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Under Pressure: Electoral Competition and Women's Representation

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ABSTRACT

Under Pressure: Electoral Competition and Women's Representation[*]

How can women's representation improve in countries that do not embrace legislated gender quotas? We study municipal elections in Turkey during 2009-2019. A conservative dominant party, Erdogan's AKP, is often challenged by a Kurdish party that promotes gender equality in electoral lists. Exploiting within-municipality variation, we find that the Kurdish party winning leads AKP to increase its share of female candidates by 25 to 30% in the next election. Other opposition parties winning has a substantially lower impact. Our results suggest that one party empowering women can help reducing gender gaps in lists across-the-board.

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1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) advocates for women increased participation at *all levels* of government, with a specific SDG indicator focusing on women's representation in local government. Legislated gender quotas are credited for a relatively rapid expansion of women's participation in local politics especially in developing countries (Berevoescu and Ballington, 2021).[1] Gender quotas for local elections tend to be embedded in electoral laws and sometimes constitutional changes. In European countries, gender quotas have typically been introduced when one party that had initially adopted a gender quota internally came to power and extended its quota to other parties. In Latin America and in many post-conflict countries in Africa, the candidate quota laws instead were often legislated during transition and reconstruction processes following armed conflicts (Dahlerup, 2021).

But, how can women representation in local politics improve in countries where a conservative (in terms of gender norms) dominant party is stably in power in the central government, making the adoption of electoral gender quotas highly unlikely? Can individual parties that promote women empowerment bring about change in other parties, even when they are not able to secure power at central level?

In this paper, we consider the case of Turkey, an ideal setting to study the question of interest. On one hand, one party, Erdogan's Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP, translated as Justice and Development Party), ideologically conservative and with a religious base, has held power for more than twenty years, a period over which no law was passed to increase women's participation in politics, in spite of the vast gender gaps at all levels of government.[2] On the other hand, local elections are often contested, with AKP failing

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[1]As of 2023, 85 countries have introduced gender quotas for local elections (WEF, 2023).

[2]The share of women in the Turkish Parliament rose after the most recent elections in 2023, but it is still as low as 20%. The representation of women in local governance is even lower: as of 2023, Turkey is one of the 24 countries where women's representation in local governance is below 15% (WEF, 2023).

to win municipal elections 40% of times over the period 2009 to 2019. One of the main opposition parties in local elections has been a Kurdish party, running in 37% of the elections held between 2009 and 2019 and winning 19% of them. This party changed name over time, but its policy platform and constituency remained fundamentally the same since a major shift in 2005, when its activity increased in the entire country rather than catering to a narrow geography where the Kurdish population was mostly located, and also the party started to gain popularity among progressive Turkish voters.[3] The Kurdish party stands out in the Turkish political landscape for its commitment to women representation in many areas of society, including politics. For instance, currently the party pledges to enact a "zipper system" (strict alternation of candidates) in its electoral lists, and more generally to build a gender equal society "starting with the local governments."[4,5]

Against this background, we study the dynamics of electoral competition and women's political representation in Turkish municipalities, where these two remarkably different parties in terms of attitudes toward gender equality compete. Does the Kurdish Party winning induce AKP to improve gender equality in its lists in the next election? Is the main mechanism at play electoral competition or learning about women's skills as policy-makers?

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[3]Between 2005 and 2009, the Kurdish party was called Democratic Society Party (DTP). When, at the end of 2009, DTP was outlawed due to its direct and indirect linkages with terrorist organization PKK, Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi (BDP, translated as Peace and Democracy Party) was formed to replace DTP. In 2013, Halklarin Demokratik Partisi (HDP, translated as People's Democratic Party) was formed and BDP and several left-wing small parties joined HDP. Factually, these are the same party running under different names. For example, in 2014, BDP and HDP both participated in local elections but they never ran in the same town or province. See Section 2.2 for more details on the history of Kurdish parties in Turkey.

[4]See HDP official website at https://shorturl.at/nD9rT. As reported by Alemdar et al. (2020), the Kurdish party introduced in 2005 a 40% gender quota as well as a gender-mixed co-leadership system featuring one female and one male party leader for the first time in Turkish political history. The quota was raised to 50% in 2015, and the co-leadership tradition continues both at the national and local levels to this day. It bears noticing, however, that our data show that the 50% quota is not always enforced.

[5]Among the other opposition parties that have parliamentary representation at national level, only the Republican People's Party (CHP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) has a quota for candidate lists, but limited to 33% and hardly enforced, and broadly speaking the party has less of a focus on women's empowerment. Other parties with parliamentary representation have gender quotas for party bodies but not for electoral lists (https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/country?country=229).

We leverage a newly built dataset of the gender of all candidates to Turkish elections for municipal councils in 2009, 2014, and 2019 combined with electoral results. Besides providing a unique overview of the gender composition of local electoral lists in Turkey, this dataset allows exploiting within-municipality variation in the Kurdish party winning the election to estimate its impact on the share of women in AKP lists. We find that the Kurdish party winning the election leads AKP to increase its share of female candidates in the next race by 2.8 to 3.4 p.p. (25 to 30% of the baseline average, equal to 11 p.p.), an estimate that is robust across different specifications.[6] Placebo estimates also show that municipalities where the Kurdish party wins are not on a differential trend in terms of share of female candidates in AKP lists.

Moreover, we find that another major opposition party, CHP, winning a municipal election induces AKP to increase its share of female candidates to a much lower extent, and the effect is only marginally significant, suggesting that the response to the Kurdish party's victory is not exclusively explained by increased political competition that would force AKP to improve the selection of its candidates (Esteve-Volart and Bagues, 2012). The Kurdish party's specific focus on gender-balanced electoral lists and women representation seems to be crucial to explain AKP's response to the party electoral success.

AKP might choose to increase its share of female candidates when observing a Kurdish party's victory for strategic reasons, namely to attract votes from AKP's constituency, or because the exposure to female councilors elected from the Kurdish list improves AKP leaders' perception of women's ability as policymakers. To gauge the relative importance of these different mechanisms, we exploit a special feature of the Turkish electoral system, namely parties submitting, together with the "main" list of candidates to be selected by voters, a "special quota" list containing the candidates directly assigned to the municipal

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[6]While our main specification is a difference-in-differences that allows for heterogeneous treatment effects (De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille, 2023a), we also present estimates from traditional TWFE models.

council by the party if it wins the plurality vote. Such list is not very salient to voters, and often not visible to them. We find that there is no increase in the share of women listed in AKP's special quota lists after the Kurdish party wins an election, indicating that attracting Kurdish party voters might be a more relevant motive behind AKP's response than a genuine goal of promoting more female politicians.[7]

Our paper relates to a number of strands of literature. First, it is related to the vast body of work on women in politics. Particularly relevant to this study are a few papers that have analyzed how electoral competition affects the candidacy of women. While Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) find that parties in Spain promote female candidates to better positions in electoral lists when the election is more contested, Le Barbanchon and Sauvagnat (2022) show that in France parties subject to gender quotas select male candidates in the most competitive municipalities when voters are biased against women. Very related to our paper, given the focus on Turkish politics, is recent work by Cakir et al. (2024), who argue that heightened electoral competition in 2015 led AKP to remove and demote women candidates from its lists for Parliamentary elections, reversing the previous trend of increasing female representation. Fernandes et al. (2024) consider more broadly how parties that have previously voted against a gender quota reform in Portugal position themselves on gender equality issues in the aftermath of the reform, by studying legislative debates. The evidence is that these "anti-quota" parties adopt women-friendly stances when they face an electoral threat, and vice versa when they do not. Overall, this body of work tends to suggest that stances on gender equality as well as the candidacy of women are used strategically to improve parties electoral prospects, in ways that seem to

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[7]A caveat is that the special quota list is short, including only one candidate in municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants—see Table A1. As shown in Lucas et al. (2021), list diversity goals are more likely to be achieved when lists are longer. However, we also fail to find an effect of the Kurdish party winning an election on the number of female candidates in top positions in AKP's lists or on the share of women elected from AKP's lists, although the coefficients are always positive. This pattern confirms that the party's effort to improve the gender balance of its lists is focused more on descriptive rather than substantive representation.

depend on the underlying preferences of the electorate.[8] With respect to this body of work, our contribution is to look specifically at the competition between two parties that have markedly different positions on gender equality. Considering a predominantly Muslim and typically conservative country allows us to exploit an ideal setting to study this question, and also to provide insights on the dynamics of women's political representation in contexts where patriarchal norms are more deeply rooted as compared to the Western European countries that are the focus of most of the studies mentioned above. In this sense, this paper contributes more broadly to the literature studying how gender gaps in politics are closed over time. A large part of this work has focused on the impact of gender quotas, both at party level or legislated, on women's candidacy and election—see, e.g., De Paola et al. (2010); O'brien and Rickne (2016); Baltrunaite et al. (2019); Bagues and Campa (2021). Other studies consider the role of the electoral systems (Gonzalez-Eiras and Sanz, 2021; Profeta and Woodhouse, 2022), but always in the context of advanced democracies. Little is known about policies or developments that might help closing gender gaps in more traditional societies, such as a Muslim-majority country, where the under-representation of women in political institutions is particularly severe and gender quotas are unlikely to be adopted.[9]

Finally, our work is also related to the literature that studies how electoral competition shapes parties' choices more generally. Most of this literature has focused on parties' policy platforms, with the most recent work analyzing the impacts of the electoral success of radical right parties—see Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020) for an extensive review of this literature. Building on this body of work, we focus instead on how electoral competition

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[8] A related body of work studies the adoption of gender quotas at party level (so called voluntary quotas) as a strategy to compete with other parties (Krook, 2010).

[9] A related literature, mostly outside of economics, studies the correlates of women's descriptive and substantial political representation in Turkey, but does not focus on dynamics that can bring about change in representation. Our focus on changes over time allows isolating causal effects under milder assumptions and also provides more direct insights on the extent to which we can expect current gender gaps to narrow in the near future. For a review of some of this literature, see Bulut (2021).

affects the selection of candidates, focusing specifically on gender. How the characteristics of candidates evolve over time as the nature of electoral competition changes is arguably relevant in contexts of identity politics (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022).

2 Institutional setting

2.1 Local election system

The 81 provinces of Turkey are divided into 922 municipalities. The municipality-level administration system is organized in a two-tier structure: an appointed municipality governor and an elected municipal administration. The municipal administration consists of a mayor and council members. The council is the central decision-making body of a municipality.

Mayors are elected through a first-past-the-post system, with the winning candidate in each municipality being elected by a plurality. Council members are elected through a proportional representation system. Elections are held every five years and turnout rates are rather high, at around 87% on average during the period covered by our study.

For the election of municipality mayors, each political party nominates a candidate and the nominee who receives the plurality of votes is elected. For the election of council members, each political party nominates an ordered list of candidates. The post-election distribution of council seats between political parties is determined based on the D'Hondt method.[10]

The candidate list submitted by each political party consists of three sub-lists: master list, list of substitutes, and special quota list. The master list is the main list of candidates. The list of substitutes consists of candidates who are not directly elected, but who succeed

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[10]See Gallagher (1991) for a detailed description of different electoral systems that are based on proportionality rules.

an elected member in case of resignation, death, etc. The special quota list contains the candidates directly assigned by the political party that wins the plurality vote within the municipality.[11] The maximum size of each list, as well as of the municipal council, depends on the municipality population.[12] Political parties can submit partial lists or may choose not to run for the elections in a specific locality.

2.2 Gender and politics in Turkey

Gender equality in Turkey. Turkey is a secular democracy with a predominantly Muslim population of about 85 million people. Its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, has straddled the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa as well as parts of Central Europe in its heyday. This unique historical legacy still has implications for the many complexities in Turkish political and social life. The modern Turkish Republic was established in 1923. The Republic adopted a series of major reforms, ranging from the separation of state and religion to women's rights.

The issue of gender equality in Turkey, both in terms of legal changes and societal awareness, goes way back to the early days of the Republic. In 1925, a women's movement for political participation was organized under the leadership of the political party for women's rights, Kadinlar Halk Firkasi (Women's People Party). In 1930, Turkish women were granted to vote in the municipal elections and in 1934, to vote in national elections and to be elected to office. This means that Turkish women were able to exercise political rights—to vote and to be elected for public office—many years before women in other European countries.

Despite the early adoption of key legislation related to gender equality, the political par-

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[11]The special quota serves to empower the winning party in the decision-making processes, by allowing the party to secure a majority within the council.

[12]Table A1 shows the relationship between municipality population and the number of candidates in each sub-list.

ticipation of women has remained low in Turkey.[13] Their presence in parliament has increased only recently (see Figure A1), but they are still severely under-represented at around 20% after the 2023 elections. Concerning women's representation in local governments, Koyuncu and Sumbas (2016) document that the share of female mayors was less than 0.5 percent between 1930 and 2004. This number increased after 2005, which is the period that we focus on in this paper, mostly due to the rapid growth in the share of female mayors elected in Kurdish party's lists (see Figure A2). During this period, the share of female candidates in electoral lists for the municipal council also increased by 6 p.p., and the share of female councilors increased by 5 p.p.—see Figure A3. We hypothesize that part of the growth in women's candidacy in local election is due to the competition between AKP and Kurdish parties.

AKP and women in politics. AKP was established in 2001 by former members of the Milli Görüş movement, a Turkish Islamic political movement founded in 1970. The AKP came to power with the 2002 elections. At a time when other political parties were facing leadership crises, coalition governments had become the norm in Turkish politics, and the Turkish economy was experiencing a downturn (Cosar and Ozman, 2004; Sandal, 2014). During its establishment years, AKP embraced a transformative agenda with emphasis on economic liberalization, European Union membership (long coveted by the Turkish policy elites), and the recognition of minority rights, mostly to compete with the existing secular parties. In general, AKP has successfully implemented several political competition strategies to outbid the competitors, which is an inherent characteristic of the religious populism implemented by AKP (Sandal, 2021).

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[13]Strong patriarchal norms shaped by social, historical, and religious factors are among the most likely factors restraining women's participation in politics and many socio-economic activities in daily life. Turkey has the lowest female labor force participation rate among the OECD countries. The average schooling level of women in Turkey is also much lower than in other OECD countries—although there has been a significant improvement after the back-to-back education reforms increasing years of compulsory schooling from 5 to 12 (Erten and Keskin, 2018). Widespread intimate partner violence and strong male backlash against women's empowerment are also consistently documented by academic research (Erten and Keskin, 2021).

Among those strategies, two of them are of critical importance for this paper. First, AKP prioritized engaging women into local politics to attract votes, by including them in candidate lists and at times even in electable positions in the lists so that some women would be elected to municipal councils (Wuthrich, 2021). Second, AKP has fought to maintain its popularity among Kurdish voters despite the large swings in its policies related to Kurds.

Kurdish parties and women in politics. HDP is the final link in the chain of pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey for the period that we study. The Kurdish political movement in Turkey gained popularity after the 1980s and the earliest predecessor of HDP was established in 1990—the People's Labour Party (HEP). However, due to their direct and indirect linkages with the terrorist organization PKK, HEP and its ancestors were banned and shut down by the Constitutional Court. Kurdish political parties typically place themselves at the left of the Turkish political spectrum. Until 2005, Kurdish parties had a more nationalistic stance. 2005 was the year in which the Kurdish political movement increased its activity in the entire country rather than catering to a narrow geography where the Kurdish population was mostly located. Parallel to this shift, its agenda also evolved to gain popularity among progressive Turkish voters. Most importantly, "gender equality" has been a central topic since then. For example, the party introduced a co-chaired leadership system that featured one female and one male leader at the head of the party with equal responsibilities. They established "Women Election Bureaus" across the country. Specifically, in relation to electoral lists, the party also pledges to enhance a "zipper" quota, with strict alternation of women and men candidates in local elections. As a result, female political representation in Kurdish electoral lists increased substantially over time—see Figure A2.

As we discussed above, AKP has successfully developed effective means of competition in response to this change. First, they increased the number of Kurdish politicians in

their lists in local and general elections. As part of this strategy, they have appointed several Kurdish ministers in the cabinet and nominated people with Kurdish origin in local elections, where they compete with the Kurdish party. Strong religiosity among Kurdish people has tremendously helped them to implement this strategy. Second, they increased the number of women in their local and central organizations. In this paper, we empirically assess whether the increase in female representation in AKP is causally affected by political competition with Kurdish parties.

3   Data

Data sources. We use data from the 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019 local government elections in Turkey. We focus on the municipal council member elections to leverage the larger sample size compared to higher-level elections and the sizable variation in the number of women in candidate lists.

We use two data sources. The first one is the candidate lists published by the Higher Election Council (YSK).[14] These lists consist of pdf files that include the names and election areas of the candidates. There is no gender information in these lists. We use an NLP-based algorithm to extract the data from the pdf files and match the candidates' names with a dictionary to impute the gender of each candidate. Some Turkish names are unisex and it is not possible to reliably tell *a priori* the candidates' gender by only looking at the name. In our data set, there were 592 candidates with unisex names out of 283,853 (0.21%), and we classify their gender as missing.[15] Note that the YSK databases include full list of candidates only starting from the 2009 local elections. Because of this limitation, we restrict our attention to the electoral lists presented from 2009. We use 2004 elections to construct the previous election results for the 2009 elections in each

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[14]See https://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/mahalli-idareler-genel-secimleri-arsivi/2650.

[15]Our results are mostly unchanged when we assume all these candidates with unisex names to be men.

municipality. In fact, this is not a real limitation as the shift in Kurdish party's strategy (see Section 2.2) about the role of gender in politics started in 2005.

The second data source is the local election results published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), which provides the names of the elected candidates in each municipality for each of the election that we study.[16] We then merge the two data sources to obtain a unique data set covering the universe of candidate for municipal council-member elections at municipality level with complete information about candidates' gender, their party, and whether they are elected or not. Our data set contains comprehensive information about all three types of candidate lists, namely the master list, the list of substitutes, and the special quota list.[17]

Summary statistics. Our final dataset includes about 900 Turkish municipalities observed in election years 2009, 2014, and 2019.[18] We focus on municipalities where AKP runs, which account for 100% of the sample in 2009 and 2014, and 97% of the sample in 2019.[19] In Table 1, we show summary statistics for electoral outcomes in our final sample. Municipalities are on average quite large, with a mean population of nearly 80,000. An average of 7 parties participate to the municipal elections, with 2.4 of them getting at least one seat in the municipal council. The average number of councilors is 17, out of which only 10% are women.

While the AKP runs in nearly all of the municipalities in Turkey, the other major parties tend to participate only in some elections, with a strong regional component in terms of where they run. In particular, the other party of interest for our analysis, the Kurdish

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[16]See https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/secimdagitimapp/yerel.zul.

[17]Nevertheless, in the analysis, we mostly focus on master lists as these are by and large the most visible to voters, and not every party running in an election also presents a list of substitutes.

[18]The number of municipalities in 2019 is slightly smaller.

[19]In 2019, AKP did not present its own list in 94 municipalities, because it supported lists from another party, Milliyetci Hareket Partisi (MHP, translated as Nationalist Movement Party). These municipalities are not included in our sample. We also drop municipalities that were newly created after 2014, because we would not be able to measure the lagged values that we use in our analysis.

party[20], runs only in 36% of the races that we consider, mostly in the Eastern part of the country, whereas participation from the two other major parties, CHP and SP, is larger, at respectively 82 and 87%. AKP wins 60% of the races where it runs, whereas the electoral success of the Kurdish party is lower, at around 20%.

The average number of candidates in master lists is 8.4, with AKP listing more candidates than the Kurdish party, likely reflecting differences in expected number of elected candidates. Nevertheless, the share of candidates who are women is much higher for the Kurdish party, at 21%, as compared to AKP's 11%. The Kurdish party stands out for its share of female candidates also in comparison with the other major party, CHP, that averages a 13% female representation.[21] The higher feminization of the Kurdish party's electoral lists is reflected in the share of women elected: on average, only 6% of the councilors elected with AKP lists are women; this number goes up to 12% for CHP and jumps to 28% for the Kurdish party. This stark difference in women's representation in elections across parties, and in particular between AKP and the Kurdish party, is crucial for our hypothesis, namely that increased electoral competition from the Kurdish party might induce AKP to raise female representation in its lists.[22]

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[20]Kurdish party here represents DTP in 2005, BDP and HDP running in different provinces in 2014, and HDP in 2019.

[21]Notice that, although the Kurdish party has been pledging a 50% quota in candidate lists since 2013 and a 40% quota since 2005, its overall average share of female candidates over the period 2009-2019 is lower, suggesting that the enforcement of the quota is not fully in place yet during our study period. On the other hand, the quota seems to be better enforced in national elections. In the 2023 Parliamentary elections, the Kurdish party had 30 female Parliament members out of 61 in total, while AKP had 50 female members out of 267 and CHP had 30 female members out of 169. (Source: YSK Election Statistics on https://www.ysk.gov.tr).

[22]In Figure A2, we show that the differences in female representation across parties have been widening over time and are statistically significant at conventional level. We also note that the Kurdish party tends to elect a much larger share of female mayors than its competitors. According to YSK Election Statistics, in 2009, 2014, and 2019, the Kurdish party had respectively 21, 30, and 45% of women among its elected mayors, whereas AKP elected less than 1% of female mayors in 2009 and this percentage remained at 1% in 2014 and 2019. The respective percentages for CHP were 1, 3, and 5%—see Figure A3.

Table 1: Summary statistics for elections where AKP runs

	N	Mean	(Sd)
Town-level variables			
Population (in '000)	2805	79.12	(128.79)
# of parties in the race	2805	7.12	(2.76)
# of parties in the council	2805	2.43	(0.60)
# of councilors	2805	16.61	(9.77)
Share of races where:			
Kurdish party runs	2805	0.36	(0.48)
CHP runs	2805	0.82	(0.39)
SP runs	2805	0.87	(0.33)
AKP wins	2805	0.60	(0.49)
Kurdish party wins (cond. on running)	997	0.19	(0.39)
CHP wins (cond. on running)	2290	0.23	(0.42)
SP wins (cond. on running)	2449	0.01	(0.11)
Average # of cand. in master list	2805	8.38	(7.62)
Female cand. share in master lists	2805	0.11	(0.08)
Female cand. share in quota lists	2805	0.09	(0.13)
Female councilors share	2805	0.10	(0.09)
Party-level variables			
AKP's # of cand. in master list	2805	14.67	(8.72)
Kurdish party's # of cand. in master list	997	9.61	(8.34)
CHP's # of cand. in master list	2290	13.31	(9.08)
AKP's female cand. share in master list	2805	0.11	(0.09)
Kurdish party's female cand. share in master list	998	0.21	(0.24)
CHP's female cand. share in master list	2290	0.13	(0.13)
AKP's female cand. share in quota list	2802	0.06	(0.20)
Kurdish party's female cand. share in quota list	423	0.28	(0.35)
CHP's female cand. share in quota list	1967	0.12	(0.27)
AKP's female councilors share	2759	0.09	(0.12)
Kurdish party's female councilors share	317	0.26	(0.19)
CHP's female councilors share	1402	0.12	(0.15)

Notes: This table shows summary statistics for electoral variables in towns where AKP runs, which represent nearly the universe of towns in Turkey. AKP is the main party in the country, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Kurdish party represents the Kurdish opposition party running in a given election/town. We study the response of AKP to electoral victories from the Kurdish party at municipality level. CHP is the main opposition party at the national level, and SP is an extreme conservative party which often competes with AKP especially in Southeastern Turkey where the Kurdish party is also strong. The master list is the main list that a party presents in the election, and one that is visible to voters. The quota list ranks candidates directly assigned by the political party that wins the plurality vote within the municipality, whereby such party obtains a "premium" number of seats that allow reaching the majority in the council. Quota lists are typically not visible to voters.

4 Empirical strategy

Our outcome variable of interest is the share of female candidates in AKP's master list running in election e, where $e = \{2004, 2009, 2019\}$ in municipality m.[23] The treatment variable is whether the Kurdish party won the previous election in the same municipality or not. We exploit within-municipality variation in Kurdish party winning the previous election, comparing municipalities within the same province to account for local political forces.[24]

Across the panel of municipalities, treatment occurs at different time periods. In this setting, standard two-way fixed effects and event-study estimates might be biased if treatment effects are heterogeneous across units or over time—see De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2023b) for a review of the literature on this econometric issue. Moreover, in our panel, the same municipality might be treated multiple times. We thus follow De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2023a), who propose a difference-in-differences estimator that is unbiased for treatment effects when treatment might occur multiple times at the same unit and effects might be heterogeneous across units or over time. This approach is a generalization of the standard event study analysis where the event is redefined as the first time a unit changes its treatment status and, when estimating the lth dynamic treatment effect of a "switcher" (i.e., a unit that switched into treatment l periods ago), the estimation uses as control those units whose treatment status has not yet changed ("non-switchers"). In practice, given that our panel is short with only three elections, we only estimate the short-term response of AKP to Kurdish party winning the previous election (l=1). We thus conceptually compare the change in the share of female candidates in AKP lists in municipalities where the Kurdish party won the previous election

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[23]In the analysis of mechanisms, we also consider the quota list—see Section 5.4.

[24]The province is an administrative unit that is one level up from municipalities. As observed above, the Kurdish party is substantially more likely to run and win in the Eastern part of the country, which suggests accounting for province-specific shocks.

and municipalities where the Kurdish party has not yet won, accounting for province-level shocks. Implicit in this setup is a conditional parallel-trends assumption, based on the comparability of municipalities in the same province. To support this assumption, we show placebo estimates based on the comparison of the outcome trends of switchers and non-switchers before the switchers switch (De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille, 2023a).[25]

In the baseline, we control for the size of AKP's master list. This control is important in the context of Turkish municipal elections, where the minimum length of lists is not legislated and is thus endogenously determined.[26] Other controls include whether or not the Kurdish party submits a list, as well as municipality-level demographics, namely population, the share of individuals with at least high-school education, the share of married individuals, the average age of the resident population, and the sex ratio.[27] We cluster standard errors at province level.

In Section 5.2, we further discuss identification. Section 5.3 reports standard TWFE estimates, and shows that the results are largely comparable.

5   Results

5.1   Main estimates

We present the main estimates in Table 2. In column 1, we show results from the baseline specification, controlling for the length of AKP's master lists and accounting for province-specific shocks. In column 2, we exploit only the variability created by municipalities that switch into treatment, i.e., move from not being treated to being treated, thus excluding those that switch out of treatment, i.e., move from being treated to not being treated. In

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[25]To produce the estimates, we use the Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019).
[26]Nevertheless, in Figure A4, we show that results are robust to excluding this control.
[27]We selected the control variables based on data availability.

column 3, we control for whether the Kurdish party submits a list in the current election. In column 4, we add controls for municipality-level demographics.

Strikingly, our estimates are quite stable across all specifications. When accounting for all the controls, our estimate is that the Kurdish party winning an election leads AKP to increase its share of female candidates in the next electoral round by 3.1 p.p. Since the baseline (i.e., when the Kurdish party has not won) share of female candidates in AKP's lists is 11 p.p., this is a sizeable effect, equal to 28% of the mean.

Table 2: Kurdish party wins and share of female candidates in AKP lists

	(1) Baseline specification	(2) Only "switchers in"	(3)	(4)
			Additional controls	
Kurdish party won previous election	0.028**	0.034**	0.028**	0.031**
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.013)
# of observations	1831	1734	1831	1831
Switchers	65	50	65	65
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list HDP runs	Length AKP list HDP runs Town-level demographics

Notes: Dependent variable is the share of female candidates in AKP's list. Unit of analysis is municipality. AKP is the ruling party in the country. The average share of female candidates in AKP's lists in municipalities where the Kurdish party has not won the previous election is 0.11. Town-level demographics include population, share of individuals with at least high-school education, share of married individuals, average age of resident population, and sex ratio. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019). Standard errors clustered at province level are reported in parentheses. We compute *p*-values and report statistical significance based on coefficients and standard errors reported in the *did_multiplegt* output. ***1%, **5%, *10%.

5.2 Identification

Placebo estimates. To document the plausibility of the parallel-trends assumption, in Figure 1, we show point estimate and 95% confidence interval from a placebo estimator that compares the outcome trends of switchers and non-switchers before the switchers switch (De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille, 2023a).[28] In the same figure, we report the

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[28]Conceptually, think of a municipality where the Kurdish party does not win in 2009 but wins in 2014. The treatment effect is estimated off the change in the share of female candidates in the AKP

estimated coefficient and 95% CI of the treatment effect from column 1 in Table 2 for comparison. Consistent with the parallel-trends assumption, we find no evidence of the share of female candidates in AKP lists evolving differentially in places where the Kurdish party will win the following election.

Figure 1: Placebo and treatment effects
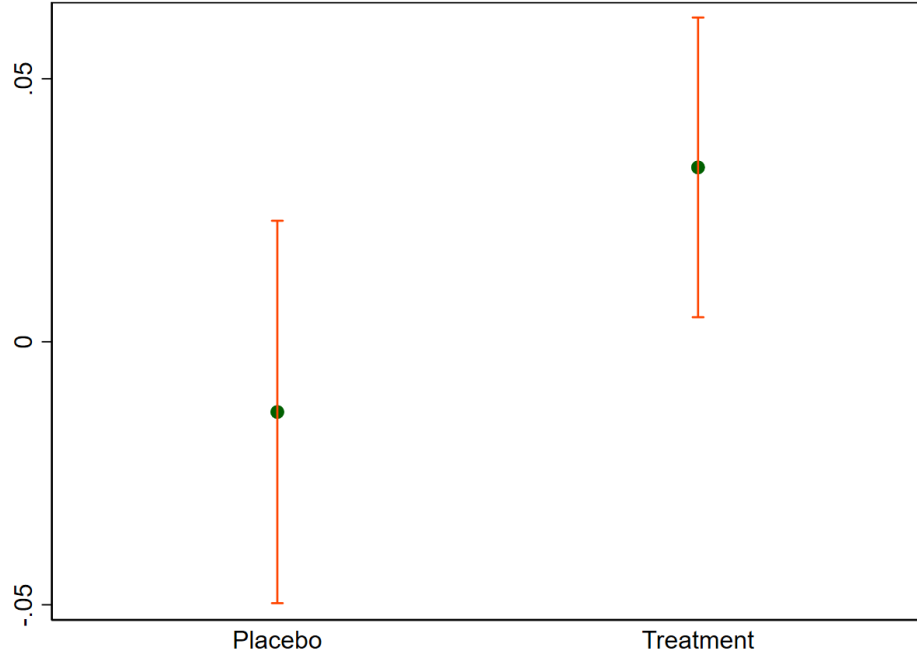
Notes: This figure shows point estimate and 95% CI for two effects: the treatment effect, i.e., the change in the share of female candidates in AKP's list when the Kurdish party won the previous election, and the placebo effect, i.e., the change in the share of female candidates in AKP's list when the Kurdish party will win the future election. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019).

Balanced covariates. In Table A2, we compare a number of demographic variables in towns where the Kurdish party wins and where it does not for each of the three election years that we consider in our analysis.[29] In 2009 and 2014, the Kurdish party

list between the 2014 and the 2019 elections, i.e., the change after AKP has observed the Kurdish party winning. The placebo effect is based off the change for the same list between the 2009 and the 2014 elections, when AKP has not yet observed the Kurdish party winning.

[29]Specifically, we show point-estimates and standard errors from cross-sectional regressions of various demographics on *Kurdish party won previous election*, accounting for province fixed effects and clustering standard errors by province.

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tends to win in substantially larger municipalities, whereas the difference is much smaller and not significant at conventional levels in 2019, when the Kurdish party wins in more municipalities as compared to previous elections, including some very small ones. We fail to detect instead statistically significant differences in any of the other variables that we consider.

To account for the possibility that our coefficient of interest in Table 2 captures differential trends in shares of female candidates by municipality size, we consider a specification where we allow for non-parametric trends in population, using a categorical variable that is based on percentiles of the distribution of population.[30] We show the resulting estimate in Figure A5. As compared to the baseline specification in column 1 of Table 2, which accounts for province-specific shocks instead of population-specific shocks, the point estimate is slightly larger, at 0.033, and is still 5% statistically significant (s.e. = 0.016).

Moreover, we do not find evidence of the Kurdish party being more likely to win in municipalities whose population is growing more (results not shown and available upon request), consistent with the time-varying controls not affecting the unconditional estimate—see columns 1 and 4 of Table 2.

5.3   TWFE estimates

We also estimate variations of the following standard TWFE model:

$$y_{me} = \alpha + \beta KP\_Wins_{m,e-1} + \gamma X_{me} + \phi_m + \xi_{pe} + \varepsilon_{me} \tag{1}$$

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[30]We create a categorical variable that takes values from 1 to 10 depending on whether a municipality population belongs respectively to the 1st, 5th, 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, 90th, 95th, or 99th percentile. The categorization results in a variable strongly correlated with population that has overlapping values for a number of observations. This overlap is needed for the *did_multiplegt* command to work, since its routine accounts for population-based shocks by considering the weighted average of various DIDs, each comparing switchers and non-switchers with the same value of population.

Table 3: Kurdish party wins and share of female candidates in AKP lists: TWFEs

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Kurdish party won in $t-1$	0.026**	0.026**	0.024**
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)
# of observations	2,805	2,805	2,805
Adjusted R^2	0.503	0.503	0.506
Province × election FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Town FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list HDP runs	Length AKP list HDP runs Town-level demographics

Notes: Dependent variable is the share of female candidates in AKP's list. Unit of analysis is municipality. AKP is the ruling party in the country. The average share of female candidates in AKP's lists in municipalities where the Kurdish party has not won the previous election is 0.11. Town-level demographics include population, share of individuals with at least high-school education, share of married individuals, average age of resident population, and sex ratio. Standard errors clustered at province level are reported in parentheses. ***1%, **5%, *10%.

where y_{me} is the share of women running in the master list presented by AKP in municipality m in election-year e, and the main variable of interest is $KP\_Wins_{m,e-1}$, which takes value of 1 if the Kurdish party won the previous election in the municipality. ϕ_m and ξ_{pe} are respectively municipality fixed-effects and province-specific flexible trends. X_{me} is the same vector of time-varying controls listed in Section 4.

Results are shown in Table 3 and are in line with the main estimates from Section 5.1. When we account for all the controls, we estimate a 2.4 p.p. (21% of baseline mean) increase in the share of female candidates in AKP's list where the Kurdish Party won the previous election (see Column (3)). The estimate is also very similar to the baseline in column (1) where we only account for the length of the AKP list.[31]

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[31]The number of observations is larger than in Table 2 because the heterogeneity-robust DID indicator practically considers outcome and regressors in differences, whereas the TWFE estimator considers them in levels.

5.4 Mechanism

AKP's response to the Kurdish party's electoral success might underline different mechanisms. One hypothesis is that the party strategically increases its share of female candidates to compete more successfully with an opponent that champions women's representation in electoral lists and beyond. In other words, the party would try to appeal to an electorate that seems favorable to a certain degree of gender equality in lists.

Alternatively, the party might respond more generally to increased electoral competition. When challenged by a successful opponent, AKP would have more incentives to select the best possible candidates in the available pool, which would imply selecting more women if the party tends to discriminate against them.[32] Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012), for instance, find that while Spanish parties assign women to less electable positions in lists when they contend safe seats, they tend to place women in electable positions in highly competitive races. On the other hand, Cakir et al. (2024) find that, in nationwide parliamentary elections, AKP demotes and removes women from lists after a disappointing electoral result, suggesting that heightened electoral competition could be, if anything, detrimental to women in lists.

A third hypothesis would be that AKP leaders, once exposed to the elected women from the Kurdish party, update their beliefs about women's competence as politicians and become more likely to see them favorably as potential council members, similar to the learning mechanism proposed by Lee and Zanella (2023).

In this section, we investigate respectively the competition and the learning mechanisms and find that they are unlikely to explain entirely the AKP's observed response to the Kurdish party winning an election, leading us to suggest that the Kurdish party's specific

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[32]As pointed out by Bertrand (2018), in the presence of discrimination, enlarging the pool of potential candidates would increase the quality of the selected candidates.

focus on gender equality and women's presence in electoral lists plays a crucial role in inducing AKP to increase its share of female candidates.

Electoral competition. In Turkish local and national elections, the main opponent to AKP is CHP, a social-democratic party that runs in around 82% of the elections in our sample and wins nearly a quarter of them—see Table 1. CHP also pledges to adopt a 33% gender quota in its electoral lists, however data show that enforcement of such quota is generally poor. Overall, while the share of women in CHP lists is larger than AKP's, the difference between the two parties is not stark. Moreover, CHP does not advocate for gender equality to the same extent that the Kurdish party does—see Figure A2 and Section 2.2.[33] Against this background, we study AKP's response to CHP winning an election, to gauge the role of electoral competition in general rather than specifically from a party that promotes gender-balanced lists and campaigns on a gender-equality platform.

In Table 4 Panel A, we show results from replacing *CHP won previous election* as main regressor instead of *Kurdish party won previous election* in the heterogeneous treatment effect analysis—see Section 4. We consider all the specifications from Table 2. We find that AKP also responds to CHP's victory by increasing its share of female candidates, but to a much lower extent than when the Kurdish party wins the election. The coefficients are always less than half the size of those estimated in Table 2, and are only marginally statistically significant in some specifications.[34] On one hand, this suggests that electoral competition in general might play a role in enhancing women's presence in electoral lists, even in a conservative setting such as Turkish politics. This finding resonates with the evidence in Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) on the strategic "use" of female candidates

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[33]While one more party, SP, also participates in most of the elections where AKP runs, we do not consider it as an AKP's competitor because it wins only 1% of the elections conditional on running—see Table 1.

[34]The baseline share of women in AKP lists in places where CHP has not won the election is 0.10, very similar to the baseline in Table 2 that is based on the Kurdish party not winning.

from Spanish political parties, and is in contrast with that in Cakir et al. (2024).[35] On the other hand, the much larger impact of the Kurdish party's victories also suggests that, in a highly gender-unequal landscape, an electorally successful party that stands out for its commitment to gender-equal representation exercises pressure on other parties to improve the gender balance of their lists.

Learning about women as politicians. To explore whether AKP's response could be explained by the party leadership learning about the competence of women once they have seen them in office (Lee and Zanella, 2023), we exploit a feature of the Turkish electoral system for municipal councils. Together with the main list of candidates, parties present a special quota list containing the candidates directly assigned to the municipal council by the party if it wins the plurality vote in order to reach a majority—see Section 2.1. We hypothesize that, if "learning about the competence of women" is a relevant mechanism explaining AKP's response to the Kurdish party's electoral success, then we should see an improvement in the gender balance of AKP's quota lists too. If instead listing more women is a purely strategic devise to make AKP electorally more competitive, then the quota lists should be affected by a Kurdish party's victory to a lower extent, since they are much less visible to voters.

At baseline, the share of women in AKP's quota lists is around 6 p.p. We fail to find evidence of a significant increase in this share following a Kurdish party win—see Table 4 Panel B. This is suggestive of the party filing more women for strategic electoral reasons rather than to benefit of their competences. A caveat is that the special quota list is short, including only one candidate in municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants (see Table A1), which might hamper the pursuit of diversity goals (see Lucas et al. (2021)). However, we also fail to reject the null of no effect of the Kurdish party winning the

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[35]The difference in findings from Cakir et al. (2024), who show that in elections for the national parliament increased competition is actually detrimental for women in lists, suggests likely different parties' strategies as well as roles for women in politics between national and local elections.

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previous election on the presence of women in top positions in AKP's list, although the estimated coefficients are always positive—see Table A3. Given the electoral system, this means that AKP is unlikely to aim at electing more women in the council, confirming our suggestion that the party's main goal is to attract more votes rather than to harness the ability of women as policymakers.[36]

Table 4: Mechanism

	(1) Baseline specification	(2) Only "switchers in"	(3)	(4)
			Additional controls	
Panel A. *Dep. var.*: Share of women in AKP's master list				
CHP won previous election	0.013* (0.008)	0.013 (0.011)	0.013* (0.008)	0.014* (0.008)
# of observations	1831	1523	1831	1831
Switchers	271	148	271	271
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list CHP runs	Length AKP list CHP runs Town-level demographics
Panel B. *Dep. var.*: Share of women in AKP's special quota list				
Kurdish party won previous election	0.002 (0.043)	0.006 (0.059)	0.002 (0.043)	0.005 (0.047)
# of observations	1828	1731	1828	1825
Switchers	65	50	65	65
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list HDP runs	Length AKP list HDP runs Town-level demographics

Notes: Unit of analysis is municipality. AKP is the ruling party. CHP is the main opposition party in both national and local elections. The average share of female candidates in AKP's lists in municipalities where CHP has not won the previous election is 0.10. Town-level demographics include population, share of individuals with at least high-school education, share of married individuals, average age of resident population, and sex ratio. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019). Standard errors clustered at province level are in parentheses. We compute *p*-values and report statistical significance based on coefficients and standard error reported in the *did_multiplegt* output. ***1%, **5%, *10%.

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[36]We also fail to find an effect of the Kurdish party winning the election on the share of women elected from AKP's lists. We note, however, that how many women are elected is a function not only of the party's choices but also of voters' responses to these (Bagues and Campa, 2021).

6 Conclusion

Historically women have been under-represented in political institutions at all levels and all over the world. Despite enormous progress in recent decades, largely fuelled by the sweeping adoption of gender quota laws, wide gender gaps persist in some countries. Many of those countries have been governed for several years by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes that, unlike more mature democracies or countries in transition, have not introduced gender equality laws or at best have introduced very week ones. What are some alternative paths to women political representation in these particularly challenging contexts?

In this paper, we study the case of Turkey, where one of the opposition parties, the Kurdish party, has over the years raised its popularity among voters in local and national elections and at the same time has increasingly championed gender-equal representation in electoral lists and beyond. We hypothesize that the electoral competitiveness of such a party might constitute one path for women to gain representation in Turkish politics, not only because the party itself includes more women in its electoral lists, but also because it exerts pressure on other parties, especially the highly conservative ruling party, AKP.

Leveraging a newly-built dataset of electoral candidates to three rounds of municipal elections in, respectively, 2009, 2014, and 2019 and within-city variation in Kurdish party's electoral performance, we find that in municipalities where Kurdish party has won a plurality of votes in the previous election, AKP increases its share of women in electoral lists by 25 to 30%. We find no evidence of pre-trends and show that results are not driven by differences in other municipal characteristics.

We also investigate the mechanisms behind the observed increase in AKP's share of female candidates and find that, while electoral competition in general might pressure AKP to include more women in its electoral lists, the Kurdish party's specific focus on gender

equality heightens such pressure.

Finally, we show evidence consistent with AKP listing more women to attract votes, rather than because the party leadership learns about women's competence after their election from Kurdish party lists.

The results in this paper could be relevant for other countries characterized by a combination of stagnating women's participation in politics, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes that are unlikely to introduce deep gender quota reforms at national level, and a recent history of opposition parties' gains in local elections, such as, e.g., Hungary, Iran, or Russia.

A relevant question is whether AKP's response to the Kurdish party winning has durable and more sizable effects in the long-run, ultimately leading to more women being elected. We propose the study of the long-term Kurdish party effects, including on substantial representation, as a direction of future research.

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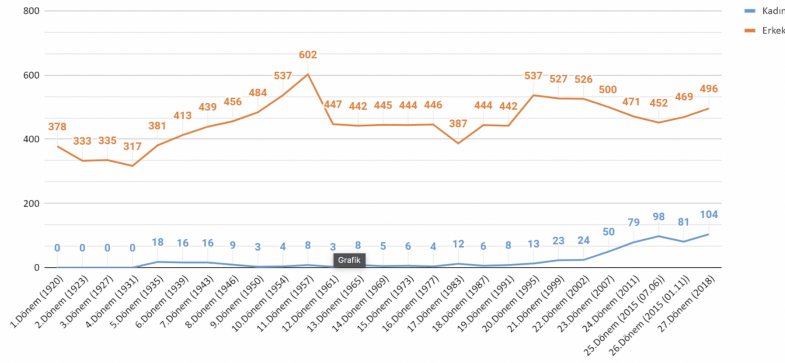
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Appendix: Figures and Tables

**Figure A1:** Female and Male Parliament Members

Notes: The original source of this graph is mecliste.org, which is an online platform where quantitative and qualitative reports about all activity in the parliament in Turkey are published. The report can be found here: https://www.mecliste.org/icerik/58/ Mecliste-Kadin-Temsili---Detayli-Degerlendirme-Notu. The title of the article can be translated as: "Women Representation in the Parliament—A detailed Assessment".

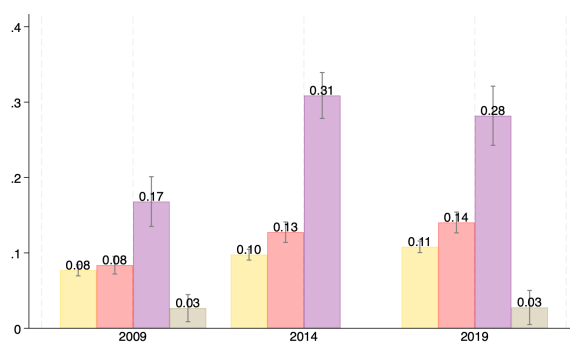**Figure A2:** Female shares over time by party
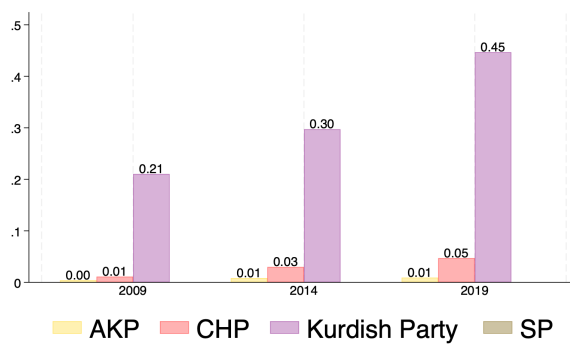
(a) Female candidates in master list
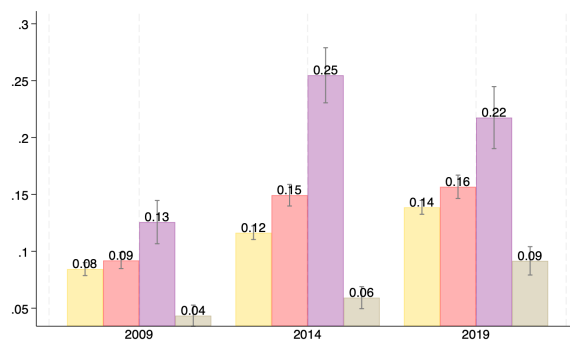
(b) Female candidates in quota list
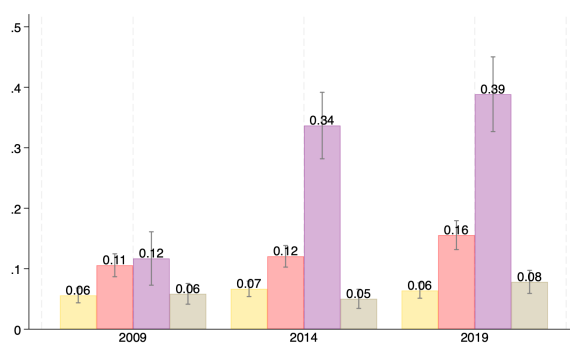
(c) Female councilors

(d) Female mayors

AKP · CHP · Kurdish Party · SP

Figure A3: Female shares over time - Town Level
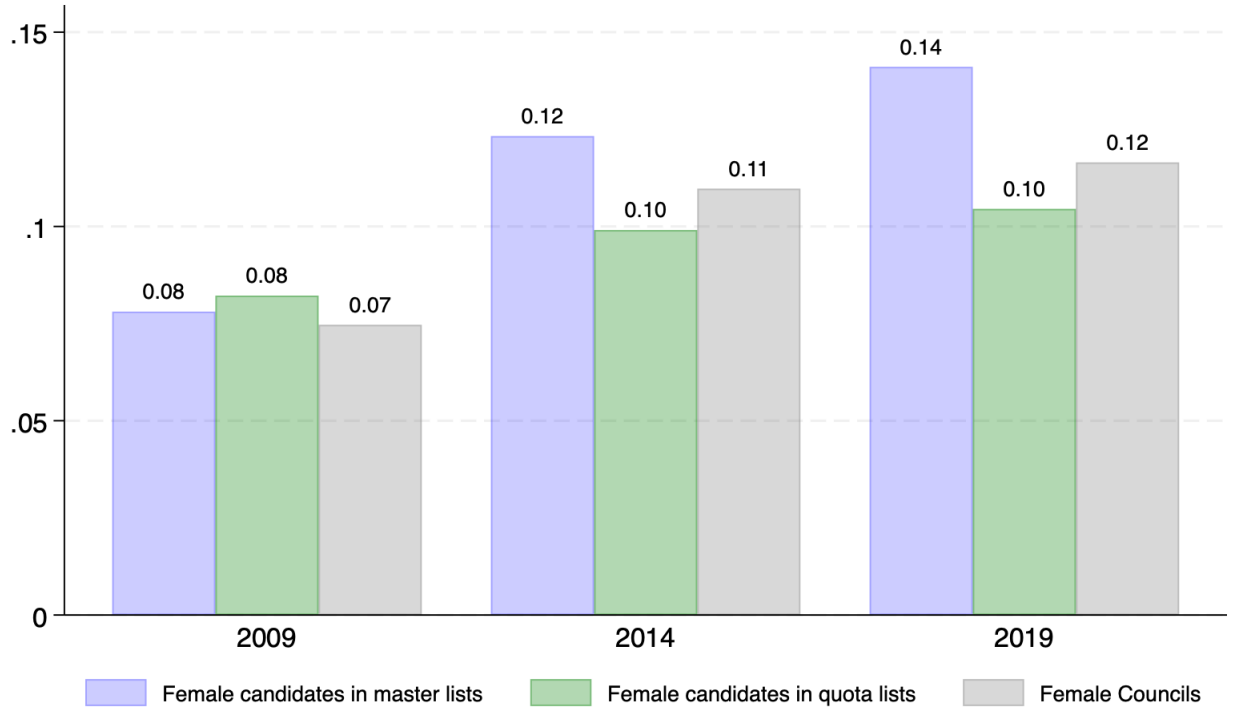
Figure A4: Kurdish party wins and share of female candidates in AKP lists, no controls
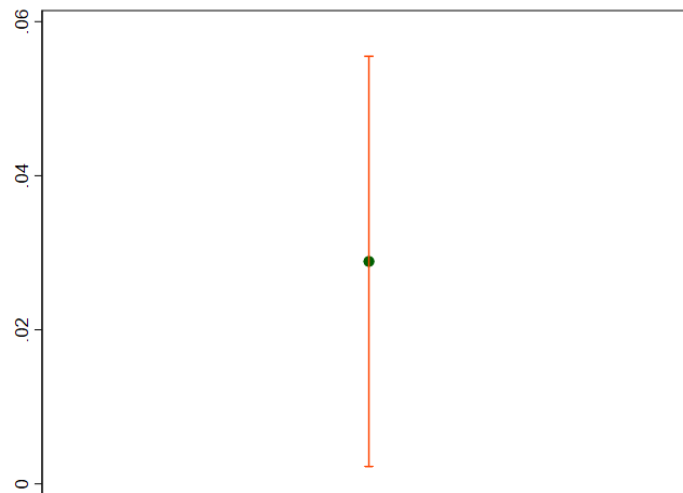
Notes: This figure shows point estimate and 95% CI for the treatment effect, i.e. the change in the share of female candidates in AKP's list when Kurdish party won the previous election, without controls. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019).

Figure A5: Kurdish Party wins and share of female candidates in AKP lists, allowing for population-based shocks

Notes: This figure shows point estimate and 95% CI for the treatment effect, i.e. the change in the share of female candidates in AKP's list when Kurdish party won the previous election, allowing for population-specific flexible trends. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019).
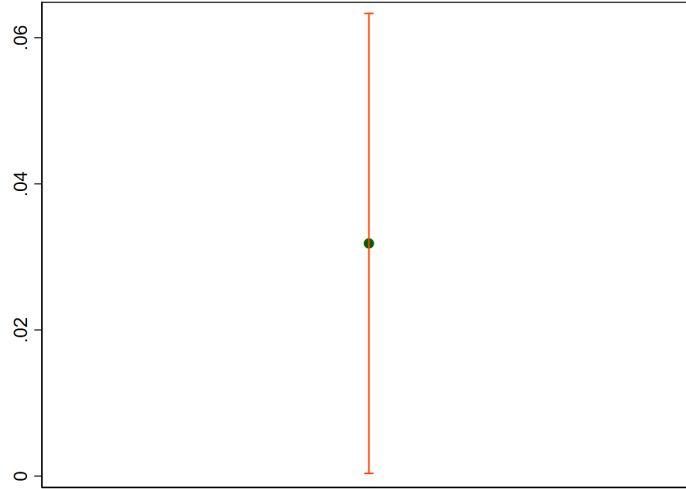
Table A1: municipality population and number of council candidates

Population size	Master list	Special quota list	List of substitutes	Total
≤ 10,000	8	1	(9)	9
10,001-20,000	10	1	(11)	11
20,001-50,000	13	2	(15)	15
50,001-100,000	22	3	(25)	25
100,001-250,000	28	3	(31)	31
250,001-500,000	33	4	(37)	37
500,001-1,000,000	40	5	(45)	45
≥1,000,000	50	5	(55)	55

Notes: See Article 18 of the Municipality Law #5393 for more details.

Table A2: Balanced covariates, by *Kurdish party won previous election*

	(1) 2009	(2) 2014	(3) 2019
Population	34033**	38685**	2617.43
	(14636.07)	(15429.40)	(18768.73)
Share high educ.	0.01	0.01	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Share married	0.00	-0.01	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Avg. age	-0.40	-1.10	-0.97
	(0.48)	(0.56)	(1.03)
Sex ratio	0.37	-2.26	-0.34
	(2.47)	(1.61)	(0.92)
# of observations	957	971	877

Notes: The table shows coefficients from regressing various municipality-level demographic characteristics on *HDP won previous election* in each election year and municipality considered in the main analysis. *Share high educ.* is the share of individuals with at least high-school education. *Sex ratio* measures the number of women every 100 men. Province fixed-effects included in all the regressions. Standard errors clustered at province level are in parentheses. ***1%, **5%, *10%.

Table A3: Other outcomes

	(1) Baseline specification	(2) Only "switchers in"	(3)	(4)
			Additional controls	

Panel A. Number women in top 3 positions in AKP's list

Kurdish party won previous election	0.024	0.031	0.024	0.009
	(0.089)	(0.099)	(0.090)	(0.100)
Mean dep. var.	0.292	0.292	0.292	0.292
# of observations	1831	1734	1831	1831
Switchers	65	50	65	65
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list CHP runs	Length AKP list CHP runs Town-level demographics

Panel B. Number women in top 5 positions in AKP's list

Kurdish party won previous election	0.077	0.155	0.077	0.071
	(0.107)	(0.124)	(0.109)	(0.125)
Mean dep. var.	0.531	0.531	0.531	0.531
# of observations	1831	1734	1831	1831
Switchers	65	50	65	65
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list HDP runs	Length AKP list HDP runs Town-level demographics

Panel C. Share of women elected from AKP's lists

Kurdish party won previous election	0.046	0.040	0.046	0.045
	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.034)	(0.042)
Mean dep. var.	0.094	0.094	0.094	0.094
# of observations	1780	1699	1780	1780
Switchers	59	44	59	59
Province shocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Length AKP list	Length AKP list	Length AKP list HDP runs	Length AKP list HDP runs Town-level demographics

Notes: Dependent variable is the number of women in top 3 and top 5 positions in AKP's list in Panel A and Panel B, respectively. In Panel C, the dependent variable is the share of women elected from AKP's lists. Unit of analysis is municipality. AKP is the ruling party. The mean of the dep. variable is calculated in towns where the Kurdish party has not won the previous election. Town-level demographics include population, share of individuals with at least high-school education, share of married individuals, average age of resident population and sex ratio. Estimates are produced using Stata command *did_multiplegt* (De Chaisemartin et al., 2019). Standard errors clustered at province level are in parentheses. We compute *p*-values and report statistical significance based on coefficients and standard error reported in the *did_multiplegt* output. ***1%, **5%, *10%.