

**AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION TO AKP'S ELECTORAL SUCCESS:
STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE LOCAL BRANCHES**

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ABSTRACT

General perception in political science literature is the declining strength and functions of political parties' local organizations due to the loosening voter/party linkage and decrease in political activism. Nevertheless, given the safe nature of a permanent voter/party linkage in affecting vote choice, in party systems with hegemonic tendencies, incumbents may use the resources at their disposal to strengthen their links with the society via their local organizations. Within this Respect, this paper is an attempt to evaluate AKP's local branches activities and functions in understanding their role as intermediary mechanisms that enhance the voter/party linkage in the Turkish political context.

Keywords: Political Parties, AKP, Local Organizations, Voter/party Linkage, Hegemonic Party System, Political Network, Political Participation.

**AK PARTİ'NİN SEÇİM BAŞARISINA ALTERNATİF BİR AÇIKLAMA:
YEREL ÖRGÜTLERİN YAPI VE İŞLEVLERİ**

ÖZET

Siyasi literatürün genel algısı siyasal partilerin yerel örgütlerinin gücünün ve işlevlerinin azaldığı yönünde olmuştur. Yine de, kalıcı bir seçmen/parti ilişkisinin seçmen tercihleri üzerindeki güvenli etkisi göz önüne alındığında, hegemonik eğilimli siyasal sistemlerde, hükümette olan siyasal partiler ellerindeki gücü kullanarak yerel örgütleri aracılığıyla bu ilişkiyi güçlendirme eğiliminde olabilirler. Bu varsayım doğrultusunda, çalışma, seçmenle olan ilişkisini güçlendirmede rollerini anlayabilmek için AK Parti'nin yerel örgütlerinin faaliyet ve işlevlerini değerlendirmeye çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyasal partiler, Ak Parti, Yerel Örgütler, Seçmen/parti İlişkisi, Hegemonik Siyasal sistem, Siyasi Ağlar, Siyasal Katılım.

Introduction

The 12 June 2011 general elections have resulted with the electoral victory of AKP that increased its votes and gained the right to form the government for a third time. The

electoral campaign was characterized in the written media and on TV with harsh criticism of leaders to each other, rising violence in the streets and the content of AKP's announced infra-structural projects. Local activities of the political parties during the electoral campaign have not caught much attention. This situation is not an exception but characterizes most of the studies on electoral campaigns and political parties and competition or voting behavior in Turkey and the world. This is mostly due to the general perception that sees the weakening organizational strength of political parties and their decreasing importance as a result of major changes taking place in the society and perceives politics as a competition between political parties that position them on issue dimensions which decreases the effects of the mobilization efforts.

This study suggests that these studies underestimate the parameters at local level. Especially in countries like Turkey where educational level is relatively low, intermediary political participation mechanisms that link the parties to the society are weak, political parties have difficulties in understanding the demands of the voters and politics is perceived by citizens as an elite game, it seems meaningful to explore the mechanisms through which AKP connects the society and the role of local organizations. This is why the study will mainly focus on the structure of AKP's local branches, their main activities and their functions in understanding their roles in providing a link between the society and the party. The study is based on interview and observations effectuated in three districts of Istanbul with low literacy rate and socio-economic indicators. The study suggests that part of AKP consolidated and increasing vote shares, especially among neighborhoods with low socioeconomic indicators, is the result of AKP's organizational strategy to increase its root in the society in which especially the characteristics, functions and activities of the local branches is of vital importance.

Within this respect the first section will be devoted to first, the existing literature on the decreasing importance of party organizations, then investigate circumstance under which local organizations' role as link provider may still be very effective, lastly a brief evaluation of the data collection procedure will be highlighted. The second section will be an analysis of the local branches of AKP in order to understand the role of the party organization in providing a link with the society and the strategy the party uses. First, the internal and organizational characteristics of the local branches and the party's recruitment mechanism will be highlighted in order to understand the degree of this link. The second emphasis will be on the major activities and functions of the local branches to understand the role and function they play in mobilizing the voters and provide support to the party.

Political parties and Role of their Local Branches

Existing literature on Political Parties

Political parties are indispensable institutions for the democratic functioning of political systems. Their importance comes from the fact that they are the main organizations that links the society to the state and play an important role in democratic representation as they aggregate the interest of different segments of the society. What are the mechanisms through which political parties fulfill this function, what are the strategies they use and how they adapt their organizational structure are important issues that contributes to a vast body of literature on political parties.

The literature on political parties mainly focuses on the changing characteristics of political parties as they adapt themselves due to major shifts occurring in the social and political environment they function. The major cause of this adaptation is perceived as the result of technological developments and changing nature of society that alter the rules of the electoral competition. Decreasing party identification, membership, party activism accompanied by increasing volatility has been identified as major developments occurring in Europe. Basing their definition on Duverger mass-party model (Duverger, 1966) where the parties are agents through which different social groups compete or cooperate with each other (Katz & Mair, 1995: 6), the main focus has been to track the change in the organizational and functional characteristics of political parties by defining different ideal types of political parties. The evolution of political parties from mass parties with well defined strong party organizations that has control over the leaders and represent a specific group of society, to catch-all with loose organizations, larger but more fluid membership and a less ideological appeal and then to cartel defined via it closeness to the state are major discussions in the field of these studies. (Katz & Mayer, 1995; Koole, 1994; Diamond & Gunther, 2001; Heider & Saglie, 2003; Bolleyer, 2009). The passage from mass party to catch-all parties has been evaluated as the result of the decomposition of the well-defined sectors of civil society and erosion of traditional social boundaries due to the evolution of welfare state where parties could claim to represent the interest of all segments of the society and relied less on their partisan organizations to mobilize people. The result of this process has consecutively been the declining differences between political parties on ideological terms, a decrease in voters' party identification. From the perspective of local organization this meant decrease in number of political activists and participation in traditional forms of political participation due to lack of motivation. As a result, The catch-all party is characterized by a weak party organization organizing primarily around elections, having no control over the leaders, a top down

organization between the leader and the members, weak and shifting linkage with civil society organizations and a shifting constituency. Although activists and members are still used as communication channels, the party competes for access to non-party channels of communication (Diamond & Gunther, 2001: 10; Katz & Mair, 1995: 20). Major developments in media and the emergence of alternative channels of political participation has contributed to the decreasing importance of the direct link with the society and loosening of political parties' organizational structures as leader can directly give their messages to the voters via the television and have no more need to rely on their grass-root organizations to contact or mobilize people in order to gain their support. Rather they prefer to contact their constituencies in person through the media or deal with interest groups (Katz & Eldersveld, 1961; Kirchheimer, 1966; Katz & Mair, 1995: 7).

The decrease in the importance of direct contact and party organization has also been sustained by the dominant literature on electoral competition. Most of these approaches see competition as being based on the positioning of the parties across issue platforms at the national level. The major idea is that programmatic parties position themselves along ideological dimensions and inform the voters on their positions (Duverger, 1954; Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988; Hinich & Pollard, 1981; Hinich & Munger, 1994; Hinich, & Munger, 1997) This provides the logic on which both rationalists and socio-psychological approaches bases their theories.¹ The success of the party is due its position and policy based responsiveness to the voters' preferences which does not require a direct link between the party and the voters (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007: 1). Within this regards, decrease in the role of grass-root organizations in mobilization efforts and professionalization of mobilization activities during the electoral campaigns are widely expected and observed phenomenon (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1992: 71; Çarkoğlu, 2010: 7).

Developments in 1990 concerning the closer relations between political parties and the state have contributed to the perception on the further weakening of party's organizational structures. This resulted in the elaboration of a new model of party labeled as 'Cartel' where this closer relation was identified as the political parties becoming agents of the state. According to the defendants of this new emerging type of party, the frontiers between the parties and the state have become blurred especially concerning the use of the state resources by political parties for their own survival (Katz & Mair, 1992; Katz & Mair, 1995; Scarrow, 1996; Scarrow, 2000; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). It is suggested that electoral campaigning through the use of professionals funded by the resources of the states and dominance over non-party communicational channels regulated by the state, decreases parties' reliance on

their organizations to communicate with the society (Kartz and Mair, 1995: 18). Information on voters' preferences is acquired through the use of public opinion polls and the electoral outcomes of previous elections. This has resulted in decreasing number of studies that focus on the role of local organizations as intermediary mechanisms that link the party to the voters.

The decrease in the organizational strength of political parties, the loosening of a direct link with the society via their organizations are perceived to be a rule rather than an exception as political parties move from mass parties to catch-all or cartel parties and competition becomes less ideological and more policy responsive. This has resulted in decreasing number of studies that focus on the role of activists as information provider between the party and the voters. Although major developments taking place in the political realm do force parties to adapt their organizations, the study suggest that the role of the party's activists should still not be underestimated. Even if their quantity, degree of commitment, loyalty or weight in the decision making process may have decreased, activists may still act as an important tool for political parties especially at the local level.

Besides, the uniform conception of the developments in the political realm and the tendency to see the weakening strength of ideological voting or different motivations of voting decisions as pre-given underestimates the resources that political parties have to increase their local organizations. Within this respect, even if previous studies suggest that the motivation of political activists is difficult due to the breaking down of the permanent links between the political parties, political activists and voters; two processes contribute to the capacity of an incumbent to recruit activists to perform this function. Consecutively, the ability of an incumbent to orient these processes is expected to be increased in hegemonic party systems where an incumbent has a steady control on the state apparatus and its resources (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

First in ideological terms, as highlighted by Mair (1997) what characterizes the political context is not the breakdown of the ideological positioning of political parties, activists and voters but their identification with a given specific party. Within this respect, a hegemonic incumbent may use its monopoly to formulate and implement policies as a tool to attract ideologically motivated activists indifferent to political parties having the same ideological position. Second, the closer relationship of incumbent with the state and its access to state resources may provide a new instrument to motivate both activists and re-develop this kind of link which would consolidate the support to the incumbent. In situations where access to state resources is greater, as in a party system with hegemonic tendencies, an incumbent's use of these resources to strengthen its organizations and facilitate their infiltration in the

society by distributing these resources is expected to be even more probable. In fact a great number of studies have confirmed the use of state job as a mean to strengthen its organizational support and guaranty its access to state resources (Bolleyer, 2009; Kopecky at'al, 2011; Kopecky & Mair, 2011; Kopecky & Spirova, 2011). The use of state resources to motivate political activists less ideologically motivated provide also the incumbent a flexibility to move through the ideological space since lower ranks of the party becomes less sensitive to ideological issues.

So in circumstances where local organizations provide an advantage, an incumbent may probably use resources at its disposal to strengthen its local organizations. The next section will be an evaluation on the basic circumstances where local organizations may still matter especially for the political parties' mobilization strategies.

Why Political Parties' Local Branches Still Matter

Whatever their type are, clientelistic, mass, catch-all, cartel, ethnic; hegemonic, whatever their functions are, government, opposition, tribune, systemic, un-systemic, all political parties have vote maximization as their major objective and they compete with each other in order to achieve this goal. Then how political parties compete and how they persuade voters, what are the strategies and mechanisms used to achieve this end, what is the effect of mobilization and role of party organizations in mobilization efforts are still important field of research for the studies on political parties. There is much evidence to suggest that despite in the overall decrease of grass-root organizations, local party organizations may still provide important role for political parties in informing the voters on the party's position, translate the demands of the voters to the state, distribute resources for vote or consolidate a party's vote through the formation of permanent relations with the society. Especially in societies like Turkey where alternative political participation mechanism are considerably low and distribution of state resources on a selective base seems to be an integrated part of politics; strong local organizations may be even more valuable than expected. The organizational strength of a political party especially at the local level, how much it is rooted in the society still act as in important advantage in electoral competition, especially among the electorate with low level of socio-economic situation. Given the fact that mobilization may not be effectuated only in elections periods but also in the long run between election periods, the political parties' organizations may play a vital role in mobilizing voters not only to inform them on the party's policies or distribute state resources but also to change their perception in the long run (Stokes, 2005).

Recent studies mostly perceive local organizations and their activists as voluntary human resources that would work for the party during the electoral campaigning periods to support the campaigning activities. Although it is usually suggested political parties tend to communicate voters through non-organizational communication channel and the information they give on their positions is available and understandable to everyone (Bartolini, 2002) this is not the case for most of the time. Voters may not understand or be fully informed about the political parties' positions via these alternative channels of communication. So, an important function of local organizations is to contact voters to further inform them on the party's position publicly declared by the party via mass communication channel. This function is expected to be important to convince confused voters unable to discern between the different positions of the political parties on different issues due to the decreasing differences in political parties' ideological appeals, decreasing party identification, inability to understand complex messages the political parties give, or simply lack of interest in politics. Reliance on local organization to contact and mobilize voters may be a selectively used strategy by political parties changing from one electoral region to another. Eventually there are signs in the literature that political parties' organizational strength and strategy do differ according to regions (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1992). These mobilization efforts are expected to be higher especially among voters with low socio-economic status as these messages are especially less understood among them (Brady et al, 1995). In addition, the approaches on political parties' competition assume that the parties' platforms on issues are uniform in each region of the country, which is probably not the case in Turkey. Party elites may choose to focus on their positions in different dimensions depending on the context in which party competition takes place, such as the positioning of the voters across issues or degree of importance given to each issue dimension in the regional unit. Especially on politicized issues, the party may not want to make some of its policies public, but rather prefer to inform the concerned segment of the society via mobilization at the sub-national level or put more focus on issues that it perceives to be more salient in that specific unit. In these situations, nationwide alternative channels of communications such as TV will probably be inefficient vis-à-vis local organizations.

Additionally, since parties are constrained in terms of their organizational capacity and resources (Calvo & Murillo, 2010), they would focus on certain regions in an effort to reach voters that could vote for them (Bartolini, 2002: 93; Karp & Banducci, 2007: 218). In fact, a considerable number of studies suggest that mobilization is less costly and more predictable and efficient for political parties when it is as local as possible and effectuated on a geographical base. Accordingly, political parties tend to formulate strategies to detect swing

or core voters more easily. Since information on individual voter characteristics is not available, the local branches may provide the parties with this kind of information, enabling political parties to efficiently target voters during the electoral campaigns and decreasing their mobilization costs and increasing its efficiency. Another function is to support the party in providing participation in all kinds of events such as rallies, dinners, concerts effectuated within the framework of the electoral campaign.

Furthermore, Classical arguments on party competition usually ignore the resources that are at the disposal of political parties that necessitate a party organization which is deeply rooted in the society. With the democratization of developing countries starting in 1970s, it became evident that issue positioning is not the only form of competition between political parties. Mobilization through the distribution of selective incentives in return for votes was identified as another strategy used by political parties in order to gain votes. (Rosenstone & Hassen, 1993; Auyero, 2001; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). This strategy is expected to be mostly used on voters with low socio-economic situation since they are more sensitive to this kind of mobilization tools (Dixit & Londregan, 1996: 1138). Distribution of material incentive is identified as being individualist in character and, as a consequence, necessitates the presence of a control mechanism that checks compliance. The local organizations may be used as a very efficient distribution and control mechanism. Given the wide literature in Turkey on the existence of this kind of mobilization (Adaman & Carkoglu, 2000; Ayata, 1996, 2004; Erder, 1996, 1997; Heper, 1978; Karpat, 1976; Kudat, 1975; Sayari, 1975; Sunar, 1990; Wedel, 2001), local organizations may be an important tool for the provision and control of this sort of a relationship between parties and voters, especially in geographical units with low socioeconomic indicators. The local organizations may be more effective in states where distribution is effectuated in lower regional levels of the state. Such a strategy is also expected in Turkey where state resources are not only distributed nation-wide but also through local actors of the state or municipalities and local branches may act as the agents that effectuate the distribution of such resources. Nevertheless, scholars have suggested that parties mostly use both kinds of tools, programmatic or selective incentive in order to mobilize the voters (Esteves et al, 2002; Calvo & Murillo, 2004).

The party's organizational structure, especially local branches, may also be an important mechanism to consolidate a party's vote by increasing identification with the party through the use of both ideological and material mobilization tools in actual and of newly formed social networks within a given geography. Especially, In Turkey where local social networks are still important in people's daily social and political sphere in regions and sub-

regions with lower socio-economic indicators, mobilization efforts through these networks via local branches may be an effective strategy. Under these circumstances, the strength of the local organizations and the extent to which they are rooted in the society would be vital for the success and effectiveness of these mobilization efforts. Within this respect, most of the studies focus on the number of activists and members of a political party and how they are organized in order to understand how much it is rooted in the society (Duverger, 1966; Panebianco, 1988). Although number of activists and member are important indicators of a party's roots in the society, this study argues that an equally important indicator that has to be into consideration is the personal characteristics of the activists. In terms of mobilization efforts, the importance of activists' personal characteristics comes from his/her positive or negative effect on quality of contacts performed with the voters. The frequency of the contact as well as the characteristics of the person who initiates the contact (i.e. party volunteer versus someone in individual's social network) may affect voter's decision (Çarkoğlu, 2010: 10). Specifically, individuals may be more inclined to switch their votes if they are contacted more frequently via someone they know. Mobilization will probably be more influential when the voter is contacted by a person with the same socio-economic status, a person that he/she knows a relative or a friend. While direct contacts by the party via a stranger who knocks on the person's door may be less effective, indirect contacts in social and political networks by known individuals sharing the same ethnic identity, close friends or family should be more effective. An equally important factor, on who the activists of local branches are, concerns their representative character of the society in the region the party's local branch functions. Identified by Panabianco as the composition of the dominant coalition that forms the party; (Panebianco, 1988) at the local level, contacting and mobilization is expected to be more influential when activists are members of the sub-groups the party intends to mobilize. In return, representation is expected to be factor shaping the party's recruitment strategy.

Increase in number of contacts and their effectuation on a regular base can also strengthens the ability of the party to aggregate the interest of the voters, its responsiveness and consolidate it votes, since provides more information on the interest and demands of different voters and fortifies the party roots in the society. Furthermore, even if the party is deeply rooted, in the society in political parties where mechanisms through which information is transmitted are weak, the strength of the organization may not be so effective since the party's ability to respond to the voters will be heavily curtailed. The mechanism through which information flows at the same level and between different levels of the organizational branches is also important as it shows the party ability to be responsive to the voters' demands

and needs of the voters. Within this respect the local organizations with effective inter and intra- communication channels provides a regular connection between the voters and the party, increasing responsiveness of the party and consolidating its electoral base. This would especially be more important in situations where the voters' demands and interests are more local in nature.

Concerning the role of the organization, especially of the local branches as agents that directly contacts the society, this paper will focus on two of its aspects. The first one concerns the internal structure of the party where the characteristics of the organization, flows of information and recruitment strategy is expected to be important factors affecting contacting and mobilization efforts. The second focuses on the activities and functions of the local branches as the main units that meet the society as the representative of the party. While the number of the activists and the amount of their routine activities increase the number of contact, their personal characteristics and the content of the activities they perform affect the quality of the contact and the image of the party via the voter. This is why; the second section of the study will try to evaluate the nature of the link between AKP and the Turkish society in assessing the strength of its local organizations and their activities by focusing especially on regional units with low socio-economic indicators.

Notes on the content of the field research and data collection

The major aim of the study is to evaluate the nature of the link between AKP and the Turkish society by identifying the characteristics and functions of the branches of the party in geographical units with low socio-economic indicators. This kind of a study necessitates observation to be effectuated in the most local geographical unit as possible since it is at this level that the party effectuates a direct relationship with citizens. Istanbul has been chosen as the unit of analysis since it is one of the cities where electoral competition is expected to be the highest due to both strategically importance of the city for all parties and fragmentation in distribution of vote shares. As a result, the importance of local party branches, their activities is expected to be higher. Furthermore, Istanbul provides a good micro-example of Turkey in terms of geographical representation with its large number of residents having migrated from nearly all cities of Turkey.

Although the district branches are the legally most local structures that represent the party, it is also a known fact that major Turkish political parties have neighborhood organizations that functions within the administrative body of the districts. This is why the main emphasis will be devoted to the characteristics and activities of the district and

neighborhood branches. Since the socio-economic indicators are expected to affect the organizational strategy of the party, districts with considerably low levels of socio-economic indicators, measured in terms of education will be included in the analysis.

The main data that has been used in the study is collected from the observations on AKP district branch activities effectuated during the legal electoral campaigns of 2011 general elections and indebt interviews realized before and during the electoral campaigning period with a considerable large number of AKP administrative units and activists. Within this respect, 56 semi-structured and scheduled interviews have been effectuated with the party president of Istanbul and elites from different levels of the organization such as districts presidents, vice-presidents responsible of the organization or neighborhood presidents from both main or woman branches in districts such as Zeytinburnu, Küçükçekmece, Beyoğlu, Beykoz, Sancaktepe, Esenler, Başakşehir. Main focus of these interviews has been on the organizational structure of the party, its recruitment strategy, link with the voters and their changing characteristics in different districts. The main activities of the local branches and their organizational structure have been sustained by data collected during observations and interviews effectuated with neighborhood organizations and activists from different ranks during the electoral campaigning of 2011 general elections in the districts of Beyoğlu, Beykoz, Sancaktepe². During the data collection period, main attention has been devoted to understand the administrative structure of the party, its recruitment strategies and the diverging activities of local branches in understanding their function in the overall mobilization strategy of the party. Interviews effectuated within this period have mostly been performed on ad-hoc base and were more characterized as daily conversations during the campaigning activities. Although these interviews which the number is 128 are not as extensive as the scheduled ones, they provide valuable information on the local organizations of AKP and their functions.

Evaluating the role of AKP's Local Branches in its mobilization Strategy

As expressed by most of the AKP representatives the party's mobilization strategy can be identified as "*descending to the public*". The representatives insist on mentioning that this strategy is not limited to the election campaigning period. The party's main aim can be identified as reaching different segments of the society at the lowest level as possible by infiltrating in the daily life of the citizens. Contacting and giving a positive image of the party is their main aim and local organizations are key actors that provide this contact with the society. The strength of local organizations and the activities they perform are vital to the

proper functioning of this strategy. Strong party organization is based on the quantity of activists, the mechanisms of communication and to the recruitment strategy based on the incorporation of representatives of all the segments of the society.

AKP's organizational structure at the Local Level

The organizational structure of the party is important in the sense that it increases both the number of AKP representatives functioning in the society and it provides the mechanism through which information circulates from lower to higher level of the party branches and vice versa. Legally, AKP is organized at national, municipal and district level which reflects the geographical administrative structure of the Turkish state. At all levels, three different branches, main, woman and youth; function autonomously from each other with their own executive and administrative boards. Legally, the main branch is the official representative of the party while the women and youth branches function as un-official branches that are tied to the former ones. In practice, women and youth organizations are autonomous branches that are not responsive to the main branch of their geographical unit but to their own branch's higher organ.

With this legal organizational structure AKP does not differ from other Turkish political parties in terms of the links through which it contacts the society. The real difference lies in the main characteristics and strength of the neighborhood organizations that provide the most direct link to the society. The importance given to these organizations by the higher ranked political elites is an indication of their perceived importance in the mobilization strategy of the party. These branches which organize in a similar way to the upper level branches are classified as non-formal organizations, tied to the district and functions under its supervision. Each branch; main, women and youth; are represented in the neighborhood legally with a board of at least 11 members, in which one of them is the president of the neighborhood branch. This makes a total of at least 33 activists functioning as the representative of the party at the neighborhood level. This number increases as in most of the neighborhoods especially where the party's electoral support is high other volunteers are included in the board. Additional to the neighborhood organization, a neighborhood responsible from the district executive board of each branch is appointed by the president. Residency of the administrative member is not a necessity. While in Sancaktepe and Beykoz the appointed members were residents of the neighborhood, in Beyoğlu some of them resided in other neighborhoods. This makes the number of activists functioning in the neighborhood even higher.

Furthermore, each of the three branches have function based committees at all levels, the neighborhood level included, where major responsibilities are divided in order to enhance the functioning of the party and are tied to the upper administrative level. The presidents of these committees form the executive board of that geographical unit. Some of these committees are social issues, foreign relations, organization, financial affairs, advertising and media, public relation. Each of these committees has their own executive board selected from the representatives of that committee at the lower level.

Nevertheless, large numbers of activists or representatives at local level are not the only characteristic of AKP's organizational structure; an equally important characteristic is the mechanism through which communication takes place within the party. How information is translated between the higher and lower level branches or among different branches at the same level is an integral characteristic which affects the party's mobilization strategy and increases its effectiveness.

Although technological developments such as internet or cellular phone are widely used at all level of the organizational pyramid, these are mostly used to inform the activists and the members about events taking place. These new forms of communication have been especially used during the electoral campaign in order to inform both the activists and members on the major events taking place in the neighborhoods, districts and Istanbul. Nevertheless, the most important mechanism used to regulate the communication flows in the party is the realization of regular meeting in which attendance is strictly supervised by higher administrative organs and non-participating members are contacted to be informed on the cause of their non-participation. Nevertheless, if the non-participating members appointed one of his/her vice-presidents, non-participation seemed not to be a very important issue. Weekly scheduled meeting within each level of all organizational branches; main, woman, youth and functional committees are the first kind of meeting that reinforces internal cohesion. Within this respect, at both national, municipal, district and neighborhood level all representatives of the executive boards of the main, woman and youth branches effectuate weekly meetings in order to discuss the headings highlighted by the higher organ, important issues specific to the branch and plan major activities to be effectuated. Similar activity can be observed for the functional committees.

The communication flows between the branches and the functional committees at the same level are effectuated via the members of the district committee boards who are also the responsible in the district executive board of their own geographical unit. The communication between the main, woman and youth organizations at the same level is realized through the

participation of a representative of women and youth organizations, mostly the president, to the weekly meeting of the main branch. Especially in the neighborhood level variations has been observed where in some neighborhoods the main branch president participated to the meetings of the other branches or especially in neighborhoods where have difficulties to function, all branches effectuated a common meeting.

Communication at different levels is effectuated by two different mechanisms that both main, woman and youth branches effectuate separately. The first one is the monthly meeting effectuated with the executive board of one geographical unit with the presidents of the lower units. I have been able to participate in two kind of monthly meeting at different levels and branches. The first one was the monthly meeting of the Istanbul main branch executive board with the district presidents. The main participants of the meeting were the municipal president with its executive board, the municipal women, youth presidents and presidents of all districts. The second one was the monthly meeting of the woman branch of the district of Sancaktepe with its neighborhood presidents. The main participants in that meeting were the district woman branch president and its executive board and the woman branch neighborhood presidents of the district.

The second mechanism that provides communication between different geographical units is via the appointed responsible from the district administrative board for each neighborhood. This responsible has the duty to attend to the weekly meetings of his/her neighborhood. As an example, in the main branch meeting of Veysel Karani, a neighborhood of Sancaktepe, the district administrative board member responsible for this neighborhood was also present. Nevertheless, a considerable number of neighborhood presidents complained that their representatives do not attend these meetings. Similarly, mostly the district presidents preferred to contact directly the neighborhood presidents in case of necessity. Even if these procedures are not always applied properly, especially at the neighborhood level these meeting forms a huge organizational network where information, whatever its kind, flows between different organizational units via a large amount of representatives of the party functioning with a direct link to the society.

Personal Characteristics of the Activists of the local Branches

Another important dimension of the organization of the party that effects its mobilization strategy is the personal characteristics of the activists at the local level that directly contact the society as the representative of the party. Who the activists are and how they are evaluated by different segments of the society seems to be an important criterion for

the success of mobilization and as a result, the recruitment of the activists. So, the main criterion of selection is the members' ability to reach different segments of the citizens and successfully represent the party in daily community relations to increase its positive image and support. Although each district and neighborhood president is free to select its own administrative and executive boards, they are supervised by the higher authority so that the socio-economic composition of the neighborhood and the district are reflected. This increases the ability of the party to have a positive contact with members of different communities.

During the indebt interviews effectuated with district presidents, all indicated the importance of representation as a major mechanism to include different segments of the society in the party. Within this respect, representation of different segments of the society is the most important factor that influences recruitment. The recruitment strategy is mainly based on two sorts of representation; socioeconomic and geographical representation.

The party's representatives are very delicate to represent the general demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the geographical unit they function in their recruitment strategy. In this sense, similar to previous studies (Erder, 1996; Wedel, 2001) a general observation is that the political and social political life in these districts and the neighborhoods that have low socio-economic indicators and consist of the shanty-towns of Istanbul, mostly functions through the social networks based on hometown origin of the residents. Although other characteristics such as profession, education, economic situation are also taken into consideration, the dominance of hometown origin is also reflected in the organizational structure of AKP's branches. As a result, the demographic composition of each district branch differs among each other in parallel to the districts' demographic composition. One can easily observe the difference between the districts of Beyoğlu, Sancaktepe and Beykoz whose residents' characteristics changes in terms of hometown origin, socio-economic situation, political attitudes and individual life styles. While the branches of Beyoğlu are very cosmopolite in hometown origin, in Beykoz the number of representatives of the Black Sea region is the majority. Similarly in Sancaktepe residents whose hometowns are in East and South East region constitute the majority. A parallel situation can be observed for neighborhood organizations which often diverge even within the same district. All interviewed district presidents highlighted how much they were careful to incorporate in the party's both central and neighborhood organs residents with different origins. Sancaktepe district presidents argued that in their district the main criterion to decide to the number of the representatives of each hometown was their mathematical percentage (12 March 2001). Nevertheless, although all districts have the aim to fully represent each hometown in their

branches this objective is not always attainable. Especially in neighborhoods such as Sancaktepe, Küçükçekmece or Beyoğlu the party has difficulties to recruit residents whose hometowns have large numbers of Alevis and Kurds.

The second criterion for representation is geographical. The district and neighborhood president pays attention to have members from respectively all the neighborhoods and streets so that he/she can be informed on the general attitude of the electorate, all events taking place and set regular channels of communication within the whole of the geographical unit under his/her responsibility. This provides the members the opportunity to increase both the amount and the quality of the contacts; and to actively participate in daily lives of the citizens as the representatives of the party. At the district level, this representation is performed via the neighborhood representative at the administrative board.

The representation criteria are important in this sense as it gives opportunity to inform the activists about all kind of events taking place, facilitating their participation to these activities and increasing the quality of the contact as it is taking place by the intermediary of known people. With these activities the activists reinforce the positive image of the party since it is perceived as to be sensitive to all aspects of the citizens' personal life. Demographic and geographic representation provides opportunity to the activists to regularize the contacts, enter in different communities and inform them by the intermediary of people known by these communities. This in turn, can serve as a tool to consolidate and increase the party electoral base. In all the neighborhoods observed, the neighborhood president was informed by its local administration on the events taking place among their hometown relatives or in the streets they reside or prepared a home talk by their intermediary.

To consolidate and increase the contacts; recruiting people that have time, are active, respected, dominant (mostly local elites) in their society, have good relations with the residents as a whole are further characteristics that the party pays attention. The individual characteristics of the presidents and other representatives are vital in carrying on and increasing the party's organizational strength at both district and neighborhood level, since their main function is to form the branch organizations and provide the coordination of their activities and relations between members. Replacement of the neighborhood president is a very widely exerted procedure when the organization in the neighborhood is not functioning as desired. In neighborhoods where the neighborhood president is active and successfully forms its administration on representation principles the party is successful in reaching diverse voters on a regular base. Individual characteristics of the activists seem to be very influential when attitude of different groups towards the party is taken into consideration. A

major observation is the diverging reaction of the communities distanced to AKP's different activists. When respected activists contacted them they were considerably moderate in their reactions while towards others their reaction was rather aggressive.

Functions and Activities of the Local Branches

The local branches, especially neighborhood organizations activities have one basic function for the political party. These activities serve as mechanisms that provide a permanent linkage between the party and its electoral base, consolidating the party's votes and increasing solidarity among party activists, members and supporters. Furthermore, through these mechanisms the activists can also detect sensitive voters, or even change voters' attitudes and perceptions on the party, contributing to the increase of the party's electoral base. Since contacting occurs on a very personal level, the activists can easily be informed on the basic needs of the people, they also can guess the ideological stance of the individual and whether he/she has the probability to vote for the party. This in return provides important data on how to convince the voter and shape the content and target of the electoral campaigning activities of the district decreasing the efforts and costs of the district branch. Another important function is to reinforce the image of the party as an organ which is sensitive to the needs and demands of its electoral base and the citizens as a whole, and works hard and continuously for this purpose.

There is great variety in the activities the neighborhood organizations perform. While these activities have the major aim to increase the party's positive image, they also function as a motivation and control mechanism of the activists' performance since all kind of activities are reported to the districts and from the districts to the province for each branch- main, woman and youth. Although the activities are similar in all neighborhoods, their amounts change.

Daily Activities and Functions of the neighborhood branches

The research confirms the tendency of local branches to form a linkage with communities in their geographical units through their activities effectuated via present political networks in order to increase party identification. The main activity of the neighborhood branch is the weekly meeting which is mostly effectuated on an informal base as home talks in which not only the administration but all citizens can participate. These meetings mostly takes the form of home talks where the neighborhood's district representative or neighborhood president inform citizens on the party's policies and note

different demands and problems, all mostly being local issues. Especially in home talks, the organization members bring with them the things offered to the guests and the house owner is asked to gather her/his neighbor or friends. The location of these meeting changes greatly; it is mostly realized in a members' house but any kind of occasional meeting in the neighborhood such as *mevlit* or Koran readings, women's tee day is preferable if possible. For main, youth organizations coffee houses are the most suitable place. These meeting are especially effectuated in areas frequented by lots of people so that they can contact as many people as possible. While increasing the number of the people informed on the party's policies, these meeting also serve as mechanisms that reinforce the perception that the party is working hard. Indeed, most of activists mentioned that they purposively made the meetings in crowded place to perform this end.

These meetings also serve as places to make new members. People are mostly demanded whether they want to become member or not at the end of the meeting. Within this respect, making new members was an important part of the party's strategy before the general elections. Information on the members was entered in a computer system which could be used nationally, messages were send on the cellular phones of the members where information on the party's activities at the local level was transmitted. This contributed to the mobilization of the members as a part of the electoral campaign.

Other forms of activities consist of participating in all social activities taking place in the neighborhood such as marriages, funerals and visits of newborns, ill, elders, Koran readings, *Mevlûts*. These visits are performed with some gifts such as cloths for baby, sugar, tea or coffee. While strengthening the bonds between activists as the representative of AKP and the citizens it contributes to a positive perception on the party's sensitivity towards the members and the society, and its overall performance.

Another important activity of the neighborhood branches covers all kinds of social and economic assistance to the citizens in need. While this assistance consists of informing people on how to benefit on the social, economic or health services provided both by the municipalities or the state, allocating economic aid is the most important part. How and where to apply for a wheelchair for the handicaps, ambulance services for the ill citizens, other application procedures for state services such as retirement, education aid programs, green card to benefit from free health services, care services for elders, education assistance for mentally disabled etc... The first step is to determine the helpless, (handicapped, poor etc) and report it to the district via the social affairs branch. Providing social and economic aid to the helpless is the second step. An important responsibility of the neighborhood branch is to

further control the economic conditions of the people benefitting from the social aid programs of the municipalities. Although officially, the control of the economic conditions of residents who applied to the benefit is effectuated by the field employees of the municipality, neighborhood branches are influential in all the process of application, continuation or cancelations. Lots of activists give examples of incidents where they have been influential in the cancelation of the services provided because they have determined that beneficiaries have done fake declarations about their economic situations. When demands for economic assistance is taken into consideration, the neighborhood branches play as broker that defends the individual's right if the demands have been effectuated under their knowledge. It is interesting that most of the neighborhood activists stated that the main cause they participated to the party was to help people in need. This shows that connection to the party provides an advantage in benefitting from these assistance programs. The organization members become even more powerful in providing these needs if they works at the municipality at the same time. Working at the municipality also helps the activists to reach different segments of the society; this is especially the case when the activists work in field as controllers of the economic situation or distributors of the aid packages, helping them to know these people more personally and changing the image of the party.

Some activists try to allocate donations from private companies, businessmen etc that are close to AKP using their social networks within the party. The women branch neighborhood president of Hacıahmet, informed that they have found funds to cloth children, to furnish houses or provide food packages from businessmen last year. During the electoral campaign lots of residents contacted the neighborhood presidents in order to attain economic assistance. Furthermore, activist talked among themselves on how they could help some households which they thought they were helpless. Representation reinforces the activists' ability to identify and help the ones in need. It also increases the general perception that the party does not discriminate between different communities in these activities.

Variation in activities between neighborhoods can be observed, especially in neighborhood where there is great reaction towards AKP. This mostly corresponds to neighborhood where radical groups are active such as İnönü in Sancaktepe, Hacıahmet in Beyoğlu or Kanarya in Büyükçekmece. In these neighborhoods where a representation criterion is also difficultly applied, activists perform their activities more discreetly and activists try not to expose themselves. Home talks are effectuated with less and trusted people while in other kind of other activities such as visits or helps, activist do not introduce

themselves as AKP representatives. A more long term strategy is effectuated, especially in neighborhoods where violence occurs.

There is not much evidence on the effect of being an AKP supporter or compliance in order to have access to these assistances or their cancelation. Within this respect, there seems to have variations, but even if control is not directly effectuated by activists, the network that neighborhood organization have formed and work through, provide considerable mechanisms through which control can be effectuated that are tied to the activists personal perceptions. Observation of known supporters in daily community relations, demands to participate in party activities and noting down the names of the participants are among these mechanisms. Besides, most of activists pointed that most of the BDP supporters have economic aid but still did not vote for the party. They mostly think this situation as unjust and unethical. Furthermore, there is sign that the party activists provide help to their entourage. The fact that most of the activist entered the party to help people confirms the expectation that AKP supporters are advantageous. I have heard in different occasions that the Kurdish citizens tried to join the party in order to be able to provide benefits to their entourage.

Activities and Functions during the Electoral Campaign

Local organizations also serve to the party as human resource with their large quantity that facilitates mobilization activities before and during the electoral campaigns. Furthermore, their strength affects the nature of the electoral campaigns effectuated in each neighborhood. Before the beginning of the official electoral campaign, neighborhood branches worked intensely for attaining the tasks the Istanbul branch demanded. For making as more members as possible activists participated in every social activity in the neighborhoods. Furthermore within a period of two month every neighborhood was asked to organize two home talks for every polls, given the fact that in a medium sized neighborhood there are approximately 30 polls, realization of 60 home talks necessitates a very good coordination and a strong neighborhood branch that have contact in every streets. Nevertheless some neighborhoods had difficulty in reaching their targets. Besides, activists were charged to make voter surveys in all the polls within two days in which they made door to door visits and filled forms where the voters' general information and complaints were asked. This has been mostly effectuated in all the neighborhoods observed.

During the elections neighborhood branches provide logistic to the electoral campaign of the district. Besides, they were mostly responsible in organizing the activities of the district's electoral campaign program effectuated at the neighborhoods with the participation

of two candidate deputies appointed by the Istanbul center each and every week of the day for a period of 2 months. When a deputy candidate came to the neighborhood, the organization was responsible for all activities. When the neighborhood branch controlled the neighborhood and was well coordinated the visits were efficiently used to motivate members and supporters, and persuade swing voters. These activities included home talks, visit for ill, elder and helpless people in order to find solution to the demands via the candidate deputies, to gather citizens for the meetings in the contacting the office where the candidate deputy informed on the party performance in government. In Sancaktepe and Beykoz, the campaigners mostly acted according to the demands and programs of the neighborhoods.³ This was especially the case in Sancaktepe since local branches are relatively stronger than Beyoğlu and Beykoz. All members were responsible to participate in activities in their neighborhood and other neighborhoods if appointed by the district branch.

Especially in neighborhoods where polarization is high, members of main and youth organizations worked as security guards. The personal characteristics of the activists were very important in these situations. When the activists were not respected enough or the branch did not have good contact with these groups, activities by the district could not be effectuated, such as in the neighborhoods of Hacıahmet and Çukur where support to the pro-Kurdish party BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi – Peace and Democracy party) are high and the neighborhood branches are not very successful to penetrate among them.

Recruiting people for general activities such as mass meetings, concerts (in Sancaktepe members were called to demand whether they will participate or not) or motivation breakfasts, dinners, trips or picnics for the official members was another function of the neighborhood activists. Besides gathering people for these activities, they also were responsible take the names and contact numbers of the participants. The distribution of the brochures to all the residents was an act mainly performed by main and youth organizations. Neighborhood branches were responsible to prepare the list of people responsible at the polls in their neighborhoods, besides, all of them were actively in charge to control the polls during the voting day with two official members, one in the poll board and one as observer and other non official members as floor or school responsible in the polling stations. When the neighborhood branches could determine the handicapped that can not go to the polling station on their own, they provided the means to transport them to the polling stations. In some neighborhoods activists even transported these people on a chair to the polls that were at the upper floor of the building.

Conclusion

Although the existing literature on political parties suggest the evolution of political parties into organizations where mobilization and organizational branches progressively has weakened, this study has tried to identify how strong party organizations could contribute to political parties mobilization efforts in consolidating and increasing the electoral support for political parties in geographical units with low socio-economic indicators. In accordance with this objective the study has tried to identify the mechanisms through which AKP has formed its roots in the society via its local branches mainly focusing at neighborhoods level in regions with low socio-economic indicators.

Within this respect the first section of the study has focuses on the important discussion on the role of party organizations especially local ones as provider of the link between the state and the society at the most local level. By Analyzing AKP's local branches, the study has tried to show that in contrast to major approaches, local organizations can still function very effectively especially under of party system characterized by an incumbent with hegemonic tendencies. It has been defended that especially in regions where socio-economic indicators are low local branches still acts as important mechanism through which the party's position on important issues are introduced, interest and demands of the voters are transmitted and control of distribution of resources are effectuated.

The second section of the study has been the evaluation of AKP local organization and branches according to these factors. Within this respect, first the administrative structure of the party and its recruitment strategy has been explored. It has been observed that the party's main strategy at the neighborhood level is to reach different segments of the society by creating an organizational network in which both the numbers; representative and individual characteristics of the activists matter. The party has formed an organizational structure where the information flow within and between each organizational level is assured and local branches act as the main provider of the information on the voters interests and needs. Daily and campaigning activities of the local branches and their functions have been identified. The results of the study confirm that nearly all activities that can be mainly grouped as representing the party, introducing the party's policy, informing the upper level of the organization on the interest and demand of the society and distribution resources were performed to consolidate the electoral base of the party and increase its support.

The results of the study on AKP confirms the expectation that local organizations play an important role as a link between the party and the voters; and act as an important actors in the party's mobilization strategy especially in regions with low socio-economic indicators.

Nevertheless, two different points' that would contribute in understanding diverging organizational strategies of political parties merits further attention. First, analyzing whether the party also uses this strategy in regions with high socio-economic indicators would be very interesting in understanding the role of socio-economic indicators. Second, although the study has mentioned the possible affect of both ideological and material nature of motivation of political participation, the effect of these factors on the organizational capacity of political parties may provide fruitful further information, in explaining AKP's consolidated and increasing electoral success and incumbents in other democracies.

END NOTES

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¹ Their main difference lies on the factors that affect voting behavior. While rationalists evaluate the choice of voters to be bounded only to the positioning on the specific elections and easily changes across elections (Downs, 1957; Hinich & Pollard, 1981; Hinich & Münger, 1994; Hinich, & Munger, 1997), socio-psychological approaches link voting behavior to longer process of evaluations that does not easily change (Campel, 1960; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

² These three districts were selected due to their variety in terms of their demographic characteristics.

³ The situation was different in Beyoğlu where all neighborhood activities were prepared and performed by the district which mostly consisted of street walks where candidate deputies distributed flowers to the residents. This was possibly due to the cosmopolite character of the district and Beyoğlu was rather an exception.

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