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The Turkish Policy Agendas Project

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The Turkish Policy Agendas Project was launched in 2013 by Alper Tolga Bulut, Berna Yilmaz Maggione, and Tevfik Murat Yildirim. The project consists of three research units that are located in the University of Houston, University of Milan, and University of Missouri, each of which was assigned to code a particular set of policy agendas data. Although the Project does not have an official sponsor or a funding source, individual members of the Project have received financial support from the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy at the University of Missouri and from the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa.

The main motivation behind the project is twofold. First, by providing scholars of Turkish politics with longitudinal datasets on policy and media agendas, the project sets out to encourage scholars of Turkish politics to focus on understudied topics in Turkey, such as agenda-setting and the link between policy, media, and public agendas. Second, the project aims to contribute to the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) by bringing authoritarian politics into the study of agenda dynamics. Turkey, the first developing country to join the CAP, has experienced multiple military interventions, an authoritarian single-party regime and political scandals that hindered the health of democracy. This variation allows scholars of comparative public policy to explore agenda dynamics under democratic and authoritarian regimes. By so doing, scholars will get a chance to observe whether or not findings based on the Western democracies travel to the developing world.

19.1 Turkish Politics

Although the modern Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, the first multi-party fair elections were held in 1950. In this first free-and-fair election,

the Republican People's Party (CHP), which had ruled the country over twenty-five years, suffered a stunning defeat against the center right Democratic Party (DP). The victory of the DP in the 1950 election marks the beginning of a new era of multiparty competition in Turkey. The period following the transition to democracy had also introduced several factors that eventually led to the weak party institutionalization, which still characterizes the country today. Sayari (2008) defines three non-electoral sources of weak party institutionalization in Turkey: military interventions, party closures by the constitutional court, and frequent party switching. Military interventions can be considered as one of the most significant sources of party system instability in Turkey. Since the transition to democracy in the late 1940s, Turkey has experienced several military interventions, (1960, 1971, and 1980) and two indirect interventions (1997 and 2007). Although electoral politics and party competition have survived these military interventions as none of the direct interventions lasted long, the party system became more unstable. Frequent elections, coalitions, and coalition breakdowns became an inherent characteristic of this period.

One of the most significant impacts of the military interventions on Turkish politics was the strengthening of political Islam (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2006). The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s roots can be traced back to the Islamist National Order Party (MNP), which was formed by Necmettin Erbakan in 1970. After almost thirty years of struggle in politics and surviving coups and party closures, the AKP was established in 2001, by splitting from the Felicity Party and claiming to break ties with political Islam. Later, the party defined itself as a center-right party.

The 2002 parliamentary elections marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Turkish party politics. The AKP has benefitted greatly from the diminishing popularity of its rivals in the 2002 parliamentary elections. The party also inherited the strong grassroots organization of the pro-Islamic party tradition and had large numbers of dedicated party activists. Financially it had the support of a growing number of conservative businessmen. The electoral victory of the AKP coupled with the high election threshold, made it the dominant party in the Turkish party system. The consecutive electoral victories of the party not only strengthened its place in the Turkish party system but also increased its influence in governmental institutions. This inevitably enabled good access to political patronage, which is regarded as important to win elections in Turkey (Gumuscu, 2012; Sayari, 2007).

Studies on contemporary Turkish politics often make references to the clientelistic nature of elections in Turkey. The clientelistic behavior in Turkey shows itself in different shapes and forms. The nature and form of clientelism has changed significantly over time in Turkey. In early stages of the multiparty competition, it was largely confined to the rural population. However, rapid

urbanization created a class of urban poor and combined with strengthened party organizations at the local and national level paved the way for large-scale clientelistic politics. In order to gain the votes of this large social class, parties had to offer goods that will mitigate their socioeconomic problems. In this respect, the pro-Islamist parties have been more successful than their rivals. According to Sayari (2011: 13), the success of these parties largely relies on the fact that they were able to replace vertical ties of clientelism with frequent face-to-face interaction between party workers and their neighbors. This strong base of party workers, coupled with state resources, created a new network of clientelism that played a major role in AKP's success.

Currently there are four parties in the Turkish parliament. According to the expert survey analysis conducted by Benoit and Laver (2006), BDP (the then pro-Kurdish party) and MHP are located at the opposite ends of the ideological left–right spectrum, with center right AKP and center left CHP in between. The period before AKP has been dominated by coalition governments and instabilities due to several factors as mentioned above. The post-AKP era, on the other hand, has shown less electoral volatility and more stability in terms of party competition, as the same party has been ruling the country for almost sixteen years and the same parties have entered the parliament in the last four elections. Finally, party politics in the last decade shows clear signs of an emerging dominant party system that is highly clientelistic.

19.2 Datasets

It is evident that scholars of the Middle East studying quantitative social sciences suffer greatly from the lack of data. Turkish sources, including from the period of the Ottoman Empire, constitute an important exception (Lewis, 1951). The collection of parliamentary speeches, recorded day by day since the founding of the Turkish parliament in 1920, consists of more than 150,000 oral statements made during parliamentary sessions. Additionally, parliamentary speeches from the Ottoman period (1908–18) are available online. Many other parliamentary activities were digitalized and made public, reachable on the website of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (www.tbmm.gov.tr).

Data on budget allocations in Turkey, starting from the late Ottoman period in the 1840s, are available online in both Turkish and English. The budget documents have been preserved extraordinarily well (Shaw, 1975); there is no missing data even during the periods of military regimes. These documents consist of data on authorized spending and actual spending for each spending unit, along with total spending in each fiscal year. This dataset allows scholars to explore the government's longitudinal policy priorities and how they vary with changing political environments (e.g., under different governments and regimes).

Lastly, we content coded the front pages of a once-leading newspaper, *Milliyet*. *Milliyet* newspaper archives are public and available for the period of 1950–2007. According to the website of the archive, the archive will be expanded to 2016. Our dataset, currently covering the period of 1980–2005, consists of more than 41,000 news stories coded according to the CAP codebook. Fortunately, the period currently covered by the Turkish Agendas Project enables scholars to examine media attention under a military regime, and minority, coalition, and single party governments.

Extensive and detailed coding enables reliability in comparing issue attention across different decision-making venues and nations. While coding each item, our coders strictly followed the general guidelines of the CAP coding system. Each item in the dataset is coded according to the relevant issue area, giving a measure of aggregate issue attention of legislators and parties.

To code parliamentary questions and laws, we used their titles, which are usually long and detailed and therefore make coding relatively easy and straightforward. In those situations where the title was not enough to understand the content of the question, we have referred to the actual document (available in the parliament's website). For the parliamentary bills, we used their short summaries. The dataset was coded by the same four coders. These coders went through about a month of intensive training, where examples and problems were discussed. Several rounds of reliability tests were then conducted where the four coders coded the same documents. The training was stopped when the level of intercoder reliability reached 85 percent at the subtopic level.

We have also content coded the election platforms of the governing AKP and the main opposition CHP parties. Party platforms are widely used to measure the parties' policy stances on several issues; hence coding platform sentences enables us to measure party priorities before they enter the parliament. Together, this yielded more than 10,000 platform sentences to be coded. To code the platforms, we used the natural sentence rather than the quasi-sentence (QS), based on the findings of Daubler et al. (2012).

To measure the preferences of the public, we use the most important problem (MIP) survey question of the Eurobarometer Survey. The MIP question has been widely used in the literature to measure public preferences or the public's attention to the political agenda as well as the broader public salience of issues (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2004, 2005). The policy priorities of Turkish citizens are estimated on the basis of the survey question, "What do you think is the MIP facing our country today?" Since Turkish opinion surveys typically have not included this question, we rely on Eurobarometer Surveys, which have asked the MIP question in its surveys of Turkish citizens since 2003. To translate Eurobarometer polls into issue attention percentages, we followed three steps following Jones et al. (2009). First, we matched each

Table 19.1. Overview of Turkish Agendas datasets

Data type	Data source	Data availability	Period covered	No. of observations
Budget	Ministry of Finance	1841–2016	1841–2016	~ 6,800
Media (front-page coverage)	*Milliyet*	1950–2007	1980–2005	~ 41,000
Parl. questions	TBMM	1987–2016	1991–2011	~ 13,000
Parl. speeches	TBMM	1920–2016	1983–2007	~ 48,000
Laws	TBMM	1920–2016	2002–13	~ 1,700
Party platforms of CHP and AKP	TBMM	1960–2015	2002–11	10,403 sentences
Public opinion	Eurobarometer	2003–16	2003–13	40 surveys

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Turkey

answer with the CAP main topics. Second, for each poll, we calculated the percentages of responses for every issue category. Finally, we aggregated the data annually by taking average values in those years where multiple polls were conducted (see Table 19.1).

19.3 Empirical Applications

Our dataset can be used to study several research questions. First, it can be used to trace and analyze issue attention at both the legislature level and the party level. Second, it can be used to analyze "opinion-policy responsiveness" or the responsiveness of political parties to the priorities of the public. Studies of opinion-policy responsiveness have been largely confined to Western democracies, mostly the United States and the United Kingdom. In this respect, analyses using this dataset have the potential to make significant contributions to the literature. Third, the dataset can be used to analyze the responsiveness of the parties to their party platforms (which is usually defined as program to policy linkage).

In this section, we will briefly illustrate two possible applications. First, we will look at the general congruence between the public priorities and legislative activities, more specifically parliamentary bills. Second, following the scholars of the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, we will show the annual changes in annual budget allocations during Turkey's single-party government.

19.3.1 *Measuring Public Preferences and Government Responsiveness*

Figure 19.1 compares parliamentary bills with public priorities. It shows the proportion of bills introduced in a given topic area with the proportion of the public stating that that is the most important problem facing the country.
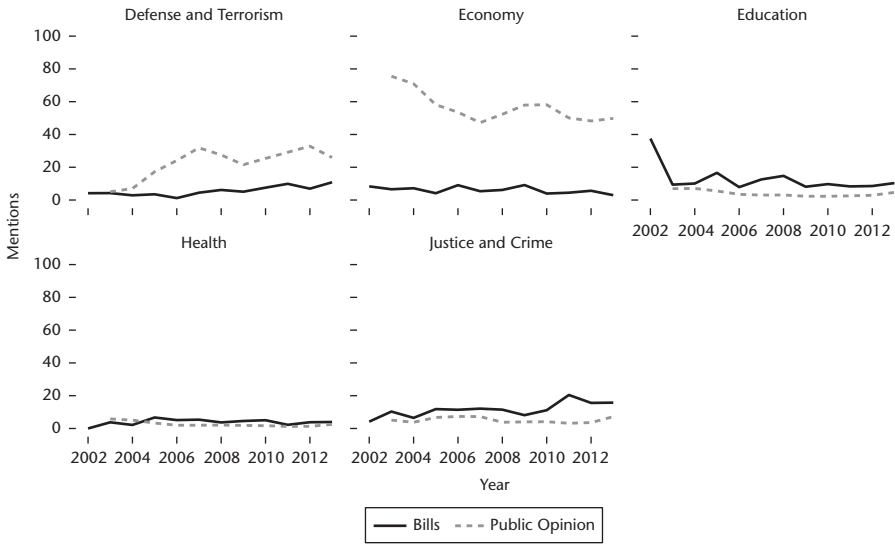
Figure 19.1. Public priorities (MIP) versus parliamentary bills (2002–13)
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Turkey

Although the visual evidence seems to indicate a gap between public priorities and parliamentary bills, there is a directional correspondence. The gap between the public priorities and laws is most evident in the topic of economy. For other topics, there seem to be a better correlation between public priorities and laws. The legislative agenda seems to be particularly responsive in the domain of defense and terrorism. However, as in the other CAP datasets, we can see that MIP responses tend to be highly concentrated in the areas of economy and defense, whereas the policy activities of the government are widely dispersed across all the CAP topic areas.

19.3.2 *Public Budgeting in Authoritarian Regimes*

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) contends that public policies can best be described as long periods of stasis and brief but dramatic periods of change (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Disproportionate information processing that stems from "cognitive" and "institutional friction" is at the core of PET. Evidence for PET comes mostly from Western democracies (Jones et al., 2009). Recent scholarship, however, expanded PET to authoritarian regimes. Lam and Chan (2015) find that authoritarian periods in Hong Kong are associated with more punctuated policy process. Chan and Zhao (2016) show that information restrictions lead to punctuated
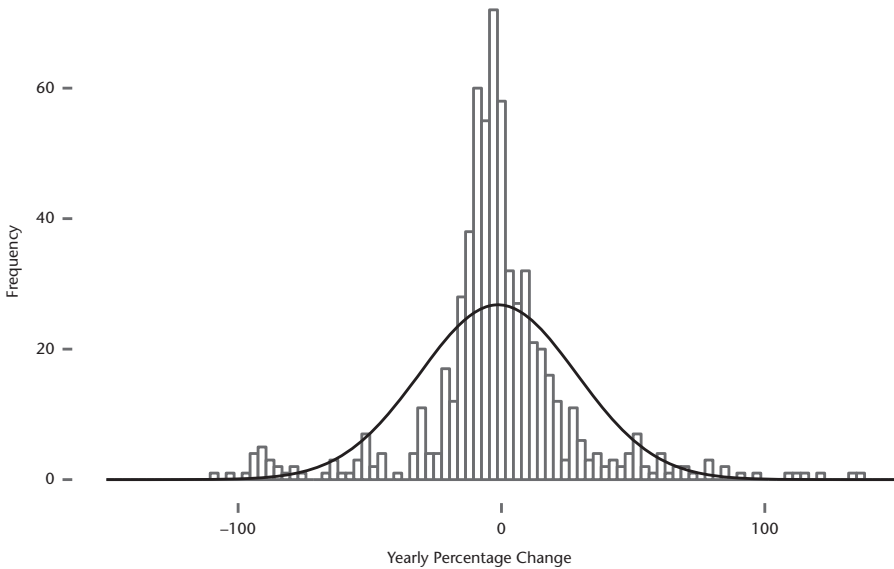
Figure 19.2. The distribution of annual budgetary changes during the one-party regime

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Turkey

equilibrium in the policy process in China. In a more comprehensive study, Baumgartner et al. (2017) lend support to these studies, demonstrating that democratic transitions in Turkey, Malta, Russia, and Brazil are associated with lower policy punctuations. Starting from the 1840s, Turkish budget data allow for more comprehensive tests of PET in authoritarian regimes.

Figure 19.2 shows the distribution of annual changes in budget allocations. As seen in the figure, the distribution of budgetary changes during the one-party regime can be described as leptokurtic, showing the presence of punctuated equilibrium in the Turkish policy process. In other words, Turkish policy process during the authoritarian one-party government was dominated by forces protecting the status quo, and this trend was often disrupted by policy shocks and led to dramatic policy changes.

19.4 Concluding Remarks

The Turkish Policy Agendas Project produced massive datasets on media, public, and policy agendas in a limited time, thanks to the digitalized government sources that date back to the early 1900s. The fact that Turkey has experienced one-party and multiparty elections for decades, several military

interventions and de-democratization during the period we cover indicates that scholars of comparative public policy can make use of the Turkish case to explore some previously unanswered questions. How do authoritarian regimes translate policy inputs into outputs and how is it different from that in democratic regimes? How does the link between political and media agenda vary with changing political environments? Were the Turkish military regimes different from others in Latin America or Africa in terms of policy-making (Demirel 2005)?

Finally, our dataset also enables us to broaden the study of opinion–policy and program–policy linkage to a highly clientelistic polity. Research on these topics is quite extensive in the Western context, and the literature's findings suggest a strong relationship. However, the dynamics of party politics in these two settings are quite distinct, as parties use different linkage mechanisms to connect with voters. Previous studies have argued that in clientelistic party systems, politicians lack the incentive to create coherent and well-structured party platforms on which to compete that inevitably leads to unresponsive parties (Epstein 2009; Hagopian 1990). In this respect, our dataset will enable researchers to investigate opinion–policy and program–policy nexus in a different setting. In short, we believe that the Turkish Agendas Project will help scholars explore the agenda dynamics in developing countries under various political settings.

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