

Analysis of the Democratic Development of a Country in the Context of Voter Turnout: 2007-2018 General Parliamentary Elections: The Case of Turkey

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Abstract

The democracy concept that is based on the idea that the administration is determined by the people is also the source of legitimacy of the state administration. Elections are an indispensable element of democracy in countries governed with democracy, and the electorate are one of the key actors in the decision-making mechanisms of the government. The participation of voters in political life via their votes in elections, and via the representatives they elect is an indication that the democratic participation function is fulfilled. For this reason, low voter turnout rates in elections that are held in countries with democracy might be interpreted as a democratic problem. If the reason for the existence of democracy is the human factor, the voter turnout is one of the indicators for democratic development in a country. High voter turnout means that the citizens of that specific country approve the administration that will be created by the representatives they elect, adopt the regime and that the election results are legitimate. In the present study, which examined the general parliamentary elections that were held in Turkey between the years 2007 and 2018 in terms of the voter turnout rates, it was determined that the Turkish electorate were interested in general elections and that the voter turnout rates did not fall below 84.24%. This rate has followed an increasing trend among elections, and has become a settled culture that established a positive connection between high voter turnout rates and democratic development.

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1. Introduction

It is not possible to make one single definition that everybody agrees about the *democracy* concept, which means the administration of people (Sartori, 1993: 42). In Greek, the word democracy consists of the words "*demos*", which means the people, mass of people, or full citizenship, and "*kratein*", which means power, sovereignty or using power (Schmidt, 2002: 13). According to Plato, democracy "*is a very nice political order, anarchic and colorful*" and refers to "*the equality to those who are and who are not equal without discriminating*" (Kuçuradi, 1998: 21). The reason of referring to the democracy concept with different definitions is that every society interprets it in terms of its socio-economic, political and legal

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structures. It is observed that the democracy concept is associated with various meanings based on the level of development of societies. This concept, which means the sovereignty belongs to the nation or the people, emphasizes that the power is in the hands of the people. Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as “*the administration of the people, by the people, for the people*” in 1864 (Iba, 2008: 81). Electors’ pointing at the political party they adopt by choosing among the programs offered by them during elections (by showing their preferences), or contributing to the decision-making in the political processes, their participation in the political life through the votes they cast and through the representatives they elect show that the political participation function is fulfilled (Aliefendioğlu, 2005: 71). The democracy concept can show variations according to time and conditions, and various types of democracy may be mentioned; however, certain basic principles must exist in order to be able to talk about the existence of democracy. The *freedom, equality, political representation* and *political participation* principles, which are the indispensable principles of democracy, may not be ignored in any way; and are important because they make democracy exist and cannot vary among societies (Lijphart, 1997: 3).

When we consider the people, who live in a certain country, as the most fundamental element of democratic development, -even as the reason for the existence of democracy-, it is possible to claim that the participation rates of this people to the functioning of this order and their belief in the existence of democratic order is linear. The rate of the participation of the people in social and economic influence mechanisms is also an important indicator for the democratic development in a country. The voter turnout being low in democratic elections in a country causes that the legitimacy of the election results become questionable (Schelker and Schneiter, 2017: 68).

The main purpose of the present study is to analyze the course of democratic development in the country by determining the public participation rates in the general elections that were held in Turkey between 2007 and 2018. The role of the participation of the people in the elections in democratic development, and the fact that such a study has not been previously conducted reflects the necessity and importance of the present study.

In the following section of the present study, which consists of five chapters, the studies in the literature conducted on the subject are given. In the third section, the democracy and political participation concepts are explained; and in the fourth section, the data showing the voter turnout in the above-given period in Turkey are given together with the analyses of these data. In the last section of the study, the results and recommendation that were formed in the light of these findings are given.

2. Literature Review

Studies on voter turnout, which is one of the democratic development elements, were conducted generally on the factors that affect voter turnout and the ways with which voter turnout might be increased. In addition to such studies, there are also some other studies conducted to analyze the participation rates in the general elections of countries. Schram and Sonnemans (1996) reported three important

conclusions in their study, which was conducted to determine why people voted. In this study, it was determined that group identity and communication increased political participation; and there was a strong relation between participation and individual features. Lee and Brunn (1996) analyzed how the society and economy of Korea were reflected in the electoral processes by employing voter turnout data in 1992 and 1987 presidential elections in this country.

Lijphart (1997) reported that low voter turnout was a serious democratic problem and added that this situation could be solved with institutional mechanisms, which would take the participation to elections to higher rates. He listed some of the solution proposals as follows: voter-friendly registry rules, proportional representation, rare elections, voting at weekends, and simultaneously combining the most important national elections with other elections that are less attractive. The other option, which may take participation to maximum rates is compulsory voting.

Knack (1997) conducted a study and searched the answers for the question why the American electorate increased in 1992 elections when compared to 1988 elections by employing the data at state level and a questionnaire. Reitan (2003) conducted a study on voter turnout in Russia in 1990s and reported that there were three important factors that affected voter turnout. These are individual or regional characteristics, the characteristics of the electorate system and political climate characteristics. In this study, the relation between the first group and the tendency to participate in public health and elections is dealt with. Lehoucq and Wall (2004) conducted a study to explain voter turnout rates in new democracies and reported that economic development and geographic location had an effect that was barely noticeable on participation. Frank et al. (2004) empirically examined the agreement of specialists on voter turnout for the first time and used the OLS median and ARMAX regression techniques for the purpose of analyzing the behaviors of individual voters and voter turnout. Jun Xu (2005) conducted a study to determine why minorities participated less to elections, and emphasized the socio-economic explanations, acculturation, the positive effect of education and institutional obstacles on voter turnout. Geys (2006) conducted a study to explain the voter turnout and examined and evaluated the empirical evidence reported by 83 general meta analyses. Sjøberg and Tangerås (2007) conducted a study and analyzed the voter turnout by using the data they obtained from 309 Norwegian citizens in the referendum between 1965- 2005; and reported that the results were related negatively with the size of the selection and were related positively with election competition. Fieldhouse and Cutts (2008) analyzed the differences between the voter turnout of citizens from different religious origins with a case study (2001 British General Selection).

Some studies reporting that some factors are influential on voter turnout attract attention. Burden (2009) conducted a study on the effect of education, Panagopoulos (2009) on the effect of street sign campaigns, Deary et al. (2009) on the effect of childhood intelligence, Schechter (2009) on the effect of moral issues and direct democracy, Jacobs and Spierings (2010) on the effect of the size of the region, Steiner (2010) on the effect of economic globalization, and Panagopoulos (2011) on the effect of social pressure on voter turnout.

Flavin (2012) conducted a study and examined whether high participation of low-income individuals in elections led to equal policy representation. He emphasized that wealthy citizens voted at very higher rates compared to citizens with low-income levels. Kamalak (2013) conducted a study and analyzed the voter turnout rates in the local elections in 2009 and the general elections in 2011 in Turkey; and reported that voters considered general elections as more important than local elections and concluded that the participation to general elections was more. Hooghe and Stiers (2016) conducted a study and reported that elections were a democratic and legal connection mechanism between citizens and the political system. They also reported that the people's participation in the elections increased political trust in participants. Steiner (2016) conducted a study, and by analyzing the 2001 British General Elections, he concluded that economic globalization created a perception claiming that the effect of national government on economy decreased; and the voters, who believed in this reduced their votes. In the study conducted by Aggeborn (2016), he examined the effect of the changes in voter turnout rates on tax rates and public expenses rates. He concluded that reforms increased the voter turnout in Sweden. He also claimed that high participation rates reduced the votes of the right-wing parties. Garmann (2017) conducted a study and analyzed the relations between frequency of elections, electoral exhaustion, and voter turnout. He reported that frequent elections led to voter exhaustion, and that these reasons led to low voter turnout. Schelker and Schneiter (2017) claimed that low voter turnout caused that the legitimacy of the elections was questioned; and stated that reforms in the legal system were made to increase voter turnout in most democracies. Cebula (2017) examined whether high unemployment rates caused that there were increases in voter turnout rates; and reported that high unemployment rates led to increases in voter turnout as high as 1.0%. Frantz (2018) conducted a study and examined the relation between voter turnout in competitive authoritarian elections and opposition performance; and concluded that voter rates affected the increases in the votes of opposition parties in a positive way; and supported his thesis by investigating 61 competitive authoritarian elections in the period after the cold war. Giersch and Dong (2018) conducted a study on citizenship courses, citizen examinations and voter turnout; and reported that there was a positive trend that the compulsory citizenship courses run by the state increased the registration or participation rates.

3. Democracy and Voter Turnout

Democracy is a term derived from the word "*demos*", which means public mass or full citizenship, and the word "*kratein*", which means having the sovereignty or using the power (Schmidt, 2002: 13). According to Plato, "*democracy is a very nice political order, it is anarchic and colorful, attributes a sort of equality to those who are equal and not equal without discrimination*" (Kuçuradi, 1998: 21). The democracy concept, which is based on the idea of determining the administration by public, is also the legitimacy source of the state governance. The historical developments gave new dimensions to this concept; however, the core idea of freedom and the equality concept were the factors that directed these dimensions. In our present day, the concepts like human rights, the supremacy of law, and freedom of thought are associated with democracy, and several studies have been

conducted reporting that these elements may remain firmer in democratic societies. About the definition of the modern democracy, Robert Dahl defined the conditions that were accepted widely for the existence of democracy, which he called "*the minimum conditions*" (Diamond and Platner, 1995: 72). Based on this theory, it is possible to define the form of democratic administration as follows; "*Democracy is the form of governance in which the administrators have the opportunity to come to power and be dismissed through elections with the help of general, free, equal right of elections, competition between parties, obtaining accurate information for all citizens, freedom of opinion, opposition, coalition and voting*" (Schmidt, 2002: 21).

As it is clearly given in the definition of democracy, the basic targets of democracy concept are political representation and turnout, and rights, especially in terms of freedom and equality (Demir, 2010: 601). In democracy, the purpose of the political representation is that any opinions may become organized without any limitations to govern the country, be represented in the parliament (assembly) and in democratic platforms, be able to announce their rights and to defend their rights and interests. Citizens expect that the representatives whom they vote for with their free will take over the administration of the country and reflect their rights and freedoms, wishes and opinions. For this reason, voters constitute one of the important actors in the decision-making mechanisms of the state (Sakal, 1998: 2018). It means that citizens elect those who manage them, and authorize the representatives to provide public goods and services that will be offered to them in the future (Lindblom; 1968: 45).

Throughout the history, being a voter has been regulated with several criteria such as citizenship, age, gender, education, residential area, race, ownership of lands, and socio-economic status. When the history of democracy is analyzed, it is possible to argue that the right of being a voter and dealing with politics on a legal basis has had a widening history in the context of the elimination of discrimination (Alkan, 2006: 137).

Voter turnout in elections for the purpose of determining those who will represent them is one of the irrevocable elements of democracy. Lijphart (1997) stated that low voter turnout is a serious democratic problem. According to him, low voter turnout is a serious democratic problem; and a turnout that is not equal creates an unequal political impact. For this reason, this situation must be resolved by institutional mechanisms, which will take the turnout to maximum points.

When we consider the citizens who live in a country as the most basic elements of democratic development or even as the reason for the existence of democracy, we can argue that these people go to elections in proportion to their belief in the existence of a democratic order. Citizens participate in elections at the same rate in which they believe that their desires and opinions will be realized through their representatives. If voters do not believe that elections will be effective in political terms, it must be expected that the electorate become indifferent or alienated to political system and to relevant developments (Kalaycıoğlu, 2008: 251). A democratic government is based on the presence of people who have a sense of democracy. Democratic people refer to those who can resist to the differentiation

between the future and the past; and passivity and activity (Touraine, 1997: 186). The citizenship of an individual is the degree with which s/he can control his own destiny in an effective manner (Demirbolat, 1999: 230).

The introduction of elections, which is one of the democratic rights, to the Turkish nation occurred in the Ottoman Empire Period. The first general elections were held in 1877 in our country, which set off on a serious path in the democratization process today (Doğan and Göker, 2010: 160). When individuals vote in elections, they show a political behavior that is beyond realizing their citizenship tasks or beyond using one of their most basic human rights (Arslan, 2007: 3). The basic purpose of the present study is to analyze the progression of democratic development in our country by determining the rate of voter turnout in the general elections that were held in Turkey between 2007 and 2018. The role of voter turnout in elections in democratic development, and the absence of such a study in the literature reflects the necessity, importance and preference of the study.

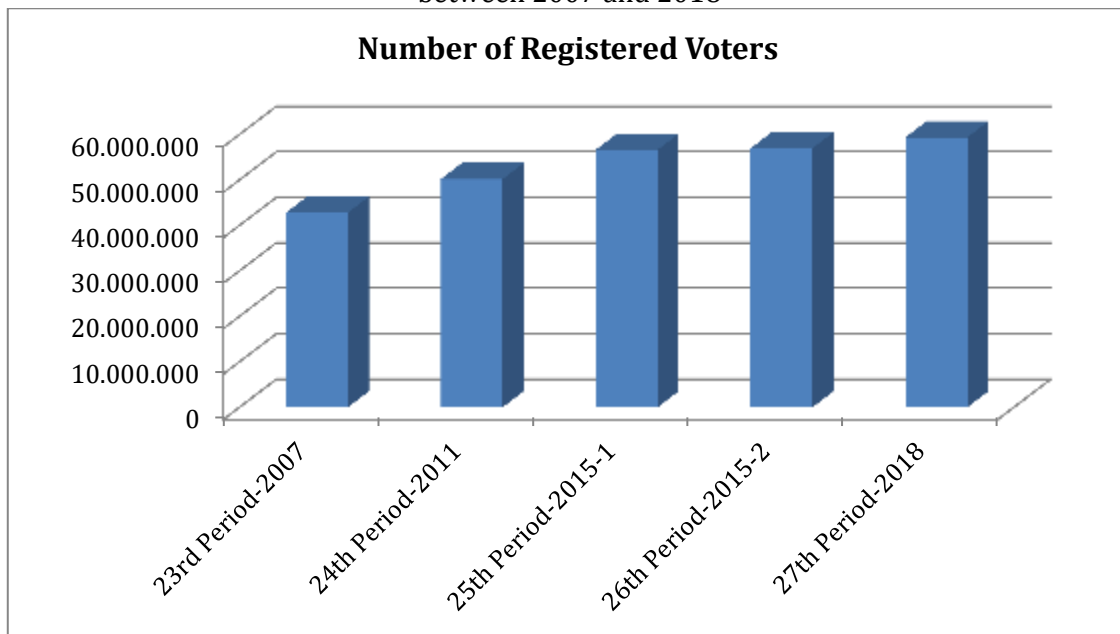
4. Analysis of General Parliamentary Elections Held Between 2007 and 2018 in Turkey in Terms of Voter Turnout

People have voted for parliamentary elections for 27 times in the Turkish political life that started with the opening of the first Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) in 1920 (Turkey Statistics Institute [TSI], 2012: 5) until 2018 through 98 years. Karpat defined the history of Turkey as the history of democratization interventions in Turkey; and stated that this phenomenon has not settled in Turkey with its full meaning (1996: 23). One reason of the inability of the settlement of democracy in Turkey is that it has been interrupted by coups through years. Coups and coup attempts that hindered the democratic development are among the phenomena which must be dealt with separately in Turkish political life. People's right to elect and be elected as a part of democratic development is related closely with the belief in the existence of the order that will appear as a result of this action. Voters' going to polls is one of the moments when they approve the legitimacy of the political system (Kiriş, 2015: 25). The voter turnout in a country being low causes that the legitimacy of the results are arguable (Schelker and Schneiter, 2017: 2). In this context, the subject of the present study was limited with the general parliamentary elections held between 2007 and 2018 in Turkey. The data that were used in the study was obtained from the Supreme Electoral Committee of Republic of Turkey. The purpose of limiting the scope of the date in the present study is to follow and evaluate the course of democratic development in Turkey in the last decade in terms of voter turnout rates.

Although there are a great number of factors that affect the number of votes cast in elections in a country, targeting to have a voice in the administration of the country in terms of democracy is a prior impact. In addition, elections constitute a legitimate connection mechanism between citizens and the political system (Hooghe and Stiers, 2016: 4). Choosing the people who will manage them by citizens brings benefits to them to a certain extent, and in this way, people give power to the representatives who will provide them with public goods and services that will be offered to them in the future (Sakal, 1998: 219). As a result of this action of citizens done with this awareness, a legitimate connection mechanism is established between the administration and the people. However,

citizens may sometimes think that participating in elections will be of no use for them, or they may also think that even if they cast votes in elections, the elected representatives and governments will make decisions only on the basis of their own viewpoints (Lindblom; 1968: 45). In such a situation, an indifference occurs in people about elections, and the distance between people and administration grows even more. In Graphic 1, the number of registered voters in the general parliamentary elections that were held between the years 2007 and 2018 in Turkey is given. It is possible to claim that there is an increasing voter population depending on the population growth.

Graphic 1: Number of Registered Voters in General Parliamentary Elections in Turkey between 2007 and 2018

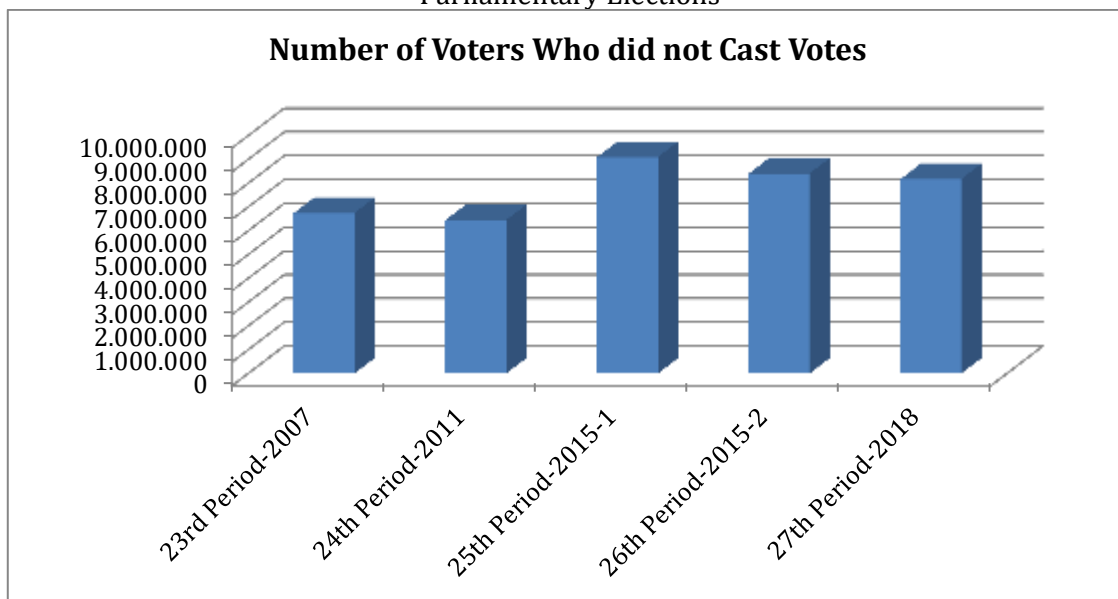


Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018)

In Chart 2, the number of voters who did not cast votes in General Elections in Turkey between 2007 and 2018 is given. The 23rd General Elections in Turkey were held in July 22, 2007. Although the number of registered voters was 42.799.303 in this election, the number of people who cast votes was 36.056.293, which shows that there were 6.743.010 voters who did not cast votes in this election that was held in 2007. A total of 6.451.267 voters cast their votes in the elections held on June 12, 2011(24th Period); 9.101.350 voters in the elections held on June 7, 2015 (25th Period); 8.411.314 voters in the elections held on November 1, 2015 (26th Period); and 8.178.025 voters in the elections held on June 24, 2018 (27th Period) (SEC, 2018). When Graphic 2 is examined it is seen that the number of voters who did not cast their votes decreased at first, and then increased suddenly in the 25thperiod elections, and the number of voters who did not cast their votes increased to its highest level. There are two factors, which need to be dealt with in these data. Firstly, the increase in the number of voters who did not cast their votes in 2015 general elections stemmed from foreign sources, which is deal with in detail in the section where the data on foreign votes are analyzed. The second is that there was an increase in the interest of voters in the second elections that were held in the same year in 2015. This situation shows that the

citizens of the Republic of Turkey are aware of their democratic rights to elect their representatives, which is given to them by democracy; and they are interested in the politics and in the administration of the country. In the general elections that were held on June 7, 2015, no political party could obtain the number of 276 members of parliaments, which was required to become the government alone. When the struggles to establish a coalition government were useless, a decision was made for an early election on November 1, 2015, and the 26th period elections were held (SEC, 2018). As it is clearly seen in Graphic 2, the interest of the people increased in the second general elections that were held in the same year. In the second general elections that were held in 2015, which was the 26th period elections, the decrease in the number of voters who did not cast their votes and the reason of the increase in the voter turnout is that the people wanted that the administration of the country, in other words, the government of the country was established as soon as possible.

Graphic 2: Number of Voters Who Did Not Cast Votes in 2007-2018 Turkey General Parliamentary Elections



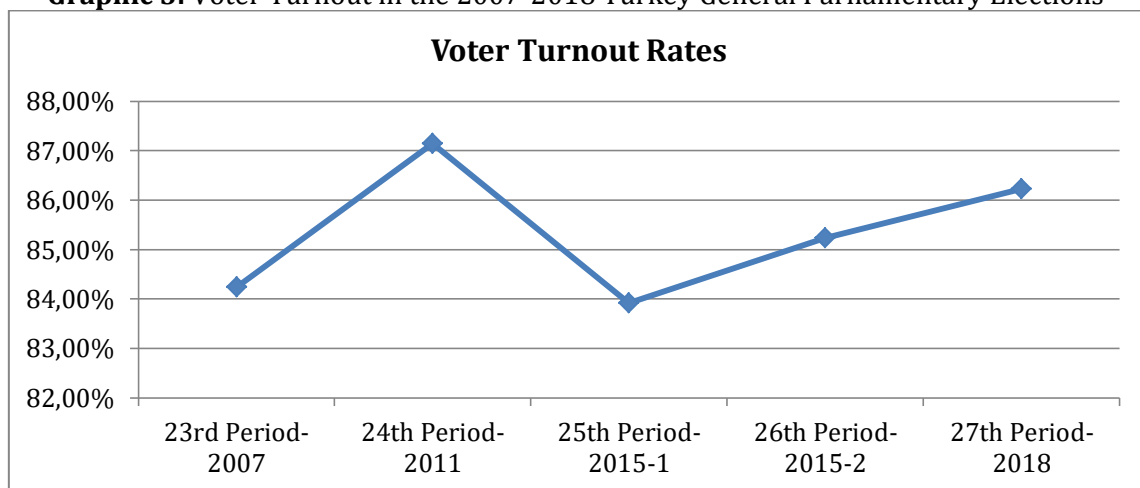
Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018).

The rate of voter turnout (“voter turnout” rate or “voter participation” rate) is obtained by dividing the number of voters who participate in the elections and cast valid or invalid votes by the total number of registered voters for that specific election, and is generally evaluated as percentage (Kiriş, 2015: 25). This rate shows how many of the voters who had the right to elect went to the ballot box. In Graphic 3, the voter turnout rates in the General Parliamentary Elections in Turkey between 2007 and 2018 are given. Although the voter turnout was 84.24% in 2007 elections; it became 87.14% in 2011 elections; 83.92% in the 2015-1 (June 7) elections; 85.23% in 2015-2 (November 1) elections; and 86.22% in the 2018 elections. For individuals, participating and voting in elections is a part of their political activities. Many studies that were conducted in this field show that there are many explanatory variables for elections and for casting votes like the ages, educational status, occupations, income levels, marital status, employment status, religions, languages, religious cults, identities, access to campaigns and benefit-cost

relations of the voters (Kolovos, Harris, 2005: 3-4; Matsusaka, Palda, 1999: 440). However, the impacts of these variables vary from country to country.

One of the most important political issues that have been discussed in Turkey in recent years is whether the voter turnout rate is the basic measure of democracy. The ability of identifying the people who will come to representative mechanisms by voting in elections comes to the forefront as the most common and institutional political participation method of democracies that function democratically. According to Kalaycıoğlu, elections constitute a mechanism that legitimizes, protects or eliminates the political system (1984: 254-256) and brings solutions for the problem of changing political authority and controls and audits the policies of the government. The ballot box still continues its existence as the main indicator used to define democracies, which may still be classified and developed.

Graphic 3: Voter Turnout in the 2007-2018 Turkey General Parliamentary Elections

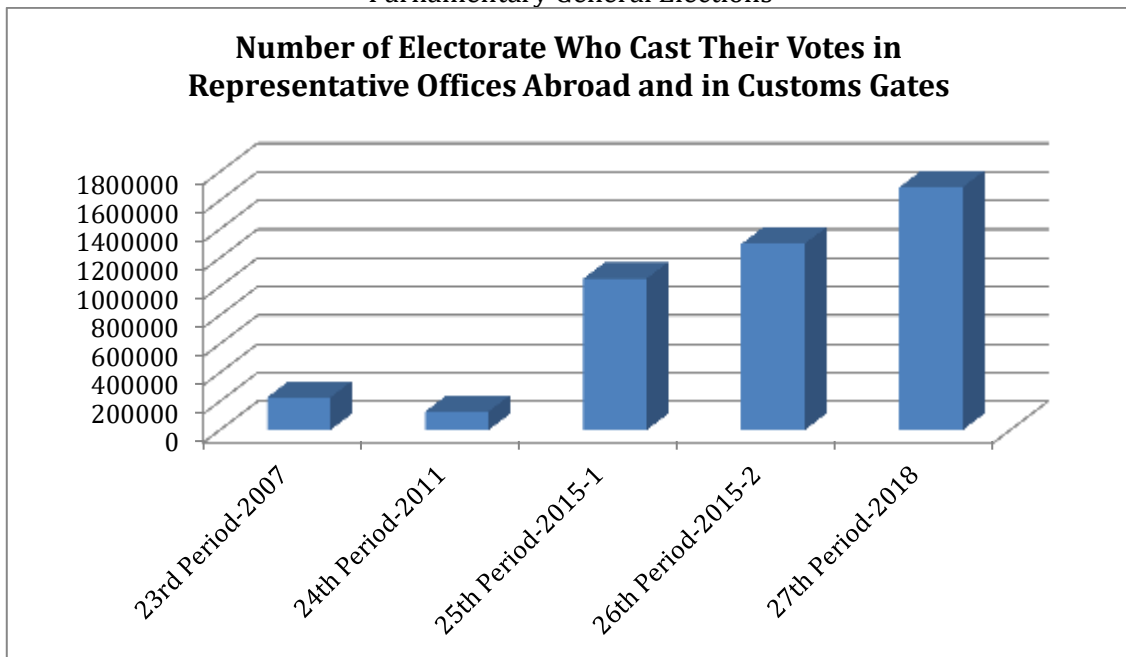


Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018).

When the fact that elections were made at certain intervals in Turkey since 1908 and that multi-party democracy experiences were faced since 1946 are considered, it is possible to claim that Turkey has a firm election history and voting culture. It is seen in Figure 3 above that the voter turnout rate increased since the general elections in 2007; however, there was a sharp decline in the general elections in 2015. However, when this graphic is interpreted, it would be incorrect to claim that the people were indifferent to the elections in 2015 after 2011. Because the citizens who lived abroad went to the ballot box to vote for the first time in a parliamentary election in the elections that were held on June 7, 2015 (Yıldırım, 2016: 376). For this reason, it becomes compulsory to consider the number of votes and voter turnout rates used in foreign representatives of Turkey as of 2015 in analyzing the election results. Turkey experienced two successive general elections in 2015; and people went to the ballot box for parliamentary elections on June 7, 2015; and then in less than five months, they went back to ballot box again on November 1, 2015. Another important point in terms of political science was that the citizens of the Republic of Turkey were able to vote for the parliamentary elections in 2015 in diplomatic representative offices abroad in the cities where they lived, as well as the time period being short between these two elections firstly on June 7, followed by on November 1 (Yıldırım, 2016: 377). Although the

application started on August 10, 2014, the first implementation of it was with the general parliamentary elections that were held on June 7 elections (SEC, 2018). When these developments are considered, the analysis of the election data received abroad especially in 2015 except for the voters who cast votes in customs gates until then is important as well as the inclusion of foreign representatives in the analysis of the voter turnout. In Figure 4, the total number of the voters who cast their votes in customs gates and agencies abroad is given for the periods covered in the present study. Based on these data, it is possible to claim that the interest of the electorate who lived abroad in the politics of the country increased. In Graphic 4, the reason for the increase in the number of voters in 2015 is that the abovementioned application was put into effect for the first time. When the fact that the voter turnout rate decreased in 2015 for the voters who lived abroad decreased is considered, it must not be ignored that there was an increase in the number of the electorate who cast their votes.

Graphic 4: Number of Electorate Who Cast Their Votes Abroad in 2007-2018 Turkey Parliamentary General Elections



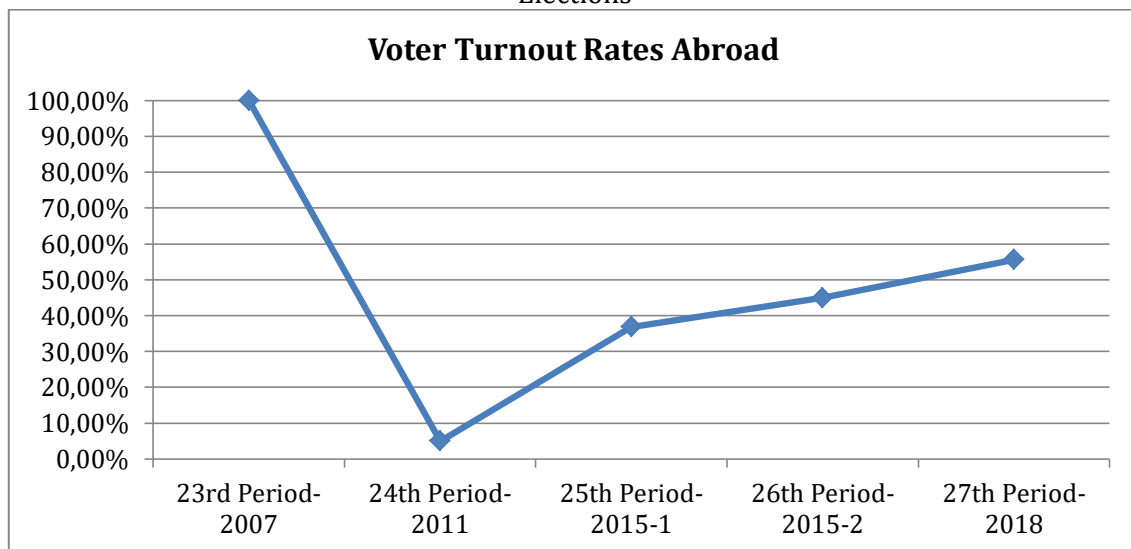
Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018).

The phenomenon of casting votes abroad may be defined as “*the regulation that allowed citizens living abroad to vote in elections held in their own countries*” (Boccagni et al., 2015: 13). Studies conducted in this field date the history of this phenomenon in the modern period until 1862 when Wisconsin allowed the soldiers who fought in the Wisconsin Union Army and who were out of Wisconsin to vote (Pogonyi, 2014:124). The number of countries, which enacted regulations for citizens who lived abroad was very limited until 1960s. However, this regulation spread in an increasing manner especially since 1990s, and countries enacted necessary regulations to make this right available for their citizens living abroad even in different ways. It was stated in the report which was released in 2007 by the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) that these regulations were enacted to cover more than 190 million people in 115 countries

worldwide (Bauböck, 2009: 496). This number has been increasing from year to year.

In June 7, 2015 General Parliamentary Elections, for the first time in the political history of Turkey, the citizens of the Republic of Turkey living abroad were given the opportunity to vote without leaving the country where they lived; and the citizens went to ballot boxes by making use of this regulation. In Graphic 5, the voter turnout rates of the citizens living abroad are given for the General Elections held between 2007 and 2018 in Turkey in representative offices abroad and at customs gates. The regulation that allowed the citizens living abroad to vote at customs gates and in representative offices abroad, which was applied for the first time in 2015, increased the voter turnover rates abroad; and on the other hand, also caused a decline in the domestic and international voter turnout rates. The reason for this is the increase in the number of the registered voters living abroad. The number of voters who cast their votes abroad for General Elections held on July 22, 2007 was 228.019; it was 129.283 in the elections that were held on June 12, 2011; it was 1.056.078 in the elections that were held on June 7, 2015; 1.298.325 in the elections that were held on November 1, 2015; and 1.693.354 in the elections that were held on June 24, 2018. For this reason, the interest of the electorate living abroad in the elections continued to increase. In Graphic 5, the basic reason for the decline in 2015 was the increase in the number of the registered voters living abroad. The number of the voters living abroad in 2015 also increased at a significant level. The reason of the voter turnout abroad, which was 100% in the 2007 elections, is that the number of voters who were registered in the data of the Supreme Electoral Committee and the number of voters who actually cast their votes were equal.

Graphic 5: Voter Turnout Rates Abroad in the 2007-2018 Turkey Parliamentary General Elections



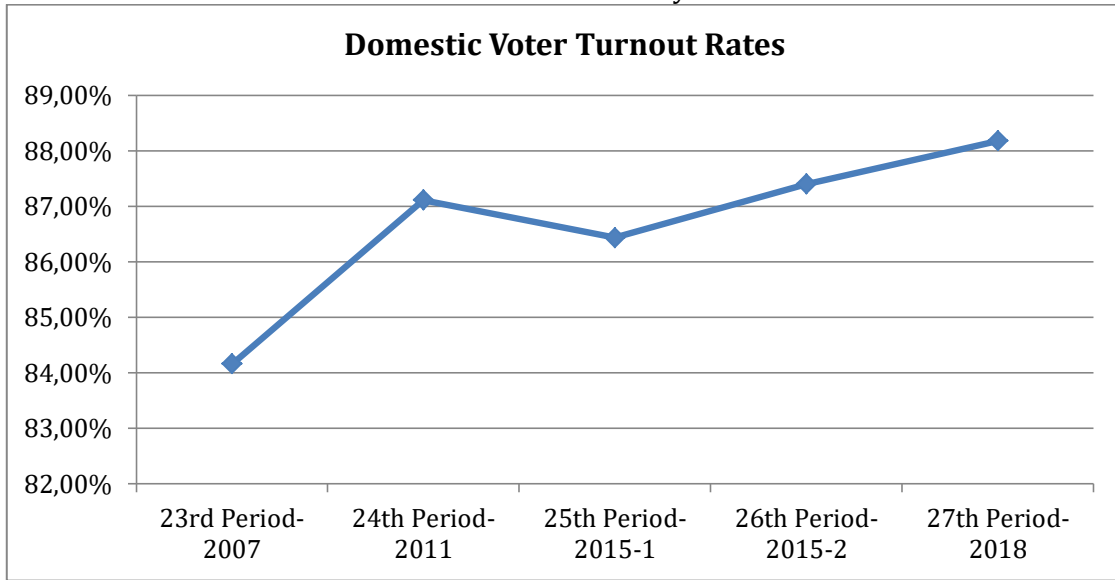
Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018).

According to Larner (1958: 50), although traditional society is not a participative society, modern society is a participative one. Similarly, Huntington also argued that the most important difference between modern state and traditional state was

that people participated in the politics and had an impact on it (1968: 36). Kapani (1996: 144) and Daver (1993: 210) stated that political participation was a concept defining the status, attitudes and behaviors of citizens in the face of political system. In democratic administration forms, people have the right to elect and be elected. There is a strong bond, i.e. an inseparable unity, between democracy and election. For this reason, the people's use of the right to elect and to be elected is related closely with the adoption of democracy and the democratic lifestyle. When we evaluate the parliamentary general elections that were held in the past decade in the Turkish political life, it is seen that there is an increasing participation in these elections. The reasons for the fluctuations in the voter turnouts have been explained above, and it has been stated that this was a result of the reflection of the change in the system rather than the indifference of the people in these elections.

There are many factors influencing the voting rates of the people during elections, their using the right to elect and be elected. It is possible to list these factors as education (Burden, 2009), globalization (Steiner, 2010), rapid population growth and urbanization, modernization, the transition to an order dominated by industrial production instead of an agriculture-based economy, the migration from rural to urban areas, the increase in the number of individuals who know how to read-write, the spread of mass communication means and economic factors (Şen and Donduran, 2017: 39). The domestic voter turnout rates in Turkey was influenced positively by the factors that are listed above, and it was seen that the voter turnout rates increased between elections. In Graphic 6, the domestic voter turnout rates for the General Elections in Turkey between 2007 and 2018 are given. The voter turnout rate was 84.16% on June 22, 2007 (23rd Period); it was 87.11% on June 12, 2011 (24th Period); 86.43% on June 7, 2015 (25th Period); 87.39% on November 1, 2015 (26th Period); 88.17% on June 24, 2018 (27th Period). When we consider the domestic voter turnout rates for the past decade in Turkey, we see that this rate never dropped below 84%. This rate was 86.43% even in public elections when the elections were held during holiday season like in the 2015-1 elections.

Graphic 6: Domestic Voter Turnout Rates for the 2007-2018 Parliamentary General Elections of Turkey



Source: R.T. Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC, 2018).

In general, a positive bond was established between voting in elections and democracy in Turkey, and was interpreted as the development of democracy. According to the Kışlalı, elections are an indispensable part of democratic system (2003: 245). High voter turnout in elections, which constitute an indispensable part of democratic system, means that this system is approved by the people, and that the people give the elected representatives the power to govern them. The higher the voter turnout rates in elections, the higher the representation rates of the people living in that country. Voter turnout may provide us with important data on the socio-economic development level and political system of a country. For example, low-level voter turnout rates show that a country has not completed its modernization and has not been relieved from the traditional environment; and high voter turnout rates might show that the country is modernized and has eliminated the traditional environment. The voter profile in Turkey is also acting under the influence of different factors in terms of voting. However, the presence of a settled culture, which establishes a bond between the voting behavior and the development of democracy in our country might be interpreted as the increasing voter turnout rates having an increasing progression creating a positive impact on the democratic development level.

5. Result and Recommendations

Elections, which constitute one of the most important indicators of democracy in countries that are governed by democracy, are among the most important democratic activities. One of the most important indicators for developed and developing democracies is still the ballot box. However, the contents of modern democracies is constantly developing and changing. For this reason, considering the ballot box as the sole and unique democratic indicator would not be a proper approach. According to Güldiken (1996: 32), the thing that determines the performance of a democracy is the participation of citizens in politics and their being active, in other words, their having a sense of citizenship. When considered

in the light of the realities of the Turkish political life, it might be claimed that a positive relation was established between voter turnout rates in democratic elections and the settlement of democracy in Turkey, and that the increase in the voter turnout rates was interpreted as the positive outcomes and effects of democracy. For the purpose of avoiding the negations that will appear as a result of unequal and low voter turnout rates, providing institutions and tools that will enable high voter turnout rates are among the most important reasons for the positive emphasis on the interpretation of high voter turnout rates (Kiriş, 2015: 31). In the present study, the general parliamentary elections that were held in the last decade were examined in the context of voter turnout; and it was concluded that voters participated in elections in an increasing rate.

There are several studies that interpret the positive relation between democratic development and voter turnout as a democratic development; and claiming that high voter turnout rates in elections increase the legitimacy and reliability of elections. However, there are some other studies, which claim that the opposite situation might also be true. For example, according to Lipset (1964: 12), since a stable democracy is based on the idea that the results of an election will not reveal a big difference in the society, the low participation rates seen in western democracies might also be the sign of the stability of the system.

It is possible that high voter turnout rates do not always yield beneficial results for democracy. High voter turnout rates might also be considered as the indicator of the decline of social unity and the collapse of the democratic process. Huntington and Dominguez (1975) claimed that when there was no institutionalization, increased participation and mobility would cause instability. In societies that have high socio-economic welfare levels, it might be concluded that it is not considered necessary to deal with politics. However, intensive participation might also be the indicator of problems related to classes, and regional or religious conflicts in a country.

Turkey ranks among the top countries in terms of voter turnout rates among modern democracies. When we consider the general voter turnout rates in Turkey, it is seen that these rates followed an increasing trend; and did not fall below 84% in the last decade. When voter turnout rates are interpreted in terms of democratic development, there are studies that claim two different approaches. The first one of these, and the one that was dealt with in the scope of the present study claims that high voter turnout rates are important indicators of democratic development. The second one claims that low voter turnout rates do not always cause negative consequences for democratic development. In this respect, considering the importance of elections as an indispensable element of representative democracy and the level of democratic development, future studies to be conducted in the context of determining at which level these elections and voter turnout rates will lose their importance or become insignificant will make a significant contribution to this field.

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