

Voter Advise Applications in Practice: Answers to Some Key Questions from Turkey

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Abstract

In this article we investigate the effect of the media events that promoted the Turkish Voter Advice Application website (www.oypusulasi.org) in the 2011 Turkish Parliamentary elections. Our research design combines data on the dates and medium used for the promotion of the VAA with factual data on the number of connections received, the recommendations received by users, and the ‘propensity to vote’ (PTV) for each party by users. By running a multiple-interrupted time series (MITS) model, we find that there is a ‘double-screen’ effect in the promotion campaign. In fact, the VAA was promoted through traditional media, such as television and newspapers, and through internet-based communications. We also find that the political parallelism characterizing the Turkish media system has an important impact on the composition of the users. Voters supporting conservative parties only were attracted to the website when conservative leaning media mentioned it.

Keywords: Voter Advice Applications, Election Campaign, Political Parallelism, Statistical Analysis, Turkey

1. Introduction

On June 12th, 2011 Turkey had the third general election wherein the conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) dominated the polls by increasing its vote share to 49.8%. Considering the fact that the AKP's first election victory in 2002 came with only 34.3% followed by a significant increase to 46.6% in 2007 general elections, this third election victory was a truly remarkable success. As the electoral appeal of the AKP widened, the nature of the Turkish party system and the behavior of key players therein slowly changed creating a number of consequences for the governance practices.

Authors have argued that the Turkish party system has become a predominant party system where the uncertainty about election results, and especially about the winner, has diminished considerably, and the opposition is found to be in considerable disarray.ⁱ One important feature of a predominant party system is the increasing complacency of the dominant party in power.ⁱⁱ The election successes are typically taken for granted and the real competition between parties is replaced by competition between fractions within the dominant party. An immediate implication of this development for the election campaigns is a focus not on alternative issue positions and policy differences but rather on inner party struggles and rhetorical differences.

A peculiarity of the election system in Turkey also contributed to the establishment of such an atmosphere in the campaign, characterized by low information content. In the Turkish elections, unless a political party receives 10% of the nation-wide votes, it cannot receive any seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*-TBMM). Hence, commentators focused on whether or not the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP) was going to remain above or below the critical 10% nation-wide threshold of electoral support. Thus, a great deal of attention was directed toward the horse-race, polarizing the attention on the upcoming seat shares in the TBMM. In addition, since the 1990s ethnic and ideological cleavages have proved to be particularly powerful in structuring the Turkish electorate (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu,

2009; Kalaycıoğlu, 1999). This feature has led to the priming of a nationalist and polarized frame in public discourse, pushing aside policy stances.

For the June 2011 election, the widening electoral power of the AKP was clearly evident in the way the election campaign was conducted by the political parties and covered in the media. As the AKP confidently moved towards its third consecutive election victory, by again increasing its vote share, the media coverage appeared increasingly polarized and biased. More importantly, the information content of the election debates and discussions appeared to sink lower and lower. The web based voter advice application (VAA) (www.oypusulasi.org), that was launched during the 5 weeks of campaign preceding the June 2011 election, can be considered as a natural response to this growing partisan alignment of the Turkish media. VAAs are Web-based software tools that typically provide information on issues, that is, the substance of politics, instead of the horse race on which the parties' campaigns often seem to concentrate. VAAs are seen as offering a useful resource for undecided voters seeking authoritative information on the issue positions of parties (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2008). From a normative perspective, VAAs participate to the attainment of an enlighten electorate in modern democracy by providing objective information allowing voters to compare parties and leaders on their issues' stances. However, as we will illustrate such applications are critically dependent on effective media promotion and become most effective when, and if, traditional media complements and supports the VAAs.

Despite being supported in a very limited fashion by the traditional media sources, the *Oypusulasi* application was able to reach approximately 190,000 respondents. As we will illustrate below, the application proves to be a valuable additional information source for election analysts as well as providing crucial information to interested voters about the issue positions of the major parties in the election. We show below that the sample of respondents reached via this application exhibit interesting patterns. We also show the effectiveness of media support in promoting such applications. In conclusion, we argue that effective partnership with media is critical in reaching a large and well-balanced sample of the electorate. Below, we first shortly describe the Turkish media system

within the context for the 2011 general elections in Turkey. Then we provide a basic description of the sample of respondents that was reached by the application. Next, we illustrate how effective were the various media sources in the promotion of the application. Finally, we conclude by evaluating how to provide more information during an election campaign in the Turkish context. Similarly, we underline the application design and data collection issues for future VAAs.

2. The Turkish Media System and Political Parallelism

Since the AKP's coming to power after the 2002 general elections, an increasing concern about the freedom of media, pressures upon the press and the emergence of an advocate/partisan's (*yandaş*) media have been voiced (Çarkoğlu, 2010; Kaya and Çakmur, 2010; Kaymas, 2011). According to Freedom House (FH)'s reports, Turkey is ranked in 2011 as 116th with "partly free" status among 206 countries in the Freedom of the Press Index. Similarly, the 2011 Press Freedom Index released by Reporters without Borders (RwB) ranked Turkey as 138th among 179 nations, with increasing restraints on press especially in the following years: 2003, 2004 and 2009-2011ⁱⁱⁱ. Such a development is not surprising within the rising predominant party system in the country. Media systems are shaped by the wider context of political structure and thus, the influence of the political system on media institutions is not unexpected. As Hallin and Mancini (2004, pp.46-65) note, the role of state, interest groups, the structure of clientelism and the party system all influence the configuration of a media system.

The conceptual framework of the press-party parallelism (PPP) developed by Seymour-Ure (1974), which is defined as the partisanship or the alignment of a newspaper to a particular party, provides plenty of room for analysis of when the expected role of the press for provision of a non-partisan coverage of the news agenda is weak. Organizational ties, media content, personal affiliations of journalists and in political characteristics of newspapers' community of readers are typically used as the basis for diagnosing the alignment between a party and a media outlet. Hallin and Mancini (2004)

prefer to use the term ‘political parallelism’, noting that PPP in strict sense is in decline, but political parallelism is still common in the form of media organizations being associated not with particular parties, but with general political tendencies.

Kaya and Çakmur (2010) and Bayram (2010) show that political parallelism in Turkish media history is nothing new, however since the liberalization of the media markets in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new competitive environment with increasing conglomerate control of the media institution has emerged. Kaya and Çakmur (2010) identify three characteristics of this new context. Firstly, the Turkish mainstream media heavily promotes the culture of commercialization by a preference to sports, scandal, and popular entertainment. Incorporation of entertainment in informative programs led to the rise of ‘infotainment’ (Brants, 1998) in Turkey. Secondly, “in Turkey, unlike many European countries, deregulation and development of commercialization did not decrease the degree of political parallelism in the media institution. Instead, it increased the instrumentalization of the Turkish media by business interests” (Kaya and Çakmur, 2010, pp.528-529). Thirdly, a distinctive change in the Turkish media landscape is the rapid development of the conservative/Islamist media, which can easily rival the mainstream commercial media.

Recent empirical studies reveals that in the 1990s level of parallelism reached level unseen since the one-party era (1925-1945) (Bayram, 2010), and that from 2002 to 2007 during the first term of the AKP internal pluralism decreased (Çarkoğlu and Yavuz, 2010). Internal pluralism refers to when individual media outlets contain multiple viewpoints and give fair share to all political views. While external pluralism is system-wide pluralism, with every political current in the system finding an outlet for the expression of its views, and being able to make its voice heard (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, pp.26-30). Therefore, a decreasing internal pluralism indicates an increasing bias in individual media outlets towards particular political parties and an increasing polarization in the Turkish media market between 2002 and 2007.

Due to the combination of infotainment, political parallelism, and polarization, the media in the country appeared to be unable to focus their attention on issues relevant to the voters and to engage the political parties in an informative debate during the campaign leading to the 2011 parliamentary election. The campaign appeared to focus upon non-policy issues, harsh rhetoric and on the horse race. On rare occasions, the parties gave hints as to their specific policies but such a debate accomplished little for the undecided, but nevertheless interested voters, because issues were framed in terms of personal conflicts between leaders instead of policy content, increasing the perception of factionalism within parties.^{iv}

However, a characteristic of the ‘postmodern campaign’ environment (Norris, 2000) is that, in response to the erosion of the ties between parties and organized interests, new actors have emerged (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2008) describe this trend as “the era of non-party actors in politics”. Whether, on one side, this trend is characterized by the increasing number of organization seeking influence on policies, on the other side, it also implies the growing personal involvement of ordinary, unorganized citizens in the electoral process. The exponential spread of Internet-based political communications may signal a tendency for unorganized voters to engage more strongly than before. Some of those non-party actors may also pursue objectives non-related to future policies, but rather to the quality of the electoral process itself, such as the accountability of the candidates or the transparency of parties’ policy propositions. Since VAAs are online guides for voters on how best to match their policy preferences to particular parties, they fully inscribe themselves in this ‘postmodern campaign’ environment.

Given this political background, the project team started to work for a VAA in Turkey approximately 18 months prior to the general elections in June 2011.^v From the start, the objective has always been to find a media partner that could help the VAA to reach a political spectrum of voters as wide as the country can offer. Accordingly, large mainstream media groups have been contacted. Initially, there appeared to be a sincere interest and willingness to support the project but eventually all contacts have

conspicuously pulled out from being the main sponsor of the project. However, as our analysis below will show, despite being reluctant to systematically disseminate the content and the findings from the VAA by sponsoring it, media attention from prominent newspapers, columnists and news agencies remained supportive.

3. A Profiling of *Oypusulasi* users’: who was plugged in?

Despite their increasing popularity among voters, VAA sites have only recently started to receive attention from political scientists. During a campaign, the number of connections to VAAs varies from hundreds of thousands to few millions from one country to the other (Cedroni and Garcia, 2010; Walgrave, van Aelst and Nuytemans, 2008). While providing transparent information on where political parties stand on a variety of issues relevant to the ongoing campaigns, such an extensive usage of VAAs necessarily raises a few fundamental questions: How do they function? Who visits them? And, what sort of advice do they produce? (Fivaz and Schwarz 2007; Hooghe and Teepe, 2007; Walgrave, Nuytemans and Peepers, 2009; Wall et al., 2009). More recently, the question of its informative versus persuasive effect on voting behavior has also been discussed (Ladner and Pianzola, 2010; Ramonaite, 2009; Walgrave et al., 2008; Wall, Krouwel and Vitiello, forthcoming).

Since it is the first time that a VAA site is built up in Turkey, we firstly focus on the socio-demographics characteristics of the *Oypusulasi* users’. In addition, we were also able to gather information on the geographical location of each connection to the website, which allows us to look at the geographical distribution of the connections, and at the characteristics of the users by regions. On the *Oypusulasi* website, users were not only being asked to position themselves on 30 statements in order to receive a political advice, but also provide information on characteristics such as their gender, their year of birth, and their education level, among others. Answering to those questions is not required for the tool to work, and so the users can simply skip the questions if they do not wish to provide the requested information. The regions of connection were identified by using a GEO-IP database. This database checks the users IP address against a large database, and

returns the city if the users IP is in a known IP-city range. Since personal IP addresses cannot be stored due to privacy concerns, this procedure is used to generate location of connections to the site. Then, individuals are aggregated into provinces first and then into regions. Lastly, the data presented in this article have been collected during the four weeks preceding the June 12th, 2011 Parliamentary elections.

In April 2011, 42.9% of households have access to the internet at home in Turkey. Despite a low level of internet penetration within the Turkish society, the interest for political content is high among internet users: 72.7% of internet users indicate to read or download online news and newspapers, and 50.8% declare to read and post opinions on civic or political issues via websites. Therefore, internet appears to be a communication tool mostly used for getting access to political information. In terms of internet access, the country is also characterized by an important digital divide between male and female, and between urban and rural areas. While 54.9% of the male uses the internet, only 35.3% of the female does, this divide is persistent among all age groups. In urban areas, 53.2% of the population uses internet, while in rural areas only 25.7% of the population does.^{vi} Therefore, consistently with other profiling of VAAs' users, *Oypusulasi*'s users were predominantly young male with a university degree and living in urban centers. 75.2% of the users were male, 67.3% were below the age of 34, 87.5% attended or graduated from a university, and 76.2% connected from the provinces of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, which are the three largest urban centers in Turkey.

The connections to the *Oypusulasi* site are mostly distributed among Western regions, and particularly in Istanbul, West Anatolia, and the Aegean region. While the region of Istanbul concentrates 18% of the Turkish population, 52% of connections to *Oypusulasi* came from it. From Figure 1 to 3, we can observe other relevant regional characteristics of the website users. The Western regions are also the regions where the largest proportion of female connected to the sites, where the median income is the highest, and where the proportion of 15-24 years old users is the highest. While the Southeastern regions have the lowest proportion of female users, the lowest median income per users, and have the lowest proportion of 15-24 years old users among all the regions.

[FIGURE 1 to 3 ABOUT HERE]

Thus, the socio-demographics and geographical data collected on the users of the *Oypusulasi* site go in the same direction of the data on internet users, suggesting that important digital divides exist in Turkey: a divide between male and female, and a divide between urban and rural areas. When it comes to technology and internet usage, studies in Western countries underline the generational divide among possible others. The *Oypusulasi* users have a similar median age, of 30 years old, as the whole population in Turkey, 29.2 years old in 2010. So, the fact that the largest proportion of the VAA users in Turkey is below 34 (turning point in our age interval variable) is also because most of the people in Turkey are below this age.

In the next section, we will present data on the channels of access to the *Oypusulasi* website. Since the project did not encounter any national media sponsor, there is a genuine interest in finding out from which channels the users ended up on *oypusulasi.org*. Were they redirected through international media websites or social networks? Or for instance, did they search for the tool through Google Search?

4. ‘Looking it up’: Through which web channel did the users access to *oypusulasi.org*?

As mentioned in the introduction, despite showing a genuine interest in the tool in the beginning, national media groups pulled out from sponsoring the project. When media partners are involved, hyperlinks toward the VAA site are available and, therefore, an estimate of the importance of each channels of access to the website is possible. Lacking those partnerships, we had to rely on another tool for gathering this information. A variable named ‘referrer’ was inserted in the tool, similarly to the service provide by Google Analytics, we were able through this feature to keep track of the webpage from which the users accessed the *Oypusulasi* website.

Table 1 displays a comparison of the channels of access to the website between the users who connected from Turkey and the users who connected from other countries. Through the same procedure described in the previous section, using a GEO-IP database, we were able to identify the countries from which the users connected to the site. The comparison between connections from Turkey and connections from abroad is for us relevant because *Al-Jazeera* was an international partner of the project, and thus relayed the fact that such a website providing substantive information on the political platforms of the main parties running for the election existed. Among the connections from Turkey, 84% of the users directly entered the name of the site in the toolbar of their computer screen, 7.9% of the users have been redirected to *oypusulasi.org* from the *Al-Jazeera* website, 3.3% from the *Doğan Haber* Press Agency website, and 2.9% from Google Search. Several other items record a flux inferior to 1% of the connection to the *Oypusulasi* website. The most striking difference when comparing those data with the connections from abroad is the fact that from abroad, the connections coming from the *Al-Jazeera* website are almost as numerous as the one going directly to the *Oypusulasi* website, respectively 47.4% and 48.1%. This fact suggests that in case of media partnership, there is the possibility for an effective promotion of the website which will attract interested citizens toward the VAA. Therefore, the next section will focus on the echo that the VAA found in the media and on the effectiveness of those in attracting users to the website.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

5. The *Oypusulasi* ‘mini-campaign’ and the double-screen effect

As mentioned in a previous section the *Oypusulasi* website could not find any national media partner, therefore the team behind the project had to launch its own ‘mini-campaign’ (Abold, 2008) in order to reach out to the voters. This ‘mini-campaign’ can be described as a ‘double-screen campaign’ since it involved both traditional media events, such as promotion in television and being mentioned by newspapers columnists, and internet-based events, such as the use of social networks to promote the VAA. This

section proposes to evaluate the impact of such a ‘double-screen campaign’ on the number of connections that the *Oypusulasi* website received during the 4 weeks preceding Election Day. From May 16th to June 12th, the *Oypusulasi* website received about 190.000 connections. However, after cleaning the data, for users that did not answer to any questions and did not position themselves on any issue statements, the dataset includes 73041 observations, including 58579 connections from Turkey. Since the media events of the ‘double-screen campaign’ took place in Turkey, only those latter connections are kept for the analysis in this section. In order to measure the effect of the ‘double-screen campaign’, a multiple-interrupted time series (MITS) analysis is applied to the dataset.^{vii} For the sake of carrying a MITS analysis, the dataset was recoded from 28 days to 672 hours so that both the short and long term effects of each interruption could be measured.

One of the aims of this article is to evaluate the impact of multiple interruptions caused by different formats of media events. Those formats are of three kinds: the promotion of the *Oypusulasi* website on Twitter, the newspapers articles and columns mentioning the tool, and lastly the television news programs in which the website has been discussed. Since newspapers items are daily, they are included into the hourly analysis by coding every hour from 7 am to 24 pm as 1 covering the daily exposure for a given day of newspaper news or columnist article. While, we can incorporate into the analysis both the Tweeter items and the television items by taking their exact hour of diffusion. Table 2 and Table 3 list the different media items used as interruptions in the following MITS model:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Time Trend} + \sum \lambda \text{Hours} \sum \mu \text{Promotion Events} + \varepsilon$$

Where Y indicates the hourly number of connections, β_0 indicates the reference level of the dependent variable for the dependent variable when no promotion takes place at the very start of the analysis period. Then for every promotion event for which we have an exact time, we code a dummy variable for that event at the time of the event and zero

otherwise. As noted above, for newspapers we adopted a convention for coding the hours of the day in which the newspaper published an article on the application starting from 7 am and ending at 24 pm.

Although the official Twitter account of *Oypusulasi* has been re-tweeted several times, we observed the most salient changes in the slope when ‘celebrities’, intended as opinion leaders, mentioned or re-tweeted the address of the VAA website. Therefore, the Twitter items included in the analysis represent re-tweets by journalists and academics. These re-tweets took place on May 16th, 17th and 26th. In addition, we included eight television news programs in which the *Oypusulasi* website was promoted. These programs were also included as interruptions on May 17th, 18th, 21st, 23rd, 24th, 28th, 29th and 31st. Figure 4 displays the hourly frequency of connections out of which interruptions’ effects are estimated. The results of the MITS analysis are shown in Table 4.

[TABLE 2, TABLE 3, FIGURE 4 and TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Several patterns surface when we run this equation. First, we see that the time trend has a significant and negative coefficient indicating that people coming in to fill out our web questionnaires were higher at the start of our mini-campaign and started to decline towards the end of the campaign as Election Day approached. Every ten hours we were losing 10 respondents compared to our reference starting point. Early hours of a day were typically of lower levels of connections to the application web site.

Re-tweets by Kanat Atkaya and Deniz Ülkü Arıboğan brought the largest hourly gain compared to any other promotion activity, respectively on the 17th and 16th of May. Then, the third largest gain comes from the TRT program “*Haber Tadında*” coverage of the application on the 28th of May. What is interesting to note here is that the re-tweets brought in a larger hourly followers according to our model than the TV programs that came in later in the campaign. Besides the CNN-*Türk*’s morning program “*Güne Merhaba*” on the 23rd of May, no other TV program appears to have brought in a

significant group of respondents after controlling for the hour of the day and the long term trend.

The newspaper coverage of our application first by Ruşen Çakır (*Vatan* daily) on the 18th and then by Koray Çalışkan (*Radikal* daily) on the 19th and then by İsmet Berkan (*Hürriyet* daily) on the 31st of May all appear to have significantly added to our in flow of respondents. However, most significant among these appear to be Şahin Alpay's article in *Zaman* daily on the 7th of June. It is noticeable that Şahin Alpay's article got covered in Moralhaber.net and Timeturk.com on the web and thus reached a triple source impact that brought in approximately 3000 people over a time span of 17 hours in the above specification. Similarly, İsmet Berkan's article appears to have attracted about 2900, Koray Çalışkan's 1150 and Ruşen Çakır's 1080 respondents above the overall time trend and the day of the week they appeared during our promotion campaign. The fact that Şahin Alpay's piece appeared in the conservative daily *Zaman* is a factor that we have had trouble reaching in our earlier campaign efforts, and may explain its relatively large appeal to a conservative segment of respondents. It also appears that the longer and more in-depth coverage of the logic and usefulness of the application in his column tends to increase its appeal. Short and relatively simplistic coverage of the applications content appear to yield fewer respondents and many times such coverage does not help push the respondents above the underlying trends controlled for in our model. It also appears that as time passes the influence of new columns coverage of our application brings in more respondents. There seems to be a momentum building in our campaign shaped by re-tweets, and TV appearances. Another important but difficult to measure campaign item was the massive email messages sent out to university students, academia and informal networks of the project team members via social networks. These appeals to respondents have been sent out at the early days of our campaign but are likely to create an inflow hard to predict later stages.

In addition to the above analysis about the impact of newspapers upon connections we see from Figure 5 that the evolution of the number of connections to the *Oyusulasi* website with the days in which newspapers items were published show a clear pattern

(see Table 3 for a detailed list). One can reasonably argue that newspapers coverage matches with the registered peak in the number of connections to the *Oypusulasi* website.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Thus, the findings of the MITS analysis and the data displayed in Table 1 and Figure 8 point toward the fact that the ‘mini-campaign’ launched in order to promote the *Oypusulasi* website resulted in a ‘double-screen’ effect on the number of connections. The users that connected to the VAA website appear to have been brought to it through multiple sources of information: from traditional media sources, such as television and newspapers, but also from internet-based communication, such as social networks and online media websites. Even with the lack of national media partners, significant media attention has been generated toward the tool, suggesting that despite the fact that the campaign mostly focused on the horse-race, there was room for a more substantive debate. Next section reviews the advices provided to the users by the tool.

6. Press-party parallelism and audiences’ segmentation: what output for a VAA?

In an electoral campaign, the main objective of a VAA is to provide its users with an electoral advice reflecting basic policy preferences. The logic behind it is that “other things being equal, the voter will choose the party which, in policy terms, is least distant from them” (Evans, 2004, p.100). Before providing the advice to its users, the *Oypusulasi* website also asked them to estimate the likelihood that they will ever vote for each of the main parties competing in the election. By offering this question before the final result is given, the estimated propensity to vote for each party is not ‘affected’ by the advice of the VAA. Eijk et al. (2006) demonstrate that this ‘propensity to vote’ (PTV) survey item is a useful way to operationalize the electoral utility that a voter attaches to each party competing for their votes at the election. Since the Turkish media system is characterized by a high level of press-party parallelism, we can evaluate the heterogeneity of the PTVs expressed, in the light of the media events mentioned in the previous section. For instance, among the newspapers that discussed the tool in one of their columns, *Zaman* is

identified as having a conservative stance and being pro-AKP, while *Hurriyet*, is perceived as adopting a more neutral stance in the media landscape. Hence, we would expect their respective audiences to express PTVs toward different political parties.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Therefore, when observing Figure 6, we see that overall the users expressed consistently higher PTVs for CHP than for any other party, therefore indicating a lack of heterogeneity in the political orientation of the VAA users since CHP received only one quarter of the total vote in the elections while the AKP received about 50%. However what is relevant to our analysis here is that, on several occasions the sample of users appears to be more heterogeneous: particularly on May 28th and on June 7th. On both dates, we see sharp increase in the PTVs expressed for the following parties: AKP, Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*-BBP), and Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*-SP). AKP and SP are conservative and religious parties, while BBP is a nationalist right-wing party. When crossing those two dates with Tables 2 and 4, we see that on May 28th the television channel *TRTHaber* mentioned the *Oypusulasi* website in one of its news programs, and on June 7th, the newspaper *Zaman* discussed the tool in one of its column. Both media are known for having a rather conservative audience (Çarkoğlu and Yavuz, 2010) and therefore may have attracted toward the VAA users likely to express PTVs in favor of those parties. In other words, as our application got coverage in more conservative media the inflow of respondents to our web site immediately reflected the predominantly right-wing conservative party choices of the readers of these newspapers. That clearly shows a natural openness of our tool to all ideological orientations as long as the media support necessary for exposure to different ideological groups is present in support of our application.

On Figure 7 to 9, we can see for each of the parties displayed in Figure 6 when they were advised to the users during the 4 weeks of the campaign. Overall, every distribution has a four-peak structure due to the distribution of the connections to the website which is itself four-peak shaped (see Figure 5). However, three observations can be made out of those

distributions. Firstly, on May 19th when the newspapers *Radikal* mentioned the tool in one of its columns, we see a high concentration of BDP advices (Figure 7). Secondly, on May 28th, when the television *TRTHaber* talked about the VAA in one of its news programs, we observe a fifth peak emerging in the advices of conservative and nationalist parties, such as AKP, BBP, MHP, and SP (Figure 8 and 9). And lastly, on June 7th, there is a particularly high concentration of AKP, BBP and SP's advices given to the users on the day in which the newspaper *Zaman* wrote about the tool (Figure 8 and 9).

[FIGURE 7 to 9 ABOUT HERE]

Thus, the findings presented in this section seem to point out to the fact that, according to the media outlet mentioning the *Oypusulasi* website, users with political tendencies in line with the media outlet were more likely to connect to the VAA. We shall now discuss the overall implication of the first VAA experience in the Turkish context.

7. Conclusion

The *Oypusulasi* website was the first VAA ever run during an election campaign in Turkey. As such, the data collected through the tool and the analysis presented in this article assume the status of a 'health check' of the users' profile, of the diffusion of the website and of its impact in the Turkish context. The development of a VAA in Turkey was a response to the growing partisan alignment of the media in the country. Unfortunately, this political parallelism is also what made the promotion of the VAA more difficult. The focus on substantive issues proposed by a VAA was not likely to interest a media environment characterized by political parallelism, rhetorical games, and political pressures on press bodies. As a matter of fact, no national media partner accepted to sponsor the website. Despite, the data presented in Table 1 suggest that when there is a media partner promoting it, a substantive proportion of users are attracted to the application by the media partner.

Even though no national media sponsored the website, the fact that some media outlets still discussed the VAA in their news programs and columns led to a relative promotion of the application through a ‘mini-campaign’ (Abold, 2008). This ‘mini-campaign’ was characterized by a ‘double-screen effect’: on the one side, traditional media outlets such as television and newspapers considerably incremented the number of users, and on the other side, the *Oypusulasi* website was relayed through social networks and other internet-based communications. In this respect, the diversity of the media discussing the VAA proved to be essential in order to reach a heterogeneous group of users. Since media audiences in Turkey are politically segmented, it is only for instance when conservative media mentioned the website that users with conservative opinions came to use the VAA. Hence, with no surprise the political parallelism of the Turkish media is salient in our findings.

The simultaneity of the increase ‘recommendations’ in favor of conservative parties and the presence of the VAA in the conservative media also tells us something about the tool itself. The VAA measured a parallel evolution of the PTVs expressed for conservative parties and of the ‘recommendations’ in favor of those same parties. Thus the tool was successfully able to catch this group of users. At first sight, it suggests that the statements selected in order to position parties and voters on political dimensions are valid. Of course, this is only a preliminary finding which should be investigated further. The data collected through the VAA website will allow an evaluation of the issue dimensionalities expressed by the *Oypusulasi* users, and control for the validity of the issues selected in a comparative fashion. The Turkish case can provide an interesting ground for comparison both with data collected through VAAs in Western countries, and with data issued from the VAAs that recently went online in some of the Arab Spring countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Moreover, the political parallelism observed in the data indirectly suggests that VAAs could, and should, be integrated into broader research designs in order to fully use their potential to measure campaign effects. They should be run in parallel with panel studies, so that VAAs generated data can be controlled for panel studies’ data. But also, the PTVs

expressed and the ‘recommendations’ given on the website would gain in informative power if they could be aggregated with content analysis of media items. While at first political scientists focused their analysis on ‘recommended’ parties, now there is a shift of interest in the field. VAAs are observed and studied as tools offering voters with structured information on parties’ positions. Therefore the interactions, on the one hand between VAAs and its users, and on the other hand between the VAAs’ users and media content, are acquiring an increasing saliency in the debate.

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Table 1. Channel of Access to the *Oypusulasi* site

Channel of Access	Connections from Turkey (%)	Connections from Abroad (%)
Oypusulasi	84	48,1
Al-Jazeera	7,9	47,4
Doğan Haber Press Agency	3,3	1,0
Google Search	2,9	1,0
Eksi Sozluk	0,9	0,3
Facebook	0,4	0,3
Twitter	0,1	0,1
Le Monde	0,05	0,5
Kamil Pasha	0,03	0,2
Other	0,42	1,1
	100	100
N	57105	14462

Note: *Doğan Haber Agensi* is a Turkish press agency; *Eksi Sözlük* is a Turkish site of information sharing; *Le Monde* is a French newspaper with an online version; *Kamil Pasha* is the blog of Jenny White, professor of Anthropology at Boston University.

Table 2. Media Items as Interruptions for the MITS Analysis

Interruption Date	Interruption Type	Media	Name of Twitter Account/TV Program
16.05.2011	Retweet	Twitter	Retweet by Deniz Ülke Arıboğan
17.05.2011	News Program	Ntv	“Haber Merkezi”
17.05.2011	Retweet	Twitter	Retweet by Kanat Atkaya
18.05.2011	News Program	Ntv	“Güne Başlarken”
21.05.2011	News Program	A Haber	“Nasıl Yani?”
23.05.2011	News Program	CNNTürk	“Güne Merhaba”
24.05.2011	News Program	CNNTürk	“Beş N Bir K”
26.05.2011	Retweet	Twitter	Retweet by Koray Peközkay
28.05.2011	News Program	TRTHaber	“Haber Tadında”
29.05.2011	Tv Program	CNNTürk	“Eğrisi Doğrusu”
31.05.2011	News Program	CNNTürk	“Güne Merhaba”

Table 3. Newspaper Items Covering the *Oypusulasi* website

Interruption Date	Interruption Type	Media	Name of Columnist
18.05.2011	Column	Vatan	Ruşen Çakır
19.05.2011	Column	Radikal	Koray Çalışkan
24.05.2011	Column	Bursa Gerçek	Hakan Yusuf Ekren
31.05.2011	Column	Hürriyet	İsmet Berkan
01.06.2011	Column	Akşam	Ali Saydam
01.06.2011	Column	Milliyet	Mehveş Evin
07.06.2011	Column	Zaman	Şahin Alpay

Table 4. Results of the MITS analysis

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Significance level
		B	Std. Error	
	(Constant)	124,7	14,9	,00
	Overall trend (t)	-,1	,0	,00
May 17th	Kanat Atkaya - Retweet	593,1	75,7	,00
May 16th	Deniz Ü Arıdoğan - Retweet	457,9	75,7	,00
May 28th	TRTHaber - Haber Tadında	457,7	75,5	,00
May 23rd	CNNTürk - Güne Merhaba	278,9	75,5	,00
June 7th	Şahin Alpay - Zaman	180,2	18,6	,00
May 31st	İsmet Berkan - Hürriyet	169,4	18,9	,00
May 31st	CNNTürk - Güne Merhaba	106,5	77,8	,17
May 19th	Koray Çalışkan - Radikal	67,5	18,9	,00
May 24th	CNNTürk - Beş N Bir K	64,2	75,6	,40
May 18th	Ruşen Çakır - Vatan	63,8	18,9	,00
May 17th	NTV - Haber Merkezi	54,6	75,6	,47
June 1st	Ali Saydam (Akşam) Mehveş Evin (Milliyet)	29,4	18,4	,11
May 29th	CNNTürk - Eğrisi Doğrusu	17,6	75,5	,82
May 26th	Koray Peközkay - Retweet	-29,5	75,5	,70
May 21st	A Haber - Nasıl Yani?	-36,7	75,6	,63

*Dummy variables for hours of the day are not reported.

Adjusted R-Squared= 0,47

Figure 1. Proportion of Women among Users

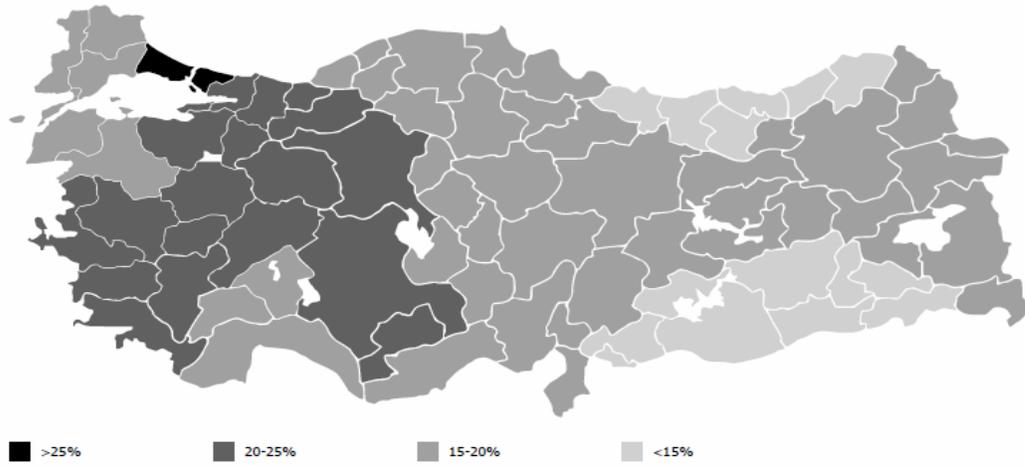


Figure 2. Median Income of the Users

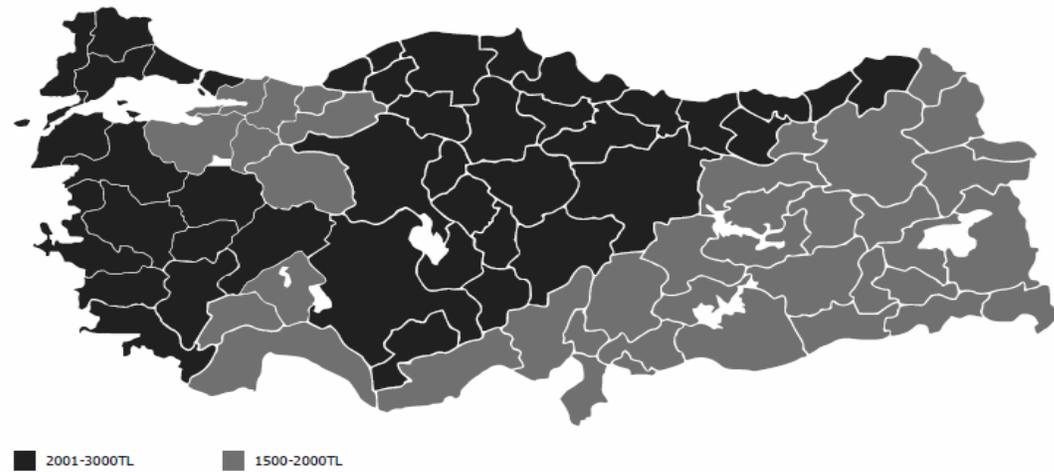


Figure 3. Proportion of 15-24 years old Users per Regions

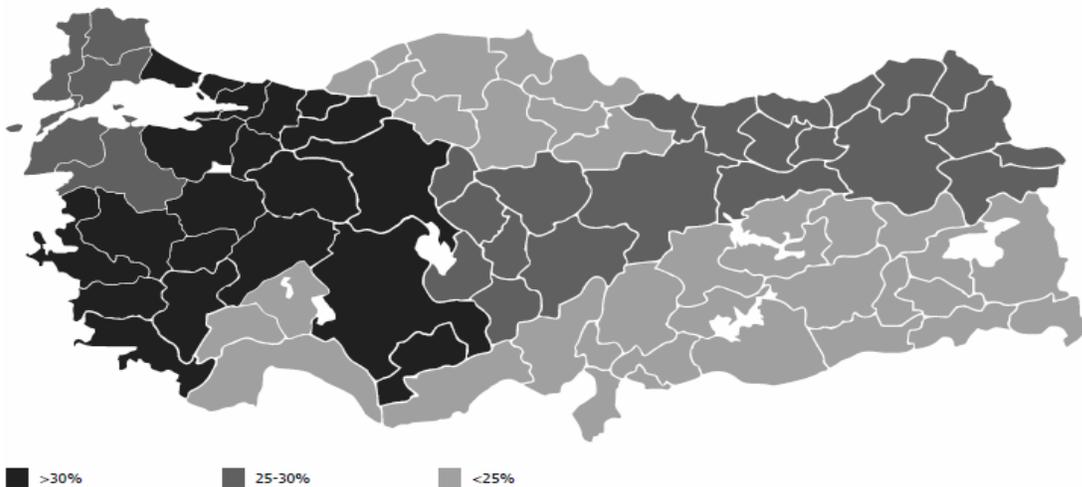


Figure 4. Hourly frequency of Connections to the *Oypusulasi* website between May 15th to June 12th

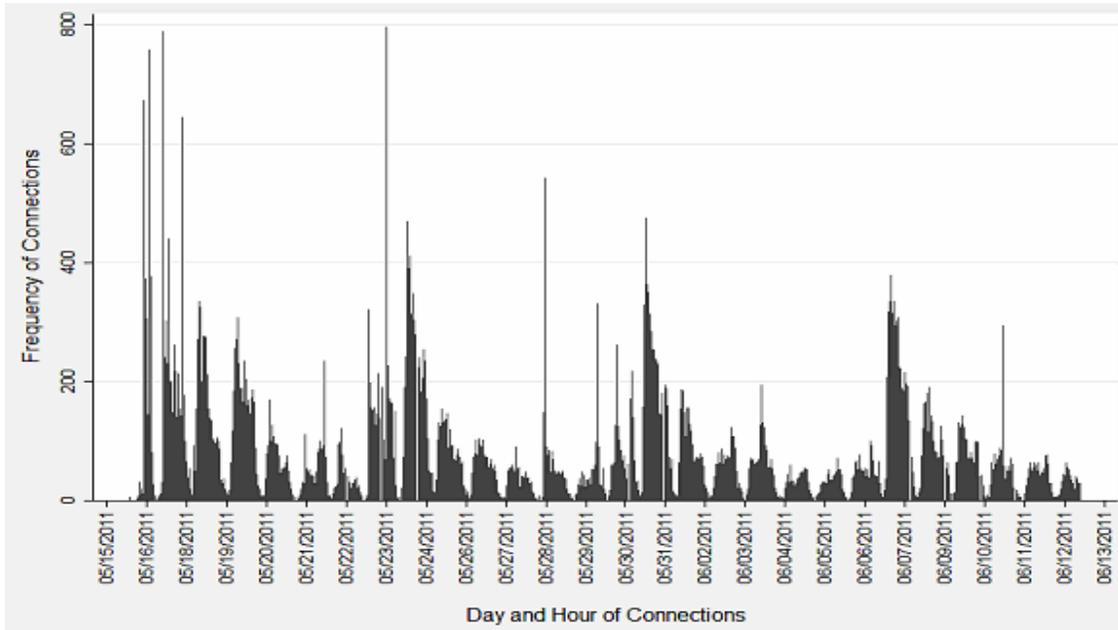


Figure 5. Number of Connections and Publication of Newspapers Items

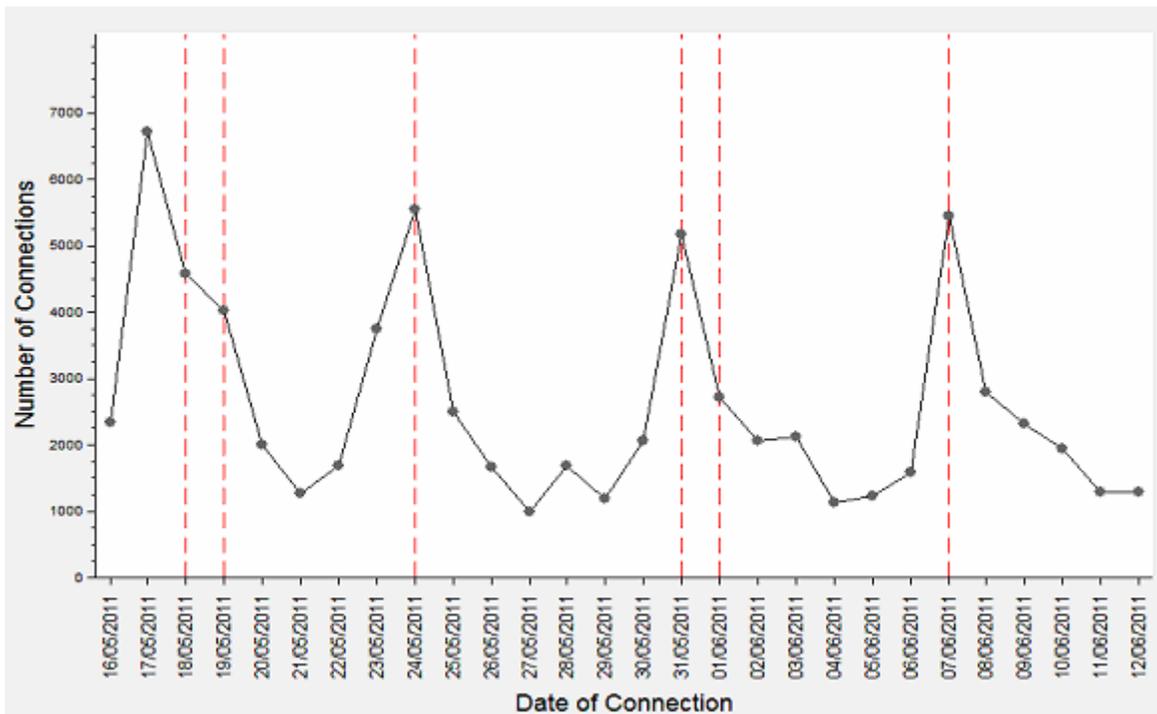
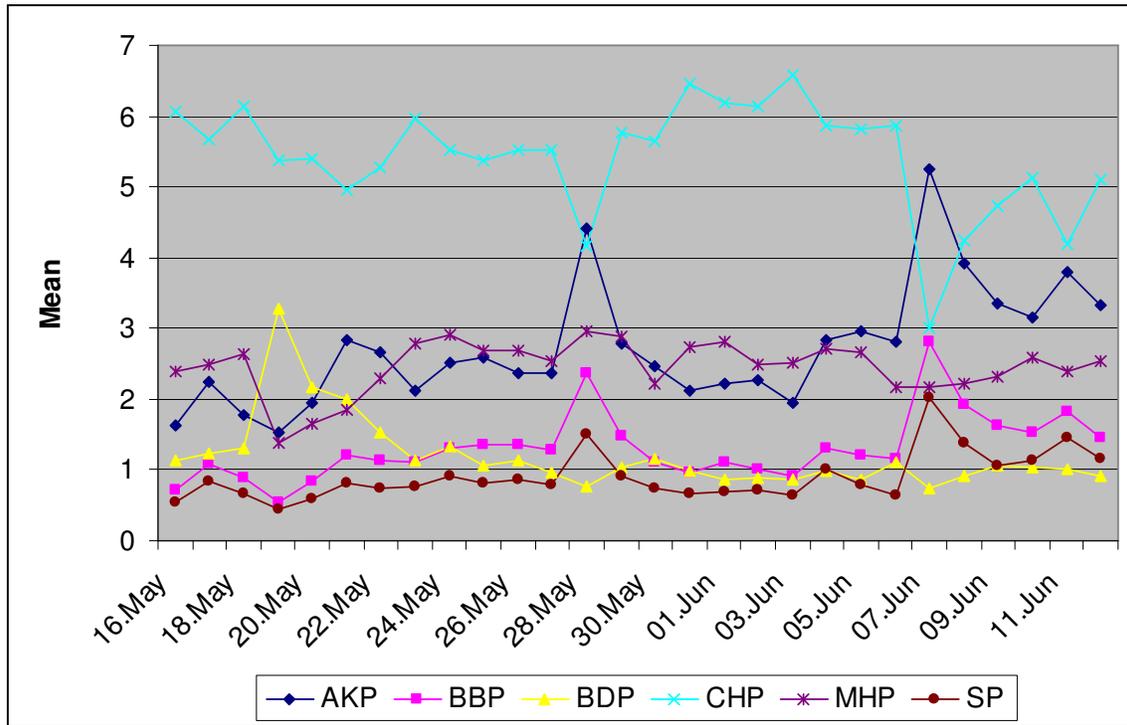
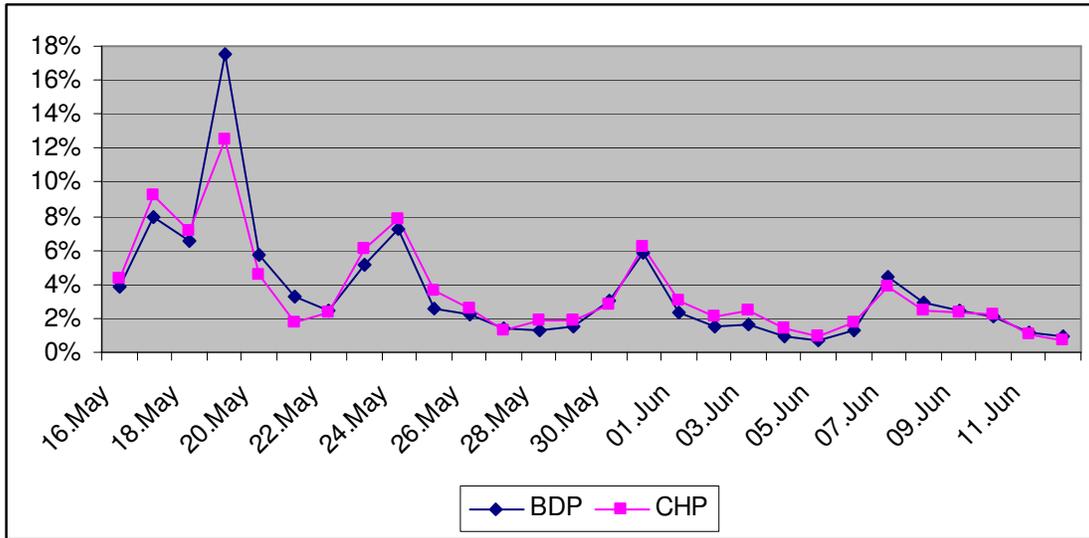


Figure 6. Evolution of the PTVs (scale 0-10) expressed on the *Oypusulasi* website



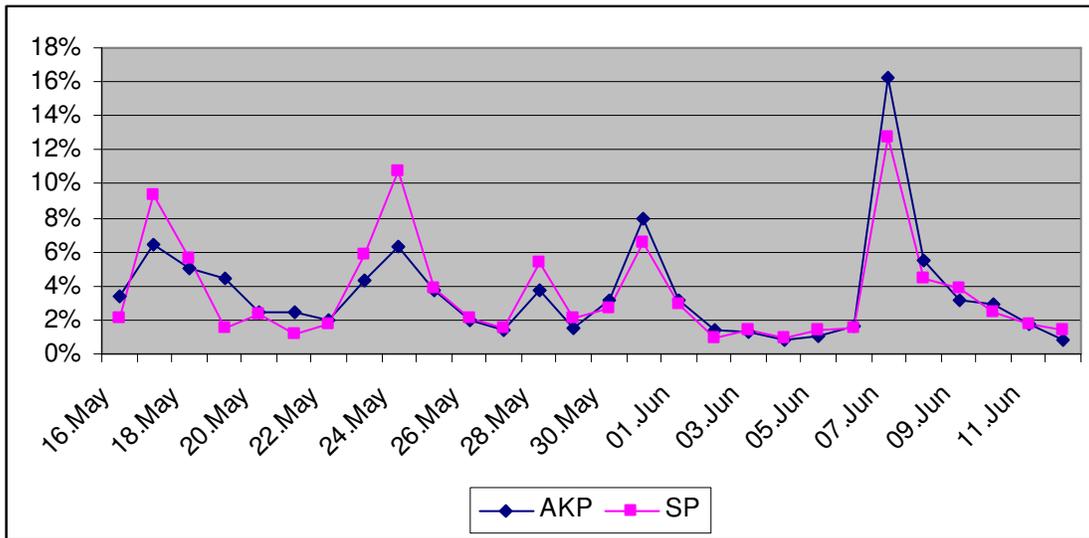
Note: The parties displayed are the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP*), the Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi-BBP*), the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP*), the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP*), the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP*) and the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi-SP*). For a matter of readability, several minor parties (the Democrat Party-*Demokrat Parti-DP*, the Left Democratic Party-*Demokratik Sol Parti-DSP*, and the People’s Voice Party-*Halkın Sesi Partisi-HSP*) have not been included in the Figure.

Figure 7. Distribution of the advices given in favour of BDP and CHP by the Oypusulasi website



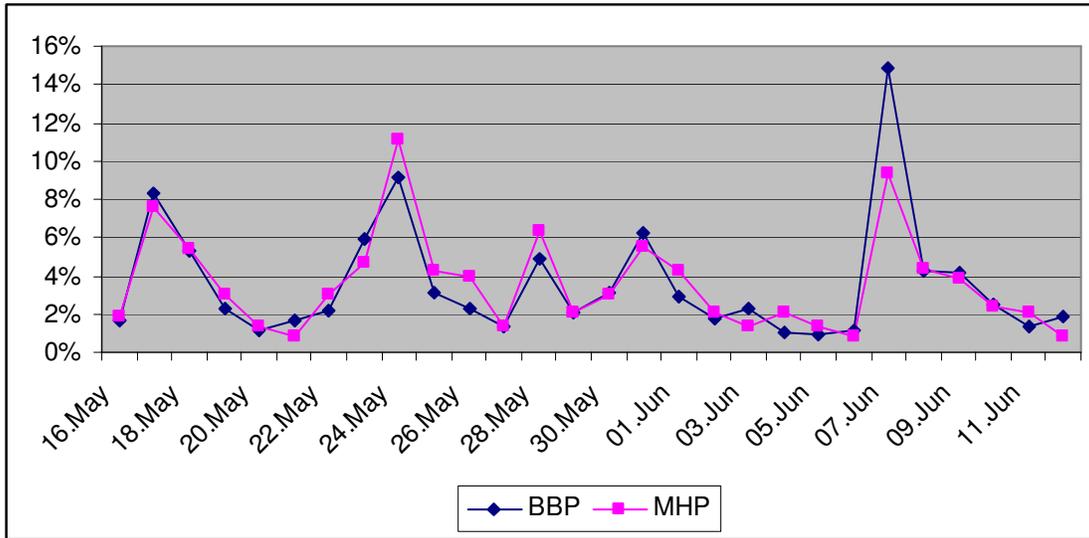
Note: Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*-BDP), Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP)

Figure 8. Distribution of the advices given in favour of AKP and SP by the Oypusulasi website



Note: Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP), Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*-SP)

Figure 9. Distribution of the advices given in favour of BBP and MHP by the *Oypusulasi* website



Note: Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*-BBP), Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP)

Endnotes

ⁱ See Esen and Ciddi (2011) and Çarkoğlu (2011) for the recent claims of predominant party system in Turkey.

ⁱⁱ See Çarkoğlu (1998), Sayarı (2002) on the historical characteristics of the Turkish party system. Ware (1996) states that a dominant party should “usually” wins. See Sartori (1976, 171-172) for a more commonly adopted definition based on electoral success over time.

ⁱⁱⁱ For details see: <http://en.rsf.org/>

^{iv} For instance when the CHP leaders presented its proposition of a ‘Family Insurance’ program providing financial help to poor families, as an alternative to compare this proposition with what other parties proposed on the issue, the media mostly focused on the disagreement expressed within the CHP itself. For newspaper coverage of the project, see:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=kilicdaroglu-makes-a-8216social-state8217-move-2011-02-18> and <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-238833-chps-deputy-criticizes-family-insurance.html>. For details on the ‘Family Insurance’ program see: <http://www.chp.org.tr/en/wp-content/uploads/electionmanifesto.pdf> , pp.51-57. (Accessed on 25 January 2012).

^v The Project team consisted of Turkish political scientists, including an advisory panel comprised of the country’s prominent scholars in the study of electoral politics. Professor André Krouwel of the Vrije University-Amsterdam, acted as consultant and quality control monitor to the project.

^{vi} Data from the Information and Communication Technology Survey in Households 2011, accessed on January 27, 2012 on www.turkstat.gov.tr.

^{vii} See Lewis-Beck (1980) for an accessible exposition of the methods of MITS.