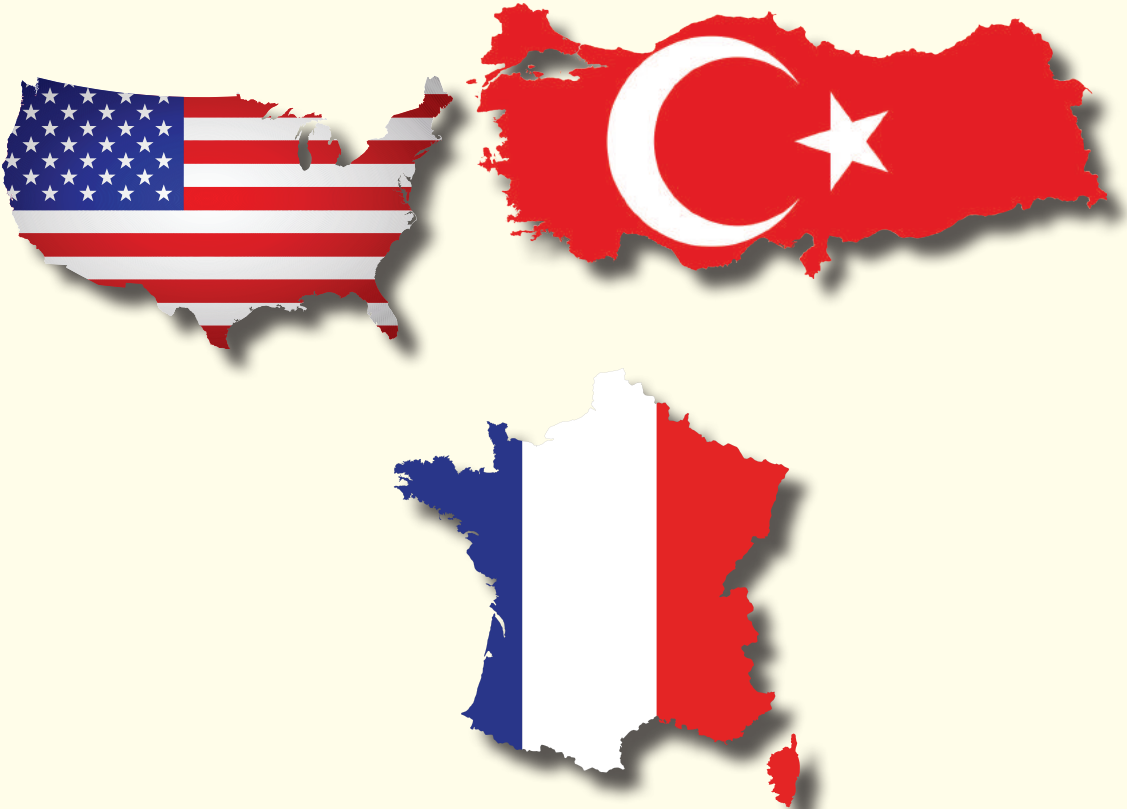




مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط  
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# Grassroots Mobilisation of Political Parties: Three Case Studies

Research Department



Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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## Introduction

World politics today are going through a stage of upheaval. In many countries, parties that have ruled for years and even decades are being replaced by new parties that often push an alternative and, sometimes, anti-establishment agenda. Other times, established parties have fielded candidates that nevertheless bucked established trends, capturing the minds and imaginations of the voters in the process.

This paper looks at three case studies: The Justice and Development Party in Turkey and its election in 2002, the La République En Marche in France and its election in 2017 and the Democratic Party in the United States and its election in 2008. All offer different insights as to how grassroots support can be mobilised and retained. From social media to civic society to direct democracy, all these parties offer different stories as to why they succeeded.

However, through it all, a common point remains: In all cases, these parties supplanted parties or systems that had lost credibility. Furthermore, in all cases, these parties were able to present a vision that not only resonated with core voters but also with opponents and sceptics.

## Case Studies

### Turkey: The Justice and Development Party

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)) is a relatively new political party, having been founded in 2001 and subsequently winning its first elections in 2002. The party has since steadily increased its electoral majority, experiencing dips only in the elections of June 2015 (which was recovered in the November 2015 elections) and June 2018 (where it retained bloc majority). As of 2018, it has some 10 million members<sup>1</sup>.

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1. «Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi», T.C. Yargıtay Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığı, 10-July-2018 (Last Updated), <<https://www.yargitaycb.gov.tr/sayfa/faaliyette-olan-siyasi-partiler/1095>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

The party's ability to maintain electoral successes despite numerous crises and periods of economic or foreign policy troubles has been held as a remarkable example of resilience in a country where political parties have been known to emerge and fade away rapidly. Much of the success has been attributed to the charismatic persona of its founder, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Indeed, the political discourse of the Turkish Opposition frequently painted Erdoğan's supporters as gullible or ignorant for continuing to vote for him. However, it should be noted that Erdoğan's success, as well as the grassroots movements that propelled him to leadership and kept him there, have a much longer history.

The movement corresponds roughly to the Muslim conservative and, oftentimes, rural population of Turkey. The secular and Western-looking policies of the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, often didn't resonate with this demographic, compelling supporters to vote for parties alternative to Atatürk's Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP)). Such parties, starting with the now-defunct Democrat Party, were often subject to legal pressure from the Turkish Army (which regarded itself as the defender of secularism) or were outright banned. These periods of suppression prevented the movement from gaining political power but also gave it a self-identity and a persecution narrative that Erdoğan would go on to utilise.

The movement also found itself more political room to operate in the aftermath of the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s. This period was characterised by escalating attacks between socialist-communists and the nationalists, resulting in authorities and, later, the Turkish military, in cracking down on both sides. The proto-Islamist civil society emerged relatively unscathed and grew even as the rest grew politically apathetic<sup>2</sup>. In effect the Islamist civil society in Turkey came to fill a vacuum left by other political groups.

By the 1990s, the movement was represented by the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi (RP)) of which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was a member of. The party, founded in 1983, became the largest party in 1996 before being forced out in 1997 during the "Post-modern coup" and being shut down in 1998, with many members including Erdoğan banned<sup>3</sup>. Its successor, the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi (FP)) was also shut down. These events would have significant impacts on how Turkish Islamists viewed political power<sup>4</sup>.

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2. Malashenko, Alexey; Shlykov, Pavel. «“Anti-Kemalist” Revolution: Where is Turkey Going?», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22-September-2011, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/22/anti-kemalist-revolution-where-is-turkey-going-event-3479>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

3. Friedman, Dov. «The Causes of the Coup Attempt in Turkey: A History of the Usual Suspects», War on the Rocks, 21-July-2016, <<https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/the-causes-of-the-coup-attempt-in-turkey-a-history-of-the-usual-suspects/>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

4. Ibid.

Two successor parties emerged from the FP: The Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi (SP)) and the AKP. While the SP retained loyal to the National Vision (Millî Görüş) ideology of the RP, the AKP, founded by Erdoğan in 2001, took a more pragmatic route. The AKP branded itself as a traditional centre-right party more akin to the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom or the Republican Party in the United States. Islam was held close but not as an ideological lynchpin, allowing the party to portray itself as a moderate party without running afoul of secularism. AKP also built a group of core supporters from technocrats and veterans of municipalities to increase its governance credentials. Indeed, as the former mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan himself already had a “brand name” recognition.

The AKP’s timing was opportune, as it took place against the backdrop of an economic crisis that took place in 2001. The crisis was a result of the post 1997 coalition government collapsing, leaving the main parties that participated in it discredited and demoralised. During its election campaign, the AKP took advantage of the situation, emphasising fixing the economy as one of its core goals.

Thus, by the time the elections took place in 2002, the AKP already had a large pool of civil society activists and grassroots supporters ready to vote for what the party represented. These voters were joined by those who felt disillusioned with previous governments. The party’s performance was also likely aided by voter apathy in the opposition. It should be noted that despite this, the AKP only got 34% of the vote, highlighting that the initial victory of the AKP was less due to the party’s position of strength but more due to the weakness of its opposition<sup>5</sup>.

How AKP has increased its support in the intervening years and retained grassroots support is a matter of intense speculation among Turkey observers. Western analysts, especially, tend to overemphasize on Erdoğan’s “strongman” charisma. However, the fact remains that in its early years, AKP’s economy reforms genuinely brought forth growth and development. Ties with neighbouring countries also improved. Thanks to the peace process in the late 2000s, Erdoğan was even able to gain significant Kurdish votes<sup>6</sup>.

It should not be forgotten that Erdoğan is indeed a master of Turkish politics and has not shied away from using dirty tactics to discredit the opposition, suppress the press or appeal to the anxieties of the Turkish populace, appealing to such anxieties during

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5. «Erdogan triumphs—with plenty of help from his enemies», *The Economist*, 7-November-2002, <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2002/11/07/erdogan-triumphs-with-plenty-of-help-from-his-enemies>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

6. Kadercan, Burak. «The Year of the Gray Wolf: The Rise of Turkey’s New Ultranationalism, War on the Rocks, 16-July-2018, <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-year-of-the-gray-wolf-the-rise-of-turkeys-new-ultranationalism/>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

times of crisis or confrontation<sup>7</sup>. Erdoğan is also highly adept at earning the acquiescence of political factions not aligned with him. For instance, the Kurdish peace process was aimed at gaining the Kurdish vote at the cost of alienating the nationalist vote, then represented by the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP)). When the peace process in 2015 broke down, Erdoğan formed an alliance with the MHP, ensuring the survival of his political bloc even as AKP itself lost votes<sup>8</sup>. However, the spontaneous, pro-Erdoğan (or just anti-coup) protesters in July 2016 Coup Attempt suggests that many grassroots Turks do support him, as opposed to the alternative<sup>9</sup>.

It remains to be seen if the AKP can maintain its grassroots support. Although the 2018 elections ended with a victory for Erdoğan's bloc, the AKP itself lost significant percentage of votes to its coalition partner, MHP. Newly-minted nationalist Good Party (İYİ Parti) also won 10% of the vote, especially among young nationalists. The nationalist growth is especially pertinent, given that İYİ was subject to heavy censorship in the Turkish media while the MHP did not hold a single rally<sup>10</sup>.

Ultimately, the success of AKP's grassroots strategy can be linked to the presence of a discredited opposition, a pool of civil society activists that grew over the decades, a genuine appeal due to ideological or historic reasons and Erdoğan's own political acumen.

#### France: La République En Marche:

La République En Marche (LREM), often shortened to just En Marche, was founded by then-government minister Emmanuel Macron in 2016. Despite its young stature as a party, it managed to win the 2017 French presidential election with a 66.1% margin against Marine Le Pen's National Front (Front National (FN)). It has over 400,000 "adherents" (members), making it far higher than any other party in France<sup>11</sup>.

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7. Ozcelik, Burcu. «The AKP's Resilience in Turkey», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3-November-2015, <[carnegieendowment.org/sada/61855](https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61855)>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

8. Kadercan, Burak. «The Year of the Gray Wolf: The Rise of Turkey's New Ultranationalism, War on the Rocks, 16-July-2018, <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-year-of-the-gray-wolf-the-rise-of-turkeys-new-ultranationalism/>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

9. Unver, Akin; Alassaad, Hassan. «How Turks Mobilized Against the Coup», Foreign Affairs Magazine, 14-September-2016, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-14/how-turks-mobilized-against-coup>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

10. Kadercan, Burak. «The Year of the Gray Wolf: The Rise of Turkey's New Ultranationalism, War on the Rocks, 16-July-2018, <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-year-of-the-gray-wolf-the-rise-of-turkeys-new-ultranationalism/>>, [Accessed 15-October-2018]

11. «La carte des comités», En Marche, October 2017, <<https://en-marche.fr/le-mouvement/la-carte>>, [Accessed 16-October-2018]

The victory of LREM, especially on such a short span of time following its founding, is often attributed to its ability to rally grassroots support. Indeed, from the beginning, LREM framed itself less as a political party and more as a movement. This is not a unique trend. Other parties, such as Spain's Podemos, Italy's Five Star Movement and the Jeremy Corbyn faction of the United Kingdom's Labour Party have also taken on to presenting themselves as movements in recent years. But whereas Podemos, Five Star and Corbyn-Labour grew organically out of grassroots anti-establishment groups, LREM was founded specifically by Macron who was looking to run for French Presidency<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, while Macron as relatively unknown by the public, he was still an established government minister at the time rather than a political outsider.

Despite these factors, LREM went through great efforts to bolster its credibility as a grassroots actor. Macron avoided launching his party in a top-down fashion with predetermined policy positions. Instead, the party held a large-scale conversation with its citizens, labelled Grand Marche. Some 5,000 volunteers conducted 45 minute in-depth interviews with 25,000 people across France on their views on the country, their problems, the challenges their communities faced and their desired future. All this data was filtered to experts within LREM<sup>13</sup>. This exercise was similar to the opinion polls conducted by other parties but much larger in scale, resulting in the publication of a document diagnosing France's problems<sup>14</sup>. Never before had any party (or government entity) had published such a document. The public input in the formation of the party chapter has helped the party's positions and policies resonate with voters especially amidst many voters losing faith in the established parties.

LREM was also notable for its open-door policy. The party was open to anyone regardless of party affiliation, changing the mode from an active membership model to an adherent model. Unlike other parties, they were not required to make monetary donations to the party, only agree to its charter and submit contact information. This has allowed LREM to garner large quantities of voter data of different backgrounds at very low cost. The open adherence model also allowed the party to gain large quantities of small donations that accumulated thanks to the party's open model. Bruno Bonnell,

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12. Chwalisz, Claudia. «En Marche: From a Movement to a Government», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6-April-2018, <[carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=75985](https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=75985)>, [Accessed 6-April-2018]

13. Chwalisz, Claudia. «En Marche: From a Movement to a Government», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6-April-2018, <[carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=75985](https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=75985)>, [Accessed 6-April-2018]

14. «Le Diagnostic du pays», En Marche, 20-October-2016, <<https://en-marche.fr/articles/actualites/le-diagnostic>>, [Accessed 16-October-2018]

LREM's coordinator in Lyon, referred to the party's methods as "guerrilla style"<sup>15</sup>.

LREM also retained credibility due to Macron avoiding adhering to long-standing French political taboos, such as defying trade unions. During the campaign, Macron was forthright about the need to reform public services at the face of intense opposition<sup>16</sup>. Although this garnered some backlash to Macron, his position was compared generally favourable to Jacques Chirac who, in 1995, promised to "mend social fracture" without prescribing policy positions. Upon his election, he put forward tough measures to cut public spending, resulting in many voters feeling betrayed and taking to the streets<sup>17</sup>. In Macron's case, his gamble appears to have paid off, and he was able to quell most trade unions into accepting his reforms following the election. What discontent there was gradually fizzled away<sup>18</sup>.

It would be amiss to attribute Macron and LREM's victory without contextualising the wider developments in Europe and around the world. The French elections took place against the backdrop of what was referred to as the "populist wave" around the world, ranging from the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom to the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Macron's main opponent, Marine Le Pen the FN was part of this wave, having been associated with the far-right movements in Europe. Following the developments in 2016, grassroots movements mobilised to counter the far-right and populist movements around Europe by countering their narrative and presenting a positive vision of Europe. Le Pen's at-times-open association with the far-right galvanised these activists, compelling them to support her opponents<sup>19</sup>. In contrary, Le Pen's attempts to "de-demonise" her party were viewed as half-hearted and her indecisive position on numerous policies lost her credibility<sup>20</sup>.

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15. Chisafis, Angélique. «The grassroots «guerilla army» powering Macron's French election battle», *The Guardian*, 3-April-2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/03/emmanuel-macron-french-presidential-candidate-grassroots-movement>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

16. Pedder, Sophie. «Macron's Reformist Victory», *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 24-July-2018, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2018-07-24/macrons-reformist-victory>>, [Accessed 16-October-2018]

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. De Gruyter, Caroline. «The Rise of Europe's Antipopulists», *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <[carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/25/rise-of-europe-s-antipopulists-pub-68764](https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/25/rise-of-europe-s-antipopulists-pub-68764)>, [Accessed 25-April-2017]

20. Goldhammer, Arthus. «Macron's Victory», *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 7-May-2017, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2017-05-07/macrons-victory>>, [Accessed 16-October-2018]



Thus, the victory of the LREM and the ascendancy of Emmanuel Macron to the presidency can be boiled down to several factors. Like the AKP, LREM emerged at a time when traditional parties had lost credibility and the opposition was viewed as less credible, albeit for reasons different than the Turkish opposition. Unlike the AKP, LREM did not have access to a pre-existing civil society movement that had grown over the years but was able to mobilise one through an open and inclusive system that let voters feel they were being listened to while allowing the party to modify its language to better resonate with voters. The party was also able to bolster credibility among those (such as anti-populist and anti-far-right activists) who did not necessarily would have voted for LREM under different circumstances.

Today, the main challenge LREM faces is to reconcile its top-down model with that of a standard, hierarchical political party. Macron also faces pressures passing the reforms he pushed for due to Europe-wide and world-wide developments that are not under his control and may still damage his credibility.

### The United States: The Democratic Party

Unlike the AKP and LREM, the Democratic Party of the United States is not a new party but one of the two established parties, the other being the Republican Party. However, the election of Democratic Party candidate Barack Obama in 2008 has nevertheless significant, as he was previously viewed as an unlikely candidate. Furthermore, his campaign saw the first concerted use of social media platforms that were becoming ubiquitous at that point, allowing Obama to mobilise supporters previously apathetic or otherwise uninterested.

Obama's election came to fore after the party failed to win the elections in 2004, despite the negative impacts of the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003 becoming increasingly apparent. As early as 2006, the party was exploring its strategy of why it lost in 2004. The common conclusion among the party was that it had failed to produce a coherent strategy that appealed to its idealistic and pragmatic segments. It therefore set out to identify which issues held priority among its members and which issues were of secondary importance. Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton emerged as the main Democratic Party figures around this period, representing the idealistic and pragmatic strands of the party<sup>21</sup>.

The US system dictates that prior to the presidential elections, both parties need to nominate a presidential candidate through their National Committees. These events, referred to as the National Convention, allows party members to have a voice in who the party's candidate is, giving the US system a unique participatory mechanism through which grassroots members can contribute. By the time the Democratic National Convention (DNC) was held in 2008, Barack Obama's campaign had already been on the campaign trail.

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21. «The Progressive Left: An Emerging Strategy», Stratfor, 16-June-2006, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/progressive-left-emerging-strategy>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

Obama's success is attributed to a number of factors, the most important of which being his oratory and rhetorical skills. Like most "Big Tent" parties, the Democratic Party has numerous factions within itself, covering political positions of different spectrums. The challenge in any such party is to gain the support of all (or at least enough) of these segments to be nominated. Analysts suggest that Obama's written policies were not too different than his in-party opponents such as Hilary Clinton, his predecessor George W. Bush or his Republican presidential opponent, John McCain. However, he was able to use his rhetorical skills to convey to his audience that he would pursue certain policies and political positions<sup>22</sup>. In doing so, Obama was able to avoid falling into the pitfalls that entrap many US presidents: that many positions such as foreign policy remain surprisingly continuous across administrations despite the convictions of the president or their party<sup>23</sup>. This is in contrast to Clinton who was more divisive due to her support for the Iraq War and her relative lack of charisma. At the 2008 DNC, Obama became the Democratic Party candidate by obtaining 72% of the votes.

Once the Democratic nominee, Obama used these same skills on a national level. Obama took great care to earn the support of not only his core supporters but also rivals and opponents. Both during the campaign and after his election, Obama recruited numerous officials who had worked under Hilary Clinton and George W. Bush, culminating in Clinton herself becoming his Secretary of State.

These skills were bolstered by the Obama campaign's unprecedented use of social media. Obama's campaign manager, Jim Messina, noted that the party's goals, from day one, was to mobilise grassroots support<sup>24</sup>. The first thing his team did was to identify which traditional methods of gathering data and support were obsolete. For instance, he noted that traditional polling methods (through landlines) often failed to reach or galvanise young and minority voters. The team therefore hired individuals with experience in modern marketing, letting them build innovative methods to help drive-up support<sup>25</sup>.

The campaign also used innovative data-gathering methods that were giving much more accurate data on swing-states and allowed the campaign to send out much more accurate and personalised e-mails and letters to help invest interest. The main recognition was that social media was becoming a force while door-to-door campaigning was not as

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22. «Obama: First Moves», Stratfor, 24-November-2008, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/obama-first-moves>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

23. «Democrats and a Policy Dilemma», Stratfor, 9-June-2006, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/democrats-and-policy-dilemma>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

24. Gibson, Ginger. «Messina touts grassroots strength», Politico, 20-November-2012, <<https://www.politico.com/story/2012/11/messina-obama-built-biggest-grassroots-campaign-084080>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

25. Ibid

effective as it was. Recognising these shifts and using more accurate analytics gave the Obama campaign some surprising gains, such as in the state of Iowa<sup>26</sup>.

The campaign also encouraged volunteers to add personal touches to the campaign, allowing them to both take ownership of the campaign while also allowing them to reach voters in a way that an ordinary, top-down campaign would not have reached. Sometimes, these touches involved the creation of local Democratic Chapters. Other times, these additions were more focused on being memorable than informative. However, they nevertheless increased the “brand name” recognition of Obama in contrast to McCain<sup>27</sup>. Partly due to these efforts, the Obama campaign was able to raise more funds than any other presidential candidate, far surpassing McCain in the process<sup>28</sup>.

Curiously, the Democratic Party failure in the 2016 elections can be linked to the very same factors that allowed the party to succeed in 2008. In the intervening eight years, the party came to be seen losing touch with the “common man”. Unlike the 2008 election where the party worked to obtain support of all segments of the US populace, analysts note that it was complacent in 2016 due to the assumption that demographics were on its side and that the rival candidate, Donald Trump, lacked credibility<sup>29</sup>. The party also suffered more intense divisions during the DNC of 2016 where the margin of win by Clinton (by 59%) was a lot closer to his rival, Bernie Sanders. Clinton was since viewed as unable to get many disillusioned Sanders voters on her side. This shows that while a weak or unattractive opposition may help a party on the path of victory, this is far from assured, highlighting even further why the AKP, LREM and 2008 Democratic Party succeeded.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of the Democratic Party, AKP and LREM shows a number of common points. In all cases, the parties were replacing parties or a system that had lost widespread support and whose followers were disillusioned. Sometimes, they built on pre-existing supporter networks (such as the Democratic Party and the AKP) to refine their message and help it resonate with the voters. Other times, they built support from the ground up

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26. Colvile, Robert. «Barack Obama's grassroots campaign was unprecedented», The Telegraph, 6-November-2008, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3563300/Barack-Obamas-grassroots-campaign-was-unprecedented.html>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

27. Ibid

28. Judis, John. «Money Talks: John McCain's Floundering Presidential Campaign», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6-July-2007, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2007/07/06/money-talks-john-mccain-s-floundering-presidential-campaign-pub-19425>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

29. Judis, John. «Democrats Are in More Trouble Than They Think», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14-January-2016, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/14/democrats-are-in-more-trouble-than-they-think-pub-62483>>, [Accessed 17-October-2018]

(such as LREM) by casting a wide net while showing that they are in touch with the national sentiments. In effect, the leaders of all these parties were able to grasp what the prevailing sentiment is and tap into both desires and grievances.

These methods vary in directness. The AKP was a top-down system but one that has built significant bottom-up capital. LREM started as a top-down party but opened itself to the bottom-up. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, combined the two approaches. Ultimately, the X-Factor appears to be that all these parties were able to present a coherent positive image for the future that resonated with the electorate while addressing the grievances of the past.