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## The Role of Internet on Political Fractionalization and Polarization

## CAIS Report

**Fellowship**
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# The Role of Internet on Political Fractionalization and Polarization

I was granted a fellowship for the period from September 2018 to February 2019. During this period, I was able to focus on the effects of the Internet and digitalization on the political landscape in both Turkey and the global context. This was a precious opportunity for me to concentrate on my research on the political effects of the Internet.

In order to understand the effects of the Internet on the Turkish political landscape, I first conducted an empirical analysis of the main determinants behind voter choice in the three parliamentary elections after 2002 (i.e. in 2007, 2011 and 2015). The regional variables, as well as election dataset, were obtained through TURKSTAT, the official statistics agency of Turkey.

I employed the methodology of random effects GLS (generalized least squares) to take into account heteroscedasticity and time effects. Doing so enabled me to estimate the following equation to investigate the determinants of voter behavior through ecological analysis:

$$Y_{ijt} = \alpha_{ijt} + \beta Y_{ijt-4} + \gamma X_{it}' + \varepsilon_{ijt}$$

In this equation, $Y_{ijt}$ represents the share of the main political parties (i) represented in parliament – namely, the AKP (Justice and Development Party), CHP (Republican People's Party), MHP (Nationalist Action Party), and HDP (People's Democracy Party) – in the elections of (t=2007, 2011, 2015) in NUTS III regions (j=1,…,81). The HDP first stood as a party in the June and November 2015 elections, but its predecessors had supported independent candidates in the previous elections.

For 2007 and 2011, we take the share of votes for pro-Kurdish independent candidates. $Y_{ijt-4}$ is the share of the party in the previous election from four years ago. This variable is interpreted mostly as the "cost of ruling" in political science, and it is expected to be significantly lower than '1' for the governing party, since voters may vote strategically against the parties in government to dilute their power, or they may have grown tired of the leaders, or they may have become disillusioned due to the compromises that the government made while in government.

The vector X' consists of region-specific variables that are used to identify social, cultural, and ethnic cleavages in Turkey. The results of our empirical analysis indicate that voters in Turkey are affected

by ideological, economic, cultural and social factors; in other words, regions with different characteristics tend to vote in distinctive ways.

Having identified the main determinants behind Turkish voter choice, I then investigated whether the recent refugee crisis in Turkey had affected political behavior, with the assumption being that the main effect would occur among users of the Internet and social media, since these strongly affect how refugees are perceived.

According to UNHCR (2018) data, there are 5.6 million registered asylum seekers of Syrian origin in the world, 63.8% of whom are refugees living in Turkey. Almost all Syrian refugees in Turkey have a "temporary protection" status, which guarantees the right to access secure countries, the non-refoulement principle, and the meeting of basic human needs. Given the freedom of movement and settlement that they have, only 5% of refugees live in the camps, while the remaining 95% are spread across Turkey, living in cities among the local Turkish population, mostly in cities neighboring Syria, and in other large cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana and Bursa. One of the highest refugee-resident ratios is in Kilis, where the ratio of Syrian refugees to Turkish citizens has reached 90%.

Various features of digital social-media platforms can amplify hate speech, exclusion and intolerance with regard to refugees. These platforms are also an important channel for spreading false or misleading information, usually labeled as "fake news". This false and distorted information can deepen divisions in society and cause mistrust towards institutions.

According to a report of the Turkish parliament, the most common fake news circulated throughout the digital media channels, is that Syrians are given salaries by the government, that Syrians are accepted to Turkish universities without having to take an exam, that Syrian students are provided with scholarships, that Syrians vote in Turkish elections, and that the government gives them a house for free. This fake news not only affects public sentiment towards refugees, but also increases hate speech and hate crime against them. The econometric findings of this research indicate that the interaction of Internet use and the influx of refugees increased the number of votes given to the far-right nationalist party in Turkey.

Other research on the political impact of the Internet investigates whether Internet use fosters political polarization. The main way that the Internet affects political behavior is that it is a medium of communication, it creates a virtual public sphere, and it is a source of information. One of the most common criticisms of social media is that it creates echo chambers where people only see viewpoints with which they agree, thereby driving society further apart. Additionally, some social media algorithms reinforce divisions and create echo chambers that over time perpetuate increasingly extreme or biased views.

Social-media platform design, combined with the proliferation of partisan media in traditional channels, can exacerbate political divisions. Governments in Turkey, China, Israel, Russia, and the United Kingdom are known to have deployed many social-media operatives to run multiple accounts and thereby shift or control public opinion. As a result, the early optimism that social media could democratize access to information and give a voice to those who were traditionally marginalized or censored is dwindling.

In order to investigate this hypothesis, I used the World Values Survey (WVS) data to test whether patterns of Internet use have an impact on political polarization. This dataset comprises about 85,000 respondents around the globe. In line with previous literature, I measured polarization as the standard deviation from the center. In theory, the effects of the Internet on pluralism and democracy are highly debated, especially after the advance of digital social media, which is very open to manipulative operations and fake news. On the one hand, the Internet, as a platform for a new type of media that involves citizens as the producer of information, encourages people to obtain news from diverse outlets, and promotes knowledge and tolerance of opposing ideas. On the other, there are no boundaries with regard to the promotion of extremism and misinformation, which leads to polarization in social and political dimensions. The polarizing effect of the Internet may stem from:

• The polarization of civil society via echo chambers.

• The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, and the amplification of populist and illiberal currents across the globe.

• The creation of competing realities driven by the intertwining of popularity and legitimacy in their algorithms.

• The vulnerability to political capture and voter manipulation by enabling malevolent actors to spread disinformation and covertly influence public opinion.

• The capture of unprecedented amounts of data that can be used to manipulate user behavior.

• The facilitation of hate speech, public humiliation, and the targeted marginalization of disadvantaged or minority voices.

In my analysis, the dependent variable, polarization, takes certain values as the deviation from the center, with '5' as the most extreme ideological stand, and '0' as the central position. It is therefore a categorical ordered variable, meaning that, as it rises from '0' to '5', so the level of extremism increases and takes ordinal outcomes. For this reason, ordered logit models are more appropriate to analyze the potential factors of polarized ideologies.

The ordered logit model is commonly presented as a latent variable model defining the outcome ($y*$) as a latent variable ranging from $-\infty$ to $\infty$, and the structural model is:

$$y_i{}^* = X_i\beta + \varepsilon_i$$

The independent variables ($X$) are Internet, education, religion, security, age, job, size (i.e. the population of the city), and $y$ means the polarization measure, whereas $\varepsilon$ is a random error.

Although there is a clear trend suggesting that extremist and populist movements are on the rise and have become more visible recently, the reasons for this trend are still complex and multifaceted. In this study, I do not find any evidence that the Internet is a source of polarization. On the contrary, it is a factor that decreases polarization in a global context.

However, these results should be approached cautiously, as country-specific factors may affect these findings.

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