



Elections in Turkey from the Constitutional Construction to the Republic (1908-1923)

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In its simplest form, "elections" can be defined as *"the people determining who they will govern for a certain period of time"*; Its importance and necessity in contemporary and democratic societies is an undeniable fact. The first practices of elections in the Ottoman Empire, which was ruled by an "absolute monarchy" for many years, started with the "Tanzimat Period". The introduction of elections into our constitutional system began with the declaration of the "Kanun-i Esasi" in 1876, during "I". It happened during the "Constitutional Monarchy" period. According to Kanun-i Esasi, the first parliament consisted of two parts: "Heyet-i Mebusan" and "Heyet-i Ayan". At that time, it was envisaged that the members of the "Deputy Committee" would be determined by election, but since the election law could not be enacted due to the short period of time, these first elections held in our country were held on the principles contained in a temporary decree law called "Temporary Instruction". ^(one)

Although the first parliament was established in line with this instruction, the majority of the members of this assembly were those sent from the provincial council members. During the First Constitutional Monarchy period, two general elections were held and in these elections, two-stage and simple majority principles were applied. Although parliamentary elections were held twice during the First Constitutional Monarchy Period; We can say that the first real elections in our political history were held in 1908 due to reasons such as the fact that political parties did not participate in these elections and that the elections were not open to the general public.

Between 1908 and 1923, parliamentary elections were held six times: "1908", "1912", "1914", "1919", "1920", "1923".

1. 1908 ELECTIONS:

The First Constitutional Monarchy Period did not last very long. II. Based on the authority given to him by Articles 7 and 35 of the Constitution on 14 February 1878, citing the defeat suffered by Abdülhamit in the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War; The Parliament was suspended and the Basic Law was suspended. At the end of this process, which lasted approximately 30 years,

the intense pressure and efforts of the Unionists, Abdulhamid declared that Kanun-i Esasi was in force again and II. The Constitutional Era has begun. II. Immediately after the declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy, it was decided that the first elections for the Parliamentary Assembly would be held in November and December of the same year.

The 1908 elections, which are considered the "first multi-party election" of our political life; It was held with the participation of the "Committee of Union and Progress", which made intense efforts to re-declare the Constitutional Monarchy, the "Ahrar Party" established under the leadership of Prince Sebahattin, and the candidates of the minorities. These three groups participating in the elections prepared their own political programs. Minorities; While they carried out the election campaign within the framework of a political program that largely considers and highlights the interests of their own nation, the Committee of Union and Progress and the Ahrar Party also carried out their election activities within the framework of the political program they prepared.

The main basis of the basic principles of the election system established in 1908 is the 1876 Constitution. Kanun-i Esasi;

- Article 65 states that 1 deputy will be elected for every 50,000 male population.
- Article 66 states that elections will be held secretly.
- According to Article 67, a person cannot be both a deputy and a civil servant.
- In Article 68, who cannot be elected as a member of parliament,
- Article 69 states that parliamentary elections will be held every 4 years.
- Article 70 stated that the elections would start at least 4 months before the opening date of the parliament.

Apart from the Constitution, the "Intihabat-ı Mebusan Law" dated 2 August 1908

The provisional election law named "Provisional Election Law" and the "Election of Members of Parliament Law"

The "Instruction on Suver-i Enforcement" are the legal basis that determines the procedures and principles of the 1908 elections.

To briefly mention the election activities of both political parties in this period:

1.1 Committee of Union and Progress Election Activities

The most important argument of the members of the Committee of Union and Progress in these elections is that they portray themselves as "heroes of freedom" for their efforts in declaring the Constitutional Monarchy. "Long live Freedom, Long live the Nation, Long live the Homeland!" The Unionists, who used their slogans, also used their political power in the government to apply violence and pressure against the opponents. The Committee of Union and Progress tried to announce the political program it had prepared to the public by publishing it in the newspapers "Şura-yı Ümmet" and "Tanin". In fact, it would not be wrong to say that these newspapers were a party propaganda tool at that time. Members of the Committee of Union and Progress, so to speak, went door to door during the election period and encouraged people who were not accustomed to the concept of elections to participate in the elections. They carried out propaganda activities through various programs they prepared, brochures they printed, and sometimes through the press. In their propaganda to the public; They tried to convey that "freedoms of religion and conscience can only be achieved through the Committee of Union and Progress", "there should be unity in education and Turkish should be compulsory", "privileges granted to non-Muslims should be abandoned on the condition that they do not harm Turks", "there should be equality in military service".

1.2 Ottoman Ahrar Party Election Activities

Under the leadership of Prince Sebahattin, the Ottoman Ahrar Party, which focused on "decentralization" and "liberal views", emerged in 1908 as an alternative political movement to the Ottoman political life. The Ottoman Ahrar Party published its political program in newspapers such as "İkdam", "Sabah" and "Serbesti". We can say that these newspapers, like "Şura-yı Ümmet" and "Tanin" newspapers, were published as a propaganda tool of the Ottoman Ahrar Party. Since the Ahrar Party is a newly established party, it has not been able to complete its organization throughout the country. For this reason, although it was difficult to win the election, *they participated in the elections, claiming that they believed that it was essential to participate in the elections in order to contribute to democracy in the country.* ⁽²⁾ In their political programs; They emphasized that "elections should be single-stage, not two-stage", "the deputies to be elected should be knowledgeable about the issues of the country, they should be people who protect values such as freedom, equality and justice", and "the need to defend the law". They criticized the foreign policies of the Committee of Union and Progress and declared that they acted to fulfill the requirements of the current constitutional government. Since the Ahrar Party did not have a nationwide organization, it could only participate in the elections in Istanbul.

1.3 Election Results

Although different numbers of deputies are mentioned in different sources, according to Ahmet Bedevi Kuran, one of *the living witnesses of the period*, *the number of deputies elected to the Parliament is 266. Ahmet Bedevi expressed the ethnic and religious distribution of these deputies as follows. This "142 of the deputies were Turks, 60 Arabs, 25 Albanians, 23 Greeks, 12 Armenians, 5 Jews, 4 Bulgarians, 3 Serbs and 1 Vlach."*

When the election results are evaluated in general; A candidate of the Ahrar Party is from Ankara; Since all 4 candidates were also on the Union and Progress list, they won the election from the Union and Progress list and entered the parliament. ⁽⁴⁾ Although the Committee of Union and Progress won a great victory in the elections and won approximately 150 seats, it could not take part in the government. The Committee of Union and Progress, which could not take part in the government after the election, increased its influence on the sultan and the government over time by taking advantage of its majority in the parliament. However, the number of those who opposed his policies increased over time and he lost his power in the parliament. During this period, by the opponents; Many parties were established, such as the Ottoman Ahrar Party, the Mutedil Hürriyet Party, the Ottoman Democratic Party, the Islamist Union of Muhammad Society, the Freedom and Entente Party, the Ottoman Reform Party, the Ottoman Socialist Party, and the People's Party.

2.1911 INTERMEDIATE ELECTIONS

In the Ottoman election system, deputies were elected for 4 years. During this period, by-elections were held to replace deputies who became vacant due to death, resignation, etc. Since the two-stage election system was implemented, it was the second voters who determined the deputies in the by-elections. The second electors determined as a result of the general elections served for 4 years. Between 1908 and 1912, midterm elections were held for the vacant seats due to various reasons. The most notable of these was the by-election held on 11 December 1911, following the vacancy of the Istanbul parliament. In this election, the Committee of Union and Progress nominated Memduh Bey; The Freedom and Entente Party nominated Tahir Hayrettin Bey. In the election, the candidate of the Freedom and Entente Party won the election with a difference of 1 year. The victory of the candidate of the Freedom and Entente Party in the 1911 Istanbul by-election caused the Committee of Union and Progress, which did not want to lose power, to take many measures to stay in power. These measures, which sometimes amounted to oppression and violence, had their effect on the opponents in 1912 and subsequent elections.

3. 1912 ELECTIONS:

The 1912 general elections, which went down in our political history as the "election with a stick" or the "election with a stick", were held with the participation of the Union and Progress Party and the Freedom and Entente Party. After the Ottoman Parliament was dissolved by the sultan on January 18, 1912 and it was decided to hold elections within 3 months, election preparations began in accordance with Article 7 of the constitution. In this second general election of multi-party life, the Unionists created an environment of tremendous pressure and fear. On the one hand, Unionists used state resources to protect citizens

While trying to prevent people from voting for the opposition, they also made actual attacks on citizens who came to vote. During the election, both military and civilian state officials intervened in the election; The election results were overshadowed by allegations such as voting on behalf of others and cheating in the vote count.

3.1 Committee of Union and Progress Election Activities

The Committee of Union and Progress, which formed its propaganda around the ideological basis of "Ottomanism" in the first elections in 1908, put the policy of "Turkism" at the center of its propaganda in these elections. An election committee named "Istanbul Heyet-i İntihabiye-i Milliye" was formed to carry out the election activities. They generally tried to announce their election propaganda through the "Tanin" newspaper. Within the scope of the election activities of the Committee of Union and Progress; They also carried out public activities such as the groundbreaking ceremony, smallpox vaccination for the public, and helping orphans and poor children. They tried to announce these and other works and promises through the conferences they organized in the Union Clubs.

3.2. Freedom and Entente Party and Election Activities

The Freedom and Entente Party, founded in Istanbul on 21 November 1911, became the most important opponent of the Committee of Union and Progress in these elections. The founders of the Freedom and Entente Party were the previous Parliament's Amasya Deputy İsmail Hakkı Pasha, Sivas Deputy Dr. Dagavaryan, Tokat Deputy Mustafa Sabri, Sinop Deputy Dr. Rıza Nur and the members of the Ayan Assembly are Müşir Fuat Pasha and Damat Ferit and some bureaucrats. The Party won the election against the Committee of Union and Progress in the 1911 Istanbul midterm elections held shortly after its establishment, making the Party the largest and strongest opposition party. In his election propaganda; They tried to impose on the public that the Unionists had a restrictive approach to freedoms, that the Unionists were responsible for the occupation of Tripoli and the March 31 incident, and that many of the actions of the Unionists were irreligious. He used "İkdam" and "Hedef" newspapers to announce his election propaganda to the public.

3.3 Election Results

As a result of the elections, the Committee of Union and Progress won 270 deputies, while the opposition won 15 deputies. ⁽⁵⁾ After the 1912 elections, the opposition stated that the country was not governed by free and honest elections, but was governed by state institutions established by resorting to illegal means through pressure and threats. Thus, the country was divided into two: the government and the opposition. Those who opposed the Unionists, among the soldiers sent to suppress the rebellion in Albania, formed a group called "Halaskar Zabitan" and issued a memorandum stating that they would seize power if the parliament was dissolved and a new government was not established. Upon this memorandum, a new government was established under the chairmanship of Gazi Ahmet Muhtar Pasha, instead of the Sait Pasha cabinet. However, he could not receive a vote of confidence from the Unionists. Thereupon, the parliament was dissolved by the Sultan. The elections planned to be held shortly after the Parliament was closed could not be held due to the Balkan War. The elections were postponed by the government decree dated October 24, 1912.

4. 1914 ELECTIONS

The elections that were supposed to be held upon the dissolution of the Parliament were postponed due to the Balkan Wars. The Unionists took full control of the government with the government power they captured with the Bab-ı Ali raid and neutralized the opposition. In the General Elections held in 1914, when there was no opposition, the Committee of Union and Progress entered as the only party. The only notable change in the elections held between January and April 1914 was that soldiers could not vote in this election due to the change in the law made in 1912. In the elections, in which the liberation of Edirne was used as a propaganda tool by the Unionists during the Balkan wars, almost the entire parliament was won by the Unionists. The parliament opened on May 14, 1914. It is the longest-lasting parliament of the Constitutional Monarchy period. The country entered and was defeated in World War I during the term of office of this parliament. Although the term of office of the Assembly ended in 1918, new elections could not be held due to the war conditions in the country, and the term of office of the Assembly was extended with the amendment made to the Constitution. After the Armistice of Mudros was signed, the Parliament was dissolved on 20 December 1918.

5. 1919 ELECTIONS

As it is known, the occupations that started with the signing of the Armistice of Mudros brought about the organization of regional resistances, associations and congresses. In this period, which we call the War of Independence period that started under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the current Damat Ferit

Government resigned in the political field; The government under the leadership of Ali Rıza Pasha, which was established in his place, held "Amasya Meetings" in order to break the ice with the resistance in Anatolia, and as a result of these talks, it was decided to hold elections and open the parliament for the manifestation of the national will. Thus, the process for the last general election of the Ottoman period began. Since some parts of the country were actually occupied, elections could not be held in some places such as Izmir and Adana. The candidates of the Anatolian and Rumelia Defense of Rights Association, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, won the elections with an overwhelming majority. The Parliament, which supported the War of Independence movement in Anatolia, accepted the "National Pact" on January 28, 1920. With the occupation of Istanbul on March 16, 1920, some of the deputies were arrested and exiled to Malta. The last Ottoman Parliament suspended its work with its last meeting on March 18, 1920, and was dissolved by the decision of the Sultan on April 11, 1920.

6. 1920 ELECTIONS

Following the occupation of Istanbul and the dissolution of the last Ottoman Parliament, Mustafa Kemal, as the head of the Representative Committee, sent a circular to the governorships, independent sanjaks and corps on 19 March 1920, announcing that a parliament with extraordinary powers would be convened in Ankara. The prominent items in the circular sent are as follows:

1- *A parliament with extraordinary powers will be convened in Ankara to manage and supervise the affairs of the country.*

2- *People to be elected as members of this parliament are bound by the provisions of the law regarding deputies.*

3- *The elections will be based on the sanjaks, and five members will be elected from each sanjak.*

4- *The elections will be completed within fifteen days at the latest, with a majority in Ankara .*

In addition, in the circular, the members of the Ottoman Parliament who were dispersed were asked to come to Ankara. As seen in the circular, the principle of electing MPs based on population was abandoned in this election and 5 members were asked to be elected from each sanjak, regardless of their population . “ *Although there are 92 deputies from the Parliament from Istanbul, 14 deputies from Malta and Greece, and 252 deputies determined by elections in line with Mustafa Kemal's 19 March communiqué, from a total of 66 electoral districts; The Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM), consisting of a total of 337 deputies, was opened on 23 April 1920.* ”⁽⁶⁾

After the Parliament was opened, the Allied Powers and the Istanbul Government made efforts to prevent the Anatolian people from supporting the Grand National Assembly and rebelling; With the "Guidance Committees" established in the Grand National Assembly, the public was informed that the Occupation Forces and the Istanbul Government

He made an effort to defeat black propaganda and convey the aims of the War of Independence and the Assembly. After a while, groupings began in the Parliament, which met on the common ground of the national struggle, under the influence of various currents of thought. Mustafa Kemal founded a mass parliamentary group under the name of "Anatolia and Rumelia Defense of Law Group" on 10 May 1921.

Both the fact that sultanate and caliphate are not mentioned in the group's internal charter, and that the group included it in its charter in order to prevent the votes from being dispersed and to ensure discipline; The statements "*On issues discussed in the group and decided by the required majority, the minority must comply with the majority decision*" disturbed some deputies, especially Kazım Karabekir. The deputies, who were pushed out of the group and opposed Mustafa Kemal with the thought and concern that he would be a "one man", declared in July 1922, "II. They formed the "Defence of Law Group".

II. The Defense of Law Group began to oppose İsmet Pasha's attitude during the Lausanne Negotiations and the way the negotiations were conducted. Seeing the possibility that a possible agreement that would emerge after the peace talks would not be approved by this parliament, Mustafa Kemal Pasha requested elections and early elections were decided. On April 3, 1923, changes were made to the election law. With these changes; While previously one deputy was elected for every 50,000 men, this figure was changed to 20,000; the voting age was lowered to 18; The obligation to pay taxes in order to vote and be elected has been abolished.

7. 1923 ELECTIONS

As explained above, there were no parties in the First Parliament, the Defense of Rights group and the Second Parliament. There was an opposition group called the group. Mustafa Kemal was worried that a possible Lausanne Peace agreement would not be approved by this parliament. For this reason, it was decided to hold elections on April 1, 1923 and renew the parliament. The Second Group protested this election decision and did not participate in the elections. The Defense of Rights Group prepared a list of MPs from each region and in the elections held on June 28, 1923; The candidates of the Müdafaa-i Hukuk group were elected as MPs. The Lausanne Peace Treaty, prepared as a result of the Lausanne Peace Conference, was approved by this parliament, the Republic, the new form of government of the state, was declared on October 29, 1923, and Mustafa Kemal was unanimously elected President. The government was established under the Prime Ministry of İsmet Pasha. This assembly, which approved the abolition of the Caliphate and accepted the 1924 Constitution, served until the 1927 elections.