



**Women and the Ballot: Unraveling the Motivations Behind
Female Support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in
Turkey**

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Master's Thesis — Spring 2024

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Character Count: 108.950 (45 pages)

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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Suen Wang, for her invaluable support and meaningful feedback throughout my writing process. Her guidance provided me with the direction I needed to and carried me through this process.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my friends and family for their constant support during the rough patches and long nights of research. I am especially grateful to my interviewees, who welcomed me into their homes and shared their experiences and perspectives with trust and openness.

Finally, I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to my fiancé, Enes. Your encouragement and continuous support have been a source of motivation; I couldn't have done it without you.

Abstract

During the early years following Turkey's foundation as a republic, the country became renowned for its advancements in women's rights, implementing progressive laws to establish gender equality. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) which came to power in 2002, early on established a focus on representing and benefiting women devoted to Islam whose everyday lives oftentimes take place in the periphery of Turkish society. Despite recent setbacks on gender and women-related issues, such as the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the continuously rising number of femicides, AKP has managed to maintain its high rate of female supporters.

Consequently, this thesis aims to explore the factors that influence Turkish women in supporting and aligning with the AKP by focusing on factors like politically significant events, socio-economic status, media influence, and the leadership of the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. By understanding the importance of these influences, the study contributes to the field and discourse on the dynamics of gender and politics in the AKP while addressing the gaps in existing research regarding female political conservatism.

By adopting an interpretivist philosophy, the study focuses on understanding human experiences and meanings through subjective narrative. Additionally, through employing a qualitative case study design and utilizing semi-structured interviews and anonymous web surveys, in-depth data in the shape of transcripts collected from six different women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, who are all supporters of the AKP, provided for a comprehensive dataset. The dataset was analysed through a deductive thematic analysis and secondary data further supplemented the analysis.

The study found the most loyal female AKP supporters to be typically religious housewives with lower education levels. Political alignment was found to be prominently influenced by the socializing agents of socio-economic status and level of education. It was established that a lower level of education together with a lower socioeconomic status correlates with a higher support for AKP due to the social welfare programs and policies of the party. Their collective identity was found to be reinforced through religion and significant political events, such as the lifted headscarf ban and the populist rhetoric in the media, consistently shaping women's political affiliations with the AKP.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for the understanding of these dynamics within the country's political landscape and political support amongst Turkish women by highlighting the role of socioeconomic factors, religion, and rhetoric through the media. The study additionally emphasized the importance of religion in shaping their social identity and its role in shaping political loyalties as the study established AKP's focus on representing and promoting religious values as an important factor in creating a collective identity among its supporters.

For future research, the study necessitates the importance of exploring the younger and more educated demographics' political behavior as their motivations for political alignment with AKP might differ from the older demographic. It is crucial to understand this shift, especially considering the recent changes in the political landscape of Turkey where AKP's dominance has begun to be challenged. In conclusion, investigating these dynamics can further provide insight into the evolving voter behavior and provide an understanding about the motivations behind it.

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Introduction

Turkey, when it was founded as a republic, gained attention and recognition worldwide as being a country pioneering women's rights. The revolutionary Turkish Civil Code was introduced in 1926 and some of its reforms included abolishing polygamy, granting women legal equality in marriage, inheritance, and divorce while additionally providing equality in political representation as women gained the right to vote and stand for municipal elections (Kadının İnsan Hakları, 2018). As evident through the multiple feminist waves in history, the efforts for gender equality have never stopped. Feminists, by definition, are individuals who believe women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated the same way (Cambridge, n.d.), and have through three feminist waves fought for women's suffrage, questioned traditional gender roles and coined the term "intersectionality" to bring a more holistic approach to the debate. Worldwide, we have felt the effects of the fourth wave of feminism during the last decade through feminist movements such as #metoo, the current 4B movement in Korea, pro-life discussions, and the Istanbul Convention, which are various elements that have contributed to raising awareness and bringing forward continuing demand for equality (Human Rights Careers, n.d.).

The current government of Turkey, ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2002, has made efforts to contribute to the fight of women and increase the representation of especially women of Islamic faith and those of lower socioeconomic class. Through the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2002, the country took an important step to prevent femicide and reduce honor killings, as well as implementing legislative reforms in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria in order to take a step in the direction of accession to the European

Union (EUR-Lex, n.d.). This involved implementing gender quotas, positive discrimination as well as recognizing marital rape (Yalçın, n.d.). Furthermore, in 2012, they introduced Law no. 6284, namely the Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women, which aimed to protect women and individuals affected by stalking, violence, and those at risk of violence (Laws Turkey, n.d.).

However, there has been a shift in AKP's narrative and stance on gender equality and women's rights during recent years, leading to harsh criticism and worry on both a national and international level (Unal, 2023). Despite being the first country to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention, which focuses on combating and preventing violence against women and domestic violence, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree in March 2021, making Turkey the first country to withdraw from the convention (Aksoy, 2021). In addition to this, the number of women falling victim to femicide has been on a constant rise over the years, with recent years documenting over 400 femicides annually (Zambrana, 2021), with a lack of enforcement and prosecution of offenders who are proven to have committed domestic violence, leaving the survivors at a constant risk (HRW, 2022). Taking this into consideration, it is fascinating to observe that approximately 50% of the voters of AKP, the ruling party of Turkey, consist of women (Uncu, 2018). If the AKP is doubling down on the equality and rights of women, how come they are still the first choice of millions of Turkish women?

As a result of the highly polarized political climate and divided segments of voters in Turkey, certain biases have come into existence regarding the supporters of the different political parties. The women of AKP, for instance, are often perceived and labeled as uncultured, uneducated, highly religious, and anti-feminist (Ensonhaber, 2023). Even though

they constitute a massive part of the population, their experiences and reasons for politically aligning with AKP are severely underexplored. Without sufficient research and representation of the women's own experiences, we fail to understand their point of view.

At this point, the AKP has become a part of daily conversation in Turkey, as politics is a hot topic due to various issues, such as the currently failing economy and the millions of refugees that the country has accepted (Osterlund, 2022). However, as previously mentioned, the topic of the women of AKP is neither widely discussed nor researched. The notion of conservatism does exist in literature, but often in the shape of studies on Western countries and among younger generations (Lodders & Weldon, 2019). As a consequence, finding data and research on Turkey as a geographical starting point, focusing on the AKP with a study cohort consisting of women in support of the AKP is a challenge in and of itself. With a study cohort of such immense size, and with the relevance of politics being a part of daily life in Turkey, as a researcher, I find it important to understand this influential group within the country's population and to break down prejudices. With this research, I contribute to the field of gender studies in terms of the connections between women and conservatism.

Performing research on this specific topic will therefore shed light on the dynamics of politics and gender while providing insights into the evolving discourse on gender equality in Turkey. Understanding the motivations behind the political choices of women in Turkey regarding the AKP, its policies, and rhetoric, contributes to the advancement of theoretical frameworks within international relations as well as deepening the understanding of the intersection of political ideologies with various influential factors. To ensure a holistic and comprehensive approach to this research, I will first discuss the elements important in understanding the contextual history that has shaped Turkey into what it is today. This

includes discussing the politics of marginalization based on religion, the rise of conservative parties in Turkey, and their appealing party politics. The AKP will be a central actor in the examination, but more importantly, I will focus on Turkish women and initiate a conversation to gain an insight into their reasons and influences for support.

To comprehensively understand the factors leading to political alignment with the AKP, I have defined the research question as follows:

What are the main factors that have influenced and shaped Turkish women's political identities and affiliations with the Justice and Development Party?

Historical Background and Context on Turkish Politics

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the relative historical background of Turkey, with a focus on the political landscape. By further discussing certain aspects of Turkish politics, this chapter establishes a contextual framework to clarify the ideas and concepts discussed in the later chapters.

Turkey, officially named the **Republic of Türkiye**, is a relatively new country as it was established on the 29th of October 1923 by the founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, after the War of Independence that surged as a result of the partition and fall of the Ottoman Empire (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). At the time, a modernization project that was "a total project, embracing and internalizing all the cultural dimensions that made Europe modern" was initiated by the state elites, meaning that religious notions had to be overcome (Keyder, 1997, p. 37). The modernization project was seen by Atatürk to be a milestone in

Turkey's progression to a contemporary civilization as it meant cutting off the ties to the Ottoman regime and its practices (Kocatürk, n.d.). To carry out this project, a single-party regime was in place until 1945 on the grounds that the governing military-bureaucratic elite knew what was best for the rest of the people (Arat, 1998), creating a "revolution from above" (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008, p.32). Currently, the country is officially a constitutional republic led by a system of presidential democracy, with the main legislative body being the parliament, namely the Grand National Assembly, representing the 81 provinces of Turkey. The national government is collectively run by the president, parliament, and the judiciary entity. The parliament is constituted of 600 members who are elected with a party-list proportional representation system to serve a five-year term. A political party must win at least 7% of the national vote to be represented in the parliament (Dalay & Toremark, 2024).

The current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is both the leader and co-founder of the governing political party that is mainly discussed in this paper, the Justice and Development Party, abbreviated as AKP and officially named AK Party. Erdoğan's most notable positions in his political career began as the mayor of Istanbul between the years 1994 to 1998, where he later rose to serve as a prime minister between the years of 2003 and 2014, representing the AKP and eventually becoming president after Abdullah Gül, who served as the president from 2007 to 2014 as well as being one of the co-founders of the AKP (BBC, 2023). Gül was also a previous member of the Islamist Virtue Party, which together with members from the social conservative Motherland Party, came together and formed the AKP in 2001 (Gül, n.d.). In its early days, the party was defined as pro-European, center-right, and liberal-conservative, different from its predecessors (Yeşilada, 2023).

Following the latest elections in 2023, AKP currently holds 265 chairs with 50 of the chairs being occupied by women. The main opposition, which is the Republican People's Party (CHP), holds 126 chairs with 24 being occupied by women, and the pro-Kurdish party, Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) holds 57 chairs with almost half of them, 27 seats, being occupied by women. The remaining parties hold 50 chairs or less (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, n.d.). The number of women in parliament has only increased within the last two decades: by the end of the 1990s, only 2% of the seats in the parliament were occupied by women. This number rose to 4% in the early 2000s, 9% in the following election, then 14% and 17% and currently, 20% (Ergül, 2018). Despite being designed as a parliamentary democracy, the country has experienced several military coups throughout the years which has interrupted democratic processes (Dalay & Toremark, 2024). The first coup took place in 1960, an era where the tension between the two leading political parties were high as a result of the ruling Democratic Party's policies. The party had started to loosen some of the regulations regarding religion, such as allowing for the reopening of thousands of mosques, opening schools for religious personnel as well as legalizing the call to prayer in the mosques to be in Arabic rather than in Turkish. As a result of a failing economy and devaluation of currency, together with public unrest and attacks; another coup was executed in 1971 and the military demanded a government inspired by Atatürk's views. A third coup was carried out merely 9 years later in 1980, on grounds of growing instability and the inability to restore the economy and prevent the violent clashes of the polarized right- and left-wing groups. This led to thousands of arrests and dozens of executions in the following year. Then in 1997, a "post-modern" coup was carried out by the military in the shape of recommendations to the government which was run by a coalition led by Erbakan, the leader of the conservative Welfare Party (RP). The Welfare Party would eventually be dissolved, and Erbakan was forced to resign, but not before having to implement a headscarf ban at

universities and compulsory education program for the prevention of enrollment in religious schools (Al Jazeera, 2016; Daily Sabah, 2021). In 2016, a failed coup attempt took place when a faction of the military tried to overthrow President Erdoğan. During the attempted coup, bombings took place in the capital Ankara, and tanks roamed the streets of Istanbul. The government blamed Fethullah Gülen, a cleric and leader of a religious movement, for orchestrating the failed coup (Ibrahim, 2022).

The current constitution was adopted in 1982 following the 1980 coup and then revised and approved in 2017 by a national referendum. The most important and noteworthy reform of the constitution in 2017, was the abolishment of the Prime Minister, designating the President, Erdoğan, as both the head of the state and of the government. Showcasing another example of democratic backsliding in Turkey, this period saw several people opposed to the amendment being arrested, as well as heavy restrictions on media access for the opposition (Çınar, 2018). This reform was supported by the AK Party and the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and transformed Turkey into a presidential system, transferring executive authority to the president, allowing him to appoint members to the Supreme Board and Constitutional Court, as well as to appoint a cabinet, form and regulate ministries, in addition to the authority to declare State of Emergency. The arguments for these changes were that the system, at that time, was holding Turkey's progress back and that an elected president shouldn't have to go through bureaucracy with a prime minister to enact laws. A notable change to the Parliament was also included, with the reform now requiring a two-thirds majority of the MPs vote to put the president on trial if needed (Sarac, 2018).

The following year, 2018, both the parliamentary and presidential elections were held simultaneously (Al Jazeera, 2023). As a result of the referendum held the year prior, the seats

in the parliament had increased from 550 to 600. Early on that year, the AKP, together with the MHP, proposed an electoral alliance law that would allow parties to form alliances and be grouped together on the ballot paper, ensuring that parties who usually were unable to surpass the 10% threshold would secure a place in the parliament as long as the alliance in total got more than 10% of the votes. With this change, voters could vote for an alliance rather than a party if wished, and unverified ballot papers were changed to be included in the final count at elections (Evrensel, 2018). With this, two main alliances were formed. The People's Alliance was formed between the AKP and the MHP, who had earlier stated they would support the re-election of Erdoğan, which was seen to be the reason for the law on electoral alliances to be put forward in the beginning. The opposition became the Nation Alliance, formed by the Republican People's Party (CHP), the İyi Party, the Felicity Party, and the Democrat Party (Duran & Öztürk, 2019). After being defeated in the 2023 elections, the Nation Alliance dissolved (Hürriyet, 2023).

With the AKP becoming the ruling power, Turkey initially experienced democratic deepening due to actions such as efforts to enter the European Union by making amendments to adhere to the Copenhagen criteria as previously mentioned (Goff-Taylor, 2017). In recent years, this has changed with concerns being raised regarding democratic backsliding and arguments that the country is shifting towards a more authoritarian regime, especially after the failed 2016 coup where there were extensive purges in military, judiciary, and civil service as well as crackdowns on media and civil society (Tomuş, n.d.). As a result of the coup, the government declared a state of emergency for over 2 years, giving them the ability to bypass the parliament and govern by decree, meaning they could instrumentalize the force of law without any oversight or approval. Together with some innocent individuals, the government expelled anyone who had any ties to the community of Gülen at all, no matter

how distant these relations actually were. This included over a hundred thousand individuals, thousands of whom were academics and representing the opposition or vocal about the Kurdish issue. According to Çınar (2018, p. 152), over 1500 civil society organizations and 150 media outlets were shut down, and multiple companies' managements were taken over by trustees of the government. Hence, Turkey is currently often described as a hybrid competitive authoritarian regime that is undermined by the state's actions (Stelgias, 2015). With the majority of the state institutions under control by the AKP through the imposition of reforms on the military and judiciary establishments, the criteria necessitated for a country to be democratic are frequently violated. Additionally, the political parties hold unequal grounds as a result of lack of representation due to restricted media coverage, as well as the imprisonment of various politicians (Stelgias, 2015). One may go as far as to argue that Turkey is in the process of transforming into an autocracy as a result of the strengthening presidential power as a result of the 2017 referendum which compromised the judiciary's independence. Additionally, through the continuous suppression of civil society and the forced shutdowns, AKP has managed to maintain and establish government-controlled organizations that protect the democratic façade while marginalizing any critical voice and opposition Tombuş, E. (n.d.). Throughout the years, Erdoğan has emphasized the AKP as a 'conservative democratic' party and refused labels that brand them as Islamist, despite international media and writers describing it as such, and as right-wing populists, and increasingly social conservative (Çağliyan-İçener, 2009).

With Turkey being a secular country, any promotion of Islamism by political parties, together with shariah law which in political settings refers to Islam's legal system, is strictly prohibited in the constitution (Republic of Turkey, 1982). The AKP has however, persistently increased taxes on alcohol as well as increased the regulations regarding abortion, and

Erdoğan has executed initiatives such as attempting to criminalize adultery in 2004 (Reuters, n.d.; Tremblay, 2014). As a result, attempts to ban the AKP as a political party has occurred twice on account of abusing law and justice as well as violating the separation of religion and state (Selvi, 2021). The AKP has additionally been accused of instrumentalizing political Islam, which roots in Turkish politics predate the AKP era, all the way back to the 70s, despite of Erdoğan's reassurance over the years, that the party is not Islamist (Yeşilada, 2023). The instrumentalization of political Islam has been argued to be evident through several reforms brought on by the AKP, such as making 'religion and values' courses in public schools mandatory as well as expanding religious middle schools, where students' education is focused on religion; students who would later be employed in the state bureaucracy (Yesilada, 2023, p.599).

During the first decade in power, despite protests happening around election times (DW, 2007), the AKP managed to secure the majority votes every time up until 2015, when it lost its status as the majority party (Letsch & Traynor, 2015) and in 2019, it lost Istanbul and Ankara for the first time, two of the most important and biggest cities in the country (Uras, 2019). While conducting the research for this study, Turkey experienced a local election on the 31st of March 2024, which had notable results since the CHP came first for the first time since 1977, while the AKP, for the first time since its foundation, did not. As a result, cities that make up 64% of the population are currently governed by mayors representing the CHP (Le Monde, 2024).

Literature Review and Theory

In a general sense, this research focuses on the question of why Turkish women vote for AKP. By identifying certain themes related to the research topic, I aim to explore the related existing academic research, the patterns, and identify gaps. The chapter will serve as a foundation to understand the complex context of the relationship between the AKP and Turkish women. It is divided into several sections that are each dedicated to different dimensions of the topic, such as the existing literature on relevant political history of Turkey and how it led to an increased vote for the right; the AKP's stance and ideology on issues related to women, as well as the influence of certain ideas represented in the respective theories.

Exploration of the Existing Literature

Examining the Voter Profile

Nationwide, Turkish women have been able to vote and run for office since 1934, with 18 women being elected to the Turkish Parliament in 1935 (White, 2003). The voters' statistics for the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections show that nationally, approximately 61 out of the 82 million citizens of Turkey were registered as voters, with women making up 50,5% and men, 49,5% of the voters. Out of those, approximately 54 million used their right to vote, with 26 million of them voting for Erdoğan as a president and 23 million voting for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the main opposition representing The Republican People's Party, abbreviated as CHP. For the parliamentary elections, the AKP received 18,5 million votes and the CHP came second with 13 million votes. Uncu (2018) further assesses that in 2017, half the voters of AKP were women and has been so at least between the years 2010 and 2017.

When it comes to the voter profile, the usual AKP voter is generally somewhat religious, often more rather than less. Fidrmuc & Tunalı (2016) performed a study on Turkish men and women concerning the gender gap in their voting behavior in the years 2002 and 2007 through an empirical analysis based on individual survey data gathered from the the European Social Survey (ESS). Their research established education and religiosity as the main factors of voting for both genders, with increased religiosity correlating to increased support for the AKP, and increased formal education leading to lower support. As stated in their research, the study they conducted was one of the first ones performed in their field in regard to analyzing gender differences in voting behavior in Turkey and hence is an important contribution to the field. Çaha & Bayyurt (2021) make similar statements regarding their study on women's voting behavior in Turkey and highlight the fact that such studies are sparse. Similarly, their findings confirm what Fidrmuc & Tunalı (2016) previously argued, that religiousness is a recurring influence on voting.

Uncu (2018) presents a similar study on the voter segments of Turkey in light of the 2017 referendum. He establishes that approximately 50% of the AKP voters consist of women with the majority being in the age group of 33-48. Of these women, a whole 37% identify as housewives and do not participate in the workforce. He confirms the previously discussed studies in terms of level of education as his data indicates that 66% of the general AKP voters have a low degree of education, having obtained either a primary or middle school diploma. He further verifies the theory that the AKP voters come from lower-class families with lower education, as approximately 90% of the AKP voters' fathers have the same degree of lower education.

Marginalization From Society

The Republican People's Party (CHP) was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's first president and founder. In other words, the CHP is the oldest political party in Turkey and is currently the AKP's main opposition (Erdemendi, 2020). It is founded in the principle of Kemalism, an 'ideology' based on the ideas of Atatürk, and includes 'the Six Arrows', namely republicanism, reformism, laicism, populism, nationalism, and statism (Harvard, n.d.). Republicanism was referred to as the only path after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the way of reorganizing Turkish society. Reformism at the time referred to a comprehensive transformation including planned reforms while urging future leaders to continue with a reformist mindset to ensure any obstacles could be overcome. Laicism or secularism was emphasized as previously discussed through the modernization era as well as through Atatürk's speeches where he urged the Turkish people to 'purify their knowledge 'in the light of actual science''. Populism was introduced as a concept to promote and sustain unity following the Turkish War of Independence. This meant abolishing certain notions from the Ottoman Empire such as various privileged titles, while granting women the right to vote. Nationalism was seen as a form of patriotism that could allow ethnically diverse groups to feel a sense of collectivity with the rest of the citizens. Last but not least, statism, or etatism, refers to state intervention in 'all necessary spheres' and its role and responsibility of organizing and finding solutions to the problems of the nation. (Perger, 2023, p. 35-39).

In the light of these Six Arrows, CHP during its initial years following the republic's foundation, introduced comprehensive reforms inspired by Swiss and Italian legal and penal codes. Consequently, some of the achievements were women's suffrage, strict secularism, and a shift in the written script from Arabic to Latin (Erdemendi, 2020). As a result of the strict secularism, women wearing a headscarf started facing issues in educational institutions such

as having their headscarves forcibly removed, and in 1972 in the Official Gazette, it was declared that female teachers should have their heads uncovered while on duty. After the coup in 1980, a 'public clothing regulation' was implemented, banning the headscarf from public institutions as it was deemed incompatible with secularism. As a result, women wearing headscarves working in for instance educational and political institutions were banned, and those who didn't comply would be expelled. Subsequently, in 1997, headscarves were banned from all educational institutions (Roznai & Yolcu, 2012). This issue became one of the important subjects for the AKP and the current president, Erdoğan, which were gaining power, in the early 2000s (Akboga, 2020).

Religiosity is in other words an important notion in connection to current party alignment as seen in history, the more religious citizens experienced marginalization for decades, and women in particular were excluded from certain institutions. This may serve as an influence that plays a role in terms of political alignment with the AKP, since they presented themselves as a party that invited the marginalized groups back to society with promises of restoring their right to religious expression. Rabasa & Larrabee (2008) point out the Kemalist revolution, the top-down enforced secularization and modernization, as an important impact and leading cause of the current political atmosphere of Turkey, where political Islam is recognized and favored by the majority of the population. The educational system was for instance secularized, and the religious institutions were brought under the control of the state, but these reforms were usually limited to the urban cities, whereas the rural parts of Turkey were overseen, making them isolated from the rest, and left out from the modernization process. For this reason, the divide between the center and periphery grew, with the periphery in the countryside creating their own networks and religious brotherhoods.

Representation and Inclusion of the Periphery

In Erdoğan's campaign in 2007, one of his promises was to lift the headscarf ban, which was met with many protests (Jones, 2009). The following year, after a successful election where he was re-elected prime minister, the ban was amended to allow women with headscarves to attend university, which was heavily opposed by the CHP, who asked the constitutional court to block this new amendment. Months later, the constitutional court indeed annulled the proposed amendment, stating it would be against the principles of the constitution to remove the ban (Benli, 2011). It wasn't until 2013 that public institutions started allowing women to wear headscarves through a decree, and the ban on headscarves in high schools ended the following year (Dirini, n.d.). Those in the armed forces could not wear their headscarves until 2017 (Sengupta, 2017). The headscarf discussions and the way the AKP gave importance to it, became a huge factor for women concerning political alignment and support. Through the combination of these factors, the AKP in its initial years, aimed to improve the status of women in society and introduced legislative reforms that toughened penalties for violence against women and marital rape, as well as supporting initiatives taken to increase female participation in the workforce and women's representation in politics (Arat, 2022). The AKP, and Erdoğan in specific, has though been heavily criticized in the latest years, especially after the coup in 2016. Rabasa & Larrabee (2008) provide this political context as their foundation for explaining the increasing right-vote, which became more prevalent in the 50s when the political system shifted to a multiparty democracy, leading to the election of the Democratic Party (DP), which appealed to the periphery and had less strict ideas of Kemalist policies, as well as milder views on Islam. The AKP was not only the continuation of the banned, previous conservative and Islamist political parties of Turkey, but they also managed to secure a massive number of votes by entering politics at the time of the economic crisis; filling a gap left by their predecessor. They further argue that at the time,

the AKP was more of a catch-all party as it received support from various social groups, with the *varoş*, the poor and less-developed parts of the urban, being one of the main sources of support through previously established social networks.

In today's Turkish society, it is commonly assumed that women wearing the headscarf in a religious manner, are also supporters of the AKP, which is an assumption that is based on the earlier Kemalist reforms where the symbol of a modern and secular woman, was that of a woman without a headscarf. Hence, the secular, Kemalist, CHP-leaning women were historically and contemporarily to a certain degree, opposed to the headscarf as it was viewed as an oppositional political attitude towards Kemalism (Bilgiç, 2020). Since the headscarf was banned in Turkey from public institutions in the 70s and onwards, it has become a political divide between the two sides, with the AKP gaining the support of those women who argued for freedom of religious expression in public spaces by promising and executing an amendment to lift the ban in universities in 2007, and public offices in 2013 (Al Jazeera Türk, 2013). Intertwined with religion comes access to education, which is another factor to be taken into consideration for this research. On the subject, Çaha & Bayyurt (2021) highlight how the strictly Islamist population's reluctance to send girls to school changed through the opening of religious high schools in the 1970s. They connect these *imam hatip* schools to the headscarf debate since graduates were consequently prevented from attending university due to their headscarves, and then afterwards, prevented from entering the workforce in the public sector due to wearing religious attire. In the likes of a snowball effect, this part of the population became deprived of both higher education as well as participation in the workforce. Consequently, amongst those who voted for the AKP in 2007, approximately 60% of them had a low education level, with 30% of them having a medium education level and only 10% having a high education level. It is found that women supporting AKP are "more

likely to wear a headscarf, perform salah, fast in Ramadan, read the Quran”; as well as “oppose to flirtation and abortion more than CHP women voters”. It is also highly important to take note of their finding on education, that “the biggest part of women who voted for AKP had graduated from primary school” which supports the theory that this specific group of women were deprived of the right to education either due to the headscarf ban, or internal factors such as family (Çaha & Bayyurt, 2021, p.282).

Erdoğan the ‘Savior’

Uncu (2018) presents another perspective on the case, which is namely the influence of media. His findings show that in 2017, 36% of all AKP voters never used the internet, but rather preferred watching news channels. He found the three most watched news channels to be ATV, TRT and A Haber. ATV, which is one of the most popular TV channels in Turkey, has been described as having a pro-governmental stance as its CEO is the brother of Erdoğan’s son-in-law, the former Minister of Treasury and Finance. The second most watched TV channel is TRT, a channel provided by the national public broadcaster. The latter, A Haber, is owned by the same group that owns ATV. Bianet, a Turkey-based press agency that is focused on human rights, established in their 2016 Media Ownership Monitor report that the three mentioned TV channels’ owners are all politically affiliated with the AKP government (Bianet, 2016).

The findings of Uncu (2018), additionally showcase a devotion to Erdoğan, with 46% of the AKP voters listing “leader-driven” as their answer to their primary influence on their voting choice (p.26). Furthermore, to the question “Do you have a party that you would never refrain from voting for, no matter the circumstances?”, 71% of them answered the AKP. In educated AKP voters, this percentage decreases to 58%. 74% of the AKP voters further replied “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan” to his question of who should lead Turkey, whereas

only 9% replied AKP, reflecting the importance of the leader rather than the party. Yaraş (2019, p.288), who in her study performed interviews with local female AKP politicians, mentions Erdoğan to be ‘an object of love’ following statements from various interviewees that argued women would fight their husbands if he was opposed to them voting for Erdoğan. Furthermore, this resistance to their husbands, and their independence is referred to as a progressive step they can take thanks to Erdoğan, rather than the AKP. Furthermore, with Erdoğan as a leader and with his support, the interviewees in the study assert their support is merely gratefulness as he has made it possible for them to partake in politics and have a role amongst the men (p.289).

Research Gap

It wouldn't be unreasonable to argue that there is a classic literature gap on the topic of influences that explain why such an immense number of Turkish women support the AKP. As discussed, there is data that indirectly, to some extent, investigates this phenomenon but there is a direct contextual gap. The study of Çaha & Bayyurt (2021) for instance, focuses on women's voting behavior in relation to both the AKP and the CHP, with a machine learning approach that does provide some information but is focused on a different context. Despite being a recent study from 2021, they emphasize the research gap and acknowledge that this territory is not a prominently discussed one. Altındal (2007) offers a direct insight into the women who work for the women branches of the AKP in her sociological analysis, however, it is focused on their opinions on various issues regarding women rather than why they aligned with the AKP to begin with. Similarly, Yaraş (2019) provides us with another recent study that examines the local female AKP politicians in terms of their experiences with political empowerment through being elected into AKP and working with them from the

inside. What we see is a pattern of focus on those who already work in the party, comparative studies, or articles on the historical context of the vote for the right wing rather than a focus on the millions of women who as citizens support the party. With my research, I aim to provide the field with literature to contribute to the elimination of the existing contextual gap by having the female citizens in focus and analyze their narrative.

Theoretical Implications

The sections below will introduce the relevant theories that will support and assist in constructing a result from the processes of data acquisition.

Political Socialization Theory

Political Socialization theory provides a framework that aims to explain and establish how individuals form their political beliefs through interactions with their environment and serves as a foundation to explore the role of various socialization processes in shaping the political alignment of Turkish women with the AKP in specific. My goal is thus to utilize this theory to give meaning to the political behaviors and choices of Turkish women and to recognize possible patterns existing amongst the voters by instrumentalizing various influences the theory determines as relevant.

One of the earliest and most influential works on the subject is “the Civic Culture Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations” by Gabriel Almond & Sidney Verba in 1963. Almond & Verba (1963) argue that the initial understanding of political socialization was too simple and ambiguous: the discussed initial studies prioritized the behavior of young children in their research for two reasons; the belief that anything learned in childhood is crucial as it lays the foundation for our beliefs and attitudes in the future, (Niemi & Hepburn,

1995) and secondly; the belief that acquiring political beliefs prior to adulthood would ensure those views didn't change in later stages of life (Easton and Dennis, 1969). This was further supported by Campbell et al. (1960) who suggested that party identification often served to be a lifelong commitment, as individuals usually stick with the political party they initially choose. Almond & Verba (1963) on the other hand, argued that while non-political experiences do indeed play an influential role in developing political attitudes, these effects follow through into adulthood, even going as far as directly arguing for the possibility of experiences occurring in adulthood sometimes being more influential than those in childhood. With consensus existing on the subject that an individual's environment is influential, the dispute on the specific influences and age periods continues.

By the mid-1980s, the focus in this field of research shifted toward how political views differentiate as we age. The critique of Marsh (1971) was of high importance in this regard, as it argued that political beliefs were more than mere childhood influences, and research started seeing political learning as an ongoing development. The shift furthermore led to a focus on how current events and government performance affect our political choices, rather than early political learning. Party identification, as previously mentioned, was initially assumed to be an identity development without having reached an age of cognitive skills to comprehend politics. This view shifted to a belief that argued party identification was formed through informed reactions to politics (Fiorina 1981). The consensus on the topic after years of research, is that political learning is a lifelong process that starts in childhood, (Jennings & Niemi 1981) with adolescence being considered as the most impressionable and vital years for establishing political attitudes. Specifically, from the ages of 17 to 25, (Jennings & Niemi 1981) individuals are especially susceptible to external factors such as historical events, political changes, and social and cultural dynamics (Alwin & Krosnick 1991).

The '*agents of socialization*' around us, such as family, school, and mass media, are various influences that shape our political opinions and can go as far as encouraging or discouraging our behavior, too (Rothschild, n.d.). Throughout research, the notion of family has been a constant point of interest as one of the main socialization agents. (Jennings & Niemi, 1968). The socioeconomic status of parents, by possibly contributing to political involvement through children with an increased likeliness of higher level of education, has been discussed by scholars to be a mechanism through which parents impact the development of children's political orientations. In other words, parents of higher socioeconomic status may shape the political orientations of a child through discussions and guidance on politics and civic responsibilities as it has been established that the socioeconomic status of parents may influence the development of class-specific political orientations, civic attitudes, and involvement (Beck & Jennings, 1982). With my preliminary research highlighting a recurrent pattern of socioeconomic status as a relevant factor, the analysis will examine the possible influence of socioeconomic status in relation to the Turkish case to possibly confirm these hypotheses.

Despite education being considered another agent of socialization, there is limited consensus on the actual influence of schools fostering political engagement (Campbell, 2009). During the initial stages of research on political socialization, it was argued that schools and its civic education had close to no influence at all on students (Neundorf & Smets, 2015), which became a highly contested argument in later years. It is debated that influences of education can manifest through either having lectures on topics related to politics such as civic education, or through the possibility of free discussion in a school environment. Taking into consideration the fact that Turkey has gone through many reforms in the educational system throughout its time as a republic, as well as the various elements that have prevented fair access to education, as a researcher I have had to take into account

the fact that the demographic in question may not have equal educational backgrounds. If I were to instrumentalize education as an indicator in my analysis, I must assume that civic education through schooling is, and has been, the norm. However, as that cannot be guaranteed, the *educational level* of the individual in combination with their family's education level will be utilized to form an argument based on education and its relation to political engagement and alignment. This raises the question, does the level of education influence political alignment?

The discussed theory thus offers a framework on the discussed views regarding how political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are formed and evolve over time. Based on studies, political socialization begins in childhood, with the family as an important agent that holds influence through various elements such as socioeconomic status and level of education. With further experience in life, other influences come into action, shaping an individual's political view. In literature, it is agreed on the notion that political beliefs are not static, but rather subject to reevaluation through influences from life experiences, as well as significant political events, and general shifts in the political landscape. Ultimately, political views are continuously developed through an interplay of several elements.

Social Identity Theory

In the field of social psychology, Social Identity Theory, abbreviated as SIT, was originally developed by Tajfel, and further expanded together with Turner in the late 1970s (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory argues that people shape their identities through affiliations with various social groups, creating a social identity. In the process, a distinction is made between those of one's 'own' social group, namely, 'in-groups', and the others,

called ‘out-groups’, creating a language of them vs. us. Usually, an individual holds a favorable bias towards their own group, namely ingroup favoritism or ingroup bias, fostering a sense of collective identity (Worley, 2021).

SIT further explores how individuals perceive and exaggerate the differences between their group of belonging and other groups. Through self-categorization, an individual categorizes or classifies oneself in relation to other social categories, in turn forming an identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). It is argued that social identity creates an emotional attachment to its group, influencing individual’s behavior that ranges along a spectrum with one end, being personal actions, and the other end, being behavior led by group dynamics. The degree of self-identified closeness to a person’s in-group determines their place on the spectrum of behavior. This intensity of identification with their in-group is stated to increase with conflict that arises from perceived differences between groups, resulting in an individual that acts as a group member rather than an individual. (Worley, 2021). Through this, I aim to understand how the various group identifications in the context of Turkish society and women play out and shape political affiliations with the AKP and what the building blocks of these identities are. Usually, parts of these identities are derived from larger groups such as nations, with aspects such as race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, language, religion, and nationality being key elements of social identity (Worley, 2021). What is relevant to this case, are the identities that intersect for the group in focus, which in this case includes gender and religion. Furthermore, Campbell et al. (1960) argued that identification with a political party is just as valid and will hence also be beneficial for this study. SIT provides a framework for understanding how these dynamics work and how social affiliations may alter and shape our views, attitudes, and interactions which in turn will assist us in understanding how the AKP possibly mobilizes support through various actions such as appealing to shared social identities.

SIT itself is the result of three processes, namely social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. The initial category as previously mentioned, social categorization, refers to humans' tendency to group objects or people together, allowing easier discourse on said group. By grouping, we as humans stereotype and generalize, and it allows an individual a place in society. Social identification is the next step, where an individual sees themselves as belonging to a certain group, adopting certain aspects of the behavior associated with it. The last step, social comparison, is the step where an individual seeks positive aspects of its in-group, or negative aspects of an out-group to enhance one's self-image (Worley, 2021). As previously mentioned, this step leads to rivalry between groups, with comparisons leading to competition and sometimes conflict. Further research has shown that the social identities are both descriptive, in that they outline characteristics for the said group, while also being prescriptive, setting norms and expectations for those included (Larson, 2017).

In *The American Voter*, a comprehensive study of voting behavior in the US, it is argued by the authors that individuals identify with political parties, similarly to the way they identify with, for instance, racial and religious groups; a foundation soon enough built upon by social identity theory. Partisanship is in fact described as a social identification by Campbell et al. (1960), as the nature of it, leads to the bipolar political parties being divided into 'us' versus 'them' (Greene, 2004). The differentiation between groups leads to favoritism of in-groups where the positive qualities are exaggerated, and derogation of out-groups, where there's an exaggeration of the negative qualities, leading to one's own in-group to be observed as superior. It is argued that in addition to this phenomenon, there is a positive correlation between partisan social identity and partisan behavioral consistency. In other words, an individual with a strong partisan social identity has less of an inclination to stray away from their in-group, as well as being a more consistent voter, and be a supporter

of their party in a broader sense. With a strong sense of partisanship, a political party's victory or defeat can become personal to the individual and research has stated that partisans are more likely to accept favorable information regarding their party and argue against negative information as well as evaluate factual outcomes more positively when their party is in power (Huddy, Bankert, & Davies, 2018).

As previously mentioned, religion is one of the many various components of social identity. Islamic religious identity is of high importance in Turkish society with most of the population identifying as a Muslim. The AKP has throughout the years, with the use of media and their actions presented itself as a protector of Islam and is perceived by the masses to be aligned with Islamic values, appealing to those who hold their religious identity in high regard (Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008). In this sense, one may argue that religious identity at some point, can become intertwined with political identity for some, leading people to view AKP as an extension of their social identity. To analyze and draw conclusions on this hypothesis, I will benefit from media as a platform that is instrumentalized to reinforce this bond between religion and political affiliation, through disseminating narratives and discourse presented on this specific subject by figures of the AKP. Studies have shown that individuals prefer and actively seek out media content that represents ingroup members (Harwood, 2020) and media will therefore be analyzed on its influences on the perceptions of in-groups and out-groups in terms of group affiliations based on religious identities, and if it strengthens or weakens the group in question's affiliation to the AKP. In other words, I intend to use social identity theory to support the claim and examine the degree of perception that the AKP supporters have of the party as a part of their social identity, particularly through religious affiliation that is reinforced by the party through media. Furthermore, the media will also be a point of discussion in relation to its role as an instrument for intensifying ingroup bias as well as

deepening the perceived divide between the in-groups and out-groups through certain narratives.

SIT is not exempt from shortcomings which have naturally been discussed by various researchers over time. Demirden (2021) highlights the fact that SIT falls short of explaining how individuals initially decide to identify with a group. It is known and accepted that those with a sense of collective identity may have a fluctuating relationship with their in-group, but where and when does it start? As he further emphasizes, self-categorization is usually mentioned by those using SIT, however, the decision of self-categorization itself is not discussed in detail. This is an interesting aspect to be considered and hence another reason for examining the initial stages of self-categorization with the collective identity that reasons with the AKP.

Methodology

This chapter aims to provide insight into the process behind my research on the elements that constitute the influences that have shaped Turkish women's support for the ruling party of Turkey, the Justice and Development Party, by looking at the possible influence of socioeconomic status, as well as influences that constitute social identity. This section will additionally attempt to outline the methodological approaches and decisions taken in the process. The research philosophy will be discussed in order to establish the fundamental approach to the issue as a whole and the principles that guided me while conducting the research. Then I will discuss the research approach and how it aligns with the research philosophy, and why it was the most fitting choice for this specific case. The research design will then describe the overall structure that guided the research, from start to finish, influencing the other research-related decisions. Additionally, it is important to describe the implemented sampling strategy and the case-specific reasons that influenced our

selection. Finally, I will be discussing the data collection and analysis methods, how I had to adapt along the way, and how I decided to handle the data acquired.

Research Philosophy

The system of beliefs regarding the development of knowledge is referred to as research philosophy. Hence, it is the starting point for embarking on research, as it defines a researcher's view on obtaining and analyzing data (Saunders et al., 2009). As a researcher, I adopted the research philosophy of interpretivism, as this specific case necessitates an initiative to understand and make meaning of human behavior and social phenomena through social contexts. Interpretivism focuses on the meanings created by humans by considering intersectionality and how it reflects and shapes humans' experiences. To preserve this complexity, it is necessary to collect in-depth data relevant and meaningful to the research participants, rather than constructing a more general, surface-level idea of a notion, meaning the notions of generalization and objectivity are to be challenged (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). To properly understand the point of view of the research participants, the interpretivist philosophy necessitates the researcher to have an empathetic stance (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 141) while observing individuals' subjective interpretations of certain meanings.

Research Approach & Design

Before embarking on collecting data and performing an analysis, a detailed plan on what approach is most suitable for the case in question is necessary to ensure the process is fruitful. Based on the nature of the case I will be studying and its cohort, the unit of analysis, qualitative research methods fall in line with interpretivism as it employs various in-depth

data acquisition methods on subjective experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The relevant methods of qualitative research for this study are based on text-based data, such as interviews and open-ended surveys, as I primarily analyze the individual value given to notions such as religion. As the focus of this research is on a study cohort composed of a specific group of individuals, where I aim to understand their views on meanings and experiences, I apply the quantitative research design of a case study. By doing this, I am allowed an in-depth into the circumstances of a group of people within a set context. In this case, it is specifically Turkish women in support of a specific political party. As employing a case study usually involves multiple methods of data collection, I will as previously mentioned, deploy various means in this regard. The case study further deploys an explanatory angle, which involves explaining a phenomenon through the exploration of causal factors, which aligns with my research question as it focuses on 'what the main factors' of political alignment are (Priya, 2021).

Research methods

Data Collection, Selection & Sampling Strategy

The main priority in terms of data collection, was initially to perform semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 women of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds, but with the common factor of being AKP supporters. To execute this, a semi-structured qualitative interview approach was deployed for several reasons. As a researcher with a specific research question in mind, I wanted to have a structure and set of questions ready for each interview, without conditioning the interviewees to reply to each and every one.

Depending on the situation and the interviewees' reactions, I omitted certain questions if needed, as well as reformulating some of the questions or providing follow-up questions off-script to encourage the research participant to elaborate further and provide deeper insights. As a result, I had more flexible interviews where the answers provided were richer and more detailed than what a strictly structured interview would've had. The interview guide was prepared to allow a natural flow throughout the interviews by initially asking about 'factsheet' information to establish a general demographical idea of the research participant, and asking questions related to the research question topic by topic. I formulated interview questions that I revised after a mock interview, where I identified certain issues such as an unnatural flow, or questions that were irrelevant or too repetitive. Using the method of snowballing, I was as previously mentioned, aiming to interview 10 different women. Due to issues regarding limitations as to be discussed later on, I carried out interviews with 2 women through snowballing. During my visit to Istanbul, research participant 6 was the first individual I carried out an interview with, as I had a personal connection. Through her, I was referred to research participant 5 who tried to refer me further but was unsuccessful. Research participant 6 was selected as an interviewee as based on previous interactions, she had established herself as a long-time supporter. Based on built trust, she felt comfortable enough to have an extensive, open discussion. For both interviews, I visited the research participants' homes in Turkey, presented them with a consent form they both signed, and recorded the interviews in a quiet environment, and following the interviews I manually transcribed them. The interviews were carried out in Turkish as neither of the research participants spoke English and it allowed for various nuances of language that would otherwise be lost in translation at the moment.

Through a personal connection, I managed to reach out to a third research participant for a potential interview. Based on her feedback and reluctance to participate and be recorded in an interview, I adapted my interview guide to an anonymous qualitative web survey using Google Form which the research participant stated would be preferred by herself and others. An anonymous web survey can additionally be argued to assist in overcoming social desirability bias, where the respondents may provide a ‘socially desirable’ answer rather than their own subjective opinion, hence distorting data, whereas social desirability bias may be more prevalent in interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 228). The questions in the survey had to be re-evaluated and compressed to prevent participant disengagement or fatigue (Braun et al., 2021, p. 648). Hence, while some of the questions were open-ended, meaning the participant would respond by typing out their answers, some of the questions were closed-ended. Additionally, some were multiple answers questions. All the questions were presented as conditional questions to avoid forcing a research participant to reply to a question they possibly didn’t feel comfortable answering, had limited information on, or simply did not apply to them. Similarly to the semi-structured interviews, the initial questions were related to demographic information. Following, I presented the questions in themes to allow for a natural flow and placed page breaks between each topic to allow for transitions and breaks between answers. The themes followed the themes in the interview guide, divided into topics such as religious influence, political activity, family and social environment and women’s rights. Via snowballing through the research participant, 4 individuals in total filled out the survey.

Besides the collected primary data, I additionally benefitted from secondary data by evaluating existing research papers on the topic to further support my research. The secondary data provided enriching perspectives and valuable data to support the analysis of my primary data.

Data Analysis & Coding

Based on the theoretical framework, preliminary research, as well as my observations, I identified sections of data relevant to my research question. I assigned codes to these relevant sections, and upon revising these codes, I identified broader patterns to focus on, creating specific themes. These pre-defined codes were utilized while examining the gathered primary data by applying them through deductive thematic analysis, where I examined patterns in the interview transcripts and the open-ended survey responses regarding the influences that have led to the women's support and political beliefs (Bryman, 2012). The themes emerged through repetition, with certain topics being brought up several times, and through similarities in descriptions.

Ethical Concerns

Given the sensitivity of the topic in regards to the current political climate of Turkey as well as the study cohort, as a researcher I had a responsibility to uphold certain ethical standards. Since religion was one of the recurring themes throughout the study, as well as in the discussions with the research participants, I approached the secondary data with critical perspective in order to be aware of any bias, Islamophobia, or orientalist views that could be reflected in it. Additionally, I took a deliberate stance from material prepared by researchers and other individuals with a strong pro- or anti-stance on the Turkish government.

Regarding my responsibility towards the research participants, I designed the front page of the online survey with a Turkish description that described the aim of the survey, the anonymity of the survey, the fact that participation was completely voluntary and that the

research participant could withdraw at any moment. Additionally, I provided my e-mail in case any of the research participants wanted to reach out. For the research participants that participated in the interviews, I provided a consent form in Turkish that again, shortly described the study while highlighting the anonymity of the study, the fact that the interview would be recorded, that they could choose to not reply to certain or any questions and that they held all power to stop or withdraw consent to the study.

Limitations

Going into this research I was prepared to meet difficulties regarding obtaining interviewees, as previously mentioned, politics is a hot topic in Turkey with two extremely polarized groups. Additionally, the demographic I wanted to interview still experiences prejudice by other groups, which would make them more reluctant to speak about politics. I myself do not necessarily physically present as a typical AKP supporter, meaning the perception of my appearance may be observed as an out-group. Being only half-Turkish, I don't look 'typically' Turkish, speak with a slight accent and don't necessarily dress in an Islamically modest way, as well as being of a younger age group than the general demographic that votes for AKP.

Having an already limited social circle hence posed as a difficulty in the beginning of the process of sampling.

I reached out to multiple of the women's branches established by AKP in Istanbul, both through social media as well as email, in hopes of either having the opportunity to interview someone who is politically active within the party or finding potential research participants through snowballing via them. To find research participants outside of AKP itself, I created posts on various social media, which also didn't yield any results. Upon

arriving in Istanbul to carry out the first interview, I physically visited one of the branches of the women's branches of AKP and was told the only way they would consent to an interview was if I first got consent from either the Ministry of Culture and Tourism or by arranging a private meeting with Saliha Demirer, the Chairwoman of the Women's Branch of the Province of Istanbul, who would then be able to consent and appoint someone to be interviewed.

Hence, snowballing as a sampling strategy, despite not allowing for semi-structured interviews with 10 women, presented me with the opportunity to gain insightful perspectives into a diverse group's experiences.

Analysis

The following chapter provides a detailed thematic analysis of the primary data collected through interviews and an online survey, complemented by supplementary secondary data.

The chapter is divided and organized into several sections that individually focus on specific predetermined themes drawn on the theoretical framework as well as the preliminary research. Each section will hence focus on themes such as socioeconomic level, education, religion, political events, and Erdoğan's media narrative. By examining and analyzing these themes individually, this chapter aims to explore the various influences that shape Turkish women's political affiliations with the AKP. This ensures a nuanced understanding of the various dynamics involved while providing insight into the subjective meanings and experiences of women in Turkey.

Demographic Overview Over the Study Cohort

When examining the existing data regarding the Turkish voter's demographics, it is possible to observe a pattern within those who politically align with AKP. Despite the party's denial of the existing gender discrimination as well as openly expressing their opposition to gender equality (Gülel, 2020), women have since the party's foundation, constituted on average half its voters. The party has attracted mostly housewives, which has constituted the largest portion of their female voters, as well as women with lower levels of education (Çavdar, 2022).

To gauge the validity of the influences to be discussed below, I will use the responses provided by the research study participants. This primary data includes interviews with 2 individuals and survey responses from 4 individuals, making up a total of 6 participants, whom I will refer to as the study cohort. Below I have hence introduced the relative information needed to establish a demographic picture of each participant, such as their age, level of education, and profession. Following, I will incorporate their varying responses to the related questions that will assist in exploring and answering my research question.

The demographic overview of the research study participants is presented in the table below. This section aims to provide a representative sample regarding age, education level, profession, and duration of AKP support.

Participant	Age Group	Education Level	Profession	AKP Support Duration
RP1	18-29	University Degree	Architect	1 year
RP2	18-29	University Degree	Teacher	3 years
RP3	18-29	University Student	Student	7 years
RP4	30-59	Primary/Middle School	Housewife	20 years
RP5	30-59	High School	Retired Housewife	20 years
RP6	60+	High School	Retired Housewife	20 years

The participants over 30 predominantly have a lower level of education and identify as housewives, which correlates with lower socio-economic status. This trend aligns with previous findings by Uncu (2018), who established that almost 40% of the female voters of AKP are housewives. Accordingly, these women are also those who have been supporters for the longest time. The younger research participants have a higher level of education, participate in the workforce, and have supported AKP for a lesser time.

Religious Influence and Political Events

Based on preliminary knowledge of the political history of Turkey, combined with the data presented by my research, I have observed and constructed a chain of events that could be regarded as a general experience of Turkish women who have either lived to experience the secular-religious polarization and turbulent political climate of the “lost” years in Turkey in the 90s when a fourth coup was experienced (Tekin & Sezer Şanlı, 2023, p.244), or that has experienced or observed marginalization based on religion in recent years. This assumed chain of events is additionally based on the work of Özcan (2017), which presents a timeline that consists of initial marginalization by the political system on grounds of religious

freedom, which expands into territories like the expression of freedom of religion in the form of wearing a headscarf or practicing faith outside of the home, which in turn led to exclusion from public institutions, and workforce if not complied. To explore this further, I ask the research participants about religion and their support.

Kicking off the interviews, after establishing the research participants' basic information, I asked an open-ended question: "*What are the main reasons for your support?*" This allowed the participants to express themselves freely without prior discussion. The same question was included in the survey as a multiple-choice question with an open-ended option.

The possible answers in the survey were as follows:

1. Political Ideology
2. The party's policies and promises
3. Past performance or experience of the AK Party
4. Political figures of the AK Party
5. Other:

The most comprehensive answer was given by research participant 6, who is the oldest out of the study cohort, and who has experienced the earlier periods of Turkey where political parties were banned on grounds of 'promoting religion'. She continues the interview, stating that freedom in the form of wearing a headscarf in public was their only expectation at the time when voting for the AKP and is still the main reason why she is still supporting them.

“Before the AK Party, for example, everything was interfered with; we could not feel free. Regarding worship, we faced opposition about everything from the scarves on our heads to the clothes we wore. We could not move around freely. Now with the AK Party, everything is normal. We can easily enter and exit municipalities, healthcare facilities, any governor's offices, everywhere, with our headscarves” (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B).

It is possible to observe a reflection of the sense of collective identity in the discourse by research participant 6, as she spoke on behalf of the oppressed women by continuously using the word ‘we’.

This expectation from the AKP is supported by research participant 5, who states that the headscarf issue was and is the only reason why she has been in favor of them (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B). Furthermore, she compares Turkey to Europe in the sense of freedom, stating that Turkish citizens should be able to be as comfortable and free of interference as those living in Europe. The four research participants that participated in the survey all listed “Past performance or experience of the AK Party” as their reason for support, with research participants 3 and 4 also listing the party’s political figures as an influence. A recurring theme in the answers gathered, is a focus on the past success of the political party as a reason for voting for them, rather than focusing on for instance currently carried out projects or promises by the AKP as a reason for current alignment.

To further assess the research participants’ support, I asked the question “*Has any event in the past or present significantly affected your support for the AK Party?*”. By reformulating the question discussed earlier, I hoped to gain insight on any specific political event such as the headscarf ban, that could provide further understanding, as well as to

measure if said political events increased or decreased their support. The reformulation was successful as it provided me with recurring topics amongst the supporters. 3 out of the 6 participants replied that the current situation of Syrians in Turkey is a factor that has decreased their support, stating that the AKP has put the Syrians ahead of its 'own' citizens, making Turkish citizens second-class citizens. (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B). For the same question, 3 out of the 6 research participants mentioned the current failing economy. Research participant 5 (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B) and 6 (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B). Both specifically mentioned that the last 5 years have decreased their support due to the economy and high cost of living. Research participant 5 highlights the introduction of the EYT (Retirement Benefit Age) as an unjust action by the government stating that there is no 'justice' in the Justice and Development Party, but rather 'only development' (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B). EYT was introduced in 2023 and is a regulation concerning retirees. With the introduction of EYT, individuals who normally meet the required premium days and insurance period necessary to retire are now put on hold as an age requirement was added. This issue affects those who began working as insured employees before September 8, 1999. Hence, women must now be of the age of 60, and men must be 65 to retire (Tahancı, 2024).

As religion, in the shape of the ban on the headscarf and its related events has been established as an influential event, I wanted to gauge the influence of religion in general for political alignment and evaluate its role as a possible group membership of the research participants social identity. I asked the participants if religion plays a role in their political views and support for the AKP. Research participant 6, who has supported the AKP since its foundation, admits that in the beginning, she didn't know what the AKP stood for or did in general and that for her, she only cared about religion (Research Participant 6, see Appendix

B). For the survey, I provided a follow-up question that asked if they had experienced a significant moment or event that deeply influenced the connection between their religious beliefs and political preferences. Here it is interesting to notice that 2 out of the 3 research participants in the age group 18-29 state no, and that religion plays either no role or a slight role in their political alignment with the AKP. The research participant that is in the cohort aged 30 to 59, similarly to research participant 6 who is 60 years old, stated yes to both questions. In other words, it can be inferred that for the older individuals who lived through the times of religious marginalization, religion is a more important priority and possibly a notion they would consider a part of their social identity, whereas those who have lived through adulthood in times of religious freedom do not prioritize or relate to religion in the same regard.

The recurring themes observed so far are those of religion, the economy, the AKP's past success, and its political figures. Gündem (2023) discusses said factors in his analysis of voting behavior in Turkey and establishes that the impact of religion is higher than any other factor included in his study, such as the national economic performance, seemingly being the main motivation. As religious conservatism is then the main ideology of the voters, it is fair to assume they vote for who reflects the values it brings with it.

Erdoğan's Populist Discourse and the Instrumentalization of Media

The AKP is maybe most known for its current leader and president of the country, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He has been described to fit the profile of a charismatic and populist leader who is very skillful at creating a bond of loyalty with his followers by emphasizing with them (Çay & Kalkamanova, 2023). A way of building up this trust and image, to create a sense of collective identity that leads individuals to feel a strong sense of belonging, is

through media. As Uncu (2018) established, it is evident that much of the media is biased as they have been proven to be affiliated with the current government. During the general elections last year in 2023, it was established that the state media TRT, which is the second most watched channel by AKP voters, allocated 33 hours of screen time to Erdoğan, while his main opponent representing CHP was only allocated 32 minutes (Turkish Minute, 2023). To explore the idea that media plays an influential role in creating and continuing a collective identity, either through the screen time of Erdoğan or another representative of AKP, I asked the research participants questions related to their media usage in relation to following politics.

I asked the research participants what platforms they used to follow news related to politics. The cohort aged 30 and over, all preferred to watch TV, whereas only one of the participants of the age group 18-29 stated she also watched news on TV. The replies by the rest of the group vary between social media and the internet, with no distinctive pattern in terms of age. None of the research participants used newspapers as a source for politics-related news. The older participants' long-lasting loyalty to the political party can hence be connected to their media usage as TV Channels tend to portray pro-government content. Following this, I asked the question of how close they feel to AKP on a scale from one to ten, with one being the lowest degree.

Research participant 5 and 6 who had previously stated their support has decreased over the last 5 years due to the economy, both stated that they priorly were 100% in favor of AKP but currently, their support has dropped to half of what it was, or even less. (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B; Research Participant 5, see Appendix B). From the youngest

cohort, we see the results ranging from 4 to 7, with the research participants of the cohort aged 30-59 answering 8.

These results are reflected in their replies to the question, ‘*As a member of the AK Party, do you feel like you are part of a larger group?*’. Research participant 6 answered no, which was also her reply to the question ‘*Do you think you have anything in common with other people who feel close to the AK Party?*’. From her earlier discussed replies as well as her replies to the other questions included during the interview, it was not surprising to see that she felt distant from the party. For her, the headscarf is the only issue that has brought her close to AKP. She mentions throughout the interview that she doesn’t necessarily agree with every action they do. It may be argued that such habits stem from a background of lower education, which can translate to lower political literacy.

‘I don't feel close to anything about the AK Party. Frankly, I don't find all of its actions reasonable. I only stand behind it because it gave us this tolerance. Otherwise not.’

(Research Participant 6, see Appendix B)

The youngest cohort, which has the lowest scores in terms of a sense of belonging to a larger group either answered ‘yes’ or ‘partly’ to the question about having anything in common with others that also support AKP, whereas research participant 4 who had the highest score of an 8, answered yes.

To gauge the effect of Erdoğan or potentially other prominent figures within AKP, and the degree of influence of their position as a politician in AKP when it comes to voters’ preference of political parties, I asked the research participants questions regarding their

voting behavior. During the interviews with research participants 5 and 6, I asked them what their criteria are when voting in local or general elections, and to what extent the party of the candidate is important. Both participants stated that the individual themselves is quite important and the services they have provided and can hence promise for the future. Research participant 6 stated that the political party also held a lot of importance and that she looked at how much that party could benefit the nation and herself economically and in terms of freedom of religion. She continues and says that it may be selfish, but for her, religion supersedes other influences and that if she had been young, at this point other issues might've been more important to her.

‘How much can these people benefit the nation, me, in terms of my religion, and economically? ... now at my age, I think about it this way. Maybe I wouldn't have thought this way when I was younger. It's a bit selfish, of course. But I think more about religion than the economy, frankly. It dominates, in my opinion.’ (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B)

In other words, the important notions are economic stability and religion. For the survey, the question was a multiple-choice open-ended question that asked ‘*What are your criteria when voting for a candidate in local or general elections?*’.

The recurring theme in the answers in the survey was that all four research participants who completed it checked off "the candidate's past performance or experience" as a reason for their support. Additionally, two of the research participants indicated "the policies and promises of the candidate's party," and two participants noted both "the candidate's party, political view, and ideology" as well as "the candidate's character and leadership qualities." They all answered, "moderately influences" to the question, "*To what*

extent does the party of the candidate participating in the election influence your choice when voting?". As previously discussed, most of the AKP voters had been established to prioritize Erdoğan as a politician over AKP as a party and showcased immense devotion and loyalty to both. As reflected in the responses by the research participants, it is possible to observe a pattern of preference and attention for the candidate rather than the party which can be argued to be the result of Erdoğan's populist discourse which works to strengthen the in-group favoritism of the voters.

Women's issues and representative ideology

Erdoğan, as a representative of AKP, has on numerous occasions argued for gender justice rather than equality due to his creationist views; he refers to Islam while discussing issues related to women and states that women and men are not equal on grounds of *fitrat*, which means the 'purpose of creation'. In that sense, his discourse argues that treating men and women is in fact harmful to women, and the actual problem. While talking about women, he refers to them as mothers and teachers, wives and sisters, rather than as individuals, reinforcing patriarchal narratives of women (Gülel, 2020), while calling on women to have "at least three children" (Çavdar, 2022, p.56). As Moghadam (2018, p.298) stated, the women in support of Erdoğan, "may be homemakers who find security in the traditional sexual division of labor."

AKP involves women in their party and carries out work focusing on housewives, their main group of supporters. As Erdoğan has previously mentioned, "Once women of the household are convinced to support the party, they would find a way to convince their husbands.". Through AKP's women's branch, the *AK Parti Kadın Kolları* recruits volunteers and reaches millions of potential voters every year by establishing networks on a local level.

Erdoğan works closely with the women's branch, which in 2020 announced with their 4.7 million members that they were the largest women's organization in the world. Reflecting the party's values, the women's branch exists on all levels, from national to neighborhood offices, where they weekly conduct female-only visits to those designated to have various needs (Çavdar, 2022, p.66). I personally heard about this way of work while visiting one of the branches of the women's office, where I was told I would be unable to find them on any other day of the week, as they carry out neighborhood visits 4 days a week. Furthermore, these branches are responsible for creating a sense of solidarity and support, especially in times of election where Erdoğan, in his speeches, requests them to "get in each and every house and reach every heart.". While he offers his respect to this segment of the population, he has targeted the feminists as 'the others' who "don't understand motherhood, the highest position a woman may reach" (Gülel, 2020, p. 16-19), a narrative further increasing the divide between the in- and out-groups.

While the word feminism by definition means "belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" according to Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the word is loaded for some individuals and some may have different perceptions of the word, either negative or positive.

"I say that 'Women are entrusted by God to men,' and these feminists come out and say, 'What do you mean women are an entrusted possession? This is an insult'. You have no connection with our civilization, our faith, or our religion. We look at the address of the beloved Prophet in his Farewell Sermon. He says, 'They are a trust from God,' and 'Respect and protect that trust. ' – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (BBC News, 2015)

I asked the research participants, if they knew what feminism is and if they consider themselves as one. The youngest research participants, along with one of the housewives stated they knew what feminism was. However, only two of the youngest participants, out of the entire study cohort, stated they also identified as one. To the question, if they thought of AKP as a feminist institution, they all said they did not know. Research participant 5 further expresses that she doesn't know what a feminist is, but that she is called so by her brother for speaking her mind. In her opinion and experience, the word 'feminist' is used in derogatory discourse (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B). As we can safely conclude that the majority, if not all AKP supporters, are religious and hence follow the religious ideology of Erdoğan, it is not surprising to observe that only two out of the six research participants identify themselves as an feminist as Erdoğan has continuously over the years labeled feminists as the 'others' and used derogatory language when talking about them; especially taking into account that most of the voters actively watch television where Erdoğan's speeches are continuously aired.

While no data regarding the research participants' economic status was gathered, AKP's target group has since the beginning been the periphery: the peasants, the villagers, and the lower class living in the outskirts. The ones disregarded during the modernization process, the ones with lower education, and the housewives who aren't a part of the workforce (Gündem, 2023). An effective method of securing the votes of this population was initially through resurrecting the failing economy in the early 2000's, and over time has evolved into the efforts of the women's branches in ways of social welfare. Çavdar (2022) draws attention to the instrumentalization of public welfare as a means of increasing voter support in her study where she observed that women, despite being of a smaller segment,

received more public welfare transfers than poor men, with housewives receiving the biggest share. This share of housewife recipients has increased over the years and reached 39% in 2016. The social transfers were collected under the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services in 2008, which determines who is eligible to receive transfers and what the budget is. Çavdar (2022) argues this process is political, as the ministry is controlled by AKP, and the recipients as well as the timing of the welfare transfers are determined by them as they usually have the most representatives on all levels included, from municipalities to cities. Furthermore, the transfers of for instance cash assistance, are sometimes credited to the president, where recipients may receive a text message signed off from the president. Often, these transfers of cash assistance, provisions, or even coal assistance for heating are timed to be handed out prior to Erdoğan's political rallies or an election. In interviews carried out by Kutlu (2018), most of the interviewees who had received these transfers expressed awareness on the topic of the transfers' political motivation and stated it had indeed convinced them to vote for AKP as they felt a sense of gratitude. For housewives with a lower socioeconomic background, receiving these transfers may seem like an act of respect and recognition for women, as well as a way of assisting in maintaining peace at home.

Research participant 6 expressed that she felt unrest in the family largely stems from the economy; defining a struggling economy as an event that shakes the family. When asked about areas of improvement for women, she states that the economy should be better so that peace within the family can increase. For her, women's rights are established around the framework of mutual respect in the household between a man and a woman; hence, a lack of money may lead to disrespect (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B). Research participant 5 expressed similar sentiments:

‘‘He (husband) respects my rights. When it comes to women's rights, well, I can say that I am fully able to defend my rights now. I am free. My husband respects me, and I respect his opinions. We do everything together... I mean, I have all sorts of rights at home. Don't I? We do what we want to do. My husband does not object to anything, I speak openly. He also does the dishes. We wipe things down together. We do everything together. ‘’ (RP.5, p.9)

Wanting to gain further insight into their views on women's rights and assess if they would mention issues outside the private sphere, such as femicide which has been a continuing issue in Turkey with an average of 400 femicides annually (anitsayac.com), I asked the research participants what they thought were the main problems faced by women in Turkey. Interestingly, research participant 5 expressed financial freedom as a way of women gaining their rights in society, while also being a notion that has the potential to disrupt the family structure which is highly regarded in Islamist conservative views.

‘‘In Turkey, it's probably not defending their rights. Not being able to express themselves. Their rights are being defeated. I can say that (women's) rights are only now being granted. And how does that happen? It's because women have started working. Before they worked, women were more oppressed. But I think this also depends on mutual understanding. Why? There are many people who disrespect their spouses while working. This, of course, varies from person to person, from one set of morals to another. They (women) work and then feel a sense of freedom. They try to dominate their husbands, or they leave them. We are free too, they say, we have economic freedom, and so the concept of family disintegrates. But I don't think it's related to working per se. It's more of a moral issue. Currently, I don't think that women in Turkey are being treated unjustly too much. Because everyone can now claim their

rights. The old system is gone. In fact, men are being treated unjustly.” (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B).

There is much to unpack in the quote above. The research participant highlights a chain of events where women are oppressed because they do not defend or fight for their rights. As a way of obtaining their rights, women need economic freedom, which may disrupt the family which is where equality lies according to the conservative narrative presented by AKP. Then, she concludes that it actually ends with the person; it’s an issue of morality. Furthermore, this dynamic leads to men being the discriminated population.

“We shouldn't let women be oppressed either. We need to establish a balance between the two. Actually, equality never really occurs, you know? Because power comes into play. Men are stronger. By nature, by structure. Physically. That's why there isn't true equality. But equality actually comes from the mind. If it's in the mind, there's no need to enforce equality between men and women as a rule. I think the problem is always with people. Laws don't have to be passed. People are the problem.” (Research Participant 5, see Appendix B).

As previously discussed, the conservative Islamist values held by certain people in Turkey reflect Erdoğan’s creationist views. Equality is hence not a thing, as men and women are biologically different; they have different tasks in society and women’s primary focus should be to keep the family together. She may have other duties, but they should not interfere with her role as a caregiver. Circling back to the women’s branch, it has been established that they deliberately target specific groups to support and talk to. Housewives with lower income in the neighborhood get visits from the branch and its volunteers, receive offers for assistance, and potentially cash, food, or necessities for the home. This, in turn,

benefits *gender justice*, as families may temporarily feel economically more secure, and re-establish respect and peace between the wife and husband. Çavdar (2022) argues that the material benefits provided to women as well as solidarity, are the main reasons for women's alignment with conservative parties, which is on par with what I have observed to be relevant influences.

In summary, the thematic analysis carried out, reveals that the themes discussed are crucial factors that shape the political alignment of Turkish women with the AKP. The findings align with the limited existing literature on the topic and provide personal narratives on women's experiences and reasonings for their political affiliation.

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from the analysis in the context of existing research and the theoretical frameworks of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Political Socialization Theory, to provide a deeper understanding of the obtained observations on the themes of socioeconomic status, education, religious beliefs, media influence, and significant political events like the headscarf ban.

AKP's Appeal to the Socio-economically Marginalized

Since its foundation, AKP has presented itself as a representative of the marginalized and the periphery; the religious, lower class. The study cohort presented a partial verification as it indicated that the women who had supported AKP for the longest time, were religious housewives, with lower education; the younger cohort supported AKP for less time while having obtained higher education. While existing research has established that 71% of the

female AKP supporters are of the age 33+, with over 60% having a lower education, which is a pattern observed in the collected data (Uncu, 2018); there is a gap in the literature focusing on the younger, educated generations' reasons for political alignment with AKP. It may be deduced that the socializing agents influencing the youth, stray from the older population which is the study cohort of most existing research.

Education works as a socializing agent, namely an influence that plays a role in the process of political socialization, as it provides individuals with a critical environment that provides them with the opportunity to gain political knowledge, hence shaping their political attitudes. Therefore, it can be deduced that an individual with higher education and exposure to civic education, would consider several factors when determining a political party to align with, such as the party's promises, success, legitimacy, and such. It can then be argued that the general population of AKP voters, who mostly have a lower education due to various reasons, have not obtained the knowledge that would allow a critical mindset that questions a party's façade or work in a broader context. This is admitted during the interview with research participant 6, who said she initially voted for AKP to be liberated in her own country; when asked about what values, promises, and efforts of the AKP she feels close to, she states she doesn't; and in fact, don't find all their actions reasonable. When asked about any initiatives she found well implemented by the AKP on the topic of women, she admits she doesn't know much about it. In the research participants with a higher level of education, we observe that they do claim to have knowledge on for instance feminism, as well as identifying as one. This could indicate that education has enabled them with a more critical mindset that allows them to embody different ideas than what is presented through various narratives on media for instance and adopt their own views on topics such as women's issues.

Furthermore, a lower socio-economic status in general, is another trait the general AKP supporters have in common. As established, most have a lower level of education, and the women are mainly housewives; in addition, most of the voters belong to the lower-mid class, which struggles financially more severely than the rest of the population (Uncu, 2018). Lower socio-economic status, in regard to political alignment, often correlates to alignment with parties that implement policies that directly affect the economic well-being and financial status of the voter. As AKP entered the political landscape in Turkey during a failing economy and successfully restored it, AKP can be described as an institution of economic safety for those who see economic stability as more than what it is; also, a necessity for peace at home and equality of spouses. Furthermore, we observed the women's branch as an active socializing agent that targets these groups and offers them a network, expanding AKP's base while building a community of 'us' (Çavdar, 2022), meanwhile providing financial support amongst other types of aid. Hence, it can be assumed that women of lower socio-economic status who hold a conservative Islamist view may prefer AKP as they promise financial support, which in turn provides stability in the family. Furthermore, several of the research participants pointed out the failing economy as an event that has recently affected their support.

AKP As the Defender of Islamic Values

Religion is undeniably one of the most significant sources of social identity in this case, providing an individual with a sense of both belonging and community. Throughout the modernization and especially the single-party period of Turkey, the Muslim and conservative population of the periphery was overlooked and marginalized, forcing them into creating local networks that provided a sense of community, an in-group that held similar values and had similar experiences (Binnet, 2015). The headscarf ban is an example of a significant

political event that becomes a collective memory of the in-group, a shared struggle. In an already highly polarized society, the ban on the headscarf created a further divide and left more women out of public spaces. These elements have been the main pillars of AKP, which entered a rough political climate and established itself as the advocate of religious freedom, and defender of Islam with a promise of lifting the headscarf ban (Taşpınar, 2012). Gülel (2020, p.10) observed that Erdoğan referred to notions such as Islam, religion, and sacred values 356 times during his discourse on women through 27 speeches and press releases following his presidency in 2014, reinforcing the focus on conservative values regarding women and their place in society, while maintaining religion as the focal point. Such language shapes an individual's social identity and social relations, influencing the audience (Holsti, 1976). Furthermore, through discourse, a redefinition of 'terrorist' was observed to mean anyone opposing the AKP following the 2015 elections, further solidifying the divide of the in- and out-group. Aslan (2021) argues that public crying is another method of populist discourse that communicates closeness to the in-group. In her study on AKP, she noted that Erdoğan had been teary-eyed at least 30 times in public between 2007 and 2020, usually during times of political turbulence such as the failed coup in 2016, which led to a purge of hundreds of thousands of government employees, imprisoning one-third of them (Aslan 2021). Additionally, these instances are often incorporated into videos prepared by the AKP, presenting him with a certain image to the people while creating the idea that there is a constant existing threat by out-groups. By calling himself one of the 'Black Turks', the man of the people, the representative of the "oppressed and ridiculed"; as well as being portrayed by his party as "one of us"; AKP has managed to create a strong collective identity with its in-group, with the opposition CHP, the party who reigned during the single-party era, implementing the headscarf ban, as the out-group. (Aslan, 2021, p.6)

The collective social identity of an in-group and its divide from the out-group is often strengthened by the media and its portrayal of political leaders' narratives. In our case, we observe Erdoğan as a charismatic leader with high visibility who understands and supports the in-group, in this case, the women of AKP. He utilizes the dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them' and convinces the masses that he is the guardian protecting their freedom of religion. If any opposition were to take over; the queers, the feminists, and the Western powers would take over (Gülel, 2020, p.20). In other words, Erdoğan and his party are the true representatives of the people (Özcan, 2017, p.186). Portraying the opposition as deviants that have no place in his interpretation of Islamic conservatism, he fosters and maintains a collective identity among his supporters by continuing to use populist rhetoric.

My findings correlate with existing studies and, through political socialization theory, support socio-economic status and level of education as socializing agents that influence political behavior. In the case of AKP and its network, lower socio-economic status and education correlate with higher support for the AKP as the cohort is more likely to prefer a party whose economic policies and social welfare system benefit them. There is a gap in research on the smaller cohort who has a higher education and socio-economic background in general, but it may be argued their reason for aligning with AKP is the one to be discussed further below. The findings further highlight that religion and political events as in the case of the headscarf ban in Turkey, are notions that play a role in reinforcing a collective group identity; combined with the media portrayal of the populist rhetoric of Erdoğan and his party, in-group identity amongst supporters is strengthened and the divide and polarization of the in- and out-groups are heightened, supporting the social identity theory which argues such events are factors that create and continue individuals political social identity. The

intersection of all these factors hence provides a comprehensive understanding of the various dynamics that influence Turkish women's political alignment with AKP.

The theoretical implications gained from the insights of this study are significant and provide the groundwork for further research on how the discussed socializing agents present themselves in different contexts as influences on political behavior, as well as further research on religious identity and its implications and connections to social and collective identity. Such research would be of great contribution to literature by providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in the context of political support.

Conclusion

In this research, I have aimed to answer the research question,

What are the main factors that have influenced and shaped Turkish women's political identities and affiliations with the Justice and Development Party?

A body of research has examined the various concepts related to the Justice and Development Party, discussing in depth various topics such as populism, its foundation, and its leader. However, there is a lack of focus in research on the women of AKP, which was one of the motivations for carrying out this research. This research has then focused on specific influences that were assumed and later confirmed to play a role in women's voting behavior. As a way of contributing to existing research and decreasing the literature gap, I decided to focus on the women who politically align with AKP by conducting interviews and surveys.

The results indicate that socio-economic factors are one of the most prominent indicators of the women's political alignment. To understand why, contextual information on Turkey's history and an explanation of the center-periphery dynamic that has existed since the foundation of the republic have been necessary. Certain events and periods in Turkish history, especially the modernization era, has provided AKP with a base of support as the more conservative and religious low-class, such as the villages of Anatolia and especially its women, have over decades been marginalized and limited in their religious practices.

'During our grandmothers' time, when those parties were around, soldiers would collect the

Qur'an in the villages.

They wouldn't let anyone go to the mosques; everyone had to go to school. They experienced that, and then we experienced the same thing in our late teens...

That's why I want to say that we didn't feel valued by them. As a woman, I need to be respected in every way, in terms of my religion and in terms of comfort. During their time, I felt like a monster living in Turkey.

Everywhere we went, we were despised. The AK Party gave us just that (liberation), nothing else. ' (Research Participant 6, see Appendix B)

Losing their right to access public spaces with headscarves, the women in question could not pursue further education and join the workforce in positions such as teachers, lawyers, and civil servants. Often holding conservative views on the role of men and women, the financial crisis in the early 2000s worsened households' economic stability, and with the establishment of AKP in 2001, this demographic found its political representation (Temiz & Gokmen, 2009).

AKP managed to recover the country's economy while establishing a women's branch, Kadın Kolları, giving women a voice and representation. With their public narrative and initiatives heavily involving the symbolism of Islam and conservative values, the party has successfully managed to retain their loyal voters, whose main motivation for politically aligning with them has been found to be religion. The puzzling aspect which raised the question of what factors would lead to women voting for AKP, evolved from the president and AKP's recently more authoritarian and conservative views on women's rights. While gender equality has over the last decade become an even more hot topic, the current government has taken radical steps such as withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, which they were the first signatories to; taking limited action to prevent femicide (SCF, 2021), a critical and ongoing phenomena, as well as publicly speaking against feminists, LGBTQ+ and minorities while framing progressive gender policies as threats to the nation and the *family values* (Bayhan, 2023). As their main demographic indeed holds conservative Islamist values, Erdoğan's rhetoric on gender justice, rather than gender equality, has only been embraced by their huge following.

The limitation of this research presents itself as the lack of representation and data of the younger voters, as well as the small sample of research participants. As there is a literature gap on the general subject, it was even more important to include the stories of a larger sample size which as previously discussed, was a complicated issue. To better understand the younger demographic, future studies could be performed with a scope of research focusing on women aged 18-29 with a higher level of education.

I argue that the findings of this study have contributed to the already limited field by providing a different angle on the context of the AKP and women, which in today's climate is

a subject of debate. Theoretically, they have been consistent and coherent with the arguments of both SIT and political socialization, offering a different study sample they are applicable to. I believe that understanding the dynamics behind the political alignment of this specific demographic also adds insight and reason that may reduce the current divide of the in and out-groups as both sides currently hold mutual biases that further alienate them.

As this study has sought to understand the main factors that have influenced and shaped the political identities and affiliations of Turkish women with the Justice and Development Party (AKP), I believe it would be of great interest to further carry out research on the recent shift of support. While carrying out this research in April 2024; for the first time since becoming the leading political party, AKP was unsuccessful at winning the majority votes in the local elections, making CHP the political party in charge of the majority of the 81 cities of Turkey. This shift in Turkish politics and the voters' behavior could be of interest to future research in the field, especially with attention to the potential role of female voters.

What are the factors behind this sudden shift?

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