carry out an extensive study demonstrating the strong link between the squatter settlements and election outcomes in İstanbul. Finally, Buğra (1998) points

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<sup>4</sup> Among the many papers focusing on the various aspects of the rise, ideology, and the key policies of the AKP are Çarkoğlu (2002b, 2010), Gülalp (2004), Atacan (2005), Tepe (2005), Öniş (2006), Özbudun (2006), Sayarı (2007), and Yıldırım *et al.* (2007). For discussions on the role of religion in Turkish politics, see Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000), Güneş-Ayata and Ayata (2002), and Kalaycıoğlu (2007). More general discussions and empirical results on the determinants of voting behavior in Turkey can be found in Esmer (1995, 2002), Özcan (2000), Başlevent *et al.* (2005), and Çarkoğlu (2008).

to the economic consequences of squatting and refers to this phenomenon as the “immoral economy of housing in Turkey”.

As the literature review above suggests, in the Turkish context, the concept of urbanization is closely related with internal migration which has been a major driving force behind the steep rise in Turkey’s urban population as well as the socio-political developments in those areas. This is why the current study considers internal migration as an indicator of the type of urbanization that poses the greatest challenge for policy makers, and thus, is the most relevant in the political-economic sense.

### 3. Methodology, Data, and Regression results

Our empirical examinations rely on the premise that political preferences reflect the decisions made by utility maximizing individuals. Voters decide to participate in political processes and vote for a given party based on their current socio-economic conditions as well as their expectations for the future. They are also likely to take into account the conditions that affect the general population. Thus, we argue that the support for the ruling AKP is influenced by the urbanization patterns in Turkey’s provinces as these patterns have been a major determinant of the existing social, economic, and cultural conditions prevailing in each province.

In the absence of individual level data from a comprehensive nationwide survey designed specifically for the purpose of examining the relationships in question, the best alternative is to work with official socio-demographic and election data available at the levels of the major administrative units in Turkey. Our empirical work comprises a district level analysis which is restricted to the province of Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> With 39 districts that exhibit a considerable amount of variation with respect to schooling levels and migrant and vote shares, Istanbul appears to be an ideal context for testing hypotheses relating to the relationships between the indicators at hand, considering that a nationwide study would have required a lot more factors to be controlled for before reliable estimates could be obtained.

In preparing our data set, we made use of two databases available at the website of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat). These databases can be used interactively to generate the district level indicators to be used in the empirical work. One of these databases contains the results of the 2010 census of the Address Based Population Registration System, which allowed us to compute urbanization rates, migrant shares, etc. This database also contains information on the number of people in various age groups as well as those who have completed a given level of education. The other database on the TurkStat website contains the results of 2011 General Elections at the province and district levels. Participation rates as well as party vote shares are available from this database (See Table 1).

The empirical work to be presented in the next section involves the estimation of a multiple regression model where the AKP vote share appears as the dependent variable. As for the explanatory variables, the **population registration rate** of a district is the percentage share of those who are listed in the population registry of Istanbul. In the absence of information on net

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<sup>5</sup> Districts are small administrative units that make up provinces. They have municipalities run by elected mayors.

**Table 1:** District-level data for Istanbul province, 2011 general elections

District	Population	Turnout rate	AKP vote share	Population registration rate	Mean age	Mean years of education	Gender gap in education
Adalar	14,221	84.1	32.1	41.4	39.1	9.1	7.2
Bakırköy	219,145	85.2	26.2	36.9	38.5	10.5	8.0
Beşiktaş	184,390	84.8	20.3	35.9	39.3	11.3	6.4
Beykoz	246,136	87.5	52.3	32.6	32.2	8.2	15.0
Beyoğlu	248,084	83.5	50.6	15.9	31.7	7.5	15.0
Çatalca	62,001	91.4	38.3	69.2	34.3	7.3	14.9
Eyüp	338,329	87.5	48.7	21.5	31.2	8.0	13.7
Fatih	431,147	82.7	51.8	24.5	34.4	8.1	12.3
Gaziosmanpaşa	474,259	86.6	57	16.7	29.7	7.3	15.9
Kadıköy	532,835	86	24.5	34.5	40.5	10.9	9.0
Kartal	432,199	87.5	45.6	15.6	32.1	8.5	15.0
Sarıyer	280,802	86.4	40.3	21.8	33.2	9.0	9.5
Silivri	138,797	88.2	41.1	40.3	32.4	7.6	12.3
Şile	28,119	90.1	51.6	59.9	38.4	7.2	17.7
Şişli	317,337	83.1	35.8	23.1	34.6	9.2	7.9
Üsküdar	526,947	86.8	49.9	20.8	33.5	9.3	12.0
Zeytinburnu	292,430	85.5	51.4	19.4	30.1	7.4	14.4
Büyükçekmece	182,017	85.7	45	24.9	31.5	8.6	11.9
Kağıthane	416,515	86.4	55.1	10.5	30.1	7.7	13.2
Küçükçekmece	695,988	86.7	45.9	12.0	29.7	7.8	14.6
Pendik	585,196	86.9	56.4	9.7	29.3	8.0	17.5
Ümraniye	603,431	87.2	57.8	12.5	29.5	8.2	14.9
Bayrampaşa	269,481	88	54.3	26.5	31.8	7.7	13.8
Avcılar	364,682	85.1	42.1	16.1	30.6	8.3	12.7
Bağcılar	738,809	86.9	60.2	6.7	27.4	7.1	18.1
Bahçelievler	590,063	85.7	51.7	12.4	30.8	8.2	13.7
Güngören	309,624	85.8	55.4	12.9	31.4	8.1	14.2
Maltepe	438,257	86.2	42.1	17.5	33.8	9.1	10.8
Sultanbeyli	291,063	88.2	68.8	3.0	25.3	6.6	25.1
Tuzla	185,819	88.4	51.5	10.7	28.9	8.2	16.1
Esenler	461,072	87.6	64.9	6.8	27.5	6.9	19.0
Arnavutköy	188,011	88.4	61.8	12.0	26.5	6.4	21.3
Ataşehir	375,208	87.5	45.6	13.2	31.3	8.8	10.9
Başakşehir	248,467	88.3	51.9	10.5	26.9	8.5	14.0
Beylikdüzü	204,873	86.6	43.4	22.1	31.2	9.7	11.0
Çekmeköy	168,438	88.8	53	16.0	28.6	8.2	14.5
Esenyurt	446,777	85.8	48.4	8.1	26.8	7.5	17.0
Sancaktepe	256,442	88.7	51.9	5.1	27.0	7.1	19.2
Sultangazi	468,274	88.5	59.6	6.0	26.8	6.8	19.4

migration figures, we expect this variable to serve as a measure of the stock of internal migrants in the districts. Although technically it is possible not to be registered in the province of current residence despite having lived there throughout one's lifetime, the distribution of this variable in the data suggests that it is a good indicator of long-run migration patterns.

The **mean years of education** measures the average years of schooling received by the 15+ years old population of a district. Since the available information in the population census provides only the number of people who have completed a certain level of education, the average figures were obtained by a scheme that converts this information to years of schooling. The **mean age** in the district is also obtained by using information on the number of people in different age groups. We utilize this variable to capture the variation across districts in the fertility rates under the assumption that the mean age would be lower in districts where families typically have a larger number of children. The reason we expect the fertility rate to be relevant to our analysis is that in a predominantly Muslim society, it reflects the degree of adherence to a traditional life-style where contraception is frowned upon and 'quality vs. quantity of children' considerations are largely ignored. Since the relationship between mean age and the outcomes of interest need not be linear, the square of the mean age is also included as a regressor in the regression models.

The availability of educational attainment figures by gender allows us to construct a variable that is expected to serve as a measure of gender inequality not only in education, but also in other domains of social life.<sup>6</sup> This variable, which we call the **gender gap in education**, is computed as the difference between the mean years of education for males and females expressed as a percentage of the overall mean years of education in the district. We expect this variable to proxy for the 'conservativeness' of the cultural environment.

Across Istanbul's 39 districts, the AKP vote share ranges between 20 and 70 percent which means that there is a lot of variation that can be explained provided that the right set of variables are put together. The binary relationships between the AKP vote share and the potential explanatory variables are presented in Figures 1a through 1d. The scatter diagrams reveal clear associations between the AKP vote share and the variables in hand such that the vote share is negatively related with the population registration rate, the mean age, and the mean years of education while it is positively associated with the gender gap in education.

The district-level regression results are summarized in Table 2. With an R-square figure of 0.87, the estimated model yields a very good fit. In line with the binary relationships observed above, we find that the population registration rate and the years of education are inversely related with the vote share, while the gender gap in education has the opposite effect. The coefficients on age and its square imply that the vote share of AKP is maximized when the mean age in the district is around 34. According to our estimates, a one-percentage point increase in the population registration rate leads to a 0.25 percentage point decrease in the AKP vote share. This finding is in accordance with the hypothesis that the AKP is stronger in areas with large migrant populations. The coefficient on the gender gap in education also has the expected positive sign meaning that the AKP has stronger support in conservative districts where men typically receive

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<sup>6</sup> As discussed in Scott (2006), there are connections between gender inequality in one domain and that in another, such as the link between political representation and laws that aim to narrow the gender pay gap.

more education than women. A one unit increase in the value of this variable increases the vote share of the AKP by 1.6 percentage points. This estimate implies that the AKP vote share in a district where men have 10 percent more years of education than women is expected to be 16 percentage points more than a district where men and women have equal schooling levels.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 2:** Regression results

	AKP vote share
Population registration rate	-0.247 (0.008)
Mean age	8.762 (0.012)
Mean age <sup>2</sup> /100	-12.883 (0.012)
Mean years of education	-2.867 (0.060)
Gender gap in education	1.581 (0.001)
Constant	-91.627 (0.172)
No. of observations	39
R-squared	0.869

Note: The p-values of two-sided tests of significance are in parentheses.

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the socio-demographic determinants of the vote share of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has been in power in Turkey since 2002. Making use of data available at the district level, we were able to observe the patterns that apply in the province of Istanbul. Our findings were in line with the hypothesis that the AKP has benefited the most from the existing living conditions of the urban population, especially the lower and middle classes residing in metropolitan areas. Apparently, the party has been particularly successful in identifying the worldviews and addressing the needs of conservative and generally-underprivileged masses of voters many of whom are first or second generation migrants. The high level of support for the party in parts of the province where lower-class migrant populations are concentrated was among the key findings of the econometric work. Alongside ideological and cultural factors, we attribute this success to the party's prioritization of the provision of public services to the lower-class neighborhoods.

<sup>7</sup> Since the dependent variable in our regressions is restricted to the zero-one interval, an alternative to OLS regressions would be estimating Grouped Logit models with correction for heteroscedasticity. These estimates, which yield patterns that are mainly in line with those presented here, are available from the authors upon request.



One example of such services are housing projects undertaken by the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (“Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı” or TOKI for short in Turkish) that have allowed many families to purchase their own homes and saved them from having to pay monthly rents. In addition to gaining access to affordable housing units, many lower-income families have also had the opportunity to sign contracts with construction companies and build larger and more modern housing units on the property that they have been occupying. Such projects initiated within the framework of what is known as the “urban transformation” of many districts and neighborhoods of Istanbul are among the prime examples of how local administrations provide the underprivileged masses with social mobility opportunities that they have been pursuing for a long time, even though much of the profits are nowadays taken in by construction companies.<sup>8</sup> The extension of public transportation services to the suburbs and improvements in access to health services have also made life easier for the residents of peripheral districts.

The discussion presented so far may not have given many clues as to whether or how the AKP’s success has to do with its pro-Islamist roots. We must, therefore, point out that many services provided by local AKP officials continue to have a religious aspect to them, and since Islamic conservatism is much more common among low-income families living in poorer districts, such actions have repeatedly paid off at the ballot box. Among the many ways of catering to the religious sentiments of the people are the provision of food stamps and free meals in Ramadan, social activities and free public transportation during religious holidays, and mass circumcision ceremonies for male children. Local politicians also take the initiative in the construction and restoration of mosques which they themselves visit every week for Friday noon prayers. Funeral and burial services are provided for free to all residents, and if the family of the deceased wishes the burial to take place in their original hometown, the transportation of the body is also done free of charge. Thus, over the years, party officials have become experts in not only providing basic services, but also in using them as public relations activities that aim to reinforce the positive images of the party leaders in the eyes of their constituencies. In a country where ethnic and religious identities play important roles in shaping people’s political preferences, these parties have also portrayed themselves organizations that bring together “good Muslims” who will do only what is in the best interest of the people. Barring any substantial socio-economic changes, it seems that they will continue to dominate Turkish politics in the years to come.

One aspect of the current study that deserves reiteration here is that basic information drawn from district-level census data proved to be highly instrumental in providing empirical evidence in favor of hypotheses regarding factors behind the success of a certain political party. The gender gap in education, in particular, turned out to have a sizeable impact on the party choice, in the presence of a control for the mean years of schooling in the district. In fact, this variable has a similar effect in a province-level regression across Turkey’s 81 provinces. Thus, it promises to be applicable in different contexts where social conservatism appears to be of relevance. Future empirical work that makes use of this variable which can be calculated using both census and survey data will reveal whether or not its usefulness extends to areas other than voting behavior.

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<sup>8</sup> At this time, there is no district level data that can be used to quantify the impact of this process.

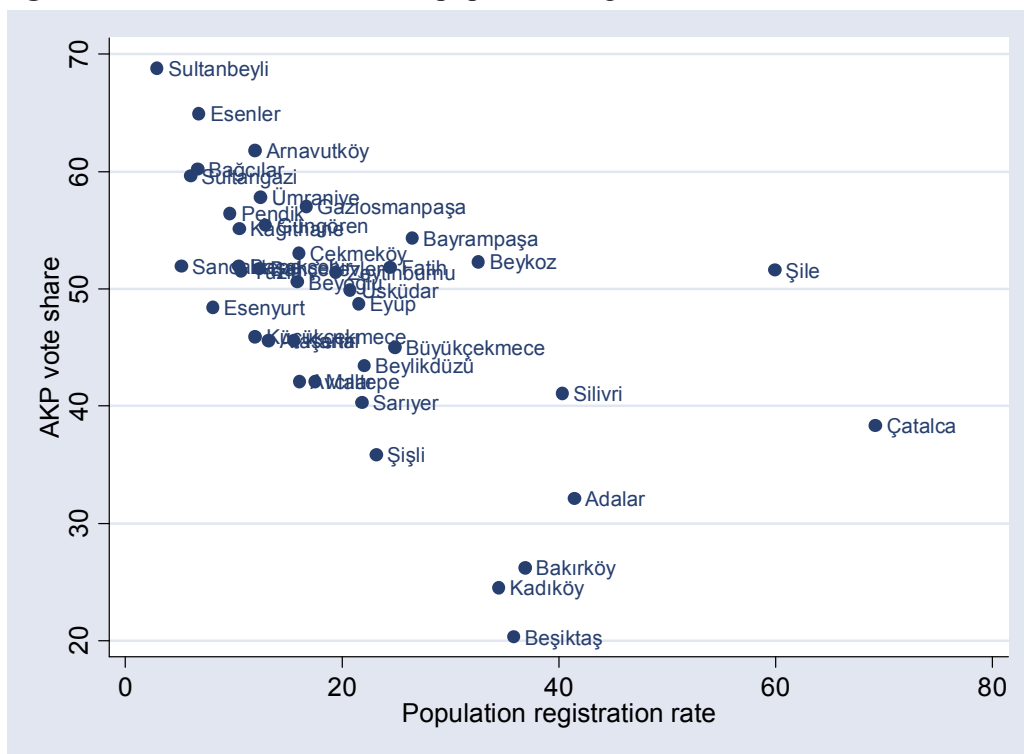
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**Figure 1a:** AKP vote share vs. the population registration rate in 39 districts



**Figure 1b:** AKP vote share vs. the mean age in 39 districts

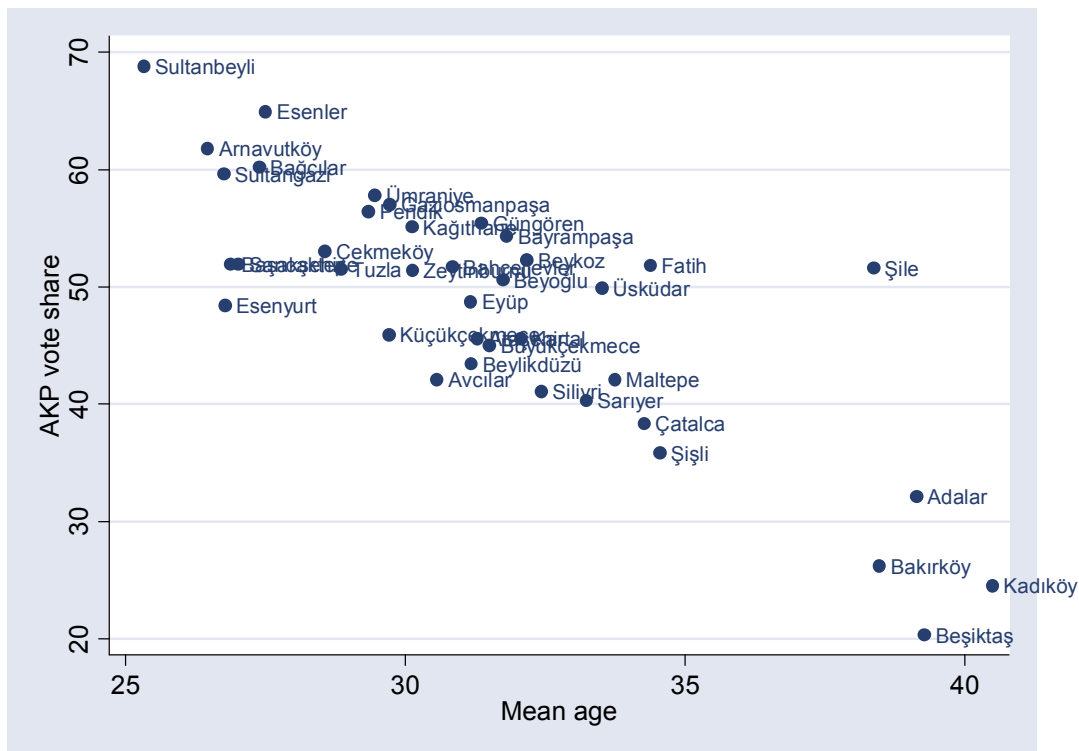


Figure 1c: AKP vote share vs. the mean years of education in 39 districts

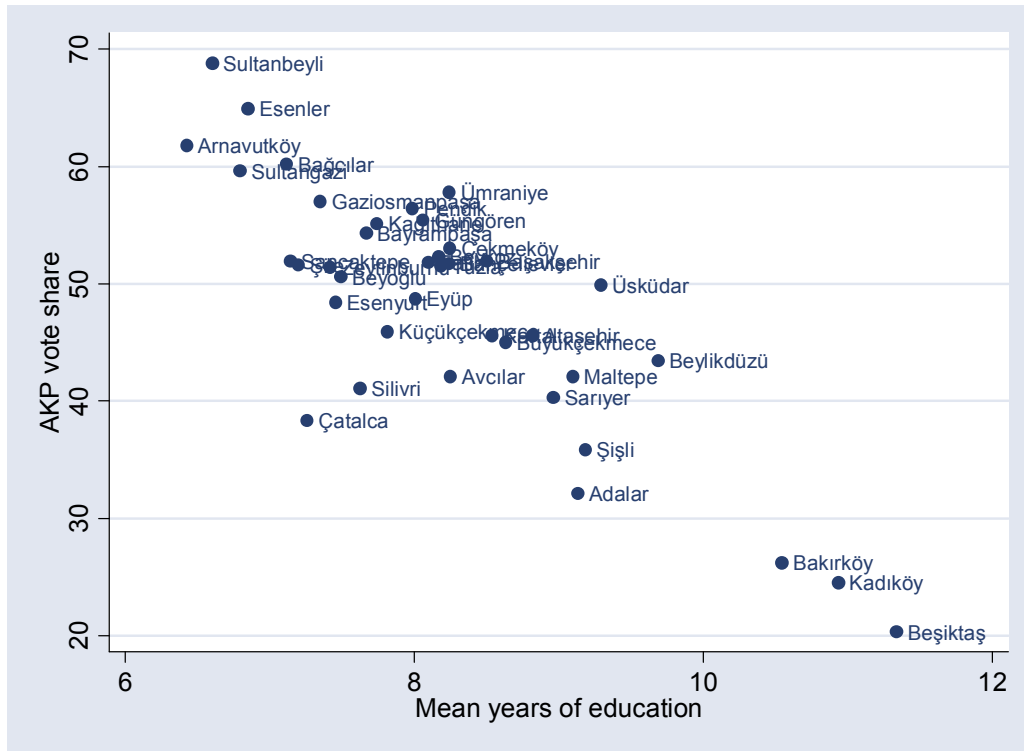


Figure 1d: AKP vote share vs. the gender gap in education in 39 districts

