

A Critical View on the Idea of Rising of Conservatism in University Graduates in Turkey

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Abstract

Even though it is getting weaker, there is still a common idea in Turkish politics that well-educated people support the left-wing political parties and contrary, under-educated people support the right-wing/conservative parties. Although this idea may partially -or at the end- be true the situation is more complicated than this.

In the Atlas of Turkish Values, for example, the comparison of 1990 and 2011 data indicates that conservatism has risen dramatically among university graduates. Therefore, it is necessary to know the background of this process together with the populist and ideological policies.

Hence, we should examine some paradoxes of liberal democracy. So, the main research questions here are:

1. How are higher education and politics intertwined between 1990 and today?

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2. What are the social and political effects of changing and specifically; on the voting behavior of the university graduates among these two main political lines: National Vision tradition and Republican political parties?

Keywords: Universities in Turkey, conservatism and education, democracy and education, Gramsci, World Values Survey Turkey, politics and universities

Öz

Giderek zayıflasa da Türk siyasetinde halen eğitim düzeyi yüksek kişilerin sol görüşten siyasal partileri desteklediği ve tersine, eğitim düzeyi düşük kişilerin de sağ görüşten/muhafazakar siyasal partileri desteklediği görüşü hakimdir. Her ne kadar bu fikir kısmen –veya sonunda doğru olsa da durum bundan daha karmaşıktır.

Türkiye Değerler Atlası'nda, örneğin, 2009 ve 2011 verilerinin karşılaştırması, muhafazakarlığın üniversite mezunları arasında çarpıcı bir şekilde arttığını göstermektedir. Bu nedenle bu sürecin arka planını, popülist ve ideolojik politikalarla birlikte anlamak gerekecektir.

Dolayısıyla, liberal demokrasinin bazı paradokslarını incelemek gerekecektir. Bu yüzden buradaki temel araştırma soruları:

1.1990'dan bugüne, yüksek öğretim ve siyaset nasıl iç içe geçiyor?

2.Değişimin, özellikle üniversite mezunlarının oy kullanma davranışlarının iki ana siyasi hat - Milli Görüş geleneği ve Cumhuriyetçi siyasal partiler- arasındaki değişimi olmak üzere, toplumsal ve siyasal etkileri nelerdir?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye'de üniversiteler, muhafazakarlık ve eğitim, demokrasi ve eğitim, Gramsci, Dünya Değerler Araştırması Türkiye, siyaset ve üniversiteler

1. Introduction

Fundamental changes economic, demographic and technological changes have taken place in the world with the ‘globalization’ process since the 1990s. During this process, the number of countries governed by democracy has increased, higher education has become widespread and university education has become available for the masses rather than being exclusive to the elite few. According to the liberal/theoretical view, a rise in the quality of education could be expected during this process due to the increasing number of universities and competition among them. However, Tekeli underlines that with globalization, knowledge has become an ordinary commodity (Kaynar-Parlak, 2004: 6-9).

However, with the commodification of knowledge, two major problems arise in universities.

The first is that the gap between good and other universities will widen as education is provided with a ‘market’ mentality, based on ‘demand’, or in other words, with a ‘customer’ focus.

The second problem is the ideological instrumentalization of education, particularly in countries where democracy is not strong.

There may also be several specific cases among countries regarding globalization and its education related consequences (Laçiner, 2001: 23-28).

As a “Secular-Muslim” country, the -education related- consequences of Turkey’s shift towards globalization through the neo-liberal economic policies in 1980 is unique in certain aspects.

The 1980 military “coup era” was the guarantor of the construction of neo-liberal economic policies, during which the Motherland Party (ANAP), (which came to power with the 1983 general elections after stepping back into the political stage) became the executive of the program in that era. In this period, extensive use was also made of the liberalist masquerade of political liberalism. ANAP claimed that it was a “liberal” party that brought together political traditions such as the center-right, the center-left, the religious right-wing, and the nationalist right.

The abolishment of Articles 141-142 on the “fight against communism” and Article 163 on the “fight on reactionism” that were present in the criminal code of the time in 1991 under the claim of “freedom of thought” can be given as examples supporting this claim.

It should not be forgotten that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, communism “became no longer a threat” in the conjuncture of the period, and the strengthening of radical Islam due to the “Green Belt” project that the United States had run since the 1970s had begun to be seen.

Especially in such a conjuncture, the steps that paved the way for empowerment of Islamic conservatism in Turkey under the guise of “freedom of thought” points to a paradox of liberal democracy worth discussing: “Should democracy have a tolerance to thoughts that threaten its own existence, or where are the boundaries of such a tolerance?”

Indeed, Turkey in the 90s witnessed the rising of Islamic conservatism, which was seen by its opponents as a threat to the democratic regime. More specifically, the rising of the National Vision (Millî Görüş) tradition, -and- as the representative of this tradition the Welfare Party (RP), came to power after emerging as the primary political party in the 1995 elections, leading to the post-modern coup of February 28 as a response to these developments.

The 1995 elections can also be regarded as the beginning of the change and transformation of the “center”, which became fully apparent in Turkish politics after 2002. However, although the RP received the highest number of votes in the elections, it could not obtain the majority to form the government on its own. Thus, ANAP formed a coalition with True Path Party (DYP), which had been established as the continuation of the Justice Party (AP) before the coup. After this coalition broke, DYP formed the 54th Government with RP in the prime minister of Necmettin Erbakan (Table 1).

Table 1: Governments formed after 1995 General Elections

Governments	Prime Ministers	Parties	Period
ANAYOL (53rd G.)	2 nd Yılmaz Government	ANAP-DYP	6 March- 28 June 1996
REFAHYOL (54th G.)	Erbakan Government	RP-DYP	28 June 1996- 30 June 1997
ANASOL-D (55th G.)	3 rd Yılmaz Government	ANAP-DSP-DTP	30 June 1997- 11 January 1999
DSP Azınlık (56th G.)	4 th Ecevit Government	DSP	11 January 1999- 28 May 1999

When we look at the governments formed after the 1995 General Elections, we see that the dominant character of power in this period is the right-wing, except for the 55th Government of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) and the 56th Minority Government established by DSP. Until now, predominantly right-wing voters have characterized Turkish democracy. However, what makes this period different from previous periods is that “Islamic/conservative” right-wing politics starts to take the place of “traditionalist liberal” center-right, as defined by Emre Kongar. This time, we see “Islamic/conservative” RP becoming the first party in the 1995 elections and being part of the 54th government (until February 28, military intervention) as a clear and significant sign of the social and political change in Turkey.

The rising political tension, starting with Prime Minister Erbakan’s first overseas visits in Muslim states of Egypt, Libya and Nigeria, followed by statements and actions with Islamic content made by leading figures and municipal mayors of the party, as well as increasing concerns for secularism, led the country to the February 28 military intervention.

In the long National Security Council (NSC) meeting held on February 28, 1997, the soldiers stressed that secularism was the guarantor of democracy and the rule of law in Turkey, and reported the decisions taken by the Council to the government.

With the decisions of the NSC meeting held on February 28, various educational requirements were put into place. Schools affiliated with the

religious sects were to be supervised by and transferred to the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The education system was changed to eight years of uninterrupted education. Further changes included the supervision of Quran courses, the application of the Law of Unification of Education, emphasis on the closure of religious sects, the necessity of keeping the media -which defended people discharged from the army due to reactionism and portrayed the army as an enemy of religion- under control, compliance with the dress code, and actions against Atatürk, and reports of violations of these requirements to the government. The soldiers prepared an “Action Plan against Reactionary Forces” during this period, and a “Western Working Group” was set up under the leadership of the Deputy Chief of General Staff Army Commander Çevik Bir to supervise whether the decisions and sanctions were implemented.

These political developments in 1990s should have led the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to be cautious while taking its position against the status quo during its establishment phase later. Although the party was originated from the “Milli Görüş” (National Vision) tradition, AKP was established by an “innovative” staff that defined itself as “conservative democrat”. AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan implied to his voters that by demanding to continue with the National Vision - he was not breaking from the tradition-. However, he made contradicting statements that the party did separate from the National Vision tradition, so as –to sway votes from right- wing voters supporting the Secular Republic. He thus succeeded in consolidating the right-wing voters. He also managed to gain support of the “liberal left” using rhetoric on the European Union (EU) and democracy, as well as with certain regulations included in the September 12, 2010 referendum. (Gürsel, 2010).

2. 2012 Atlas of Turkish Values and Conservatism in Turkey

The findings of Atlas of Turkish Values conservatism scale study demonstrate the connection of political conservatism starting in the 90s and leaving its mark on the 2000s with social conservatism.

Average conservatism level of Turkey according to Atlas of Turkish Values is given in Table 2 at intervals of 10 years.

Table 2: Level of conservatism in turkey (1990-2011)

Years	Conservatism Level
1990	60.34
2001	64.80
2011	63.00

If the central point of the scale is taken as 50, these figures indicate that Turkish people are closer to conservative values. Between 1990 and 2011, the change in society in favor of conservatism is below 3 points out of 100. Considering the decrease of 1.80 points between 2001 and 2011, it is seen that the findings are consistent with the political process and the structure of Turkish society dominated by conservatism can be observed.

The striking result triggering this study is the comparison of conservatism scales of university graduates from 1990 to 2011: the conservatism level of university graduates which was 38.5 in 1990 reached 54.8 in 2011 with a significant increase of more than 16 points.

Table 3: Level of Conservatism in University Graduates (1990-2011)

Years	Conservatism Level in University Graduates
1990	38.5
2011	54.8

The fact that the increase in the level of conservatism among university graduates is significantly higher than the Turkey average is a striking result (Tables 2 and 3).

Considering the dramatic increase in the number of universities, the result envisages questioning the reality of the perception among the Turkish public that “the well-educated voters vote for the left parties and the lower-educated ones vote for the right parties”.

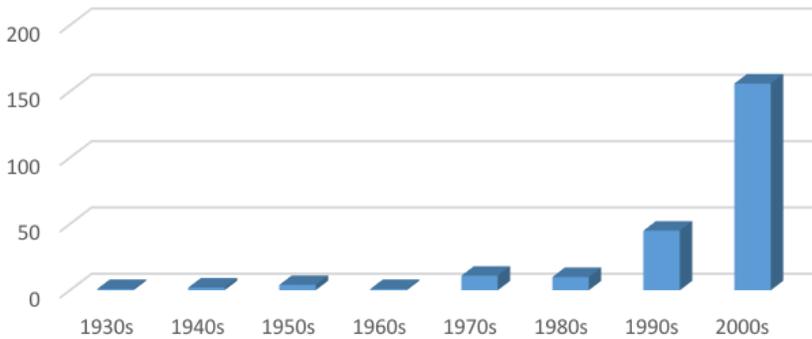
When we look at the rapid increase in the number of universities, we can clearly see in Table 4 that the number of universities increased significantly during 1990s, but more strikingly during 2000s, when Justice and Development Party (AKP) born from the National Vision tradition came to power alone at an unprecedented rate.

3. Universities in Turkey

When we look at the history related to the establishment of Universities in Turkey, we've seen that the foundations of higher education institutions adopting a Western approach were laid in the Ottoman Empire, during the last quarter of the 18th century. The name of Darülfünun, founded in 1846, was changed to İstanbul Darülfünunu in 1924, a year after the establishment of the Republic. It was defined as an autonomous institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

If we take the transformation of Istanbul Darülfünunu to the Istanbul University in 1933 as a beginning point for the Republican Period, we see the first notable increase in the number of universities in the 70s. As we have noted above, the increase in 1990s and especially in the 2000s is highly significant and cannot be explained by demographic reasons alone (Table 4).

Table 4: Number of universities established in Turkey



Source: - Mete Kaynar-İsmet Parlak, 2005:30
 - yok.gov.tr (16.03.2018)
 - While HEC (YÖK) gives the number of universities in 2018 as 185, Hüseyin Okan Durmuş adds a list and cites
 - HEC with 193 universities. (blog.milliyet.com.tr / 06.05.2015).

Right before the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the government made a new move to increase the number of universities. AKP's proposal for the establishment of 15 new universities, by dividing existing universities, including Istanbul University, was enacted despite all the public reactions (Diken, 20.04.2018). Speeches made by Erdoğan as a mayor and later as partisan president show that the educational policies of AKP are being carried out with a populist approach based on votes. Furthermore, it reveals that education is being treated as an instrument of ideological transformation (www.hurriyet.com.tr, 12.09.2008 / 02.02.2012).

Policies that emphasize the political function of education and place “party benefit” in front of “public benefit” serve hegemonic structures. A general definition of the concept of hegemony is that the interests of the ruling class are represented as universal interests.

The emphasis of democracy by the AKP, which defines itself as a “conservative-democratic party”, may also be associated with the need of universalism. It is noteworthy in this context that the founding secretary general of the AKP, E.Yalçınbayır expressed that a democratic stance was more prevalent the party's early days, when the party constitution and program were being written, but took a more critical stance against AKP as its conservative identity became more dominant over time (Hürriyet: 08.11.2013).

According to Gramsci, education is a must for the formation and continuity of a hegemonic structure; in this way, the ruling class creates its “organic intellectuals” (1997).

It is possible to see the results of AKP's education policies, which can be defined as the process of creating organic intellectuals, ‘to a certain extent’ based on the ratio of university graduate voters voting for political parties.

We will examine the voting pattern of university graduates between 1991 and 2015 and to which parties they voted for. However, as the demographic information related to the general election results during this period could not be obtained, public vision studies conducted by

KONDA were used². While this does not give us definitive results, it will allow us to understand *the tendency* of the proportions of university graduate voters who voted for different political parties.

4. The Tendency of University Graduates to Vote for Political Parties between 1991 and 2015

The research is based on the assumption that the “well-educated voters vote more for the left-wing parties, and those with lower levels of education vote more for the right-wing parties” is changing.

In connection, the aim of the research is to draw attention to the relationship between the increase in the proportion of university graduate voters voting for right-wing parties and hegemonic education policies.

Two main axes were identified for those who indicated that they would vote “left” and “right” parties in public opinion surveys conducted between 1991 and 2015. Here, “Left parties” refer to CHP and SHP (representing the social democratic line before the reopening of the CHP in the 1980 coup). We can refer to this segment as “central left”. “Right Parties” refer to RP, FP and AKP, based on the characteristics of the period covered. This segment consists of parties from the tradition of “Milli Görüş” (National Vision).

The phrase “well-educated” was used to express voters with university and post-graduate education.

In Table 5, the ratio of university graduates indicating they will vote for political parties of Milli Görüş tradition (RP, FP and AKP), and those indicating they will vote for central and leftist parties (SHP and CHP) are compared based on the voting ratios in the public opinion surveys conducted by KONDA between 1991 and 2015.

2 Public opinion studies conducted by KONDA, which could be accessed and obtained with their identification tags are listed below:
 1991 Election Survey, 7-10 September 1991
 1993 December Public Opinion Survey
 1999 19-21 December 1998
 7 June, p.58-77, 18 June 2015
 1 November 2015 Ballot and Voting Analysis, Barometer

Table 5: Ratio of Voters with University or Post-graduate education based on public opinion surveys conducted in 1991, 1993, 1999 and 2015.

	1991 %	1993 %	1999 %	June 2015 %	November 2015 %
RP	7	6			
FP			10.1		
AKP				9	10,4
SHP	33	17			
CHP		8	15,4	20	22
Undecided	8	28	18,1	16	19,4
None	7	1	11,4	22	33,3
Will Not Vote		14	2,7	27	20,4

Tables 5 and 6 enables us to evaluate at what degree the tendency of conservatism among university graduates, as measured by Atlas of Turkish Values in 1990 and 2001, reflects the tendency of voting for political parties. To see this tendency from a wider perspective, 1991 was taken as the beginning point instead of 1995, when RP emerged as the primary party in the elections and which could be regarded as a breaking point to see the tendency from a wider perspective. Public opinion surveys on the June and November elections in 2015 during the AKP government were also included in the tables.

Table 6: Ratio of University Graduates in “Right” (National Vision) and “Left” (National Democrat) Voters

	1991 %	1993 %	1999 %	June 2015 %	Nov. 2015 %
Milli Görüş	7	6	10,1	9	10,4
Center Left	33	25	15,4	20	22
Undecided	8	28	18,1	16	19,4
None	7	1	11,4	22	33,3
Will Not Vote		14	2,7	27	20,4
Difference	26	19	5,3	11	11.6

Table 5 and Table 6 shows an increase in the proportion of voters who indicated that they would vote for the political parties in National

Vision tradition in the public opinion surveys conducted between 1991 and 2015. In 1991, the percentage of university graduates who indicated that they would vote for the political parties in National Vision tradition was 7% but this ratio increased to 10.4% in the November 2015 elections. The rate of increase was +3.4%.

In addition, if we look at the change in the ratio of university graduates indicating that they will vote for the Central Left parties using the data in Tables 5 and 6, we can see that the ratio of 33% in 1991 decreases to 22% in the November 2015 elections. There is a decline of -11%. The decline in the ratio of voters indicating that they will vote for center-left parties between 1991 and 2015 is much more significant –almost three times as– the increase in the ratio of voters indicating that they will vote for the political parties in National Vision tradition during the same period.

Figure 1: Changing trends of university graduates over two political axes between 1991 and 2015

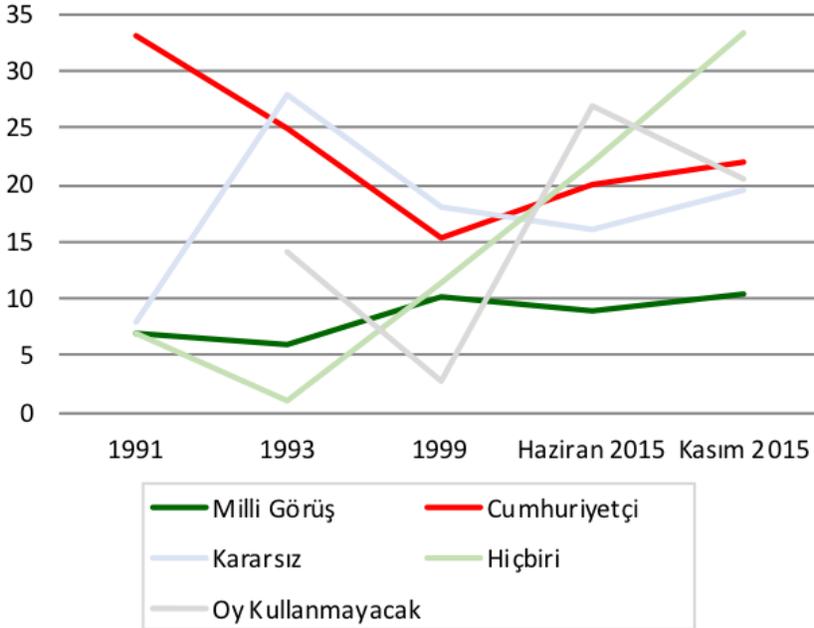
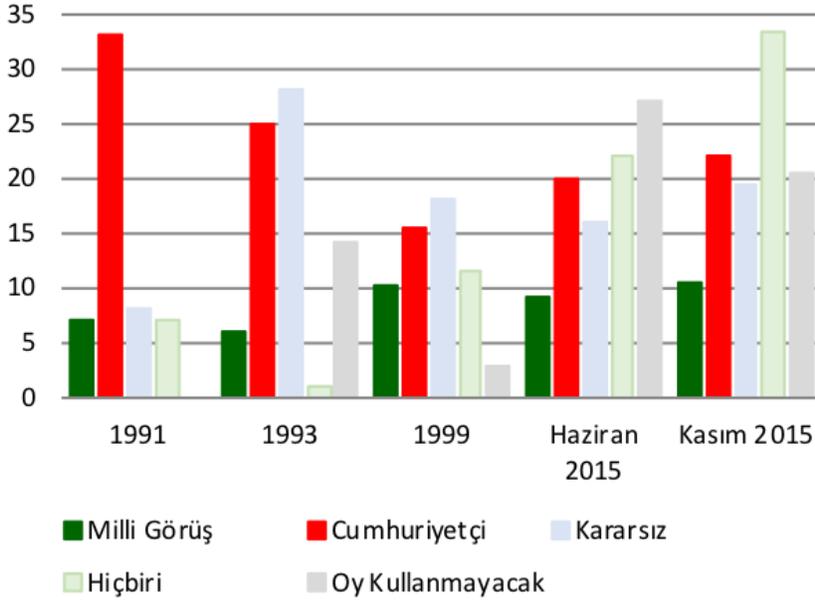


Figure 2: Change in ratio of university graduates over two political axes between 1991 and 2015



In other words, it can be said that there is a gradual increase in the ratio of university graduates voting for Milli Görüş (National Vision), whereas there is a more rapid decline in the ratio of university graduates voting for the Center- Left. Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the case.

5. Conclusion

An “exploratory” study was designed with the hypothesis that the tendency of well-educated voters in Turkey voting for left parties whereas poorly-educated voter voting for right parties *is changing*, based on the increase in conservatism in university graduates since the 1990s according to 2012 Atlas of Turkish Values and the dramatic increase in the number of universities.

Accordingly, the proportions of university graduate voters voting for political parties from the Millî Görüş (National Vision) tradition and those voting for the political parties on the left-wing were com-

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