

The Rising Effect of Economic Issues on the Public Opinion in Turkey

Banu Baybars Hawks

Abstract- This study reveals what the public thinks about current issues in Turkey, and whether the recent trends have any reflections on social, political, and cultural structure of the country. The data collected with this research provide important insights into public's opinion regarding current and potential issues in Turkey, and also guide policymakers in shaping the public policies. The outputs of this study may also encourage scholars and researchers from different fields and backgrounds to study and discuss public opinion with its complex dynamics and milieu of dimensions. This research delivers some of the most evocative and current issues in Turkey; the most important current problems, the economy, terror, the Kurdish issue, government and opposition parties' evaluations, political vacuum, institutional evaluations, political polarization/judicial system, democracy and social relations/change in Turkey. According to the survey, the Turkish public views "unemployment" as the most important problem facing the country. Besides unemployment, the most critical economic issues are determined as the rise in the cost of living and depreciation of the Turkish lira. In addition to these, foreign policy approval rate and support for EU membership increased. While the media was again the least trusted institution, trust in institutions generally increased.

Keywords- public opinion, political actors, government, economics, terror, Kurdish issue, state of governance, social relations, Turkey

I. Introduction

People have always been interested in finding out what people think about various matters, so polling people was inevitable. The responsiveness of government policies to citizens' preferences is a central concern of democracy and public opinion is crucial for political actors to maintain their legitimacy and political authority.

Banu Baybars Hawks, Professor of Communication
Kadir Has University
Turkey

In *Encyclopaedia of Social Problems*, public opinion is defined as "a collective attitude or preference concerning political issues shaped by a varied and complex interplay of factors. Group membership, personal experience, gender, race, education, class, media, government officials, elites, religion, geographical region, culture, and political ideology all affect socialization and knowledge acquisition that influence and are influenced by public opinion" [1]. The validity and reliability of polls can be opened up to discussion time to time. But despite its problems, polling is still the most common method of measuring public opinion and a valuable mechanism. Polls aim to measure what the public thinks on certain issues but often fail to determine how and why they think this way. Polls also lack context by focusing on opinion outcomes without considering the social forces and assumptions that inform those opinions [1].

During the presidential debates and the election season, politicians, media and research companies talk much about "public opinion". But what is public opinion, anyway? How do public form their opinions, where do they come from, and how do government officials use it? Can media provide the knowledge that people need to make informed opinions?

According to Walter Lippmann, the main point of public opinion is to demonstrate the problem facing democracy in its original form "because the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside" and to suggest a remedy based on organized intelligence and "representation of the unseen facts" of public affairs [2]. Lippmann supports his argument by discussing how public opinion consist of pictures inside men's heads and why the picture "so often misleads men in their dealings with the world outside" [2]. He reveals how stereotypes affect public opinions and how these individual opinions "are crystallized into what is called public opinion" [2]. According to Lippmann, public opinions are the pictures inside men's heads, "the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship" [2].

There are many factors playing a role in the composition of public opinion. Throughout public opinion, Lippmann explains the way that our individual opinions can differ from those that are expressed in the outside world. He develops the idea of propaganda, claiming that "In order to

conduct propaganda, there must be some barrier between the public and the event” [2]. With this separation, there is the ability of the media to alter the flow of information, to manipulate events or present limited information to the public. In this way, Lippmann was essentially presenting some of the first views on the mass communication concepts of gatekeeping and agenda-setting, by showing the media’s power to limit public access to information.

Following McCombs and Shaw’s pioneering study during 1972 American presidential election period, agenda-setting has been heavily researched and more than 500 research articles have been published on the issue by making the field extremely prominent in mass communications. In the past, researchers have been more inclined to focus on what shapes the public agenda, treating the media agenda as an independent variable in that process. Recently, however, they have begun to carry out studies focusing on who and what shapes the news agenda and have thus taken the media agenda as a dependent variable. With the agenda setting of the media, the public learns what is important and newsworthy.

Elites have recognized the significance of the media and may seek to ‘frame’ issues, to form public opinion [3]. Framing means to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation [3]. Framing effects are based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences. The most political issues are heavily framed in order to persuade voters to vote for a particular candidate.

Social desirability is another important factor in the formation of public opinion. It can be defined as the idea that people in general will form their opinions based on what they believe is the prevalent opinion of the social group they identify with. Based on the agenda setting and framing functions of the media, and with the repeated news on certain issues, the public may perceive a false vision where the perceived truth can actually be very far away from the actual truth. Public relations, advertising techniques, and mass media especially television itself since 1950, all became critical tools in shaping public opinion [4].

There have been a variety of academic studies investigating whether or not public opinion is influenced by “influencers”, or people that have a significant effect on influencing opinion of the general public regarding any relevant issues. Lazarsfeld and Katz modeled the transfer of information from mass media sources to the general public as a “two-step” process.

The two-step flow of communication model hypothesizes that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders, and from them to a wider audience. The people with most access to media, and having a more literate understanding of media content, explain and diffuse the content to others [5]. Opinion leaders influence the opinions of audiences via personal contact, “but additional intermediaries called change agents and gatekeepers are also included in the process of diffusion” [6]. “A person evaluates a new idea and decides whether or not to adopt it on the basis of discussions with peers who have already adopted or rejected the innovation” [7]. This dependence on peers underlines the role of opinion leaders in the public opinion formation process. Besides opinion leaders and other intermediaries, news commentators, presidents, political party leaders and special interest groups also have the power to shift public opinion, which has substantial proximate effects on policymaking.

“In contemporary society public opinion is generally mediated by the mass media, which has come to encompass the Habermasian public sphere” [8]. The ideal notion of public opinion in the public sphere are premised on the assumption of rational-critical undistorted debate, freedom of speech and universal access. However, “this arena is now characterized by the conflict between market and democratic principles, by competing interests of politicians and the media”. The issues are presented by media are distorted to gain attention, rather than to provide information. “The opinion of the ‘public’ is no longer created through deliberation, but is constructed through systems of communication, in conflict with political actors, who seek to retain control of the dissemination of information” [8].

As mainstream media continues to lose the public’s trust and people choose to follow alternative news channels, the expansion of the internet as a new method of communication provides a potential challenge to the political parties as formers of public opinion. While people try to reach information from the alternative channels on the Internet, there is another “panopticon” which follows and saves the digital “footprints” of people and sells them to the market, politicians or policy makers, as in the case of Donald Trump’s campaign in the 2016 presidential elections of US or the success of Brexit supporters. In the most “extraordinary” elections of the US in 2016, Donald Trump’s presidential campaign exploited the personal Facebook data of millions.

Technological advancements have impacted upon the nature of political activity and the political message itself. Each technological communication development has raised concerns in respect of its impact and influence on public

opinion [8]. While the internet provides greater opportunities for individuals to participate and embodies a challenge to the existing forums of debate, it is also controlled by the elite as a surveillance tool. Through a Habermasian framework, it is possible to raise questions in respect of the role of the internet in political communication and the construction, reconstruction and expression of public opinion.

II. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is a quantitative research. The research on *The Political and Social Trends in Turkey* has been conducted since 2011 by Kadir Has University- Turkey Research Center, in which the author coordinates the survey series. For the first two years, the method of data collection was CATI (computer-based telephone interviews). Since 2013, the data was collected via face to face interviews. The survey on 2018 was conducted between 12 December 2018 and 4 January 2019. For the years of 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 the sample included 1000 respondents, representative of the country's population, aged 18 and above, residing in the city centers of 26 cities in Turkey. A stratified random sampling frame has been used.

The main topics covered by the survey are as follows: The most important current problems in Turkey, the politics, economics, foreign policy, the Kurdish issue, FETO, terror, Syrian refugees, evaluation of Presidential Government System, elections, identities and social relations, and change in Turkey.

III. Results

The main objective of this study is to determine the role of different variables including the political actors and media influencing public opinion. The findings of this research will reveal who the most influential actors are on Turkish public opinion and what the possible consequences of recent trends in Turkish society could be.

The survey begins with the questions regarding the respondents' political opinions and ethnic backgrounds. 44,4% of sample population identify themselves as "pious and conservative", marking a 3% decrease since 2017. However, it should be noted that the concept of "pious" was added as a separate political category to the research in 2015 to distinguish their preferences from "conservatives" and since then its percentage has continuously increased, reaching to 30,9% in 2018. Meanwhile those who define themselves as politically conservative have continuously declined and reached to 13,5% in 2018.

The ratio of "nationalists" increased to 21% in 2018 from 19,2% in 2017. A similar trend has been detected in the percentage of rationalists. Those who stated that they are "Republican/Kemalist" increased more than 1 point in comparison to (15,5%) 2017 and became 16,9% in 2018. However, the biggest drop in the ratio of republicans happened in 2016; republicans fell down to 15,7% in 2016 from 25,4% in 2015. Those who define themselves as "Social Democrats" decreased 4 points and are found to be 6,3%. This composition may explain current picture of the country. In the leadership of Justice and Development Party (AKP), the governing party of Turkey, one segment of society is becoming dominant, so their opinions and discourses, while other segments of the populations are losing their power and visibility.

When asked about their ethnicity, 85,3% of respondents defined themselves as Turkish, indicating a decrease, compared to 2017 result of 89,9% and an increase, compared to 2016 results of 83,4%. Those who stated that they are Kurdish increased to 10% in 2018 from 6,2% in 2017. When asked about their religious belief, 85,9% of respondents defined themselves as Muslim, indicating an increase compared to 2017 results of 82,9%.

A. *The Most Important Current Problem in Turkey*

According to the survey, the Turkish public views "unemployment" as the most important problem facing the country. Besides unemployment, the most critical economic issues are determined as the rise in the cost of living and depreciation of the Turkish lira. The unemployment was seen as the third most serious problem with 17% in 2017, but it reached to 27% this and became the first among the problems the country is facing. Unemployment, cost of living and devaluation of Turkish lira reached to 51,1% in 2018 from 30,2% in 2017.

Terrorism (13,8%) and struggle against FETO (16,2%) are still regarded as one of the biggest problems of Turkey. However, in 2017, Turkish people regarded terrorism as the most important and the fight against FETÖ as the second most important problems facing Turkey. Terrorism has gone down to 13,8% in 2018 from 29% in 2017, indicating 52,4% decrease. In 2018, with a 16,2% rate, FETO continues to be viewed as the third most serious problem in Turkey. This picture reveals the changes taking place in Turkey in a year. While terrorism was seen as the most important current problem in Turkey in 2017, economic problems came to the fore in 2018.

Geographically, those residing in Marmara, Black Sea, Aegean, Central Anatolia and Mediterranean regions regarded "unemployment" as the top problem, while those

residing in South Eastern Anatolia region identified “cost of living” as the top issue. Eastern Anatolia region still regards “terrorism” as the top issue in Turkey.

B. The Economy

The most critical economic issues are depreciation of the Turkish lira, increase in inflation and unemployment. The increase in the interest rates, food prices, rents and house prices, and high level of taxes were identified as the other most critical issues of the economy.

The rate of those who regard the past year as being economically worse than the year before went up to 57,1% from 48,8%. The ratio of the ones who indicated as not being affected by economic developments is 21,9%.

The number of those who find the government’s economic policies to be successful dropped strikingly. While the rate of those founding the government’s economic policies “successful” or “very successful” was 47,7% last year, this figure went down to 33,5% this year. Similarly, the percentage of people who thought the government was not succeeding in its economic endeavors was 27,7% last year, this ratio went up to 41,7% this year. The number of respondents answering that they thought the economic policies were successful were particularly the AK Party voters. In contrast, amongst respondents who voted for other parties the economic policies were mostly described as “unsuccessful”. Those who found them the most unsuccessful were HDP supporters by 72%.

C. Terror

Survey results indicated an even distribution in solutions proposed to fight against terror. The majority of respondents thought military methods (45,5%) as the most effective approach in dealing with terrorism in 2018. Respondents who found the political methods as optimal went down to 30,5% from 32,2%. However, the participants who thought that the PKK can be defeated by military means alone went down to 52,7% from 60,1%. Due to the fact that fight against terror is a critical item on government’s agenda, this finding would likely interest the authorities as regards popular public opinion on the matter.

Notably, 38,2% of participants stated that the government’s performance in combating PKK terrorism was successful. While in 2017 42,4% of the participants found the government’s fight against the PKK successful, this ratio considerably decreased in 2018. The government’s performance in combating FETO was seen successful by 35,6%. While in 2017 %50,9 of the respondents found the government’s performance in combating FETO, this ratio considerably decreased in 2018. Respondents still consider FETO as a threat to Turkey. 32,3% of the population

thought FETO is threat to Turkey in 2018. However, it should be noted that threat perception considerably decreased as the ratio in 2017 was 47,9%.

D. The Kurdish Issue

While in 2017 43,5% of the participants thought that the government was successfully handling the Kurdish issue, this considerably decreased to 34,7% in 2018. Participants who saw the government’s approach as being unsuccessful increased from 25,5% in 2017 to 30,9% in 2018.

Since 2013, there was a continuous decrease in the number of respondents who thought that the HDP and PKK represent the Kurdish people. While 42,3% of participants believe HDP does not represent Kurds, 47,1% of them thinks PKK does not present Kurds. 82,8% of respondents thought Abdullah Öcalan has an influence on the PKK in 2016, this amount dropped to 58,5% in 2017, and 49,8% in 2018. The ratio of for his influence on HDP is also decreased in 2018 to 47,6% from 50,6% in 2017. When asked what kind of government Kurdish people would like to have in the future, 40,1% of respondents said that the Kurds would like to have an independent Kurdish state, while 21% of respondents stated they want a autonomous government.

According to 36,4% of participants, the main bond connecting Turks and Kurds is “being Muslim.” The ratio of participants who wanted the resolution process to restart decreased in 2018 to 20,4% from 23,2% in 2017. When asked about how the recent developments in Iraq and Syria have affected expectations of Kurds in Turkey, 28,9% of respondents thought this situation encouraged Kurds on independency, indicating an increase, compared to 2017 result of 21,4%.

E. The Government and Opposition Parties’ Evaluations

Like the previous year, it was found that the most successful political party was perceived to be the AKP and the most successful party leader was AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, support for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan considerably decreased to 38,9% from 56,4%. A similar trend has been detected in the opposition party leaders. As regards opinions about the leadership of the opposition, support for Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican Party (CHP) considerably decreased to 20,6% in 2018 from 34,8% in 2017, and support for Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) decreased to 20,9% in 2018 from 31,5% in 2017. Support for Meral Akşener, leader of the Good Party (İYİ) decreased to 12,8%

in 2018 from 15,4% in 2017. The HDP's support rate also decreased to 9,7% in 2018 from 10,6% in 2017.

These findings demonstrate that, for the majority of public, government performance and the politics of opposition parties have received an overall negative response.

When asked about the new presidential government system, respondents evaluated it as being successful by 41,4%. However, people support President Erdoğan by 33,6%. This ratio was 49,7% in 2017.

F. Political Vacuum and Polarization in Turkey

28,6% of the respondents thought there is a political vacuum in Turkey. When asked "Where do you see this vacuum in the political spectrum?" to those thinking that there is a political vacuum, the biggest vacuum was found in the "center" by 35,7% and in the "left" by 30,8%.

38,8% of the participants thought there is a political polarization in Turkey, marking a 14,7% decrease since 2017. The axis of polarization mostly seen between secular and religious (51,8%). Besides, 30,8% of the respondents asserted the judiciary has become politicized in Turkey, marking a 20% decrease since 2017.

G. Voting Decisions on 31 March 2019 Local Elections

According to the survey results, both "candidate" and "political party" played an important role for the local elections in Turkey on 31 March.

The question of "Which characteristics should a mayor of X city have?" was responded as "Pious Muslim" in the first rank and "hardworking" as the second rank in Istanbul; while "hardworking" and "honest and honorable" were the first two choices for Ankara and Izmir. While the major problem for Istanbul was identified as the "traffic jam" with 36,5% ratio, the "infrastructure problems" were the main problems with 41% in Ankara and 46% in Izmir.

H. Institutional Evaluations

When respondents were asked which institutions were the most trusted, the gendarmerie became the most trusted institution this year (55,1%). However, there was a general decline of trust in institutions.

A decrease has been recorded in trust in the army from 60% in 2017 to 51,2% in 2018. In 2016, the army has lost its place as the most trusted institution in Turkey the first time since the beginning of the survey series starting in

2011 and in 2017, it gained momentum again as took the second place. Police, which was the most trusted institution in 2017, retreat the third place in 2018 with 51,1% ratio. The most trusted institution in 2016 was the Presidency with 49,4% ratio in Turkey and it fell down to the fifth place in 2018 with 44,1% ratio. The least trusted institution was again media with 31,9% ratio.

I. Foreign Policy

According to the survey results, the percentage of those finding the government's foreign policy to be successful dropped to 32,2% from 45,9%. When the rate of those finding Turkey's foreign policy to be successful is examined in terms of party loyalties, it is seen that AK Party voters predominantly find the government's foreign policy successful, while it is significantly lower among voters of other parties. The percentage of those finding the government's foreign policy "definitely successful" and "successful" was 66,3% among AK Party voters, while it was 20% among MHP voters, 12,5% among CHP voters, and 11% among HDP voters.

The continuation of the EU membership negotiations increased 5,3 points and became 48,9% this year. Even so, this ratio is lower than the previous years, which came as 71,4% in 2014, 65,1% in 2015. The percentage of those supporting Turkey's continued membership in NATO was found to be 58,7. It is possible to say that Turkish people have not yet made up their minds on whether Turkey can ensure its security internationally without being a member of NATO. Indeed, 41,9% of respondents thought that Turkey can provide for its security without being a NATO member, while 37,7% of them thought it cannot.

On the other hand; according to the survey results, 18,8% of the respondents think that "Turkey is in danger of being divided." This rate was 28,8% in 2017.

This year, the trend of support for the government's policies regarding Syria does not continue. There is a 4-point decrease for those finding the government's Syria policies "successful" comparing with 2017. 61,1% of those reporting to be AK Party voters found the government's Syria policy to be "definitely successful" or "successful", while this rate was 30,5% amongst MHP voters, 21,22% amongst CHP voters and 7% amongst HDP voters. When asked about Syrian refugees, 66,6% of respondents stated that they are unhappy with them.

Reduction from 56,4% to 45,1% for the support to the cross-border military actions was observed, though "Euphrates Shield" and "Olive Branch" operations were found to be successful by the Turkish public.

Unlike the previous year, it was found that there was a decrease in the amount of support in Turkey's foreign

relations with Turkic Republics; 15,2% of participants said that Turkey “should ally with Turkic Republics”. This ratio was 25,4% in 2017. The responses of this question were returned as the “Islamic Countries” as the most favored group with 19,6%; it was followed by Russia with 18,2%, and those who replied “Turkey should act alone in its international relations” with 17,5%.

USA ranked first in 2018 as main foreign threat to Turkey with the increase of 17,6 points from 2017 and reaching 81,9% of the participants. Israel ranked second with 63,3%. Azerbaijan was again reported as the friendliest country to Turkey with 63,6% approval Azerbaijan was followed by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Pakistan.

J. Democracy in Turkey

When 35,6% of respondents considered Turkey is a democratic country in 2016, this amount dropped to 29,4% in 2018. On the other hand, the ratio of thoughts which consider that the democracy in Turkey is getting weaker decreased to 33,5% in 2018 from 36,1% in 2017.

Only 37,7% of participants approved that the press is free in Turkey, and only 37,5% thought that there is freedom of thought in Turkey.

K. Social Relations/Change in Turkey

In the research, there were also questions about changes that Turkey has been experiencing. 44,9% of respondents hold the belief that Turkey is a changing country. This ratio was 48,2% in 2017 and 56,2% in 2016. The belief that Turkey is changing have considerably decreased since 2014. Through, 71,2% of respondents in 2017 felt that change in Turkey was on a positive direction, this figure decreased to 55,7% in 2018.

When they were asked about their level of happiness for living in Turkey, the ones who said they were very happy or happy to be living in Turkey has decreased to 38,8% from 52,5% since 2017, while those saying that they were unhappy or very unhappy increased to 19,8% from 12,4% in 2017. In response to a question about the issues that are going for the better or worse, economic growth seems to be moving in a positive direction (19,6%), and economic crisis reported to be taking a negative direction by 42,9%, marking a 16% increase since 2017.

When the results were analyzed according to the political party voters, those who are happiest to live in Turkey are AK Party voters, while MHP, CHP and HDP voters are mostly appear as “neither happy nor unhappy”. 20% of the respondents reported that they would prefer living abroad if they have had an opportunity. The main reason for this preference is the “economy”.

According to the survey results, gay people are the least preferred group as a neighbor with 53,8%. It was followed by refugees with 45,8% ratio. The most preferred neighbors are “Turks” with 57,4% and “Sunnites” with 48,6%. Nevertheless, the tolerance to get in contact and establish social relations with different groups in Turkey is appeared to be increasing in overall.

IV. Conclusion

The recent changes observed in Turkish social, political and economic structure have many different consequences. We need a better understanding of the meaning of these transformations in such areas from social relations to politics. This paper examined the potential causes, dimensions and consequences of changing trends in Turkish society and public opinion. *The Political and Social Trends in Turkey* reveals a consistent trend in public opinion about certain issues for the last five years of the survey, but on most others, the public opinion keeps changing because the agenda items have been quickly changing in Turkey, and the public was not able to grasp and understand them.

This year, it was ascertained that the survey results were affected by the changes in voters’ preferences. The most crucial changes were in consequence of the disengagement experienced some of the political party loyalists, which were determined according to the votes given in the General Elections on 24 June 2018. The rates concerning the government’s policies in different political domains, confidence in institutions and the happiness of living in Turkey significantly changed since 2017 as a result of the changes of Turkish public’s stance in the political spectrum and the political disengagement from their parties.

In addition, the economic situation seems to have influenced people to change their views negatively. According to the survey which measures Turkish public perceptions on current issues and potential problems, the Turkish public views “unemployment” as the most important problem facing the country. In addition to unemployment, the most critical economic issues are determined as high cost of living and depreciation of the Turkish lira. People state they feel worse about economic situation. Besides, those who are happy to live in Turkey are declining and the main reason is the “economy”.

According to the results, the support for President Erdoğan decreased compared to past year. However, it can be speculated that he is the most powerful actor in Turkey that sets the political, media, and even the public agendas. The results also show that while piety increasing, conservatism decreases.

While the percentage of those finding the government's foreign policy to be successful decreased 12 points, support for EU membership increased. There is also a decrease in the support for government's Syria policy and cross-border military actions. The USA is seen as the main foreign threat to Turkey while Azerbaijan is seen as its closest ally.

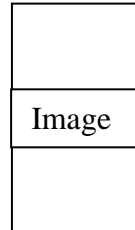
When asked which institutions were the most trusted, the gendarmerie and army came in at the top. However, there was a general decline of trust in institutions. The least trusted institution was again the media. And when it comes to the democracy, the belief that Turkey is a democratic country decreased in 2018. The political vacuum is seen in the "center" and in the "left". Despite a reduction from last year, nearly one-third of respondents think that there is a politicization of the judiciary system. And nearly half of the population think there is a political polarization in Turkey.

It is the author's hope that this study will encourage and guide academics and experts studying on social issues similar to this one. I also hope that the findings of this research may shed light on important characteristics of the institutions functioning in the country, variables setting the public and media agendas, and formation process of public opinion in Turkey.

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