



POLICYNOTE
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Dr. Türkmen Göksel,

Ankara University Faculty of Political Sciences, Faculty Member

Dr. Yetkin Çınar,

Ankara University Faculty of Political Sciences, Faculty Member

IS IT POSSIBLE TO LOWER THE ELECTION THRESHOLD TO A “LEVEL THAT MAINTAINS THE CONSISTENCY IN ADMINISTRATION”?

Constitution of the Republic of Turkey stipulates that “fair representation” and “consistency in administration” are the two fundamental principles that an election system shall meet. The main function of the election threshold in this context is to strengthen the consistency in administration at the expense of the representation equality. In practice, what is expected from an election threshold as high as 10%¹ is mainly to facilitate the forming of the government by pushing small parties out of the Parliament and distributing their power to larger parties that made it to the Parliament.

Lowering the election threshold is a long-debated issue on Turkey's agenda. However, we believe that the key question to answer is as follows: “Does the election threshold as high as 10% actually ensures great gains in terms of the “consistency in administration” while making concessions from the fair representation principle? Or to put it differently; is it possible to (substantially) improve the fair representation with no (or small) concessions from consistency in administration?”

¹ 10% is the highest election threshold level within countries with proportional representation system.

<http://www.electionresources.org>

Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe stated that election thresholds must not be higher than 3% (Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe, 2007, p. 58) and advised Turkey to lower the threshold (Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe, 2004, p. 6).

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To be able to answer this question, the note calculated objectively the principles “fair representation” and “consistency in administration” on the basis of the latest four general elections (in 1995, 1999, 2002 and 2007) in which the 10% threshold was implemented and which are similar as well in terms of the other elements of the election system. Then, it investigated the optimal level of election threshold that reconciles the mentioned two principles for alternative threshold levels (0-10%) (Please See box 1 for objective definitions).² The analysis suggested that the optimal level of election threshold was 4%. To put it differently, the study concluded that 4% election threshold can improve “fair representation” without making large concessions from the “consistency in administration”.

Box 1. Definitions of Consistency and Fairness

Fair Representation Indicator: Disproportionality index was used for an objective analysis of the concept of “fair representation” which refers to the case where the seats held by parties are proportional to their share in votes. When calculating the mentioned index, the absolute difference between the share of seats and share of votes held by one party is calculated, where the highest value gives the “disproportionality index” for that election. To determine the degree of fair representation, other indicators including the number of parties in the parliament and the proportion of unrepresented votes are also used.

Consistency in Management Indicator: To form the government and/or to pass a law, the votes of the members of the parliament (MP) must exceed a certain quota. According to the current practice, to form a government, 276 seats (half of the total 550 seats plus 1) are needed. To meet the quota, a coalition might be required. When the seats by parties are taken as a basis, the determinant role of a party in the formation of a government would reflect the power of that party. Taking this role into account, a power index was calculated for each party within a scale from 0 to 1³. “Consistency in administration” was determined on the basis of the “weighted power index” which is the summation of power indices of the three largest parties in the parliament under certain weighting scheme. The “fragmentation index” represents the distribution of the seats at the parliament among political parties.⁴

The following are the results of the comparison of the optimal level of threshold at 4% as calculated by this study with the current level of threshold at 10%:

² Optimal threshold was calculated on the basis of limited optimization and multiple criteria decision model in Göksel and Çınar (2011a), and of limited optimization model in Göksel and Çınar (2011b), both of which gave similar results. Please refer to the mentioned studies for detailed information on the model and the simulations.

³ The sum of the power index of each party is one.

⁴ The term coalition used in the calculation of power includes also the single-party government scenario. High weighted power index accompanied with low fragmentation index implies a high level of “consistency in administration”.

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Table 1. Change in the Fairness and Power Indicators at the Optimal Threshold Level (4%)

Indicators/ Years	1995		1999		2002		2007		AVERAGE		% CHANGE
	10%	4%	10%	4%	10%	4%	10%	4%	10%	4%	
Number of parties in the Parliament	5	7	5	7	2	7	3	4	3.75	6.25	66% ↑
Proportion of unrepresented votes	0.14	0.02	0.18	0.05	0.45	0.09	0.13	0.08	0.23	0.06	74% ↓
Representation Disproportionality Index	0.08	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.32	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.15	0.09	44% ↓
Total weighted power	0.32	0.26	0.20	0.22	0.61	0.49	0.61	0.61	0.44	0.40	9% ↓
Fragmentation Index	0.77	0.81	0.79	0.83	0.46	0.70	0.55	0.56	0.65	0.73	12% ↑

Table 1 shows the changes in the “number of parties in the parliament”, “proportion of unrepresented votes”, and “representation disproportionality index” as indicators associated with the principle of “fair representation” when the election threshold is lowered from 10% to 4% (please see Box 1 for definitions). In this context, the following findings can be presented on the basis of the average results of the latest four elections:

- Number of parties in the parliament increased from 3.75 to 6.25,
- The proportion of unrepresented votes decreased from 23% to 5%, and
- Representation disproportionality index decreased from 0.15 to 0.09.

In the context of these findings, it can be concluded that by lowering the election threshold to 4%, fairness of representation was improved.

Table 1 also presents the comparison of the “consistency of administration” on the basis of the indicators “total weighted power of the three largest parties”⁵, and “fragmentation index” when the election threshold is lowered from 10% to 4% (please see Box 1 for definitions). According to this:

- Power index decreases from 0.44 to 0.40, and
- Fragmentation index increases from 0.65 to 0.73.

In short, reduction of the threshold to 4% ensures substantial improvements in the indicators associated with the principle of “fair representation” while leading to slight deteriorations with respect to the “consistency of administration” despite what is generally argued. Another striking point in regards with the consistency of administration is that when the threshold is reduced to 4% in 1999 elections, both the

⁵ The analysis calculates the weights of parties in proportion to the number of seats they hold in the parliament. Similar results are obtained when the largest two parties are weighted equally.

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weighted power of the first three parties increased coupled with an improvement in the fairness of representation.⁶

The distribution of seats among parties if the latest elections in 2007 had been held with a threshold at 4%, the optimal threshold level the study calculated for the latest four general elections, is given in Table 2. But before addressing the distribution, it is important to note a vital point with respect to the cumulative effect of the election threshold. Under the dynamic results of the 10% election threshold that is in effect for a long period now, we see that in 2007 no party out of four could exceed even 4% threshold. This can be read as a sign that the dynamic impact of the 10% election threshold has started to make small parties become “signboard” parties. The details of this issue will be addressed with another policy note.

Table 2. Seats by Parties in 2007 General Elections: Comparison of Election Threshold at 4% and 10%

Number of MPs by Parties (Including Independent MPs)	PARTY	2007	
		10%	4%
	AKP	341	338
	CHP	112	110
	MHP	71	68
	DP	-	9
	INDEPENDENT / BDP	26	25

As the figures in Table 1 and 2 suggest, Democrat Party (DP) that could not enter the Parliament after the 2007 elections could have been represented with 9 MPs if the threshold had been lowered to 4%, reducing the ratio of unrepresented votes by 5.42 points. In addition, among the indicators for the “consistency of administration”, weighted power index would have remained and fragmentation index would have decreased only by 1 points, on the other hand enabling significant gains in terms of fair representation.

⁶ After 2007 elections, a structure, where three parties, one relatively larger entered the parliament, appeared while in 1999 elections 5 parties with roughly similar number of seats entered the parliament. It is of importance with respect to the consistency of the findings that the lowering of the election threshold proved fruitful in the case of the different structures mentioned.

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