

Can Büyükbay

# Populist narratives and affective polarisation: analysing the motivations of incumbent voters in Türkiye's 2023 presidential elections<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This study investigates the motivations underpinning support for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye's 2023 presidential elections (14 and 28 May) and explores voter perceptions of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, put up in that election as the candidate of the opposition, and of the opposition at large. The findings indicate that participant narratives closely mirror the rhetoric promoted by Erdogan and the pro-government media, suggesting alignment between the sentiments expressed by Erdogan supporters and state-led discourse. Through a theoretical lens incorporating populist and charismatic leadership, affective leader polarisation and negative partisanship, the research highlights how these frameworks structure the expression of voter preference. A thematic analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 24 participants from diverse regions in Türkiye who identify as Erdogan supporters reveals the centrality of their emotional and ideological identification with him, while populism and security concerns are emphasised as key drivers of voter loyalty amidst continuing economic and social challenges.*

**Keywords:** elections, voter behaviour, populism, charismatic leadership, state-led discourse, conservatism

## Introduction

In Türkiye's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's re-election was noteworthy not only for its domestic impact but also for its international significance. This election serves as a case for examining political polarisation and leadership dynamics, especially within the context of Türkiye's economic challenges, and highlights the need for analysing voter behaviour through political psychology.

Analysis of the interviews on which this research is based reveals strong emotional alignment with Erdogan among his supporters, who perceive him through lenses of loyalty and admiration. Participants often attribute Türkiye's economic issues to external forces rather than to the government, with an 'enemy subject' held accountable instead. Consequently, government-led narratives seek to amplify this perception and distance the blame from Erdogan. There is a powerful alignment between the perspectives of Erdogan's supporters and the narratives disseminated by the media which remains strongly dominated by the government. His administration

1 I would like to thank Konda Research and Consultancy for their valuable support.

appears successfully to have infused its definition of reality across various societal levels, particularly reaching rural areas, with the pro-government media actively reproducing and reinforcing this narrative.

The findings carry broader implications for Europe, especially as many EU countries are witnessing the rise of populist leaders who try to leverage similar strategies to that of Erdoğan. If populist leaders can effectively manufacture consent through media-driven, highly personalised leadership, it may suggest a weakening of traditional party structures and an increase in leader-centric politics. This shift could have an impact on party stability across Europe and raise questions about the longevity and resilience of democratic institutions. Additionally, the Turkish case highlights how populist leaders capitalise on a sense of ‘there is no alternative’, creating a perception of indispensability. This perception, combined with the strategic use of patriotic symbols, could foster societal divisions and hinder political pluralism in Europe.

#### Democratic erosion and power centralisation: Türkiye's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections and the AKP

Türkiye's presidential and parliamentary elections were conducted on 14 May 2023. A second round of the presidential election was held on 28 May. The European Commission reports that biased media coverage and an uneven playing field resulted in an undue advantage for the incumbent. Moreover, its report addresses significant problems in the functioning of Türkiye's democratic institutions and structural weaknesses within the presidential system. According to the report, the constitutional structure maintains centralised powers within the presidency and lacks a robust and effective separation of powers among the executive, legislature and judiciary. Due to an ineffective system of checks and balances, the executive branch remains democratically accountable solely through elections (European Commission 2023: 4). Moreover, Türkiye has continued to distance itself from the EU and has not reversed the negative trajectory regarding reforms (European Commission 2023: 3).

Freedom House further supports these observations and states that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party) have become increasingly authoritarian, consolidating power through constitutional changes. In 2023, a worsening economic crisis, a devastating earthquake<sup>2</sup> and the May elections provided the government with additional motivation to restrict the public discourse. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were critical of the election (ODIHR 2023), noting that the state-run media displayed strong favouritism toward AKP and that Erdogan frequently, and throughout the campaign, accused legitimate political opponents of supporting terrorism (Freedom House 2024).

Amidst democratic erosion, Türkiye has been experiencing a severe economic crisis for the last few years. In the past, similar crises have led to the fall of govern-

2 Affecting both Türkiye and Syria, this earthquake (6 February 2023) near the Turkish city of Gaziantep was the joint second largest ever to hit Türkiye. It affected 14 million people (16% of the population) and was responsible for the deaths of over 53 000 people in Türkiye alone.

ments and the marginalisation of mainstream political parties, prompting the public to seek alternatives. The following quote helps to explain the critical question of why, despite the worsening economic crisis coupled with increasingly authoritarian policies and social-political unrest, the AKP government remains in power:

While some of this can be explained by socio-economic reasons relating to the AKP's patrimonial policies towards the urban poor and ideological reasons relating to its use of Islamist, nationalist and victimhood narratives that appeal to wide sections of society, previously excluded from the political and economic life, one of the most tangible reasons is the Islamist AKP's successful co-optation of the Turkish nationalist, secularist, pro-Kemalist and far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which commands about 10% of the votes and represents an important proportion of state bureaucracy. (Yilmaz et al. 2021: 162)

The AKP's ideological alignment with the MHP has not led to a loss of support for the party as Turkish nationalism and concerns about the country's unity are prevalent among voters across the major political parties. As a result, the AKP's anti-Kurdish nationalist stance has generally not been an issue for its supporters, with only a few exceptions (Yilmaz et al. 2021: 162). Adaman and Akbulut (2021: 279) support the perspective that authoritarian elements have been inherent in AKP governance from the beginning, with their intensity increasing significantly over time. They highlight that the authoritarian nature of the AKP's neoliberal approach has been marked by a blend of populism and developmentalism.

### Theoretical framework and literature review

This section analyses the theoretical frameworks relevant to understanding Erdogan's impact on his supporters including charismatic and populist leadership styles alongside the concepts of affective leader polarisation and negative partisanship. Charismatic and populist leadership styles shed light on how Erdogan projects an image of a leader who embodies both strength and compassion, while an exploration of affective leader polarisation and negative partisanship facilitates a better understanding of the emotional and ideological bonds that reinforce Erdogan's support and underpin the antagonist relationship they have with opposition figures.

#### *Charismatic leadership*

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping political preferences, with charismatic leaders fostering strong emotional connections that solidify political support. Max Weber defines charisma as an extraordinary characteristic attributed to certain individuals, allowing them to influence followers with an aura of exceptional or even supernatural qualities (Weber 1978: 241-242). Expanding on this, Bernard Bass (1985) integrates charismatic leadership into transformational leadership theory, proposing that charismatic leaders inspire followers by articulating a clear vision, instilling purpose and demonstrating confidence. Bass underscores that followers often perceive these leaders as possessing unique abilities, particularly effective in crisis situations, which fosters trust and a sense of admiration.

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, addressing charismatic leadership within populist movements, suggest that populist leaders often position themselves as the authentic representatives of ‘the people’s will’, cultivating a highly personalised relationship with followers. This connection reinforces trust and amplifies the populist message against perceived elite threats (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Similarly, Madsen and Snow (1991) examine how charismatic leaders mobilise followers in times of crisis, creating a compelling vision that provides emotional reassurance and inspires collective action toward social change.

### *Populist leadership*

Ernesto Laclau (2015) conceptualises populism as a political strategy that creates a collective identity by unifying diverse social demands under a shared identity of ‘the people’, set in opposition to an antagonistic ‘elite’ or ‘other’. This collective identity is organised around what Laclau terms an ‘empty signifier’, a flexible symbol with broad, symbolic resonance that allows various demands to be encapsulated within a single discourse. Charismatic leaders, in Laclau’s view, embody this collective will and act as the focal point around which diverse grievances and aspirations converge. Through simplified, potent symbols and rhetoric, populist leaders foster emotional unity and solidarity among their supporters.

Populism is also closely linked to identity politics. In Türkiye, nationalism, religious values and security policies are among the elements that underpin Erdoğan’s electoral support. In this context, in a political atmosphere where populist leadership is combined with identity politics, voters’ preferences have been shaped in line with Erdoğan’s political strategies.

### *Negative partisanship and affective polarisation*

Political science studies on voter behaviour reveal that decisions extend beyond economic motives and policy proposals, driven by emotional connections to leaders and negative views of opposition figures (Abramowitz 2018). As identity politics intensifies, voters often polarise along emotional lines, forming affiliations with groups or leaders that foster both positive and negative partisanship. This dynamic leads voters to align with certain figures as a means of distancing themselves from others, creating strong, identity-based loyalties (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). This narrative strengthens negative partisanship, where aversion to the opposition keeps voters loyal and prevents them from switching support (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019: 146-147). In this context, negative partisanship pushes voters to exclude or marginalise opposing identities.

Emotional leadership is often rooted in a leader’s capacity to decode (or perceive) their followers’ emotions and to influence these. The theory of affective polarisation, as applied to leadership, emphasises that leaders’ emotional impact goes beyond their own supporters to shape reactions among their opponents. Strong emotional responses to a leader – whether positive or negative – contribute to polarisation, driving individuals to align or distance themselves not only based on political beliefs but also as a visceral reaction to the leader’s emotional appeal. Thus, affective polarisation suggests that political divides are fuelled not only by ideological differences but

by the intense emotional responses that leaders evoke (Druckman and Levendusky 2019: 114). Furthermore, affective leader polarisation intensifies the divide created by partisanship through emotional bonds established by leader-centric narratives and symbols.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the motivations behind Erdoğan supporters' voting behaviour in the 2023 Turkish presidential election. The central research question asks: What factors motivate Erdoğan's voters and what shapes their voting decisions? Qualitative methods enable a comprehensive exploration of voter mindsets, emotions and preferences, offering deeper insights into individual perspectives than quantitative approaches typically allow. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participants provided personal narratives that illuminate their voting behaviour, allowing for a rich, contextualised understanding of their motivations.

The study's qualitative design is based on interviews with 24 participants selected from among Erdoğan voters, identified through Konda Research and Consultancy's Barometer surveys conducted since January 2022, with a focus on balanced representation across Türkiye in terms of gender, age, education and occupation (Konda Barmometer 2022). The sample included 13 males and 11 females, incorporating an age range of 20-71 and reflecting diverse educational backgrounds (ranging from primary schooling to university graduates). Table 1 included at the end of this article captures the broad descriptive characteristics of each research participant.

Interviews were conducted by telephone in June 2023, shortly after the election, and were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically to reveal key patterns. Discussion topics included demographic information, voting behaviour, evaluations of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu, and perceptions of campaign discourse. Thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was applied to identify and interpret themes systematically, focusing on consistency within responses and patterns across interviews.

## Analysis and results

This section presents an overview of the interview findings within the study's theoretical framework, focusing on the factors that shape Erdoğan supporters' voting behaviours. Many participants view Erdoğan as a charismatic leader who commands respect domestically and internationally, aligning with Weber's theory of charismatic authority which frames such attachments as central to understanding voter loyalty.

Despite economic difficulties, respondents typically attribute these issues to external factors and minimise their criticisms of Erdoğan's government. Concerns about national security and stability often take precedence over economic grievances and reflect the appeal of a leader perceived as resilient and protective.

Among certain of the respondents, a hesitancy to continue supporting Erdoğan was noted; however, fears surrounding religious and security-related issues lead

them back to him. This reflects a reliance on Erdoğan as a ‘safe’ choice and demonstrates the role of affective polarisation and negative partisanship.

In Türkiye, Erdoğan’s critical portrayal of the opposition as a national security threat reinforces the perception that national values are at risk. Participants often indeed expressed negative views toward the opposition, perceiving it as aligned with terrorism. This connects with the theories of affective polarisation, fuelling the negative partisanship that overrides dissatisfaction with the administration. The findings indicate that emotional attachment to Erdoğan and negative partisanship towards his opponents are creating a strong, polarised support base.

To understand voters’ reasons for supporting the AKP and Erdoğan, the research examined key factors such as when they made their voting decision, their perceptions of Erdoğan and their level of satisfaction with specific policies. The following factors emerged as influential in shaping voting preferences:

- charismatic leadership and emotional connection: many voters see Erdoğan as a powerful and charismatic leader. This fosters a deep emotional attachment that plays a crucial role in their loyalty
- perceived lack of alternatives: voters often cite a sense of limited options. They feel that Erdoğan represents the only viable choice, especially in contrast to opposition figures who they see as lacking comparable leadership qualities
- perceptions of opposition and populist narratives: that the opposition alliance encompassed Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP; the People’s Democratic Party, a Kurdish political party) were frequently mentioned. This view is bolstered by government messaging on national security accomplishments, such as advancements in UAVs,<sup>3</sup> the domestic production of TOGG<sup>4</sup> and resource discoveries (natural gas/oil). These narratives serve as a counterpoint to opposition figures
- religious values and headscarf freedoms: religious values, particularly the headscarf’s status as a symbol of religious freedom, resonate strongly with voters who feel that Erdoğan safeguards these rights
- traditional voting patterns: some participants’ support is rooted in historical or familial loyalty to the AKP and reflects longstanding right-wing affiliations.

The following sections provide insights into how each of these factors reinforces a stable support base for Erdoğan and highlights the combined impact of emotional loyalty, ideological alignment and concerns about security and religious identity.

### The image of Erdoğan as a charismatic leader

Erdoğan is viewed by his supporters as a sincere, strong and charismatic leader who commands respect internationally. Erdoğan voters highlight his knowledge and decisiveness, seeing these qualities as markers of effective leadership on the global stage, as one participant notes: ‘he understands things well... when he travels abroad,

3 Armed unmanned aerial vehicle; or, alternatively, just unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) – both commonly called drones.

4 *Türkiye'nin Otomobili Girişim Grubu* (TOGG; Türkiye’s Automobile Joint Venture Group) is a Turkish automotive company established to develop and produce the first domestically manufactured electric car.

he demonstrates clear leadership' (I3). Statements such as 'He is a strong leader, my brother' reflect the pride and confidence many voters feel and this reinforces his image as a respected and reliable leader who embodies both national pride and resilience (I17).

In this context, the concepts of a 'world leader' and slogans such as 'the finger-wagging leader' and the man who 'stands tall in the saddle' emerge prominently (I4). Erdoğan is seen as embodying a leader who is both 'compassionate towards his people but instils fear outside,' which resonates with Machiavellian notions of effective leadership. Positive feedback from relatives or friends living abroad reinforces this view, as they repeat Erdoğan's reputation for assertiveness and resilience (I2). One participant notes, 'There's no one else who can stand up to America... we need someone who can take a stand – and that's Erdoğan' (I4), while another describes him as 'The upright man... the person who doesn't bend' (I11). This image exerts a strong pull for his voters while European perspectives add further weight: 'We used to be hesitant to mention we're Turkish, and no one recognised us. But now, just like kids in Germany know Merkel, they know Erdoğan' (I13). This collective pride reflects how Erdoğan's image abroad contributes to his supporters' conviction in his leadership. Erdoğan is thus perceived as a powerful and formidable leader, a symbol of Turkish strength:

Comments like 'Your president is very impressive, very fearless' highlight how Erdoğan, unlike previous leaders, projects confidence abroad, conveying, 'I'm in charge.' Compared to the opposition, Erdoğan is seen as a powerful world leader, respected and even feared abroad. (I2)

Participants describe Erdoğan as an honest, trustworthy and hardworking leader. One participant reflects, 'Honestly, when it comes to Erdoğan... whether he is honest or not, only God knows, but that's what comes to my mind. Also, his hard work comes to mind, his dynamism; he's such a dynamic person' (I11). Another participant highlights that Erdoğan's acknowledgment of issues like the refugee situation and inflation in his post-election speech fosters trust among supporters for his open address of the economic challenges and his demonstration of his awareness of the critical concerns affecting the country (I15). This combination of perceived honesty, diligence and responsiveness to key issues reinforces Erdoğan's appeal among his followers.

Erdoğan's religiousness and use of religious rhetoric are viewed positively by his supporters, who appreciate his alignment with their cultural and religious values. One participant notes that even supporters of the opposition party, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP; Republican People's Party), are surprised by criticisms of Erdoğan's religious expressions: 'What's wrong with saying Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, the word of Allah? It's nice to see him reading the Quran, making supplications... it's our religion' (I3). Another participant adds that Erdoğan's religious stance resonates with those who view it as a defence against foreign influences, remarking 'Foreign countries... want to divide Türkiye. Those who don't love Islam, they don't love Erdoğan' (I4). This blend of religious identity and political leadership strengthens

Erdogan's connection with his voters who see him as a symbol of both national and religious unity.

The perception of Erdogan as a 'strong and winning leader' is particularly influential in areas affected by the 2023 earthquake. This shapes their voting preferences as they seek a leader who can effectively support them. Meanwhile, many want to align themselves with what they see as the winning side, setting aside personal losses for a sense of security and stability. As one participant explains, 'We leaned towards that side... because we believed that the one side was stronger. We thought he would win anyway' (I7). However, some voters express reservations and view Erdogan as less than ideal but see no viable alternative. One participant shares, 'No, he wasn't my leader... there are many mistakes with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but I gave my vote considering the other alternative' (I9). This combination of a desire for strength and the feeling of a lack of other options underscores Erdogan's appeal among specific groups even where opinions are otherwise mixed.

In response to the question, 'What would Türkiye be like if Erdogan wasn't there?' participants expressed specific fears related to economic instability and security issues. Concerns about a potentially worsened economy and a return to past hardships were common. One participant reflected, 'Well, it used to be really bad in the past, and I still think it would be bad... our economy wouldn't be good; we could still be in misery' (I14). Worries about international relations emerged in addition, with fears that future leaders might face embargoes or export restrictions. Another participant noted, 'If someone else comes after Tayyip, they might impose embargoes... they could cut off our exports from different places' (I19). These responses underscore a belief among supporters that Erdogan's presence is essential to Türkiye's economic and geopolitical resilience.

### Continuity and emotional bond in support of the AKP and Erdogan

The majority of the research participants indicate longstanding loyalty to the AKP and a strong emotional attachment to Erdogan himself. Many have supported him since the party's inception. One participant shares, '...we have wanted him for years, we have been following him' (I19). Others highlight how Erdogan's speeches feel genuine and that this motivates their support, with one saying, 'It's not about the party for me, but we voted for the AKP... because of his speeches' (I1). This sentiment is amplified by a sense of gratitude for tangible improvements; one participant reflects on their experience of poverty and that Erdogan's leadership had brought positive changes: 'He helps the needy, helps the orphans... I grew up in extreme poverty... now, thanks to him, we have a lot of things' (I14). These responses underscore the deep trust and connection that many supporters feel regarding Erdogan.

The concept of 'Erdogan's sincerity' frequently emerges in participant discourse, with sentiments of 'love' and admiration prominently shaping their narratives. This sense of loyalty is reinforced by emotional rather than solely rational appeals. Erdogan's campaign song possibly amplifying such feelings. One participant noted, 'We love him because we grew up with Uncle Tayyip', illustrating a deep-seated affection that transcends political logic (I5). Another described Erdogan as a fatherly figure who evokes happiness and trust, saying 'I feel happy, I love him' (I14).

Even when participants express dissatisfaction with some of Erdoğan's actions or entertain doubts about supporting him, they often return to their emotional bond with him. For example, one participant remarked, 'I shouldn't have given my vote... but I did. I guess it's love, passion, or something like that' (I4). Another admitted they see both his flaws and strengths but remain committed, saying, 'Does that make me stop loving him? No... we love him as he is' (I19). These reflections highlight how Erdoğan's image transcends standard political assessment, creating a relationship with his supporters that is deeply personal and resilient to criticism.

There is a clear continuity of support for the AKP and Erdoğan and many participants cite longstanding allegiance to right-wing parties. This pattern appears inherited, some participants expressing that they have never leaned toward the left. As one participant put it, 'I have always been on the right wing' (I3). Another elaborated on this generational loyalty, tracing it through past right-wing parties from Adalet Partisi (Justice Party) to Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party) under Turgut Özal, noting that support persists partly due to regional factors such as limited job opportunities and reliance on government support (I12). This attachment suggests that there is a blend of traditional, regional and emotional factors which are sustaining their loyalty to Erdoğan and the AKP.

### **Erdoğan or AKP?**

Research participants actually expressed greater loyalty to Erdoğan than to the AKP, often directing criticisms at the party rather than its leader. Most saw Erdoğan as a trustworthy figure distinct from the party, suggesting that his leadership is what sustains the party's appeal. Statements like 'Trust is placed in the leader' (I12) and 'For us, the AKP is Erdoğan himself' (I2) reveal a sentiment that the party's future without Erdoğan would be uncertain. For the research participants, Erdoğan's strength and personal connection among his voters outweigh criticisms of his administration. This attachment underscores that, for many supporters, loyalty is directed primarily at Erdoğan rather than the party infrastructure.

### **Assessment of the policies of AKP and Erdoğan: success of populist discourse**

Research participants were asked which of the policies of the AKP and Erdoğan they were satisfied with. The production of domestic cars, natural gas/petroleum extraction and the production of UAVs/AUAVs came to the fore, although the research explored other policy issues with the participants. The emphasis on 'domestic and national' resonates as a source of Turkish pride, independence and self-sufficiency.

### **Extraction of natural gas and petroleum, UAV/AUAVs and TOGG**

The narratives of the pro-government media<sup>5</sup> on discovering petroleum and natural gas appear highly influential among supporters who view such developments as milestones of national progress and self-sufficiency. Many participants express

5 It is worth noting that Türkiye ranks extremely low in terms of the Reporters Without Borders index of press freedom. See: <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

enthusiasm about the economic relief provided by access to domestic natural gas and highlight that ‘those who have access to natural gas don’t have to pay for cylinders anymore’ (I10) and see it as a benefit for those less able to afford fuel costs (I3). This pride stems from an elevation of Türkiye’s international standing: ‘Türkiye is no longer seen as a second or third-rate country... they know us’ (I13). Others anticipate that accessing Türkiye’s natural resources will reduce reliance on foreign powers and establish the country as a leading global force (I11, I12).

Supporters also cite Türkiye’s advances in defence technology and manufacturing – particularly UAV/AUAVs and the TOGG electric car – as symbols of national pride and progress on the international stage. One participant notes, ‘They have indeed made us proud on the international stage... we saw his accomplishments as a guarantee of what he will do in the future’ (I2). This view reflects the perception of these developments as markers of leadership success and a reason to support Erdoğan’s government. Participants highlight how these achievements allow Türkiye to ‘compete with European countries’ (I4) and contribute to a strong defence posture: ‘America cannot want anything from you’ (I10). This sentiment extends to a broad range of technological advances which creates a sense of national independence and self-sufficiency (I5) that supporters find highly meaningful. For many, the government’s focus on Türkiye producing its own vehicles, planes and defence systems embodies a commitment to Turkish autonomy and capability, in the process further reinforcing loyalty to Erdoğan’s leadership and policies (I17, I6, I11).

In all this, a direct reflection of the rhetoric of the pro-government media can be observed in the statements of the participants. In particular, UAVs/AUAVs were repeatedly mentioned. Considering that a documentary about drones was shown in the pro-government media on the eve of the elections, it stands out that this had a significant impact on voters.

#### *Religious values and the dominance of the headscarf in discourse*

Many Erdoğan voters view the freedom to wear the headscarf as central to their support and note that their loyalty is driven more by religious liberties than specific policies. For instance, one voter comments, ‘I voted for the AKP because of the comfort... the freedom to wear the headscarf’ (I18).

Supporters often contrast Erdoğan’s headscarf policies with those of opposition parties, especially the CHP which is regarded as having restricted religious expression in the past. Several participants noted that, under previous CHP influence, veiled women faced barriers, especially in education, with one explaining, ‘When Erdoğan came to power, all women became freer’ (I5). For many, Erdoğan embodies the protection of Islamic values and religious expression against perceived foreign and domestic threats.

This sentiment is intertwined with personal dignity and social acceptance, as participants recounted painful experiences of the previous restrictions, emphasising that Erdoğan’s policies had allowed them to wear the headscarf without fear or judgment (I11). Despite economic challenges, these voters prioritise religious freedom and the protection of Islamic values, which they feel Erdoğan uniquely safeguards.

### **Health services and infrastructure projects**

Erdogan largely focuses on achievements in ‘services’ – a central theme for populist parties and a hallmark of the AKP’s long-term strategy. Themes such as healthcare services, social assistance and infrastructure projects continue to resonate with supporters who frequently cite these as significant achievements.

A significant number of participants express satisfaction with the healthcare services available and cite improvements in access to medication and the convenience of healthcare visits. One participant notes, ‘Now you can visit the hospital, get your medication and come back home in 15 minutes’ (I11), highlighting the system’s efficiency. Another participant expressed gratitude for the current availability, saying, ‘They provide all the medications at the pharmacy... In the past, none of these existed’ (I10), highlighting previous challenges when obtaining medication through social security was difficult and there were frequent shortages within the pharmacies.

Participants also identify patient care, social aid and elder support as essential factors in *Türkiye*’s progress and, at the same time, notably attributing the responsibility to Erdogan: ‘He provided us with many opportunities... he is interested in the strengthening of *Türkiye*’ (I5).

Infrastructure projects, such as bridges and roads, remain a prominent point of praise, participants paying attention to the improvement in travel times and accessibility across regions: ‘10-hour roads are now reduced to two hours’ (I18). This reflects an appreciation of the government’s visible investments in public welfare and national infrastructure (I24, I17).

### **Fight against terror**

While the theme of ‘domestic and national’ is prominent among Erdogan supporters, a notable factor for some research participants is his stance against the HDP and Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanê (PKK; Kurdistan Workers’ Party), designated as a terrorist organisation and with which the AKP regards the HDP as having direct links. Many participants view Erdogan’s commitment to an anti-terror stance as critical, emphasising his firm opposition to the PKK. One participant remarks on the importance of security in the education sector, expressing concerns that, under different leadership, figures associated with the PKK might influence teaching: ‘The PKK will come to my school to give secret lessons at the university... I am very sure of this.’ (I23)

For others, Erdogan’s stance on maintaining national unity against separatism is key: ‘So that the country will not be divided... most of them are voting for Erdogan’ (I10). Participants believe that Erdogan has followed through on his promises to combat terrorism and cite this consistency as a central reason for their continued support. As one participant notes, ‘Today, whatever he promised to the nation, he did almost all of them... he mostly opposed terrorism’ (I12). This alignment with Erdogan’s perceived strong anti-terror stance reinforces his appeal for those concerned with national stability and security.

### *Economy: attributing the responsibility to external forces*

While views on the economy vary, government supporters generally avoid blaming the administration directly. In examining the perspectives of Erdoğan supporters on economic issues, the findings reveal a complex interplay of resilience, loyalty, gratitude and national security concerns, with faith being put in Erdoğan's ability to improve the economic situation and the challenges often being attributed to broader, uncontrollable events, such as global inflation, opportunistic hoarding and the pandemic: 'The world is also in bad shape... It's not something unique to Türkiye' (I13).

A strong sense of loyalty emerges among participants: several see government support, such as pensions, as evidence of stability amidst crises. For example, one participant reflected, 'The economy is in good shape... we can still get our pension, alhamdulillah', noting the state's continued support despite recent challenges (I11). Others perceive economic issues as exaggerated by government critics and view the economy as manageable despite global challenges. Additionally, while some participants note income disparities, they regard this as a temporary issue.

This loyalty, framing hardships within a broader narrative of resilience, is underscored by security concerns, where defence and sovereignty are prioritised, further reinforcing a protective view of Erdoğan as a stabilising leader and deflecting criticism toward other actors.

Overall, in evaluations of the economy:

- some of Erdoğan's voters are satisfied and emphasise that people are not grateful
- others acknowledge that there are economic problems, but do not associate it with the government or Erdoğan.

### *How would he/she persuade people to vote for AKP/Erdoğan?*

When asked how they might persuade a friend to support the AKP or Erdoğan, responses varied. Some preferred not to do so at all, while others suggest highlighting the opposition's alleged connections with groups like the PKK, as one participant emphasises: 'Look, on the one side, there's the PKK and, on the other side, there's the AKP... Now they [PKK] can't even lift their heads since the UAVs have been flying' (I22). Additionally, some cite the opposition's stance on releasing figures like Selahattin Demirtaş, former leader of the HDP, as a point of criticism and believe this stance could alienate certain voters (I2).

A strong theme was the prioritisation of 'unity and integrity' over economic concerns. This reflects a belief in the importance of national stability above material challenges (I13), summarised by one participant's sentiment that 'one can live without food, but not without a homeland' (I23).

Another policy regarded as persuasive was the headscarf issue. Some recount discriminatory rhetoric around the headscarf as a 'rag' or 'piece of cloth', underscoring the sense of relief they associate with Erdoğan's governance (I18, I21). For others, Erdoğan's alignment with religious values and perceived inclusivity strengthens their support, positioning him as a leader respectful of both conservative and secular lifestyles (I3, I8).

These responses underscore the two main issues which shape voter perceptions. First, the opposition's perceived association with terrorism is juxtaposed with AKP's emphasis on advances in defence, like UAVs/AUAVs and natural resource independence. Second, the importance of religious freedoms, especially regarding the head-scarf, remains a central concern, supporters seeing Erdoğan as a defender of religious identity and values.

The AKP's support reflects a mixture of affective polarisation, with voters identifying strongly against the CHP, amidst personal loyalty to Erdoğan arising from his charismatic and populist appeal. Negative party identification and the perception of Erdoğan as a protective leader further cement their choices. This view transcends economic considerations in favour of values tied to national unity and religious autonomy.

### **Assessment of the CHP and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: the impact of negative partisanship and affective leader polarisation**

This section explores the evaluations of Erdoğan supporters of the CHP and its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, through the lens of negative partisanship and affective leader polarisation. This framework helps elucidate how strong emotional aversion to the opposition shapes political alignment and reinforces loyalty to the incumbent. While some voters express dissatisfaction with certain government policies or economic issues, their aversion to the CHP – often viewed as culturally or ideologically conflicted – appears to solidify their commitment to Erdoğan. Examining these dynamics reveals the powerful role that negative partisanship and affective polarisation play in Türkiye's political landscape, particularly in driving voter resistance to Kılıçdaroğlu and his party.

#### **Assessment of the CHP**

The in-depth interviews reveal a deep-seated resistance among many of the participants to voting for the CHP, largely due to the historical and ideological associations. This resistance often reflects family traditions, as participants describe longstanding loyalty to the AKP and an unwillingness to change. One participant connects this resistance to a promise made to a deceased family member and emphasises a sense of personal commitment (I10).

Additionally, the electoral alliance between CHP and the HDP intensifies participants' reluctance. Some view this alliance as proof of the CHP's inability to address national security adequately, particularly concerning Kurdish separatism, with one participant expressing frustration with what they saw as CHP's ambiguous stance on the issue which they believe alienates conservative voters (I15).

Many participants, particularly those with conservative views, perceive the CHP as a party that would curb Islamic values, undermine domestic projects like drone development and restrict the freedoms they associate with religious expression. One participant highlighted the 'CHP mentality' which, he felt, worked against both national sovereignty and Islamic practices (I23).

The desire to practise religious values freely and without social judgment is particularly strong among conservative women, who see Erdoğan and the AKP as protectors of these rights and, conversely, the CHP as potentially undermining them (I19, I23). This sentiment makes it difficult for many conservative voters to consider alternative parties, even if they might feel some dissatisfaction with Erdoğan's recent policies, and this keeps them voting for Erdoğan and the AKP. In this context, Erdoğan is seen as the only viable protector of religious freedoms and national integrity, despite concerns over specific policies or figures.

### *Assessment of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu*

The interviews reveal deep-seated resistance among some participants toward voting for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, mainly due to perceived inconsistencies in his political stance and the association with the HDP and the PKK. These lead to a significant lack of trust in his leadership. Some voters describe his political style as opportunistic and inconsistent across different regions, one participant criticising Kılıçdaroğlu for adapting his stance to fit various regional political sentiments, creating an impression of insincerity and a lack of defined values (I10). Meanwhile, Kılıçdaroğlu's associations with the HDP intensify the scepticism in which he is held. Here, the government's portrayal of Kılıçdaroğlu as aligned with entities perceived as threats to national unity, amplified by media coverage, reinforces the negative partisanship with him among conservative voters. This sentiment was articulated by one participant who shared his belief that the CHP-HDP alliance threatened Türkiye's stability (I15).

The analysis also reflects the impact of the pro-government media in shaping conservative voters' views on religious freedoms. Media narratives emphasise the potential threats to religious expression, particularly around the headscarf, were Kılıçdaroğlu to come to power.

Concerns about foreign influence under a CHP-led government are also prominent. Participants suggest that Kılıçdaroğlu's perceived alignment with western powers could compromise Türkiye's sovereignty. This apprehension, coupled with doubts about his economic promises, drives a preference for the stability and continuity represented by Erdoğan, despite any reservations participants might have about the current economic situation (I5).

In summary, interviews underscore that Erdoğan's base views Kılıçdaroğlu as lacking the nationalist and religious credentials they seek. Concerns about security, national unity and religious expression, along with a deep-seated fear of division and instability, sustain a loyalist-based preference for Erdoğan, as participants perceive him as the more trustworthy and consistent protector of Türkiye's values.

### Conclusions and discussion

The interviews reveal a strong alignment between the perspectives of Erdoğan's supporters and the narratives disseminated by the pro-government media. His administration appears to have successfully infused its definition of reality across various societal levels, particularly reaching rural areas, with the media actively reproducing

and reinforcing this narrative. This widespread alignment suggests Erdoğan has achieved what Antonio Gramsci refers to as ‘the production of consent’ whereby the government is able to consolidate its support by embedding its vision and values within the social consciousness, shaping perceptions and fears to match its political goals.

A notable observation is the limited presence of rational inquiry among many of the participants who, instead, tend to echo government rhetoric almost verbatim. This reliance on slogans and media-driven narratives over independent thought indicates a strategic cultivation of what might be considered ‘structured messaging’. By tapping into and amplifying voter anxieties – particularly around security, stability and sovereignty – the government has strengthened Erdoğan’s image as the embodiment of national resilience and security. Furthermore, the media’s focus on symbols of national strength, like natural gas production and the UAV/AUAV projects, has a strong influence on the electorate. This impact is amplified by the strategic timing of broadcasts such as the drone documentary aired just before the election. These efforts reinforce Erdoğan’s positioning.

The in-depth interviews reveal that many Erdoğan supporters express near-unconditional loyalty to him, seeing him as a father figure embodying trust, faith and respect. This emotional attachment, often referred to under the concept of ‘charismatic leader’, shows a willingness among supporters to forgive the mistakes of Erdoğan’s administration. The strength of this bond is intensified by media and political narratives that reinforce fears of a future without Erdoğan; for instance, conservative voters may fear religious restrictions, like the azan being made in Turkish or more limited access to courses about the Quran. Similarly, a former soldier expresses fears of national division, which deepened his ideological commitment to Erdoğan as a protector of national unity.

This loyalty persists even when participants acknowledge Erdoğan’s flaws, as they often view these as secondary to his broader symbolic value and leadership qualities. This aligns with Madsen and Snow’s (1991) insights on charismatic leadership, where the leader’s influence stems from a strong affective bond that endures beyond rational considerations. These observations illustrate how Erdoğan’s image fulfils key aspects of charismatic leadership, sustaining his support base through both personal loyalty and perceived alignment with national identity.

The unwavering support for Erdoğan, rather than the AKP itself, suggests that his leadership has transcended the party’s identity. Many participants note that they vote for the AKP solely due to their admiration for Erdoğan, acknowledging that, without him, the party would struggle to retain their vote.

Drawing on Machiavelli’s question in *The Prince* – whether it’s better for a leader to be loved or feared – Erdoğan’s image aligns closely with a blend of the two: he is viewed as compassionate toward his own people but assertive on the global stage, fostering a sense of both love and respect among his followers. This portrayal consolidates his support as voters perceive him as a singular leader who embodies both protection and strength in uncertain times.

Some voters, though dissatisfied, feel unable to change their vote due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives. This reflects a polarisation marked both by an

emotional attachment to Erdoğan and a negative partisanship regarding opposition parties. Potential swing voters seem currently to be clinging to the belief that the AKP can rectify its mistakes, hoping for a return to Türkiye's former stability. The narrative of 'there is no alternative' persists, underscoring that Erdoğan's supporters, even those who may be wavering, are hesitant to switch due to the absence of a compelling alternative. Those who vote for Erdoğan have strong negative feelings towards the opposition, especially the CHP and the HDP, and perceive the opposition as a threat. This perception, in line with Abramowitz and Webster's (2016) negative partisanship theory, suggests that voters form an oppositional political identity and this identity shapes their voting behaviour.

In the Turkish context, Erdoğan has built a strong populist hegemony by bringing together different social demands such as domestic and national production, security and religious freedoms. Laclau's theory of populist leadership thus provides a critical perspective for understanding Erdoğan's popular perception as a 'saviour'.

These findings show how the political atmosphere in Türkiye is shaped around the figure of leadership and how negative identities developed against an opposition figure can have an impact on the functioning of democracy. Comparative studies could usefully investigate similar dynamics in other European countries experiencing populist leadership and examine how these leaders utilise media channels to foster public consent and cultivate loyalty. Further studies could also focus on the psychological impact of populist narratives on voters' cognitive biases and emotional responses. Finally, political psychology research in Europe could explore how voters' affective attachment to populist leaders affects their perceptions of alternative political figures and policies, potentially contributing to a deeper understanding of negative partisanship and its effects on democratic decision-making.

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Table 1 – List of interviews

Code	Province	Gender	Age	Education status	Employment status	Lifestyle cluster
I1	Diyarbakır	Male	37	Secondary school graduate	Cook	Religious conservative
I2	Ankara	Female	39	University graduate	Housewife	Religious conservative
I3	Ankara	Female	47	High school graduate	Housewife	Religious conservative
I4	Istanbul	Female	63	High school graduate	Housewife	Religious conservative
I5	Sivas	Female	20	High school graduate	Student	Religious conservative
I6	Kayseri	Male	21	Studying at university	Student	Traditional conservative
I7	Kahramanmaraş	Female	71	High school graduate	Housewife	Traditional conservative

Code	Province	Gender	Age	Education status	Employment status	Lifestyle cluster
I8	Osmaniye	Male	21	Primary/secondary school graduate	Student	Religious conservative
I9	Ankara	Male	42	High school graduate	Unemployed	Traditional conservative
I10	Antalya	Male	51	Primary school graduate	Carpenter	Religious conservative
I11	Ankara	Female	67	Primary school graduate	Housewife	Religious conservative
I12	Erzurum	Male	63	Primary school graduate	Car mechanic	Religious conservative
I13	Manisa	Male	45	High school graduate	Retired farmer	Religious conservative
I14	Istanbul	Female	43	Primary school graduate	Unemployed	Traditional conservative
I15	Samsun	Male	32	University graduate	Private company manager	Traditional conservative
I16	Sivas	Female	36	University graduate	Officer	Traditional conservative
I17	Sivas	Male	38	Secondary education graduate	Municipality employee	Religious conservative
I18	Denizli	Female	41	Primary school graduate	Madrasa teacher	Religious conservative
I19	Izmir	Female	38	Primary school graduate	Unemployed	Traditional conservative
I20	Zonguldak	Female	52	Primary school graduate	Housewife	Religious conservative
I21	Istanbul	Male	45	Secondary school graduate	Textile worker	Religious conservative
I22	Hatay	Male	54	Primary school graduate	Carpenter	Religious conservative

Code	Province	Gender	Age	Education status	Employment status	Lifestyle cluster
I23	Sivas	Male	39	Primary/secondary school graduate	Civil servant, Department of Education	Religious conservative
I24	Antalya	Male	44	High school graduate	Cook	Traditional conservative



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