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Party change and cleavage shifting in the global South: the case of Ecevit's CHP in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the prospects of and limits to political party change through a case study of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit in the 1960s and 1970s. We demonstrate how the CHP, via a new generation of politicians led by Ecevit, gradually transformed its ideological programme and cadres in an effort to turn into a social democratic mass party, thereby maximizing its voter base in the 1973 and 1977 elections against the currents of the extant socio-political faultlines of Turkish politics. We claim that the potential for party change depends on the interplay between three factors: political entrepreneurs, the prevailing preferences and structures of a society, and the extant institutional setup. We conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for the prospects of party change as well as for the present and future trajectory of the CHP.

Introduction

Parties are conservative institutions that tend to be resistant to change (Michels 1962 [1911]). Some scholars suggest that exogenous shocks such as electoral defeats or increasing party competition compel parties to adapt (Kitschelt 1994; Harmel and Svåsand 1997). However, even electoral defeat may not be sufficient to transform the organizational structure and ideological agenda of a party. Especially, ideologically niche parties are highly resistant to shifts in public opinion as they prioritize their policy agenda over vote maximization (Adams et al. 2006; Bischof and Wagner 2020). Moreover, parties face structural constraints that arise from the existing institutional structures and political values of their respective societies. But even a structuralist account needs to make some room for the agency of parties in shaping the political arena and influencing voter behaviour. To do so, this article tries to show the role that political entrepreneurs can play in changing the trajectory of political parties.

The article analyzes the transformation of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit in the 1960s and 1970s. Founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's first president, the CHP governed

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Turkey for nearly three decades as a single party regime after the proclamation of the Republic in 1923. Due to the non-competitive single-party context, the CHP did not build an extensive political organization across the country and remained for decades as a 'cadre party' with limited popular appeal (Özbudun 2000; Ciddi 2009; Esen 2014). After Turkey's transition to multi-party democracy in 1950, the CHP was confined to opposition party status against right-wing populist parties, the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) in the 1950s and Justice Party (Adalet Partisi, AP) in the 1960s. Our article analyzes how a new generation of politicians led by Bülent Ecevit as the focal leader of the party's movement to a 'left of centre' agenda, broke the dominance of right-wing parties.

First elected as the CHP Secretary-General in 1966, Ecevit and his allies started articulating a new party outlook, popularized the party, and renewed its provincial organization to compete against other parties. Through the case of Ecevit and his 'left of centre' movement, this article explores the key role played by political entrepreneurs in moulding the political arena via a political party. Due to its transformation, the CHP eventually outperformed its main right-wing rival, fend off competition from extreme-left groups and distanced itself from putschist groups among the intelligentsia and the military in the 1970s.

Major works of the party politics literature argue that political parties are embedded in social cleavages produced by an interplay of socio-structural categories and prevailing political attitudes in society. Mair (2006, 373) defined social cleavages as 'deep structural divides that persist through time and through generations'. These divides are not a product of day-to-day issues but should be 'understood as a pattern of political competition embedded in the cognitive, emotive or social structures of the citizenry' (Enyedi 2005, 698). Although the importance of cleavages for party politics is widely acknowledged, there is some debate on the relative importance of structural and agency-centred approaches. In their landmark study, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) enumerate how major historical events produced cleavages that were then translated into political parties and relatively stable party systems following the world wars and initial decades of industrialization. Others allow for voluntaristic, elite-based accounts that give some room for political entrepreneurs to forge varying social coalitions underpinning their parties (Kitschelt 1994; Enyedi 2005). In line with this perspective, De Leon et al. (2009) claim that parties can and do bring together different groups and form new constituencies but the authors do not flesh out how these new blocs are formed via what they call 'political articulation'.

The issue of political cleavages particularly resonated in the Turkish politics literature.[1] Scholars have long treated Şerif Mardin's (1973) famous 'centre-periphery' cleavage as the dominant faultline in making sense of Turkish politics (Wuthrich 2013, 751). According to this thesis, Turkish politics has revolved around a significant socio-cultural cleavage between a modernizing military-bureaucratic centre inherited from the late Ottoman period and a mass periphery representing diverse constituencies. The military and bureaucratic elites pushed for a set of Westernizing reforms that clashed with the basic value system of the popular masses in the periphery that resisted state-led interventions from above. Whereas the CHP represented the centre throughout the Republican period, the periphery supported a series of populist right-wing parties over the decades. After the transition to multi-party democracy, these parties gained electoral hegemony against the CHP which is argued to lack popular support, to enjoy tutelary

control over politics via the military and to advocate policies that are out of touch with the electorate. According to some, the centre-periphery divide in the post-1980 period was translated into an equally strong secularist/Islamist divide as part of a *Kulturkampf* (Yalman 1973; Kalaycıoğlu 2012, 2021; Çarkoğlu 2012; Özbudun 2013).

Interestingly, the CHP under Ecevit's leadership is usually bracketed out from these cleavage discussions. Others mention Ecevit's CHP in passing but without further elaboration (Emre 2015; Onbasi 2016). For many, the transformation of the CHP was impossible to begin with, as the party could never sever its ties with the establishment (Küçükömer 1969; Ciddi 2009), whereas others saw change in the CHP as an extension of its traditionally statist approach to politics and the party's popularity in the 1970s as ephemeral (Erdoğan 1998, 35). This tendency reduces the historical significance of Ecevit's 'left of centre' movement and ignores shifts in the party's ideology and organization over time. The extant literature on the CHP sees the party's course as path dependent from its elitist origins in the 1920s (Yardimci-Geyikci and Esen 2022) and treats the CHP as a monolithic body that carried over to Turkey from the Late Ottoman modernist movements and was resistant to change (see, for example, Küçükömer 1969; Mardin 1973 . For an exception, see Wuthrich 2015).

Our article offers a detailed case study to explore how the CHP gradually transformed its ideological programme and cadres and aspired to turn into a mass party resulting in the largest number of votes garnered in the 1973 and 1977 elections. We hope to abridge the aforementioned gap in Turkish studies by demonstrating that the CHP's transformation was neither a historical anomaly nor an 'epiphenomenon'. We also shed light on the mechanisms through which the CHP underwent a major transformation in the 1960s and 1970s and shifted the dominant cleavage of Turkish politics. Our article discusses how CHP during Ecevit's tenure tried to address these challenges by offering a new political agenda that merged Kemalism with leftist ideology and appealed to the masses by articulating a new cleavage in society based on socio-economic issues and by building up a mass organization.

In what follows, we first provide a brief historical background on the CHP leading to Ecevit's tenure before turning to tracing the CHP's journey towards a social democratic mass political party. In our analysis, we rely on an extensive analysis of primary sources of the era, including parliamentary proceedings and political memoirs. We conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for the prospects of party change as well as for the present and future trajectory of the CHP.

The CHP and party change: from Kemalist origins to social democracy

The CHP's gradual shift to a centre-left that aspired to reach the masses unfolded under less-than-ideal conditions. Founded by Atatürk in 1922, the CHP served as the primary vehicle for top-down political reforms after the onset of the Turkish Republic. Under the CHP's single party regime, the government banned class-based organizations and espoused solidarist views that rejected the existence of different social classes (Emre 2015, 396; Güneş Ayata 2010, 69). The CHP had incorporated political figures from different ideological backgrounds who, despite their disagreements on other issues, worried about the prospect of class conflict and treated socialists harshly. The ruling party also made little effort to organize peasants and workers and actively discouraged

the formation of labour unions. This exclusionary policy was predicated on the fact that 90% of the labour force was working in the agricultural sector with the industrial workers constituting merely 4.3% of the total labour force (Emre 2015, 395–6). Instead of building up a mass organization, the CHP leaders relied on the state bureaucracy and the military for maintaining order and formed an alliance with local notables to stabilize the country-side. This strategy limited the party's ability for the incorporation of the popular classes and left them without any meaningful representation (Esen 2014).[2]

The delayed and dependent industrialization in the global South limits the size of the working class and hampers the possibility of labour centred left parties, while making room for the rise of multi-class populist movements. In the Turkish context, where an overwhelming part of the labour force consisted of subsistence farmers, the mantle of populism was carried by the centre-right Democrat Party, which, founded in 1946, quickly expanded its popular support and defeated the ruling party in the 1950 general elections. During the 1950s, the populist DP government adopted distributive measures and conservative cultural policies to co-opt the mass peasantry and even obtained strong support from the nascent labour movement. Meanwhile, due to its weak provincial organizations and the limited popular appeal of its policies, the CHP experienced difficulty in competing against the DP.

The 1960 coup that toppled the DP government created an opening for the left (Emre 2014, 120–1). The 1961 constitution included counter-majoritarian measures that sought to prevent the concentration of power at the hands of a single party and provided comprehensive social and political rights under which leftist groups thrived. In the 1960s, the CHP came to a crossroad. As the party needed a new direction after its ideas already went into the 1961 constitution, its coalition governments (1961–1965) did not perform well, and the newly established Worker's Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TİP) was gaining ground among voters. In response, İnönü,[3] the eminent leader of the CHP, claimed during the 1965 election campaign that his party was positioned within the 'left of centre' [ortanın solu] in the political arena. This new concept was met with suspicion, as it was both targeted as communism by right wing politicians as well as some traditional CHP elites and it was not sufficiently convincing for those on the far left, who had not forgotten the anti-Left actions of the CHP in during the single party era.

Although the left of centre branding did not initially bring electoral success to the party, Ecevit became the *de facto* leader of the 'left of centre' movement and was later elected as CHP General Secretary in the 1966 Congress. Under Ecevit's leadership, the party expanded its power basis considerably. Between 1966 and 1971, unionized workers, market-oriented peasantry and young urban middle-class professionals extensively participated in the CHP organization (Güneş-Ayata 2002, 105). Ecevit's tenure as General Secretary ended abruptly after he resigned in protest of the 1971 Coup-by-Memorandum. Next year, he organized a powerful intra-party movement and defeated İnönü to become the party leader in 1972 (Kili 1976, 325–31). This victory against CHP's longtime leader and the country's second president boosted Ecevit's popularity among the electorate. Ecevit offered a fresh start for the party. İnönü was also a risk averse politician who sought to balance the party's different factions that in the end resulted in inconsistent policies, whereas Ecevit represented the party's 'left of centre' program unequivocally. Ecevit's rise to the leadership created an impetus for the party's electoral rise. In a major case of electoral realignment, the CHP took the lead in the 1973 and 1977

general elections. Turning the party into a major contender for power, Ecevit went on to form three governments between 1974 and 1979.

Diagnosing the problem: a re-reading of history and a call for new forms of action

Ecevit became a prominent figure in Turkish politics against the backdrop of growing labour militancy and student radicalism in the post-1960 Turkish society. The import substitution industrialization policies rapidly expanded the size of the working-class. This was a period in which masses joined the political arena in a broad manner and Ecevit put himself forward with the expectation to solve the representation crisis in the system (Erdoğan 1998, 33). To rally people around himself, however, Ecevit needed to offer a convincing case demonstrating what the crucial issues were and what kind of action was needed to solve them. On that account, changing historical narratives became central for Ecevit.

Ecevit's reading of the crises of democracy and the solutions he offered stood in stark contrast with those advocated by other parties. The right-wing AP adopted majoritarian policies that excluded the opposition groups from the political system. Despite receiving substantial support from the popular classes, the party's economic agenda catered primarily to the nascent bourgeoise and the landed notables (Levi 1991, 140–41). Although the AP's import substitution policies swelled the ranks of the industrial labour and improved their living standards initially, the economic bottlenecks caused by Turkey's delayed industrialization soon put a heavy strain on the low-income voters. To suppress growing discontent among the popular classes, Demirel, the AP leader, saw the solution in further restricting the rights deeming the 1961 constitution a luxury for Turkey (Özbudun 2000, 34), whereas the newly established far-right Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) and National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi, MSP) did not shy away from calls for a more authoritarian, even fascist regime (Ahmad 2008, 252). These parties tried to appeal to conservative workers who recently migrated to major cities with a conservative cultural agenda that prioritized either ethnic or religious values (Ayturk and Esen 2021). Meanwhile, leftist groups, which attracted support from workers, university students and urban professionals, failed to garner enough electoral support to attain power. The AP's amendment to the electoral law in 1968 reduced the TİP's seats from 15 to 1 seat in 1969, obstructing the electoral path to socialism. In response, far-left groups began to focus on capturing the state through a military coup as the only option to transform the society (Ahmad 1993, 145).

By contrast, Ecevit adopted a staunchly anti-militarist attitude in politics and refrained from seeking a non-electoral path to power (Ecevit 1970; Kakizaki 2013). Unlike İnönü, who did not openly challenge the 1971 putschists in the hopes of persuading the military to not seize power directly, Ecevit unequivocally opposed any kind of cooperation with the military leadership (Kili 1976, 274–80). Following the putschists' decision to appoint Nihat Erim, a centrist CHP MP, as Prime Minister, Ecevit argued that the real motive behind the 1971 memorandum was to block the CHP's leftward shift under his leadership. This disagreement led to Ecevit's resignation from his post and started a bitter intra-party rift that was only resolved when Ecevit defeated İnönü and became the new chairperson of the party in the 1972 Congress (Tachau 2002, 111).

The solutions proposed by Ecevit (1969) in this period could be grouped as following: increasing the party channels for political participation of the popular classes, heavier public spending for reducing income gaps and regional disparity and advocating for more social and economic rights. Ecevit stressed the necessity for a change in the current order by increasing the authority of local administrations, facilitating the effective participation of workers in their workplaces' decision-making processes as well as supporting the people's economic efficacy by supporting the 'popular sector'[Halk Sektörü] (Ecevit 1968a, 178–83). Ecevit also stressed the need for economically empowering peasant and workers via cooperatives and by expanding what he dubbed the 'popular sector' as a means of building a well-functioning, meaningful democracy.

Under Ecevit's leadership, the CHP aspired to become a social democratic party like its European counterparts. Ecevit developed close ties with other European social democrat leaders. At the same time, he was careful to point out that unlike West European social democratic and socialist parties, which traced their intellectual origins to Marxism, the CHP emerged out of a national liberation movement. Therefore, Ecevit named CHP's ideology as 'democratic left', rather than social democracy to better symbolize this major difference with the Western centre-left and socialist parties (Ecevit 1975, 51–3).

Against right-wing propaganda that linked leftist agenda with communism and atheism, Ecevit sought to associate social justice with traditional values of the Turkish people. In *Ortanın Solu*, for instance, Ecevit answered the question of 'Why social democracy?' as follows:

> Because in the Turkish people, in addition to a traditional democratic orientation toward the restriction of the state power, there is traditionally a sense of equality and justice. Because in the Turkish people there is no tradition of slavery or nobility. Throughout history, there has been great fluidity among classes in the Turkish society. Therefore, no Turk would accept that another one would be or look more privileged than themselves (Ecevit 1968b, 42).

In the same book, Ecevit also added that 'The fact that there has never been a huge and continuous wealth accumulation across generations and the fact that there has never been a sense of land as private property in the Ottoman Empire have facilitated the deepening of the sense of equality' (Ecevit 1968b, 42). As a result, Ecevit claimed, 'traditionally the Turkish people would oppose the dictatorship of nobility and wealth as much as they would oppose state dictatorship (43).'

'Authenticating' the left and Ecevit the icon

The period from the late 1960s until the 1980 military coup is generally considered the heyday of the Turkish Left. In rebranding the CHP as a social democratic party during this period, Ecevit played a crucial role for several reasons. First, Ecevit was a very effective communicator who had a talent for making his messages easily digestible for the people. Whereas right-wing politician was accustomed to using a populist tone claiming direct connections with the masses, many CHP politicians lacked the ability to connect with voters. More specifically, he frequently found catchy slogans and adopted a popular rhetoric that compete against right-wing rivals. Under the AP rule (1965–1971), Ecevit played an indispensable role by responding to ruling party's efforts to portray the left of centre agenda as an alien ideology linked with the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the octogenarian İnönü and other prominent figures in the party, Ecevit was an energetic politician who toured the country and used mass communication channels effectively. No other CHP politician could utilize campaign rallies and speeches delivered from the radio and television better than Ecevit. Alongside the newspaper in the local coffeehouse, the widespread usage of small portable radios made this medium quite important for dissemination of political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s (Kolars 1973, 193–4; Güneş Ayata 2010, 161; 240).

Ecevit also successfully merged Kemalist principles with a leftist agenda so as to make social democratic ideals sound home-grown rather than alien intrusions into Turkish politics, as the right-wing parties would rather have the voters believe it. His persona and linkages to the people enabled even people traditionally distant to leftist ideals see social democracy as a promising goal. Ecevit frequently emphasized that the version of Left advocated by CHP was not mimicry of leftist movements across the globe but was instead derived from the cultural values of Turkey and reflected the authentic desires of the Turkish people (Erdoğan 1998, 30). Ecevit's personal appeal increased substantially after two international events, one being the 1974 Cyprus intervention gaining him the title 'Conqueror of Cyprus,' and the other being his resistance against the US's dictate regarding the ban of poppy cultivation.

As a former Minister of Labour who played a key role in enacting labour-friendly legislation, Ecevit enjoyed strong ties with labour unions and was popular among workers. Ecevit's 'charismatic personality and poetic style of speech' were also highly effective in mobilizing the masses (Güneş-Ayata 2002, 106). Ecevit's very style also led to the belief of authenticity of his movement. He was nicknamed *Karaoğlan* [dusky boy] after 1973, and adopted a blue shirt and flat cap, symbolizing 'the people', and lived a modest, unpretentious, even impecunious life that became influential in forming his unmediated ties with the ordinary people (Erdoğan 1998, 27).

Just as important however, were the stories he told, which assured people that social democracy was not foreign but authentic and most suitable to the Turkish people. In essence, Ecevit captured the crucial role played by narratives in his political speeches. Narratives provide a link between the past, present, and future (Bridger and Maines 1998). According to Polletta, narrative's temporally configurative capacity equips it to integrate past, present, and future events and to align individual and collective identities during periods of change (Polletta 1998). In the stories Ecevit tells about Turkish history and the need to get a good grasp of it, he illustrates what Moreno and Garzon (2002, 276) see as essential elements of historical narratives, which are to transmit a legacy from the past that demands a commitment to carrying out a future plan. By referring to the past of the Turkish people and how it seamlessly fits into a social democratic project rather than a secular-religious divide, Ecevit, in Brockmeier's (2002, 27) terms 'endows the inherent historicity of human existence with cultural meanings'. What is more, narratives reliance on emotional identification and familiar plots (Polletta 1998) and the common-sense properties of the truth claims of historical narratives attribute reality to the events to which they refer (Bridger and Maines 1998).

Transcending the cleavage: from Elitism to 'democratic forces'

As the CHP was historically viewed as 'the party of the centre and the elites,' (Güneş-Ayata 2002, 105), many CHP politicians were resigned to their party's minority status

against right-wing populist rivals. Some even saw the party's secular policies as a historical baggage that could not be overcome. Meanwhile, other CHP figures were in contact with interventionist officers who formed cabals to topple the AP government (Esen 2021).[4] In contrast, Ecevit's political beliefs in the 1960s and 70s were clearly defined by his anti-elitism and his anti-military stance in politics. He was keen to transform CHP 'from its traditional elitist character into a genuine populist organization' (Tachau 2002, 109). Accordingly, Ecevit criticized those group of intellectuals who, he argued, looked at the people with contempt and were alienated from them. He also targeted their 'bureaucratic elitist' and a top-down attitude (Ecevit 1970, 96–9; Erdoğan 1998, 29).

In Ecevit's political rhetoric, the political landscape was not divided between the centre and the periphery or secularists and Islamists but rather between the genuine people who lived off their own labour and those who exploited them. This was a deliberate attempt on his part to articulate a new cleavage in Turkish politics. He was not willing to make this distinction as a strictly class-based one, yet he departed significantly from the traditional CHP line by acknowledging the stratified character of the society and by working for the betterment of the conditions of the popular classes (Erdoğan 1998, 27).

Ecevit claimed that the Turkish people were descendants of a rich and sophisticated culture and civilization. Hence, it was not their background but the corrupt order under which they lived and the AP rule exploiting the corrupt system that had caused their predicament. He would depict Turkish people as intelligent and open to new ideas and would add that the Justice Party rule was incapable of utilizing these properties of the Turkish people, as the party was too conservative and narrow-minded. Moreover, the party was not on the side of the people and therefore would not provide the Turkish people with the happiness they deserved (Ecevit 1968a, 207–15; 256–7).

Ecevit's antielitism and his stance with the common people were also evident in his economic views. Ecevit saw those who made a living by exploiting others as the real opponents of the people. This was a populist reformulation of the right-wing parties' portrayal of the nation divided between secular bureaucratic elites and the masses. These included those who were not producing anything but instead served as intermediaries in trade or those who conducted usury [büyük aracılar, tefeciler]. He noted that his government expressed the opposition of workers, peasants, tradesmen, scatter town dwellers, producers to the corrupt order [bozuk düzen] (Ecevit 1968a; 1974c, 385). The primacy of addressing the means of production issue was encapsulated in catchy party slogans such as 'Land belongs to those who cultivate it, and water to those who use it' (Tachau 2002, 117).

Ecevit, an ardent supporter of the extension of the rights of workers, argued for redistribution, a universal healthcare system and unemployment insurance to be introduced for workers. Beginning with his tenure as Minister of Labour, he engaged in implementing inclusive policies, such as 'Labour Assembly', and participation of labour force to decision-making in the workplace (Kili 1976, 195–9; Emre 2014, 104–18). This would later be programmatized as 'self-government' [Özyönetim] (Coşkun et al. 1976). For villagers and farmers, Ecevit talked about the need for land reform, proposed crop insurance, health insurance and social security. Ecevit brought these issues up numerous times during his parliamentary speeches in the 1960s and made them the cornerstones of his government programs when in office (Tachau 2002, 117; Kili 1976, 372–7). In

accordance with this economic agenda, Ecevit also proposed a new economic sector dubbed 'popular sector' in which cooperatives were to play a crucial role to 'eliminate the middle man between producer and consumer and thus to counteract the alienation of workers without resorting to a massive program of nationalization' (Tachau 2002, 117–8; Ecevit 1974, 1975, 71).

When Ecevit proposed land reform, he was accused by opponents of trying to establish a collectivist regime and harbouring plans of transforming Turkey to a Soviet-style regime. Even his critics in the party accused him of entertaining communist sympathies (Kili 1976, 308–9; 318–9). Against those accusations, Ecevit (1970) saw Atatürk as insurance to what he was advocating. Ecevit noted that it was, in fact, Atatürk who first advocated land reform in Turkey, and asked whether Atatürk was a communist (23–4). Ecevit depicted the ruling AP as the opponent of land reform arguing that the party was getting directions and resources from big landowners.

Against charges of copying communist models of collective farming, Ecevit (0000) maintained that, during budgetary proceedings in 1974, despite the AP opposition claiming otherwise, there was 'an unprecedented will to form cooperatives' among the Turkish peasants. CHP-MSP Coalition's act was to put a name to this popular excitement with '*Halk Sektörü*' (619). He added that they were taking Western democracies as their example for human rights and claimed that whoever believed in the Turkish nation would accept these rights. 'Those who do not believe in the maturity of the Turkish nation,' on the other hand 'would go ahead and form "national fronts" in order to cover their complexes caused by their lack of belief in their own nation … It is because we believe in our nation that we deem our nation worthy of the liberties enjoyed in Western democracies' (631).

Far from denouncing the party's roots, Ecevit appropriated its Kemalist tradition to legitimize his left of centre agenda. Ecevit benefited from works by at least one Turkish intellectual, Kemal Tahir, who offered critical accounts of Kemalism in accordance with socialist ideas. Ecevit and his colleagues in the left of centre movement took key elements of Kemalism and reinterpreted them in a leftist fashion. For example, he reformulated Atatürk's revolutionarism [devrimcilik] as the changing of the current establishment [düzen değişikliği] and democratic people's revolutionarism [demokratik halk devrimciliği] (Erdoğan 1998, 28). In his book titled *Atatürk ve Devrimcilik* [Atatürk and Revolutionarism] Ecevit (1970) claimed that the genuine revolution is the democratic revolution of the base as opposed to the superstructure. By this he meant the re-organization of means of production and the redistribution of economic power. The superstructural revolutions, for him, were already accomplished by Atatürk. He deemed this as a very necessary yet insufficient phase (61–2; 106). The revolution's next phase was planned to be achieved by the CHP's left of centre agenda. Under Ecevit's leadership, the Kemalist connotations were minimized, as left-wing formulations and policies gained dominance. For example, 1973 Electoral Platform of the CHP, *Akgünlere*, mentioned 'Atatürk's way' twice and made no reference to Atatürkism or Kemalism (CHP 1973).

Right-wing parties criticized the Kemalist secular reforms and portrayed the CHP as a party that was set against religious people during electoral campaigns. The CHP leader İnönü did not have an effective strategy against this line. He saw secularism as not using or even mentioning religion or campaigning in religious areas and kept his distance from religious orders and sects. By contrast, Ecevit was not willing to perpetuate the deep

divide between secularism and religion and did not buy into the binary division of the society into progressive and backward camps based on religious observance. He declared that 'a people can be devoted to religious rituals but if their mind is open to ideas that will enable the development of the society and that will bring more social justice, it means that that people is progressive. It is progressive even if it prays five times a day, even if it fasts' (Ecevit 1973, 8; Koloğlu 2000, 81). Ecevit thus made a conscious effort to end the previous discursive patterns and attitudes that were feeding this divide. Only after that point, the Left of Center movement was able to develop the concept of 'Laicite that is respectful of beliefs' [İnançlara Saygılı Laiklik]. He noted that 'with our new attitude towards religion, we got more powerful and CHP's voting basis also took a positive turn' (Çarkoğlu 2012, 48).

The way Ecevit justified his party's coalition with the Islamist MSP in 1974 also exemplified his cleavage-transcending attitude towards Turkish politics. This coalition was justified by the shared belief of the coalition partners in the importance of breaking the power of the big capitalists and policies such as the nationalization of natural resources and oil (Güneş Ayata 2010, 93). Ecevit (1974) emphasized that the coalition partners shared the belief in the primacy of social justice in the advancement of democracy, along with political rights and individual liberties (364). Ecevit's words in his introduction to the government program give a good sense of his views on the secularism-religion divide in Turkey: 'The Government partnership established between the CHP and the MSP opens a new era in our country, which ends the artificial separations caused by some historical errors that have thus far damaged our national unity and stifled our development moves.' (381) When prompted to clarify what he meant during a parliamentary discussion, he elaborated on this point further:

> In the past, those who wanted to use religion as a means of exploitation wanted to define ideational societal divides in religious terms. As a result of this tactic, some religious people, who were provoked that way, opposed some innovations in the past even though these innovations would actually be in their favor. Some intellectuals who saw this situation wrongly assumed that all religiously observant people are against innovation and progress. As a result, a gap has opened up between the well-intentioned intellectuals who wanted to bring innovations to society and the large community of peoples who could benefit from those innovations. Thus, the Turkish people, the Turkish peasant, Turkish workers tradesmen, who are in fact very progressive and open to innovation, have been unjustly accused of zealotry and reactionism for a long time. We see this accusation as an historical error. Therefore, we are expressing our joy and hope in this respect for this coalition that accelerates the disappearance of this historical error and the complete disappearance of this error, which is essentially already in the process of disappearing. There will no longer be divergences in politics on the basis that one is more committed to religion and the other fulfills the requirements of the religion less. Instead, political divides will be based on economic and social issues. This is the healthy separation in a democracy (Ecevit 1974, 424).

The speech provided a rereading of Turkish history that sees socio-cultural cleavages as ephemeral. Against efforts of right-wing parties to wage a *Kulturkampf* that portrayed CHP elites as alien to the religious beliefs of the electorate, Ecevit tried to dispel the image of his party as anti-religion. Through his discursive treatment of religion as a positive tool for social justice, Ecevit's goal was to shift political debate on to the economic issues that resonated with voters. He redefined the genuine people primarily as the ones who are economically disadvantaged and do not receive from the system what is their due. This

facilitated his efforts to forge a multi-class coalition that consisted of 'low paid public employees, urban service workers, small shopkeepers and artisans, poor peasants and unemployed, plus liberal and enlightened intellectuals' (Tachau 2002, 117).

Organizational changes in the CHP

The ideological debates occurred against the backdrop of major organizational changes within the CHP. The rise of the 'left of centre' faction transformed upper ranks of the party through two waves of resignation in 1966 and 1972 (Kili 1976, 240–42; 264–65). Ecevit's leading rivals in the party, such as Turhan Feyzioğlu, Ferit Melen and Kemal Satır,[5] exited the CHP with their allies after being defeated in the party conventions and were replaced by a new generation of politicians from the left of centre faction who disseminated Ecevit's agenda across the country.

Until the mid-1960s, the CHP provincial organizations were primarily controlled by local notables from well-established families (Güneş Ayata 2010). Many of these families joined the Kemalist movement during the War of Independence in the early 1920s and retained their political influence by serving as interlocutors between the centre and the local populace. This political consensus had changed after Ecevit's leadership. Due to intra-party factional competition, 'a group of young professionals who had support from members and delegates that were either from working-class or small peasantry backgrounds' quickly rose through the party ranks in the late 1960s and 1970s (Güneş-Ayata 2002, 105). The mean age of the CHP provincial leaders decreased approximately ten years from the 1950s to 1975 as novice politicians outside the traditional notable families began to assume important positions in the party's local echelons. Furthermore, Ecevit's messages gave even lay members of the party an incentive for participation (Güneş Ayata 1995, 86). In the 1970s, the CHP provided disenfranchised groups such as the urban poor, agricultural and industrial workers, and ideologically excluded teachers, with a political platform in their struggle to gain representation and a larger share from national wealth (Güneş Ayata 2010, 283).

An important cornerstone of the CHP's transformation was its strengthened links with labour unions. Historically, trade unions that were centralized under the Confederation of Turkish Labour Unions (Türk-İş) were co-opted by and financially dependent on the state as represented by the government, which restricted their room for manoeuvre (Cizre-Sakallioğlu 1992; Blind 2007). As a result, Türk-İş tried to stay above party politics in favour of 'job unionism' and worked closely with governments to get concessions on bread-and-butter issues (Cizre-Sakallioğlu 1992, 720). The fragmentation of the labour movement in the 1960s created an opening for the CHP's left of centre faction. In 1967 four breakaway unions, which accused Türk-İş of collaborating with right-wing governments, established the Confederation of Revolutionary Labour Unions (DİSK). Initially, the militant labour confederation sought to maintain autonomous relationships with leftist parties, including the TİP, but after Ecevit's rise to the party leadership, CHP formed a closer relationship with DİSK. Similarly, the left-wing unions affiliated with Türk-İş started ideological collaboration with the CHP in the late 1960s, and started to publish a journal called *Çalışan Adam* [Working Man] in 1971. As its electoral rise turned CHP into a credible alternative for power, Türk-İş and DİSK both

declared their support for Ecevit's party in the 1977 elections (Güneş Ayata 2010, 242; Algül 2015, 305).

Ecevit was in a strong position to carry the 'left of centre' message directly to workers. He had served as Minister of Labour between 1961 and 1964. It was under his ministry that a new Labour Law (1963) that granted collective bargaining and the right to strike for the first time was promulgated (Tachau 2002, 109; Kili 1976, 197–8). Unlike CHP's traditional leadership, Ecevit did not refrain from cultivating close ties with union leaders and followed a pro-labour agenda that appealed to both urban and rural workers. His decision to resign from his party post to oppose the military's 1971 ultimatum further increased his credibility as an anti-establishment politician among workers. In its efforts to build ties to trade unions, Ecevit's CHP also began to establish new participatory channels. Originally proposed, and accepted for local parliamentary deputy candidates in 1961 (Bila 1987, 257–8), the CHP included an article into its party bylaw stipulating that seats in the local executive councils of the party should be allocated to worker representative in places with a significant worker population, in 1972 (Güneş Ayata 2010, 243). Although labour representatives within the party was lower than its European counterparts, Ecevit's CHP nonetheless made a concerted effort to incorporate workers into its organization.

Support obtained from labour unions buttressed the CHP's mobilizational capacity in working class districts of major cities. This strategy became instrumental in changing the electoral behaviour of the immigrant-receiving squatter areas where industrial labourers predominantly moved to the Left (Güneş-Ayata 2002, 104). Due to this electoral shift, the CHP became the largest party in the parliamentary and local elections in 1973 and 1977 and won municipality governments in İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir, among others. This trend slowed down in the larger urban areas after the mid-1970s but the party's voter base continued to expand across the rural areas due to the CHP support for land reform (Tekeli and Gökçeli 1977, 49–52).

The CHP between social democracy and populism

Before concluding the article, it is worth discussing the tension between Ecevit's social democratic principles and the populist impetus of his politics,[6] evidently after 1973, with the Cyprus intervention and the poppy crises between Turkey and the US.[7] Social democracy is a political ideology that accepts 'liberal democracy's respect for individual rights and liberties' and 'commitment to competitive elections' but is at the same time concerned with reducing social and economic inequality and providing social rights to citizens via state authority (Roberts 2008, 216). One emphasis is on pluralism and democratic means distinguish social democracy from populism (Roberts 2008, 72) and another is on ties with the demand side of politics. In this latter view, populism is a detriment to social democracy, as it relies more on 'clientelism' and 'personalistic ties or charismatic leaders' whereas social democracy focuses on 'programmatic basis' for mobilization and rely less on clientelism (Sandbrook et al. 2007, 28). As Roberts (2015, 144) maintains, 'Indeed, the modern study of populism as a political phenomenon emerged among Latin American scholars precisely in order to differentiate the region's populist mode of mass political incorporation from European patterns of class-based socialist incorporation'. The main difference between these two political styles lies mainly

in the fact that whereas social democracy relied on 'self-constituted, class-based organizations,' populism constructs 'popular subjects from above around the figure of a dominant leader' (Roberts 2015, 144). In contrast to social democracy, populism can shortly be defined as a 'set of ideas' that 'depicts society as divided between 'the pure people' vs. 'the corrupt elite,' and that claims that politics should be the expression of 'the will of the people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018).

Populism is a dynamic phenomenon that needs to be understood both as a matter of degree (coexisting with other styles of doing politics) as well as a temporal issue (changing its prominence over time within the same political movement or leader). Under Ecevit's leadership, the CHP aspired to become a social democratic party like its European counterparts. It wanted to reform the capitalist system, establish a welfare state and employ redistributive policies (Güneş Ayata 2010, 89).

However, after 1973 Ecevit's leadership style turned increasingly populist. This shift became increasingly evident in his tone and image (as *Karaoğlan*) as well as the operation of the party. It would be wrong to call Ecevit an exclusively populist leader as[8] even in the later years of his career, he oscillated between his more populist and liberal democratic tendencies. Having said that we can still detect the populist elements in his leadership style and trace their effects on the prospects of social democracy in Turkey.

One issue was relationship of Ecevit and the party grassroots and the voters. The delegate structure of the CHP was a matter of debate and was not reformed, thus extending the power and privileges of the local leaders stemming from the earlier decades (Güneş Ayata 2010, 97). Ecevit kept a close relationship with the local CHP branches rather than pursuing a reform from above that would have broken patron-client networks around them, and further strengthened institutional channels of participation. Another example was Ecevit's rise to primary (and almost only) face of the CHP after the Cyprus intervention (Günay 2007, 248). Ecevit's increasing personalism coincided with the diminishing effect of the social democratic cadres who formerly worked closely with him. For example, the 'Mülkiye Junta' which played a critical role in CHP's social democratic turn programmatically, started to lose their prominence after the party's participation in the 1974 Coalition Government (Emre 2014, 114).

One can argue that the populist traits in Ecevit's political style helped him reach the masses easier and win their hearts over, thereby playing a significant role in the rise of the votes of the CHP and in transforming the party significantly. The appeal to the people and its redefinition, the reformulation of the moral dichotomy between the authentic people and their exploiters was crucial in this regard. Yet it is also evident that this leadership style has prevented the institutionalization of long-term party identity as the leader became the major icon holding together the movement making party-voter identification contingent on the performance and agenda-setting potential of the leader. Relatedly, it has prevented the party from becoming a machine that operates with more routinized channels, open to bottom-up influence from other actors such as trade unions, and civil society organizations.

Conclusion

Ecevit's cleavage shifting attempts relied on good storytelling accompanied by practices that moved the party towards popular mobilization. He provided a means for popular

mobilization by articulating a new definition of 'the people', a leftist diagnosis of the socio-economic problems and a plan for political action. Through his speeches and writings, Ecevit overcame the binary divisions commonly hitherto made in Turkish politics based on cultural values. He made the case that such distinction were the remnants of historical errors and should be overcome through political action by the CHP politicians. Instead, Ecevit proposed a new political faultline mostly based on the distinction between the productive masses and exploitative groups along with 'usury' classes in society. As part of this populist strategy, Ecevit presented himself as the true representative and champion of the popular classes.

His original narration of Turkish history and revered historical figures, particularly Atatürk, were respectful yet risk taking, as he did not hesitate to acknowledge the shortcomings of the CHP's single party era. Accordingly, Ecevit managed to offer a re-reading of Turkish history that did not openly challenge yet carefully negotiated the dominant Kemalist narrative of a struggle between backward reactionary forces and enlightened forces. Second, Ecevit offered a political solution that challenged the status quo, strongly linked to the diagnosis he put forward. Third, in order to make his solution appealing to the masses, he used multiple strategies: he authenticated social democratic ideals strongly embedding them into the history and culture of Turkey; he put himself forward as a populist icon embodying the people and therefore knowing for sure what is good for them; and he led the transformation of the party's organizational structures and cadres that lend credibility to his arguments.

By shifting the dominant cleavage in Turkish politics, Ecevit sought to transform the CHP into a mass political party[9] that gained the largest share of votes in the 1973 and 1977 elections. Thanks to these electoral victories, CHP was in power in 1974, 1977 and 1978–1979. In contrast to his success in expanding his party's electoral base, Ecevit's performance in office was not impressive. Plagued by high-inflation, shortage of basic consumer items and spike in political terrorism (Aydın and Taşkın 2017, 301–05), Ecevit's popularity was quickly tarnished in the eyes of the electorate, resulting in his resignation after his party's upsetting results in the 1979 by-elections. His government's failures created disillusionment among voters, contributed to the CHP's rapid electoral decline and demoralized the party cadres in the late 1970s.

The same traits that helped the CHP transcend cleavages and appeal to an unprecedented number of voters in the 1970s have at the same time prevented the institutionalization of these changes, as the leader became the major icon holding together the movement, making party-voter identification contingent on the performance and agenda-setting potential of the leader as discussed above. These problems were exacerbated by the 1980 junta that dismantled the CHP, closed down labour unions and jailed many CHP politicians (Aydın and Taşkın 2017, 326–29). According to some, the fate of Turkish social democracy was sealed and its failure overdetermined after the 1980 coup. After the transition to democratic rule in 1983, the CHP's successor parties in the centre left had weaker organizational structures and failed to garner the same level of support as the pre-1980 CHP (Güneş Ayata 2010, 281–2). Despite repeated invitations by his former colleagues, Ecevit did not return to the CHP but decided to form a personalistic party based on his own personal charisma, namely Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, DSP), in 1985 that contributed to the fragmentation of the centre left vote in the country.

Due to these challenges, the centre-left parties have been out of power for much of the post-1980 period (Ciddi 2009). Their gradual decline, particularly after the disappointing performance of the Social Democratic People's Party (Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti, SHP) in major metropolitan governments in the 1989–1994 period, paved the way for the rise of the Islamist movement. Just as Ecevit's CHP obtained substantial support in low-income neighbourhoods of metropolitan areas in the 1970s, the Islamists captured the same areas in the 1990s. Whereas unionized workers served as the primary base of CHP before the 1980 coup, the Islamist movement drew support from low-income constituencies employed in non-unionized, precarious jobs. As a result of its failure to reach out to the local-income voters, the recently reopened CHP experienced 'electoral ghettoization' (Ciddi and Esen 2014) in the late 1990s and 2000s and was excluded from power by the AKP.

Can CHP replicate its 1970s success by turning into a mass political party again? This question has occupied students of Turkish politics for many years but has intensified in recent years after the authoritarian turn under the AKP rule (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). If the left of centre experience has anything to tell us, it should be that party transformation takes huge effort by political entrepreneurs and necessitates favourable structural changes to take root in society. In order to defeat the AKP, CHP has, in recent years, sought to overcome the Islamist-secular divide and reconfigure Turkish politics as a contestation between democracy and authoritarianism (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020). Just as Ecevit's CHP took on the right-wing AP to become the largest party in the 1970s, CHP currently challenges the AKP in power. After 25 years in opposition, the candidates supported by the CHP and several other opposition parties won mayoralty in several major metropolitan areas like İstanbul and Ankara in the 2019 local elections (Esen and Gumuscu 2019).

But there remain major differences between the two periods. Unlike the 1970s, CHP does not currently have a comprehensive program that could appeal to a diverse group of constituencies across the country. Even with contemporary efforts to expand and revitalize grassroots, the party still lacks a fully competitive organization and a charismatic leader in Ecevit's mould to achieve political power by engaging in mass mobilization. The historical example of Ecevit demonstrates the difficulties of long-term success for such political projects. For one thing, putting certain figures as icons of the movement may help in the short run but in the absence of major institutional reforms to allow for mobilization, electoral success would remain ephemeral. In the 2018 presidential elections, the CHP tried to fight Erdoğan by nominating Muharrem İnce, a charismatic campaigner with strong ties to the Kemalist electorate, who expanded his party's vote share but still lost the race (Esen and Yardimci-Geyikci 2020).

The CHP leadership sought to overcome its limitations by building an electoral alliance with several opposition parties (Selcuk and Hekimci 2020) as well as concentrating its efforts at the local level with politically resonant strategies (Wuthrich and Ingleby 2020) akin to the 1970s era. By cooperating with right-wing parties, the CHP not only increased its electoral prospects but also reduced polarization levels among voters. Ecevit failed to put together a stable coalition government due to right-wing parties' refusal to join his cabinet. Ideological polarization strengthened extreme groups in both sides of the spectrum and prevented moderate actors from engaging in political dialogue in the 1970s. To avoid this outcome, Kılıçdaroğlu has worked to include right-wing parties into the opposition alliance, including even the splinter parties that broke away from the

AKP. Allied with five other right-wing parties under an enlarged version of Nation's Alliance, the CHP is currently the leading force of an electoral coalition that has risen in opinion polls against the ruling bloc led by President Erdoğan. If this trend continues, the new faultline of Turkish politics might be a struggle between human rights and democracy on the one side and authoritarianism on the other.

One take-away from this study is that, indeed, the centre-periphery divide is not overdetermining when it comes to explaining Turkish politics. A post-hoc reading of the CHP through the lens of the post-1980s political atmosphere would not allow us to properly understand the political dynamics of Turkey. Nor would it allow understanding the room for manoeuvre available for politicians and political groups under given parameters. Ecevit and the Left of Center ideology show us the central role ideas and political discourse can play in politics. So, instead of taking parties as our unit of analysis and grouping them as agents of the centre or periphery, it is academically fruitful to do more empirical studies within political parties and show who is really doing the talking and the walking and what impact that has on the electorate.

The temporal limits of the success of the Ecevit era CHP should also encourage us to think about the downsides of populist strategies and the sole reliance on charismatic leadership in the struggle with right wing populism. However difficult, the institutionalization of party channel and large-scale organizational transformations towards more participatory and routinized channels seem to be essential in the long-term success of political parties.

Notes

1. A recent body of scholarship questioned the validity of this cleavage (Wuthrich 2013; Bakiner 2018).
2. Even though the CHP introduced more working class and peasant friendly policies in the 1950s and it tried to build communication mechanisms with the people (albeit mostly through local notables) (Sayarı 1975, Metinsoy 2011; 2021), the party did not embrace social democracy or follow a systematically social democratic agenda before Ecevit became powerful in the party (Bilâ 2008, 138; Kili 1976, 238–9; Güneş 1996, 115–120).
3. İnönü was a War of Independence hero, the orchestrator of Turkey's transition to democracy, the second president after Atatürk and served three times as prime minister.
4. A case in point regarding the rift within the CHP is the departure of Muammer Aksoy from the party as a reaction to İnönü's reconciliation with Celal Bayar in 1969 (Bila 1987, 318; Kili 1976, 251). As for the relationship between the military and members of the CHP, cases of Kemal Satır, Nihat Erim, Orhan Kabibay and Sadi Koçaş are illustrative examples (271).
5. These were politicians who had served high-ranking positions such as the General Secretary of the CHP.
6. For an extensive discussion of the tension between populism and social democracy in the CHP in general and the Ecevit era in particular, see Ugur-Cinar and Acikgoz (2022).
7. The military-backed government in 1972 outlawed the growth of poppy upon US request. Ecevit declared that such decisions regarding Turkish interests were to be made in Turkey and subsequently, a governmental regulation was issued that permitted poppy cultivation in six provinces. See, Tachau (2002), Emre (2014).
8. For examples of such criticism see, (Erdoğan 1998; Günay 2007).
9. The transition towards a mass party can be evaluated as follows: An analysis of the RPP's voter base in 1973 General Elections showed that voter base expanded in the industrial zones and where urban poor in gecekondus' were prominent. Same trend was reflected also

in votes regarding Municipal Elections (Kili 1976, 367–71). As for the historical funding structure of the RPP there is no significant focused study on the topic. However, review of primary sources such as memoirs, newspaper and weekly journal articles and party assembly reports show that the RPP shifted its means of funding. This was prompted by Constitutional Court's ending of Treasury support for electoral campaigns in 1968. Donations the elite (big businessmen of the day such as Vehbi Koç and Şarık Tara) were left aside and openly criticized by İnönü in 1971. Instead the RPP resorted to popular campaigns for small donations. Also RPP Branches' primary funding method of organizing ball parties to sell tickets were dropped in favour of organizing popular concerts (Acikgoz 2022, 287–9).

The RPP provincial branches were reorganized in the by-laws of the RPP in 1974. The central, provincial and district RPP bodies were reorganized to include party members from 'professional associations, unions, cooperatives' to direct party politics at all three levels (Kili 1976, 422–3).

Delegate structure was also kept dynamic in the larger cities. However, a large-scale delegate reform failed in 1973 (Güneş Ayata 2010, 94–7). This meant that although the congress patterns were orderly and inclusive, most of the older elite structure of the RPP persisted in the provinces.

Disclosure statement

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