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# Canvassing As A Political Communication Tool: A Study On Canvassing And Its Use By The Refah Party (RP) In Türkiye

## Siyasal Bir İletişim Aracı Olarak Canvassing: Türkiye’de Refah Partisi’nin Canvassing Kullanımı Üzerine Bir Çalışma

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### Abstract

Canvassing has been one of the tools for political communication and propaganda. As its name indicates, canvassing means to get votes from voters by using different tools. Political parties conduct various face-to-face communication activities for voters either to encourage them to participate politically or to make them support their own political ideologies. It is believed that various academic studies have been conducted about different canvassing tools that political parties and leaders use in the USA. However, we might say that the number of studies on the effects of canvassing on voters in Turkey is few. Although, it’s not evaluated as a subject, we could say that in the early 1990s the most successful political party to use canvassing tools effectively and successfully was the Refah Partisi (RP). Devoted canvassing efforts of the volunteers of the party contributed to the accession to power of the party. This study depends on the compilation of leading studies on political communication and canvassing in the literature and it uses historical and qualitative methods.

**Keywords:** Political Communication, Political Propaganda, Electoral Campaigns, Canvassing, The Welfare Party.

### Öz

Siyasal iletişim ve propaganda yöntemlerinden birisi canvassing uygulamasıdır. Canvassing en kısa tanımıyla yüzyüze oy toplama faaliyetidir. Siyasal parti ve liderlerin seçim kampanyalarında kullandığı canvassing uygulamasına yönelik saha araştırmalarına dayanan akademik çalışmalara ABD’de sıkça rastlanmaktadır. Türkiye’de ise canvassingin seçmen davranışı üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeye yönelik bu türden çalışmalar yok denecek kadar azdır. Söz konusu saha araştırmalarına yönelik çalışmalara konu olmasa da Türkiye’de 1990’lı yıllarda özellikle kapı kapı canvassing uygulamasını başarılı bir şekilde uygulayan en önemli siyasal partinin Refah Partisi (RP) olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. RP’li gönüllülerin canvassing konusunda göstermiş olduğu olağanüstü performans partinin iktidara gelmesine büyük katkı sağlamıştır. Çalışmada, siyasal partiler için önemli bir siyasal iletişim yöntemi olan canvassing uygulamasına yer verilerek başarılı canvassing uygulamasıyla iktidara gelen RP gönüllülerinin canvassing faaliyetleri inceleme konusu yapılacaktır. Siyasal iletişim ve canvassing konusuyla ilgili literatürde öne çıkan çalışmaların derlenmesiyle ortaya çıkan bu çalışma, tarihsel ve nitel bir yöntemle hazırlanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyasal İletişim, Siyasal Propaganda, Seçim Kampanyaları, Canvassing, Refah Partisi.



## Introduction

Political communication is the act of delivering political messages of political actors to voters with the help of mass media. Electoral campaigns (meetings, political advertisements, visits, party soundtracks etc...), public surveys, face-to-face canvassing, mass media and persuasive messages are well-known political tools to convince voters. These tools are frequently used by political parties and leaders during elections. The intense increase of electoral campaigns during elections makes people think that political communication is limited to election periods only. However, political communication always continues to exist for all aspects of political and social life. It's well-known that politicians benefit from political communication methods while even visiting a leader in another country. With this aspect, political communication needs to be considered separately from political propaganda and electoral campaigns that are maintained during elections. Political communication is an umbrella term that encompasses political propaganda and electoral campaigns of political parties.

With its simple definition, canvassing means to get votes face-to-face and it is an effective political tool on voters' attitudes. To support other political electoral campaigns that political parties maintain during elections, volunteers have face-to-face communication with voters, which is called canvassing and these practitioners are called canvassers. Canvassing can also be conducted by visiting voters door-to-door or by talking them on the phone.

The rapid growth of mass media starting from the 1950s with radio, TV and today internet has also changed the way and tools that political parties prefer and use for their electoral campaigns, but this change has never been rapid enough to discard the importance or the effectiveness of face-to-face communication.

The effects of private TV channels, started to appear in the 1990s in Türkiye, on voters' attitudes were paradoxically far behind the successful face-to-face political communication of the RP. Despite all verbal assault of the dominant media of the period, the strong political organization and door-to-door canvassing efforts of the devoted volunteers in almost all neighborhoods contributed a lot and the party came to power.

In this study, political communication, political propaganda and electoral campaigns are firstly explained and examined. Secondly, canvassing is to be evaluated in details. On the final part, election activities of the RP<sup>1</sup> that successfully used door-to-door canvassing tool are going to be mentioned.

## The Concept of Political Communication

The term of political communication gained importance after the World War II and became a concept of political and communicational sciences in the 1950s and it has been studied as a discipline since then (Demir, 2018: 89).

Political communication is one of the most important scientific subbranches of communication science. Initially, political communication was equated with political propaganda, then, it was studied for electoral campaigns, voting and political attitudes. This made political communication to be considered as if it was limited to election periods. However, political communication does not only cover election periods, but it studies and evaluates almost all aspects of political and social life of all times related to communication such as domestic policy, foreign policy, economy, education and culture (Ekinci, 2014: 5).

When considered politically in the context of governing-governed relations and today's representative democracies, almost all individuals, professional, non-professional, interfere political communication. The close relation of political communication between politics and communication, that is it's highly interdisciplinary, leads to misconception and prevents having a clear definition of the concept (Eraslan & Durur, 2018: 194).

Political communication, a broad concept covering political culture, mass media and political communication policies of a society, might shortly be defined as a convincing period of voters depending on the delivery of common political messages. To another definition, it covers various communication tools and methods to instill typical ideological goals adopted by governments, political parties and leaders and to impress and encourage general population, voters or individuals to achieve these goals (Aziz, 2014: 3-4).

Political communication depends on a process in which specific groups interact mutually. This is called political communication process and includes three main groups which can be listed as follows (Aziz, 2014: 5);

1. Source: This group starts political communication process and provides the delivery of the ideological messages to a target group. Political actors are within this group.
2. Target: This group receives the political messages sent from political actors in the source groups and is expected to be impressed by these messages. The target group of political communication is voters.
3. Mass Media: This group acts like a channel through which any kind of written or visual media including political messages, justified by the source, is carried to the target group.

With the combination of three groups written above, we could say that political communication is a discipline that studies mutual interactions among political actors, voters and media found in democratic political managements (Taşmurat, 2019: 64). As we could understand from this definition, political communication process depends on mutual interaction of these groups. Irrespective of governing-governed differences, the first group of political communication includes political parties, leaders, governments, local administrations, parliaments, pressure groups and non-governmental organizations. Voters and media are other actors of political communication process (Doğan, 2017: 26-33). Political actors try to convince and encourage voters with their ideological and political messages and the delivery of these messages from these actors to voters is provided by mass media. All the messages received by voters affects the voters' attitudes towards to the actor or not. Voting following the message or not completes the process or if the message is perceived implicitly, the process repeats itself (Taşmurat, 2019: 66).

### **The Development of Political Communication in the USA and Türkiye**

Political communication is closely related to democracy, which is because general suffrage is spread among great numbers and due to rapid growth of mass media. The introduction of radio and TV after the world wars significantly increased the number of studies on political communication. Following the World War II, when TV was remarkably more common rather than radio, the level of interest on political communication was greater because general suffrage holds universal qualifications, activities of pressure-interest groups and political parties are on rise and changes and transformations in mass media are so rapid (Demir, 2018: 66).

When other modern democratic methods are considered, we could say that the USA organizes more elections. They conduct more than a million elections within every four years and more than 500 thousand candidates accede. Since the World War II, the development of communication technologies and high interest in public opinion pools has affected the conduction of electoral campaigns (Woodward & Denton, 2014: 232).

During 15 years, between 1945 and 1960, voter preferences basically depended on attitudes, group relations and interpersonal communication. The campaigns of the period mostly including face-to-face communication methods were conducted by volunteers and activists (Woodward & Denton, 2014: 233).

Of all USA presidents at the time, Theodore Roosevelt was the first to build up sincere relations with journalists and enlarged the rooms for press in White House and achieved to influence journalists. Along with the radio, another important tool of the elections during these years (1945-1960) to announce messages was the railways. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman travelled by trains and conducted electoral campaigns (Perloff, 2018: 226-227).

The first appearance of slogans as a political communication tool was during the presidential election in 1948 in the USA. During the election between Truman and Dewey, Truman's slogan "Give'em hell, Harry!" extremely impressed voters. It is known that the slogan had a significant effect on winning the election (Demir, 2018: 96).

As a new communication technology tool, TV was first used in the early 1950s in the USA and gained importance all over the world in the 1970s and the use of TV significantly affected the conduction of electoral campaigns (Woodward & Denton, 2014: 233).

With a higher preference of TV in daily life, we could say that political communication and electoral campaigns notably evolved. TV was first used as a political communication tool in the 1952 election in the USA between Stevenson and Eisenhower. Both leaders paid and had public speech on TV before the election.

As a result of wider use of TV in political and social areas in the 1960s, we might state that the electoral campaigns in the USA changed significantly. In the election in 1960, many TV channels organized open forums. Two candidates of the election, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy had an open forum on TV for the first time. The president that effectively benefited from TV in and after 1960 was John F. Kennedy (Perloff, 2018: 227).

In 1964, a totally new electoral campaign was experimented. The democrat candidate Johnson appeared on TV with a 30-second commercial called "Daisy Spot". This commercial has been regarded as the most successful election commercial in the USA. By the 1980s, politics in the USA became more mediatic and turned to feature the leader.

By the 1980s, politics in the USA became more mediatic and focused on leader's image (Güven, 2017: 181). The effect of TV reached its top at the time of Ronald Reagan. He was known as "Great Communicator" and he achieved to build up a friendly communication with Americans (Perloff, 2018: 229). With the help of this change and as he was used to cameras, famous Hollywood star, Ronald Reagan, won the election in 1980 and became the US president (Güven, 2017: 181).

The personal prestige of Reagan and extraordinary changes of Johnson's commercial in American elections did not stop open forums held between leaders on TVs. Discussions and open forums continued even after (Demir, 2018: 96).

During the electoral campaign in 1992, Bill Clinton tried to introduce himself as a more modern alternative of George H. W. Bush. Bush was entitled as a cloistered person by Clinton and other democrats. Clinton also played the saxophone in the late night show of Arsenio Hall and demonstrated his interest both in modern music and media. During the first two years of his governance, Clinton conducted 82 radio interviews and invited talk show makers to White House to introduce his health plan (Perloff, 2018: 231).

Following 2000, social media platforms along with TV have been an important communication tool for electoral campaigns. Barrack H. Obama frequently used YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in addition to questionnaires, polls, slogans, TV shows during the election in 2018. Similarly, Donald Trump also continued to use mainly Twitter and other similar social platforms. However, his strict complaints and critics about press made many Americans concerned. Unlike any other American presidents, Trump tried to dominate traditional and social media and put forward his own supporters' complaints about national policies, thus, could not achieve to be a proper American president figure following traditions (Perloff, 2018: 233-234).

Political communication started in Türkiye in the 1950s with the transition to multi-party system. Until that date, single party government of the Republican Public Party (CHP) was dominant and there was no competition in politics. In 1950, radio, the most effective communication tool of the time, was used for the first time for electoral campaigns. It was initiated by the Democrat Party (DP) directed by Adnan Menderes. After a change in applicable law, all parties were allowed to use radio channels for no charge to deliver their messages to voters providing that they start 15 days earlier and end 2 days before the election day. In ten years, newspapers became another tool of political communication along with radio. Journalists that closely followed the meetings and election visits of political party leaders and candidate deputies took over the responsibility of delivering messages and introducing candidates to voters (Demir, 2018: 97-98).

In the 1970s, political communication and electoral campaigns in Türkiye had a great change. In 1977, the Justice Party (AP) directed by Süleyman Demirel appointed a media agency, "Cen Ajans" for his party's electoral campaigns. It was the first time that a political party asked for professional help and cooperated with an agency to promote its campaigns, which was adopted by many other political parties in following years (Doğan, 2017: 17).

Before the 1983 election, an open forum was held on TV for the first time with three leaders of the election: Turgut Özal, Turgut Sunalp and Necdet Calp. This and other similar open forums with leaders remained as an effective election activity on Turkish voters (Doğan, 2017: 17).

In the history of elections held in Türkiye, political commercials first appeared on TV in 1987. The first parties taking advantage of these commercials were the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the Social Democrat Public Party (SHP). Many private TV channels were launched in Türkiye in the 1990s. Though these channels were not able to serve in a transparent and neutral way, more TV channels not also meant that the monopolization of Turkish Radio Television channel (TRT) ended, but also new channels with different

ideologies appeared and various political messages in different forms were delivered to more voters. Apart from that, a media owner that had close relations with the political leaders of the time established an illegal TV channel called “Magic Box”, which affected the importance of TV in competition and caused unfair competition in electoral campaigns (Demir, 2018: 99).

Since 2000 to this day, TV commercials, billboard advertisements, banners, posters, party soundtracks, open forums have been remarkable tools of electoral campaigns. Recently, social media has been effectively used as a means of communication. Today, social media is widely used both in politics and in every aspect of life.

### **Political Propaganda and Electoral Campaigns**

Political communication and political propaganda are closely related. The main aim of the electoral campaigns for political actors is to come to power and have a say in the governance of a country. To achieve this, political parties produce messages to deliver their political ideas and projects to voters. These messages are conveyed to voters by media and voters react these messages either by supporting or declining (Eraslan & Durur, 2018: 203).

Political propaganda means the delivery of any political ideology to voters by using mass media. Political propaganda is a process in which political actors develop deliberative policies to impress, change and control the attitudes and behaviors of individuals (Eraslan & Durur, 2018: 200).

Depending on the time it covers, political propaganda is divided into three steps: short-term, medium-term and long-term. Electoral campaigns are an example of short-term propaganda. Medium-term and long-term propagandas have different characteristics due to communication channels in use and content. Fascism in Italy by Mussolini, Nazi in Germany by Hitler and Communism in the Soviet Union are examples of medium-term and long-term propagandas (Aziz, 2014: 58-59).

Some differences exist between political communication and political propaganda. Political communication defines a process that functions for all times and conditions of social life, whereas political propaganda is political activity that is for voters, single-sided and short-lasting. In political communication, to achieve a goal takes a long time, however, in political propaganda does not require such a period. The aim of both is to form public opinion. The main difference between both terms is the method. Political communication rises on trust and is long-lasting series of activities, on the other hand, political propaganda is result-oriented and short-lasting (Örs, 2019: 54).

During an election period, flow of information between political parties and voters are at most and political communication activities are so intense, but then, communication between these groups has a downward trend. Meetings, visits to individuals and businesspeople and non-governmental activities are the most basic forms of electoral campaigns experienced during an election period (Örs, 2019: 55).

In democratic administrations, elections are an indispensable term of political participation and having a say in governance. Thanks to elections, voters have the right to elect their representative that is going to fight for their benefits. Candidate administrators, who definitely need the votes of individuals to achieve their goals, definitely need the support of voters. That’s why, political parties organize electoral campaigns to convince

voters, impress the public and to take over the political power. Historically, political communication and electoral campaigns changed depending on the political views of the time and technological developments, which also affected the relations between political parties and voters. For the last two centuries, in all countries, where general suffrage is aimed and becomes gradually universal and governing-governed people are elected, electoral campaigns are maintained depending on the country's political and social background. Globalization, rapid growth in mass media and developments in technology also deeply affected the relations between political parties and voters (Güven, 2017: 176).

The basic need and aim of political parties, one of the most critical actors of political communication, is to win the election and to come to power. To achieve this goal, these parties use many different political communication tools. Although there are many ways to promote political communication, they mostly prefer electoral campaigns, public surveys, canvassing, mass media, political party meetings and convincing messages (Kalender, 2005: 81). As one of these tools, canvassing has been frequently used for a long time now (Çavuşoğlu & Pekkaya, 2015: 94).

### **The Definition of Canvassing**

With its simple definition, canvassing is a political activity conducted by devoted volunteers of a political party to get information about voters and voters' attitudes (Bilir, 2011: 65).

Candidate deputies and political party representatives visit crowded places, visit individuals, talk to them about their problems and organize electoral campaigns. During these visits and meetings, the representatives give away agenda, banners, posters, badges, booklets and brochures. Thus, they are able to figure out the reactions of voters and find out who they will probably support (Çavuşoğlu & Pekkaya, 2015: 96).

In the view of political parties that desire to come to power and have a say in the governance of a country, attempts to have direct communication with voters are more economic and effective than any other political communication methods. Canvassing is a report and announcement activity in which devoted and volunteer members or appointed employees of a political party visit voters and tell them about election projects of their party. The activity is called canvassing and these practitioners are called canvasser (Erer, 2012: 57).

Canvassing includes getting information about the priorities of voters, impressing and trying to convince floating votes and directing voters to vote for the target party, and thus, canvassing increases the political interaction between the voter and the candidate and among voters themselves (Erer, 2012: 51). The aim of canvassing is to establish the most fundamental and primary relations between voters and party candidates and to increase political loyalty with the help of these relations (Anık, 2016: 253).

Though one of the main reasons for canvassing is to convince voters, this tool is mostly used to encourage voters to vote for a target party and to increase political participation (Kalender, 2007: 144).

### **The Forms of Canvassing: “Door-to-door Canvassing” and “Phone Canvassing”**

Canvassing, which mostly comes front during electoral campaigns, is a tool of political communication and has two forms. The first form focuses on face-to-face communication and is called door-to-door canvassing. The second form is getting in touch with voters on

the phone and is called phone canvassing. Door-to-door canvassing can be conducted in two ways: either through giving away party brochures, banners and posters or through having direct communication with voters. Direct communication with voters is known to be an old form of canvassing and is more preferred than the first way of door-to-door canvassing (Kalender, 2007: 145). There are two famous door-to-door canvassing activities in Türkiye: visiting coffee houses, where local people often come together, and voters' homes. These activities are organized and conducted in places where the candidate(s) of the political party has a higher possibility of winning the election. These activities let the candidate(s) be known closer by party grassroots and pull the votes of swing voters (Bilir, 2011: 66).

As mentioned above, another form of canvassing is phone canvassing. Political parties reach voters if they have a small number of members or have a limited time before the election (Çavuşoğlu & Pekaya, 2015: 96).

Phone canvassing can be performed in three forms. Political messages generated before the campaign by party officers are delivered to voters by automatic calls in the first form. The second form of phone canvassing is robocalls in which political party candidates/officers prepare recorded voice messages about election projects and deliver these records to voters through telemarketing companies. The third form includes phone calls made by devoted party lovers (Green & Gerber, 2004: 64-66).

Both door-to-door canvassing and phone canvassing have advantages and disadvantages. Door-to-door provides direct communication with voters and results in more sincere relations. Furthermore, voters can directly ask questions to political party representatives, so they have a chance of getting more information about election projects and party promises (Erer, 2012: 57). The disadvantages of door-to-door canvassing are the difficulties in finding professional/volunteer canvassers, the lack of or difficulty in organizations/plannings and the requirement of a great deal of money (Kalender, 2007: 146).

Though door-to-door canvassing has more positive effects on voters' attitudes than phone canvassing, in some cases, phone canvassing also owns positive results. It is highly advantageous for places where face-to-face communication is so limited and party representatives cannot plan visits due to geographic, physical or economic reasons. Another advantage of phone canvassing is that it is not affected by weather conditions and can be conducted between far away lands of a country. Phone canvassing can be preferred for voters living in apartments or hesitating to talk to foreigners. When time and expenses in door-to-door canvassing are considered, reaching voters in less than a minute and spending less volume of money are other advantages of phone canvassing. Though both forms of canvassing have advantages and disadvantages, thanks to its better convincing effects on voters during electoral campaigns, door-to-door canvassing is more preferred than phone canvassing (Kalender, 2013: 146-147).

### **Two Main Requirements For A Successful Canvassing: Organization and Planning**

To achieve a successful canvassing during electoral campaigns, political parties need to have good organization and planning structures. When the limited time of a campaign process is considered, organization and planning need to be well designed (Erer, 2012: 61).

To achieve electoral campaign targets through phone canvassing, a five-step process should be followed. These are planning, shipping election materials, phone communication, follow-up and phone help. Depending on the order, all activities should be justified at least 30 days earlier than the election day and brochures and booklets of the election should be shipped to voters and voters should be called on the day before the election. In the morning of the election day, party representatives should prepare the lists of voters and send these lists to the party headquarters every two hours. Finally, on the last day of the election, they should call individuals that haven't voted yet and encourage them to vote (Kalender, 2007: 147).

Door-to-door canvassing needs more rigorous organization and planning procedures. The flow of activities in door-to-door canvassing is as follows: planning target group, working on volunteers, preparing schedules, education and supervision. While planning target group, voters that will be included in canvassing are settled. Then, canvassers are informed and educated. These canvassers are mostly preferred to be volunteers and from party organization. However, if they have limited time or party organization has a low number of members, political parties can hire canvassers from non-governmental organizations, universities and businesses (Green & Gerber, 2004: 25-28).

Just before a door-to-door canvassing activity, canvassers need to be educated well and told how they should behave when they are with voters. Notes and feedbacks about voters' preference and reactions collected by these canvassers are so important for a successful canvassing (Kalender, 2007: 148).

Another critical step in door-to-door canvassing is schedule. The schedule should include where and when the canvassing is going to be conducted and what canvassers should be careful about (Kalender, 2007: 148). To achieve door-to-door canvassing, canvassers are asked not to have home visits late in the evening to prevent any adverse reaction of any voter. In general, canvassing is conducted between 5pm-7pm during weekdays and 10am-5pm on Saturdays. On Sundays, canvassers are flexible to decide on time depending on the cultural characteristics of the place. And again to achieve a successful door-to-door canvassing, the schedule should also define an average number of total individuals that canvassers need to visit a day. A study found out that canvassers should visit 12 individuals per hour for a successful canvassing, so political parties can calculate total time and total number of canvassers to appoint for their election activities (Green & Gerber, 2004: 26-29).

There are some rules that canvassers need to obey so that door-to-door canvassing might have better effects on voters. They should wear smart and clean clothes, be a good listener, be careful about personal needs/time, be broadminded, sincere, kind and not speak longer than needed and polemicize with voters and so on. These nonverbal rules are essential for a successful canvassing (Kalender, 2007: 149).

### **Empirical Studies on The Effects of Canvassing on Voters**

Beginning in the 1970s in the USA and gaining more importance to this day, canvassing has been an interesting subject for researchers to simply find out what effects canvassing have on voters. Almost all studies agree that all forms of canvassing encourage voters and contribute to their participation in elections. The studies in the 1970s examined the participation of voters and persuasion for voting a political party or a deputy. From

the results of these studies, it was found that canvassing is more effective on voters' participating in elections rather than impressing them to vote for a candidate. In countries like the USA where the participation rate is so low, canvassing has an effect to increase the rate of participation, where it is more effective in countries with high participation for persuading voters politically (Kalender, 2007: 152).

In literature, there is good number of empirical studies on both door-to-door and phone canvassing. It is possible to list leading empirical studies regarding canvassing in the world, especially in the USA:

- One of the most and oldest research on the effects of canvassing on voters belongs to Kramer in 1970. Kramer analyzed the elections in 1952, 1956, 1960 and 1964 and canvassing and found out that door-to-door canvassing in presidential elections increases the political participation, however, it is highly limited in local and national elections (Kalender, 2007: 150).
- Another study in 1970, during the governorship election for Wisconsin, evaluated the effects of political ads/commercials through mail survey on volunteers and campaign officers. From the research, they found that canvassing is more effective than TV, radio and newspaper ads/commercials (Sheinkopf et. al., 1972: 402-404).
- By the 1990s, in the study carried out by Krassa (1989: 63), it was found that canvassing has effects on voters by 36.4% (Kalender, 2007: 150).
- In the 2000s, the number of studies on canvassing increased. One of them studied the effects of phone, door-to-door and mailing on voters' attitudes in New Haven, 1998 and found out that door-to-door is more effective than phone and mailing canvassing (Gerber & Green, 2000: 653-661).
- In another study carried out on canvassing, the relations between door-to-door canvassing and its effects on voters in 6 different states in the USA. It was reported that electoral campaigns generally increase the participation in local elections, however, face-to-face relations with voters increases the rate of participation by 7% (Green et.al., 2003: 1094).
- Another study on door-to-door canvassing in the 2000s compared the participation rates for the elections in 2000 and 2004. The participation rate for the election in 2000 was 54.2%, whereas it was 60.3% for the election in 2004. The study concluded that the positive change occurs owing to effects of door-to-door canvassing (Bergan et.al., 2005: 760).

When we evaluate empirical studies in the USA on the effects of door-to-door canvassing on voters' attitudes, we might say that canvassing impresses participation and encouragement attitudes of voters. In first studies on the subject, the effects of door-to-door canvassing on party preference and political participation of voters were studied separately, then, the focus of studies became that door-to-door canvassing was more effective for the political participation of voters. In literature, there are also empirical studies on phone canvassing (Kalender, 2007: 151). And again in the USA, some of these studies on some positive and adverse effects of phone canvassing on voters are listed below:

- According to a study on phone canvassing, it was reported that phone canvassing is less effective than mailing in the election in New Haven in 1998 (Gerber & Green, 2000: 661).

- In 1998 and 2002, the studies carried out in New Haven, Iowa and Michigan found that phone canvassing had no effects on encouraging voters (Gerber & Green, 2001: 80);(Gerber & Green, 2005: 150).
- There are also studies on positive effects of phone canvassing on voters. In a study, Michigan, 2002, it was concluded that phone canvassing increase the participation rate by 3.2% (Kalender, 2007: 151).
- In the 2000s, three forms of phone canvassing and their results in voters' attitudes were the study subject of another study. From the results, robocalls has a little effect on participation, volunteer calls are more effective on voters' preferences, but this method is not suitable to reach as many voters as planned, and the effectivity of calls by professional companies varies depending they do not hurry to deliver political messages quickly (Green & Gerber, 2004: 77-78).

From these studies, we might say that door-to-door canvassing is more effective than phone canvassing on the attitudes of voters (Kalender, 2007: 151).

There are also some other empirical studies on canvassing carried out in Western European countries. Bhatti et.al. compiled studies conducted by researchers in England, France, Spain, Italy and Sweden and contributed to the literature by adding the example of Denmark in their study. From the study findings, they concluded that in all countries apart from England, door-to-door canvassing did not affect voter attitudes as effectively as it did in the USA (Bhatti et. al., 2016: 279-280).

Bhatti et.al. claims three reasons regarding why door-to-door canvassing is less effective in Western European countries than it's in the USA. The first reason is participation. The participation rate in Western Europe is higher than the USA. Most of the studies on canvassing in the USA focus on voters in elections with low rate participation. Due to its difficulty, this condition means the opportunity of door-to-door canvassing is preferred less in Western Europe than the USA. The second reason is cultural differences between these countries. Door-to-door canvassing is more frequently used in the USA than Western European countries apart from England. Western European voters are not used to encountering and enjoying political messages, hence, door-to-door canvassing is not common in these countries. The third reason is institutional differences. The USA uses presidency system and two candidates come front, however, Western European countries have parliamentary systems with proportional representation. In these countries, many parties and their leaders come front which makes door-to-door canvassing studies more complex. Another institutional difficulty is the obligation of enrollment in the USA. This obligation provides information for vote collectors about individuals and party members which in turn simplifies the conduction of electoral campaigns (Bhatti et. al., 2016: 280-281).

### **The Use of Canvassing in Türkiye and the RP**

Canvassing activities for electoral campaigns gained more importance in the 1990s and have been studied in political communication literature, however, there has been no empirical studies on its effects on Turkish voters (Kalender, 2007: 153). Although it's not proved by empirical studies, we might say that the only political party to use door-to-door canvassing effectively and successfully in the 1990s is the RP. The RP was the only political party that understood good effects of canvassing in those years (Özbudun, 2006: 554).

The devoted volunteers of the RP visited homes of voters, gave away party materials, talked to them about their problems and announced election projects and promises of the RP. The positive effect of door-to-door canvassing made the RP the first party to come to power by 21.4% in 1995 (Tunca, 2019: 2805).

### **Electoral Coordination Centers**

The RP set up small units called electoral coordination centers (ECC) in the party to organize election activities in the first year of its foundation, 1983. In the 1990s, ECC spread its organization structure to neighborhoods, villages, streets and even ballot boxes. A critical feature of ECC was that these centers did not function only the period of an election, but also they maintained activities even after the elections to evaluate voters. With its ECC organization, the RP took the advantage of door-to-door canvassing activities and educated members during the general election held in 1995. These members visited homes of voters and tried to impress the majority of swing voters (Tunca, 2019: 2805).

Most officers in ECC were volunteers. The party had more than 300 thousand volunteers just before the general election in 1995. In all regions of Türkiye, they built up organizations called divan with 50 permanent members and 50 reserve members. Apart from that, records with fine details about all voters under the control of volunteers were kept in computers and the data was delivered to neighborhood representatives and then to the general headquarters (Yeşilada, 2002: 70).

Especially, in the 1990s, the RP paid great attention to political communication and electoral campaigns and surpassed all other political parties. The foundation of ECC to coordinate election activities in accordance with the party's ideology and strategy made the RP come to power (Bilir, 2011: 104).

### **The Canvassers of the RP and Election Activities**

While other political parties in the 1990s had difficulties to find ballot box officers, volunteers of the RP did not only check and report ballot boxes, but also built up the organizational structure and arranged flights for Turkish voters abroad and allowed them to come, vote and go back on the same day (Bilir, 2011: 104).

The basis of these extraordinary relation among the RP lovers was the mentality of jihad that upper managements and party grassroots share (Baykal, 2017: 148). The close relation between the political ideology of the RP and Islamic jihad caused strong relations among the RP lovers and basic motivation of door-to-door canvassing (Çelebi, 2021: 252):

“Almost all activities like in the examples of a young man hanging a party brochure with a spiritual motivation that happiness after life does not depend on any status and everyone can work for Islam with his/her own power, of a member checking and reporting ballot box in Hakkari, of a young university student delivering party brochures to houses, of a female RP volunteer telling the party's messages to other housewives while offering them drinks and of all activities of the general director Necmettin Erbakan, seemed to be equal to gain the sake of Allah by all lovers of the RP. As a result, the RP organizations followed propaganda activities not for anything but for the sake of Allah and thinking of jihad. Therefore, there were no conflicts between the upper management and the grassroots of the party. The RP had always had a more united and dynamic appearance by comparison with other parties of the time.”

In the aspect of election activities, another activity that the RP canvassers do was to impress voters by videos. These canvassers took the records of speeches of mostly Necmettin Erbakan and other upper managers of the party and let voters watch them

during their visits in villages and towns. The voters had a better chance of understanding the ideology of the party closely and in detail (Eligür, 2010: 188).

The spiritual unity between the upper management and the grassroots of the party was the most basic motivation of the canvassers working day and night. The outstanding door-to-door canvassing efforts of the volunteers and how they were good at using computer technology during electoral campaigns is quoted by Çakır (1994: 75-76) as follows:

“The RP, unlike other political parties, achieved great success by not delivering its messages through media, instead, by delivering to people by direct speech. To invite all voters to ballot box and to wait for the ballot box until the next day might seem weird for many people today. However, with this traditional method, the RP won municipal elections. Many young people and self-sacrificing grassroots of the party worked hard as if there was an election coming soon. The RP built up its organizational structures depending on ballot box in every village and town and everybody in the party had responsibilities with different ranges like ballot box commission member, vice president of youth commission, the manageress of women commission of a neighborhood. The RP that was willing to pull Islamic votes only before 1980 is now maintaining an all-embracing approach. The RP lovers maintained campaigns in brothels, taverns and night clubs. They knocked every door. They tried to appoint a candidate with the characteristics of the place and chose volunteers with the same characteristics. They followed such scientific methods in mega cities, especially in Istanbul, that administrate chiefs wanted to use the data of the RP computers about the voters living in their city. “

All the rules mentioned above about canvassers while maintaining door-to-door canvassing are obeyed by the RP canvassers as well. The canvassers were trained by the communicational experts of the party about how they should be careful about ethnic, religious, social and economic conditions of a voter, they should not polemicize with voters and they should smile all the time (Eligür, 2010: 192). What's more, the volunteers of the RP used different expressions depending on the cultural and political differences of the regions. In regions with a higher number of Kurdish voters, they used Islamic expressions, whereas they focused on traditional subjects in conservative-sunni neighborhoods and delivered messages in suburbs with the content of justice and victimization of the RP (Arat, 2005: 84).

### **Women Commissions**

Another critical election activity that allowed the RP to come to power was the fact that women actively worked for politics. Successful activities maintained by women played a critical role in the achievements of the party. When men canvassers were unable to visit homes of voters, women took over the responsibility. These acts of women in the RP were also copied by other political parties. They did not randomly or without a plan instead, they were organized under a unit called Women Commission and supported the electoral campaigns of their party everywhere (Örs, 2019: 111).

The organizational structure of women commission was active both during before and after the elections. These activities were so useful to increase the number of women members in the party. In the report kept by the Istanbul provincial head of the party, the number of women members in the RP was 158.287 in 1995, whereas there were 377.888 women in the party in 1997 (Arat, 2005: 70).

The RP, which noticed the importance of door-to-door canvassing long before other political parties, shared some data regarding women activities as reported in the 1992 annual report in 1995. According to the data, the women in the RP performed 6350 tea

talks and 6857 house visits, which was a level that any of women's branch of other parties could reach (Gürel, 2007: 121).

The basic idea lying behind the success of women commissions was house visits and tea talks. At that time, the strict regulations and implementations of the idea of secularity in many public places, which caused many problems for the RP, and so the need of the canvassers while speaking about their election propaganda was considered that they would never be able to reach large number of people to deliver their messages. The women in the party took the advantage of visiting houses of voters because the houses were not public areas where secular rules were strictly implemented. During their visits and tea talks, these women had lessons from the holy book and obtained the chance of delivering their messages freely and comfortably, one of which was a very popular slogan of the time "fair order" (Adil Düzen) (Eligür, 2010: 195-197).

The women in the RP also adopted the use of different communicational language like other canvassers did and for different regions with different religions, ethnic base, cultural and political conditions, they preferred messages with different content. In areas where secular lifestyle is common, women that preferred to wear long jackets instead of black sheeting were appointed. They greeted people by saying "have a nice day" instead of saying "Assalamu Aleykum" though this way of greeting was more common within themselves. While visiting the suburbs, they told those places are disadvantageous because of service, whereas they gave speeches about adultery, alcohol and drugs in places where people have a higher level of welfare (Arat, 2005: 84-86).

### **Municipal Activities: White Tables and Public Parliaments**

After the election in 1994, the RP established units called white table in local managements, which were based on governor-individual relations, and thus the party was able to follow its voters. In one of his speech, the director of the RP, Necmettin Erbakan, informed people about white tables as follows (Örs, 2019: 258):

"Listen here! We established white tables in all municipalities. This is the style of Zembilli Ali Efendi. This scholar wanted to use his time effectively, so he left a basket and collected the questions of anyone. Then, he replied at night and informed them in the morning. Today, as successors of him, we, the religious teams in the RP are answering the problems of individuals within 24 hours. The difference is that he was using his basket for his purpose, whereas we have computers. The similarity is the fact that we share the same ideology, religion and love of service."

Another important information in this speech of Necmettin Erbakan, who emphasizes the importance of direct and face-to-face communication with voters, is that the RP organizations were able to use computers effectively for electoral campaigns though computer technology was not generally common in Türkiye. Deciding on target group, an important step in canvassing, and preparing the lists of voters were all performed and recorded in computer by the RP organizations. The RP organizations used to keep the lists of voters in all cities of Türkiye and it's claimed that sometimes the board of election needed help/data from these organizations (Örs, 2019: 258).

Apart from white tables, another foundation that worked all the time for face-to-face communication of the RP municipalities was public parliaments. These parliaments included coffee house talks during which mayors listened to problems of individuals and complaints about the municipality. The basis of these public parliaments was based on SE-DE (abbreviation for inspect those you voted) project (Baykal, 2017: 276).

There are many political and social reasons for the rise and success of the RP in the 1990s such as the increasing number of terror events, the scandal of water and sewerage services in Istanbul (İSKİ), corruption in the government, economic crises, strict secular implementations, bans on hijab, different projects and “fair order” idea of the RP though other political parties could not build up any ideas and projects, and the rise in Islamic thinking and lifestyle. The RP took the advantage of these problems and combined them with its careful and successful door-to-door canvassing tools. The close communication of the RP canvassers with the voters by visiting and talking about these problems was the reason for the RP’s accession to power at first rank in 1995 and made the director, Necmettin Erbakan, the prime minister.

### **Conclusion**

With its the simple definition, one of the methods used in political communication, canvassing is to pull votes of voters. Canvassing can be performed either by door-to-door visits or phone calls. Two main requirements for a successful canvassing is organization and planning. Political parties especially and naturally prefer to perform canvassing activities during elections.

Both encouraging more voters to participate in elections and convincing more voters to vote for a party are two important purposes of canvassing. Many empirical studies conducted in the USA showed that canvassing mostly serves for the first purpose. On the other hand, canvassing activities maintained in Türkiye are mainly for the second purpose. It is believed that by comparison with the USA, the electoral participation rate of individuals in Türkiye is so high. According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) the participation rates in the deputy elections between 1980 and 2000 were: 92.3% in 1983, 93.3% in 1987, 83.9% in 1991, 85.2% in 1995 and 87.1% in 1999. (TÜİK. Milletvekili Genel Seçimleri 1923-2011, 2012: 93). The data shows the interest of Turkish individuals in participating in elections, thus, canvassing activities are not performed for the participation, but for the convincing voters.

The social, religious and cultural characteristics of the USA and other countries are different from Türkiye’s. Turkish voters closely follow media performances, meetings, TV shows between leaders, political ads/commercials and many other electoral campaigns especially before the elections. However, they also find these insufficient and want political representatives to visit them. This demand was felt greatly by the political parties in and long before the 1990s because communication technology was not as developed as today. Necmettin Erbakan realized the need and performed successful canvassing activities and marked on the politics in Türkiye in the 1990s.

An advantage of successful canvassing of the RP was that governments of the time were not eligible to find solutions for political, economic and social problems, that they were corrupted and worn, but the RP was new and dynamic. Another advantage of the RP was that other political parties were unable to produce projects like “fair order” project. The RP fulfilled this political gap with its powerful and successful door-to-door canvassing activities and came to power.

During the 1990s, the RP did not only perform door-to-door canvassing activities. Like other political parties, the RP also printed brochures, banners, organized meetings, had TV commercials and arranged visits to coffee houses and coffee house meetings. The difference between the RP and other political parties is the activities that the RP

maintained with its successful canvassing tools, one of the most critical methods of political communication. At this point, we cannot say that other political parties did not canvass at all. However, compared to other political parties, the RP owned a strong formal-informal organizational structure, had good politicians and had millions of volunteers and members in the party grassroots that were sincerely loved and agreed on due to strong spiritual idea of jihad.

Following the 2000s and especially today, the rapid growth in mass media caused variety, intense digitalization and the spread of governmental and personal relations online. As a result of these developments, Turkish individuals do not want to be visited by the representatives of the political parties. These developments also changed the qualities for political communication and electoral campaigns. Therefore, today, door-to-door canvassing seems to be kept out of electoral campaigns of political parties because of the fear that voters might react adversely.

### Notlar

1 The Refah Party is a political party known for its Islamic background in Turkish Politics. Actually, the word "refah" is different from "welfare" that embodies a liberal and capitalist concept including materials. During its governance, the activists of the party used the word as a term emphasizing on spiritual peace along with its material meaning. Thus, instead of using the translation of "the Welfare Party"(WP), Turkish abbreviation of the party (RP) was used.

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# Siyasal Bir İletişim Aracı Olarak Canvassing: Türkiye’de Refah Partisi’nin Canvassing Kullanımı Üzerine Bir Çalışma

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## Genişletilmiş Özet

Demokratik yönetim biçimlerinde siyasal partilerin veya liderlerin temel amacı ülkeyi yönetmek için gerekli olan seçmen desteğine ulaşarak siyasal iktidarı ele geçirmektir. Bu amaca ulaşmak için siyasal partiler seçim vaatlerini ve projelerini başta medya olmak üzere çeşitli iletişim araçlarını kullanarak seçmenlere iletmeye çalışırlar. Seçmenler de kendilerine siyasal parti temsilcileri tarafından aktarılan siyasal mesajları kendi zihin dünyalarında değerlendirerek oy verme davranışında bulunurlar. “Siyasal aktörler”, “medya” ve “seçmenler” arasında yaşanan bu sürece siyasal iletişim süreci denir. Çok geniş bir kavram olarak farklı anlamlara gelse de seçim dönemlerini kapsayan dar anlamıyla siyasal iletişim, siyasal aktörlerin çeşitli iletişim kanallarıyla ilettikleri siyasal mesajların seçmenlere ulaştırılması ve seçmenlerin de bu mesajlara oy verme davranışlarıyla karşılık vermesi faaliyetidir.

Seçmenlerin oylarını kazanmaya yönelik siyasal iletişim faaliyetleri özellikle II. Dünya Savaşı’ndan sonra hız kazanmıştır. ABD başta olmak üzere Batılı demokratik ülkelerde iletişim teknolojilerine bağlı olarak çeşitli siyasal kampanyalar düzenlenmiştir. 1950’lerde siyasal partilerin propaganda faaliyetleri radyo aracılığıyla yapılmıştır. Sonraki süreçte televizyon radyonun yerini almış ve liderlerin açık oturum tartışmaları, kısa siyasal reklam filmleri önemli bir siyasal iletişim faaliyeti olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Günümüzde televizyon, siyasal partilerin seçim kampanyalarını seçmenlere iletmek için hala önemli bir iletişim aracı olarak önemini korusa da internet alanında yaşanan gelişmelerin bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan sosyal medya olgusu siyasal aktörlerin seçim çalışmalarını bu mecrayı da dikkate alarak yapmalarını zorunlu kılmıştır.

Tarihsel süreç içerisinde siyasal partiler iletişim teknolojilerinde yaşanan gelişmelere ayak uydurmak suretiyle seçim kampanyalarını çağın gereklerine uygun bir şekilde düzenlemişlerdir. Fakat teknolojik ilerleme her ne kadar gelişmiş olursa olsun seçmene dokunma anlamına gelebilecek doğrudan iletişim yöntemleri hiçbir zaman önemini kaybetmemiştir. Seçim dönemlerinde siyasal partiler seçim kampanyaları kapsamında yazılı ve görsel medyayı etkin bir şekilde kullanmakla birlikte seçmenlerle doğrudan iletişim kurma yöntemlerini göz ardı etmemektedirler.

Siyasal iletişimin önemli yöntemleri arasında yer alan ve özellikle seçim dönemlerinde yoğunluk kazanarak siyasal partiler tarafından ev ziyaretleri kapsamında seçmenlerle birebir iletişim kurmayı gerektiren canvassing (yüzyüze oy toplama) uygulaması önemini hiçbir zaman kaybetmemiştir.

Ev ziyaretleri yapılarak parti ideolojilerinin seçmenlere iletilmesi faaliyetine canvassing ismi verilmektedir. Bu faaliyeti yürütenlere de “canvasser” denilmektedir. Canvassingin, “kapı kapı canvassing” ve “telefon canvassingi” olmak üzere iki çeşidi bulunmaktadır. Kapı kapı canvassingin seçmen davranışları üzerinde telefon canvassingine göre daha fazla etkisi vardır.

Başarılı bir canvassing uygulaması için siyasal partilerin iyi bir örgütlenme ve organizasyon yapısına ihtiyaçları vardır. İyi bir “planlama”, “programlama”, “eğitim” ve “denetim” canvassing çalışmalarının başarıyla sonuçlanması için gerekli olan aşamalarıdır. Planlama aşamasında ziyaret edilecek bölgeler ve hedef kitle olarak seçilecek seçmen grupları belirlenmeli; programlama aşamasında hangi gün ve saatlerde nerelere ziyaretlerin gerçekleştirileceği ayarlanmalı; eğitim aşamasında canvasserlerin seçmenlerle iletişim kurarken nelere dikkat edeceği, nasıl giyineceği, jest ve mimiklerinin nasıl olacağı ve seçmenlerle nasıl konuşulması gerektiği anlatılmalı ve son olarak denetim aşamasında yapılan ziyaretlerden karşılık alınıp alınmadığının tespiti yapılmalıdır.

Canvassing uygulamasının iki amacı vardır. Birincisi seçmenleri sandığa gitmeye teşvik ederek seçimlere katılım oranlarını artırmak, ikincisi ise siyasal partilerin kendi ideolojileri doğrultusunda seçmenleri oy vermeye ikna etmek. Canvassingin bu iki amacını test etmeye yönelik ampirik çalışmalar ABD’de yoğunluk kazanmıştır. Araştırma sonuçları seçmenler üzerinde kapı kapı canvassingin telefon canvassinginden daha fazla etkili olduğunu, canvassingin amaçları arasında yer alan seçimlere katılımı artırmada başarılı bir canvassing çalışmasının işe yaradığını fakat canvassingin seçmenleri parti tercihi konusunda ikna etme amacının istenilen oranda gerçekleşmediğini ortaya koymuştur.

Türkiye’de canvassing uygulamasını istatistiksel verilerle ölçen bir ampirik çalışmaya rastlanılmamaktadır. Bu durum canvassing yönteminin Türkiye’de uygulanmadığı anlamına gelmemektedir. Ampirik çalışmalara konu olmasa da, 1990’lı yıllarda faaliyet gösteren siyasal partiler arasında Refah Partisi’nin (RP) kapı kapı canvassing yöntemini en etkili ve başarılı bir şekilde kullanan tek parti olduğunu iddia etmek, dönemin siyasal ve toplumsal gerçekliği göz önüne alındığında yanıltıcı olmayacaktır.

RP birbirine cihad anlayışıyla bağlanan gönüllü ordusunun kapı kapı canvassing faaliyetleri sonucu iktidara gelmeyi başarmıştır. Parti bünyesinde Seçim Koordinasyon Merkezleri (SKM) oluşturularak sandıklardan, köylere, mahallelere, ilçelere ve oradan da illere doğru ilerleyen bir organizasyon zinciri kurulmuş, seçmenlere yönelik detaylı bilgiler bilgisayar kayıtlarına geçirilmiş ve apartman dairelerine varıncaya kadar neredeyse tüm seçmenler RP gönüllüleri tarafından mercek altına alınmıştır. RP’li canvasserlerin belirlenen listeler üzerinden kapı kapı dolaşarak gerçekleştirdikleri ev ziyaretleri seçmenler üzerinde önemli etki oluşturmuştur.

Kapı kapı canvassingin başarıya ulaşmasında RP’li kadınların yapmış olduğu seçim çalışmalarına ayrı bir parantez açmak gerekmektedir. Özellikle İstanbul’da RP’li kadınlar erkeklerin nüfuz edemediği binlerce haneye ev ziyaretlerinde bulunmuşlar, çay sohbetleri düzenlemişler, RP ideolojisini daha samimi ortamlarda kadın seçmenlere aktarma imkanına sahip olmuşlardır. RP’nin iktidar yürüyüşünde RP’li kadınların bu faaliyetleri özellikle kadın seçmenler üzerinde bir hayli etkili olmuştur.

Türk siyasal hayatında canvassing ve özellikle kapı kapı canvassing denilince ilk akla gelen siyasal parti RP’dir. 1990’lı yıllarda RP’nin başarılı kapı kapı canvassing çalışmaları halen hafızalarda yerini almaktadır. Literatürde canvassing bağlamında RP’nin incelendiği bilimsel makalelere rastlanılmamıştır. Çalışma bu anlamda söz konusu boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyasal İletişim, Siyasal Propaganda, Seçim Kampanyaları, Canvassing, Refah Partisi.

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In this study, the rules stated in the “**Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive**” were followed.

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