

# The Unlikely Survival of Erdoğan in Turkey's May 2023 Elections

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Approaching the May 2023 Turkish presidential and assembly elections seemed to promise a challenging situation for the incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). The significant influx of refugees since the onset of the Syrian civil war introduced a reactive public agenda marked by occasional violent clashes in neighbourhoods with high refugee populations. This eventually spilled over to the national political agenda. A new political party, the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi, ZP), emerged with an anti-Syrian sentiment platform, gaining traction amongst young voters and expanding its electoral appeal. After the 2018 elections, the opposition parties united under the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*, MI), bringing together social democrats, liberals, nationalists and pro-Islamist conservatives to broaden the opposition's appeal and resistance to the ruling AKP. Additionally, the Erdoğan government's policy performance was also deteriorating. The economy deteriorated due to the President's reliance on strict monetary controls and disregard for market dynamics, leading to a depreciating national currency. The opposition's control of the largest cities since 2019 limited the cabinet's ability to regulate projects and manage clientelist networks. The resulting insecurity and vulnerability tarnished the government's image as a stability and good governance provider. The twin earthquakes on 6 February, 3 months before the elections, exacerbated the administration's failure to respond effectively to the disaster. The affected southeastern provinces, home to nearly 10% of the population, suffered extensive loss of life and infrastructure damage.

The AKP's 21-year rule seemed to be ending due to poor performance in economics and democratic governance, leading to a potential electoral defeat. However, Erdoğan won the presidency in the second round, and his People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı, CI) secured a comfortable margin for controlling the Turkish Grand National Assembly (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, TBMM).<sup>1</sup> The question remains: what factors contributed to Erdoğan's remarkable survival against all odds? Who were Erdoğan's supporters, and on what issue bases did they cast their votes for him?<sup>2</sup>

I examine the factors contributing to Erdoğan's re-election using individual-level post-election data and I argue that his success was primarily based on his performance in various policy areas, such as protecting moral values and easing the use of turban in

<sup>1</sup>In 2018, President Erdoğan's People's Alliance absorbed minor parties like the New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*, YRP), the Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi*, HÜDAPAR) and the Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP), all of which backed his candidacy.

<sup>2</sup>Several recent contributions addressing similar issues without reference to individual-level empirical findings can be found in Çelik (2023), Esen et al. (2024), Özkaya (2023) and Ugur-Cinar (2023).

public spaces, as well as his handling of security and foreign policy. However, his performance in other areas, such as resolving the Kurdish problem, reducing inflation, providing economic welfare and addressing the LGBTQ community's demands, was perceived as relatively low. This duality in his performance allowed him to strategically shift the agenda in favour of more advantageous issue areas, which were favoured by large nationalist and pro-Islamist constituencies. By successfully positioning himself on these key issues, Erdoğan secured a considerable electoral gain.

Optimistic prospective rather than retrospective pocketbook evaluations and support from low-educated middle-to-older age groups, right-wing voters and those who are not problematized by the state of Turkish governance all significantly contributed to Erdoğan's support. However, ethnic and sectarian minority groups, such as Kurds and Alevis, were negatively predisposed to voting for him. The misinformation campaign against the opposition appears to be ineffective in shaping the Erdoğan vote.

Turkey has been designated as a candidate for EU membership, but its accession negotiations have been halted since 2018 on account of worries about the rule of law and democratic values. The two election candidates cannot be easily categorized as pro- or anti-EU. Although Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the opposition candidate, was hesitant towards the EU, he promised to regain trust in Western allies, which was unprecedentedly low. Erdoğan's broader alliance now comprises partners with more conservative right-wing and pro-Islamist viewpoints, further constraining his capacity to adopt a more Western-oriented foreign policy approach. Erdoğan's eventual victory reinforces his control over Turkish politics, which does not bode well for enhancing Western relations.<sup>3</sup>

## I. A Perfect Storm in the Making. Approaching the May 2023 Elections

The 2018 elections sparked speculation about an early election in the country. The economic crisis, which significantly depreciated the Turkish lira against the US dollar, further fuelled this expectation. However, the politicization of the financial crisis is mainly due to the AKP candidates' significant losses in the 2019 local elections. This gave new momentum to the opposition and provided potential challengers to Erdoğan's electoral dominance.

### *The State of the Opposition*

The 2019 local elections resulted in significant losses for the incumbent CI in major metropolitan areas like Istanbul and Ankara, which had been under conservative control since the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), and independent candidates secured victories in coastal municipalities across the Aegean, Thrace and Mediterranean regions. Although the CI maintained a dominant electoral appeal, securing over 50% of the votes for municipal council and mayoral elections nationwide, they lost control of the largest metropolitan centres.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-elections-why-europe-is-watching-closely-2023-05-12> and <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-turkey-can-part-ways-with-european-union/a-66833644> or refer to several pre-election evaluations gathered by the European Parliament Briefing at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747133/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747133\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747133/EPRS_BRI(2023)747133_EN.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>On 2019 local elections, see Andı et al. (2023) and Taşkın (2021).

Table 1: Turkish Presidential Election Results, 2018–2023.

	2023		2018
	1st round (%)	2nd round (%)	1st round (%)
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	49.5%	52.2%	52.6%
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	44.9%	47.8%	
Sinan Oğan	5.2%		
Muharrem İnce	0.4%		30.6%
Selahattin Demirtaş			8.4%
Meral Akşener			7.3%
Temel Karamollaoğlu			0.9%
Doğu Perinçek			0.2%
Total valid votes	100.0%	100%	100.0%
Turnout	87.0%	84.2%	86.2%
Invalid votes	1.9%	1.3%	2.2%
Registered voters	64,145,504	64,197,454	59,367,469

Source: Supreme Election Council, <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/cumhurbaskani-secim-arsivi/2647>.

Due to the fragmented support for opposition parties, an alliance was seen as the only viable option for the 2023 elections. The opposition vote base grew in 2018 when the Good Party (İyi Parti, İYİP) entered the electoral scene after splitting from the MHP, attracting centrist AKP supporters who were disenchanted with the party. Although the İYİP held only five seats in the TBMM, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu helped by loaning 15 CHP representatives. This allowed İYİP to form a parliamentary group and avoid collecting signatures for their party leader, Meral Akşener, to run against Erdoğan in the presidential election. The İYİP joined the MI with the CHP, SP and DP in the TBMM elections, securing 9.96% of the vote, whilst Akşener garnered 7.3% (Table 1). The opposition alliance attracted conservative voters away from the AKP-MHP, with many choosing the more centrist İYİP and other right-of-centre parties like the pro-Islamist SP.

As the 2023 elections approached, new opportunities arose to expand MI further. Two influential figures from the AKP, the former foreign affairs minister and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the former foreign affairs minister and deputy prime minister responsible for the economy Ali Babacan, each established their own political parties, the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP) and the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DevaP), respectfully. These high-profile exits from the AKP were interpreted as a sign that disenchanted AKP supporters could be courted. Ultimately, both GP and DevaP joined the MI, forming a so-called ‘six-legged table’ comprising three splinter parties from AKP and MHP—İYİP, GP and Deva—one pro-Islamist SP, one minor centre-right DP and the main opposition social-democratic CHP. MI’s main promise was a return to a fortified parliamentary system, dismantling Erdoğan’s presidential system. A long and detailed list of policy promises primarily focused on a rational economic policy and reformed merit-based public sector.<sup>5</sup>

Kurdish voters’ support was also crucial, given the expectation of a close presidential race in 2023. The Kurdish vote already held significant weight with many

<sup>5</sup>See <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-turkeys-opposition-plans-roll-back-erdogans-policies-2023-05-06/> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/turkish-opposition-join-powers-to-return-to-parliamentary-system>.

parliamentarians in the TBMM. The Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, DEMP) decided after lengthy negotiations and the Labor and Freedom Alliance's inner deliberation against fielding a separate presidential candidate, as this individual would have no chance of triumphing over the other major contenders. In this context, the implied support of the DEMP could be instrumental in determining the election's eventual winner.

However, given the nationalist sensitivities and ties of the Kurdish parties with the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish state, the United States and the EU amongst other states, any covert or direct appeal via the political parties and their representatives in the TBMM carried considerable political risks that could backfire amongst certain electoral constituencies. Despite the Constitutional Court's threat of closure of the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), the party refused to sever any ties with the PKK. The MI argued that the HDP should be treated like any other legal party and engaged in official or unofficial talks with them. The AKP-MHP campaign, which continued to associate the HDP with the PKK, deterred the MI, particularly the IYIP leadership, from further engaging with the HDP.

Although the opposition united against Erdoğan's candidacy in 2023, this unity did not last throughout the campaign. The internal disagreements within the opposition alliance significantly aided Erdoğan's success in the 2023 elections. Opposition leadership competition garnered attention equal to economic crises and natural disasters. The opposition could not easily identify a presidential candidate. Negotiations for the alliance's presidential candidate collapsed a month after the earthquake (see Baruh and Çarkoğlu, 2024). IYIP, the second-largest party in the alliance, expressed dissatisfaction with choosing a winning candidate for the upcoming presidential election. They argued that Kılıçdaroğlu would not secure the presidency if nominated and advocated finding an alternative candidate, suggesting the names of Istanbul and Ankara's metropolitan mayors. Both mayors, CHP members, hesitated to challenge their party leader. The opposition alliance's chances improved with the addition of Ankara and Istanbul's mayors as Kılıçdaroğlu's running mates. However, the alliance's co-operative and competitive dynamics were severely damaged, ultimately hindering a successful campaign.

### *The State of the Economy and the Earthquakes*

The economic crisis after the 2018 elections was predicted to cause an early election before the crisis's full impact hit. Turkey's economy rebounded strongly after COVID-19, with 5.6% growth in 2022, down from 11.4% in 2021. Exports, investment and manufacturing activities all lost momentum, and the deteriorating external environment and heterodox monetary policies caused the economy to slow down. Despite the central bank's estimated intervention of \$108 billion, the Turkish lira fell by 30% in 2022.<sup>6</sup> Inflation, which was 20.3% in 2018, escalated to 64% by 2022. Despite the economy's negative impact on the incumbent CI and Erdoğan's electoral chances, the opposition MI's internal issues were the main focus.

<sup>6</sup>See World Bank report: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#3>.

A major natural disaster disrupted the election agenda, diverting the nation's focus from the incumbent's shortcomings and concentrating more on pressing survival issues. On 6 February, 2023, two major earthquakes significantly impacted 11 provinces, affecting approximately 16.4% of the population and 9.4% of the economy. Direct losses from earthquakes amounted to \$34.2 billion, and reconstruction needs could double that amount. Earthquakes exacerbated the delicate macro-financial landscape. The World Bank acknowledged that pre-election spending and reconstruction efforts could promote growth, which is projected to exceed 3% by the end of 2023.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the country's overall GDP growth was 4.5% in 2023. Despite the economic difficulties, the incumbent Erdoğan maintained control over the reconstruction efforts. He used the earthquake's aftermath to regain credibility by providing economic relief, especially as the election neared. Last-minute wage increases and early retirement proposals were implemented to attract key voter groups.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Election Campaign*

Erdoğan's campaign relied heavily on his ability to control the media. Turkey ranked 165th out of 180 countries in 2023 in the World Press Freedom Index, dropping from 100th in 2002.<sup>9</sup> As such, the country is a typical example of competitive authoritarian regimes that allow for some competition and limited information access in the electoral sphere. However, in these closely orchestrated elections, the cards appeared stacked to favour the incumbent's continued rule (Bermeo, 2016). Independent journalism in these regimes is severely constrained. Media outlets face pressure through arrests, assaults, threats, fines and censorship. Websites and social media platforms are also targeted by trolls. Pro-regime media bias towards favourable coverage of the ruling party leads to a significant disparity in information access for voters (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Opposition's media coverage in May 2023 was limited compared to the ruling alliance and its candidate.<sup>10</sup>

Erdoğan's messages aimed to distance him from the opposing side, polarizing both ideologically and affectively to bolster nationalist conservative support. Whilst ideological polarization may be providing voters with clear choices (Barber and McCarty, 2015), the growth of social distancing, animosity and incivility amongst political factions is damaging to a healthy democracy. Affective polarization erodes trust, impedes co-operation and leads to discriminatory behaviour towards opposing partisans outside the political sphere (Iyengar et al., 2019). Wagner (2021) ranked Turkey as one of the countries with the highest levels of affective polarization worldwide.

Erdoğan's discourse provides clear reasons for escalating affective polarization in Turkey. Often, he claimed the opposition worked with the PKK separatists. Erdoğan claimed during a Konya rally that the opposition follows PKK's Kandil leadership whilst

<sup>7</sup>See World Bank report: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview>.

<sup>8</sup>See <https://globalnews.lockton.com/turkey-eliminates-retirement-age-requirement/> and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkish-president-announces-wage-hike-for-public-workers-2892729>.

<sup>9</sup>See <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

<sup>10</sup>The independent newspaper Duvar has reported that TRT, Turkey's state-run broadcaster, has aired Erdoğan's election speeches for 32 h in 1 month whilst only allocating 32 min to Kılıçdaroğlu's rallies during the same period (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/state-run-network-trt-gives-erdogan-32-hours-of-coverage-kilicdaroglu-mere-32-minutes-in-one-month-news-62327>).

his People's Alliance obeys God's instructions.<sup>11</sup> He presented a fabricated video of Murat Karayilan, a co-founder of the PKK, endorsing Kılıçdaroğlu in a rally to prove alleged collaboration. Erdoğan's claim of opposition being anti-Islamic and pro-LGBTQ sparked conservative Islamist sentiments.<sup>12</sup> Although the EU did not occupy a significant space in the election campaign, Erdoğan claimed Kılıçdaroğlu to be a 'puppet of the West' to complement his portrayal of him as an unpatriotic collaborator with Turkey's nemeses.<sup>13</sup>

The opposition has similarly spread false information to stereotype refugees and migrants negatively. Kılıçdaroğlu adopted a nationalistic tone in the second round to appeal to voters influenced by Erdoğan's forceful campaign, accusing Erdoğan of bringing 10 million refugees into Turkey and committing himself to returning the Syrians back to Syria if elected. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that the actual number of refugees in the country is approximately 4 million.<sup>14</sup> Although both sides used these misinformation messages, it is unclear to what extent different party constituencies found them convincing.

Polarized opinions on both ends have intensified the deep rifts surrounding the nature of Turkey's political institutions. One group believes that Turkey is an autocratic regime with oppressive policies, biased media and unfair election practices. The other group sees Turkey as a thriving democracy with considerable influence in global politics. Consequently, the level of satisfaction with the current political system is anticipated to have a varying impact on voter preferences in the upcoming presidential election.

## II. The Election Results

In the first round of the presidential election, the sitting President, Erdoğan, and the opposition CHP's candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu, competed against Muharrem İnce, who was the MI candidate in the 2018 election, and Sinan Oğan, a former MHP parliamentarian (see Table 1). İnce's campaign aimed at the opposition rather than the incumbent alliance. He withdrew from the competition 3 days before the election day due to claims regarding his financial status and personal life. The late withdrawal resulted in over 230,000 votes being wasted as his name remained on the ballots. Oğan was part of the Ancestral Alliance (*Ata İttifakı*, AtaI), a nationalist-conservative group with the ZP and Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP). He received over 2.8 million votes (5.2%) and backed Erdoğan in the second round, causing the alliance to disband.

The initial round of the presidential election yielded a turnout rate of 87.04%. Turnout was notably higher in the western provinces. The low voter turnout in East and Southeast Anatolia, where most Kurdish voters supporting the opposition candidate resided, suggests that low turnout in these regions mainly hurt the opposition. The turnout in the second round was approximately three percentage points lower (84.2%). In the second round, Kılıçdaroğlu raised his votes but remained 2.3 million votes behind Erdoğan. The

<sup>11</sup>See <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogandan-muhalefete-agir-suclama-onlar-kandilden-biz-allahtan-emir-aliyoruz-2077324>.

<sup>12</sup>See Erdoğan's X message (<https://twitter.com/RErdogan/status/1654235276078637059?lang=en>) and coverage in the *Sözcü* newspaper (<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/erdogandan-muhalefete-bunlar-lgbtci-wp7659357>).

<sup>13</sup>See <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230516-kilicdaroglu-faces-real-uphill-battle-after-erdogan-nearly-clinched-first-round-win>.

<sup>14</sup>See <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/crgzmqv0qzo>.

turnout in eastern and southeastern Anatolia was even lower, harming the opposition's chances.

The vote share received by Erdoğan in the 2023 elections (52.2% in the second round) was nearly identical to the share he received in the 2018 elections (52.6%). Kılıçdaroğlu obtained a considerably larger share (44.9%) in the first round of 2023 compared to the MI candidate Muharrem İnce in 2018 (30.6%). This suggests that a considerable number of individuals who voted for HDP candidate Demirtaş and İYİP candidate Akşener in 2018 have shifted their support to Kılıçdaroğlu in 2023, hence consolidating the opposition votes behind his candidacy.

Sinan Oğan's endorsement of Erdoğan may have tilted the balance in Erdoğan's favour. However, the collapse of Atal after ZP and AP, both members of the Alliance, supported opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu suggests that Oğan may not be fully in control of his supporters in the second round. To pressure Erdoğan's campaign in the second round, Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign adopted an increasingly nationalistic and antagonistic discourse to attract Oğan's and ZP voters and promised to return Syrian refugees to their home country. This last-minute appeal to the nationalists might have worked against him, pushing both the Kurdish voters and his core CHP supporters to not vote in the second round.

### III. Why Erdoğan Won

Analyses of voting behaviour in Turkey are built on long-term cultural cleavage arguments based on Mardin (1973) and short-term economic voting dynamics. According to Mardin, cultural differences shape Turkish politics, which is characterized by a dominant military and bureaucratic elite that controls a strong and coherent state apparatus. The periphery, comprising mainly peasants, small farmers and artisans, is often hostile and confronts the centre. In the Republican era, the 'center' is defined by Kemalist secular principles and a nationalist modernization programme. The 'periphery' is a coalition that opposes the centre's modernization efforts and includes diverse regional, religious and ethnic groups with conflicting interests and strategies.

The cultural bases of the cleavage are diagnosed to continue into an even sharper *kulturkampf* after the peripheral AKP's capture of the state apparatus (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, 2021).<sup>15</sup> Reflection of this cleavage in voting behaviour is found in peripheral masses with a pro-Islamist conservative attitudinal predisposition amongst relatively lower educated predominantly living in the outskirts of large metropolitan cities and Anatolian small towns who tend to support the right-of-centre pro-Islamist and nationalist parties.<sup>16</sup> The central constituencies have relatively higher education, display lower piety and cherish secular values (Çarkoğlu, 2013; Kalaycıoğlu, 2021).

A persistently significant effect of economic evaluations has also been diagnosed with macro and micro-individual-level data.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the intensive use of misinformation in traditional and social media is underlined with implications for influencing vote choices (Akgül, 2019; Bozdağ and Koçer, 2022). Given the declining democratic standards in the country over more than a decade during Erdoğan's tenure, presidential

<sup>15</sup>For early diagnoses of this continuity, see Kalaycıoğlu (1994).

<sup>16</sup>The Kurdish periphery is divided in its support between pro-Islamist parties and left-wing Kurdish parties.

<sup>17</sup>On micro individual-level evidence for economic voting, see, amongst many others, Aytaç (2024) and Hazama (2021).

vote decisions are also expected to depend not only on evaluations of performance in different policy areas but also on the overall satisfaction with the way Turkish democracy performs.<sup>18</sup>

### *What Made Erdoğan a Winner? Who Are His Voters?*

To gain an empirically sound insight into how Erdoğan was able to secure a winning margin, I rely on a three-wave panel and a cross-sectional post-election survey.<sup>19</sup> One important pattern that emerges from these data is that performance evaluations across 15 issue areas exhibit a dual character. Most issues are considered important when not assessed based on performance. Amongst these, the average importance of LGBTQ and Kurdish issues is relatively low. Reducing inflation and promoting economic welfare are top priorities, followed closely by national security. Despite heated debates on conservative and nationalist issues such as the use of turban and hijab in public spaces, Syrian refugees or moral values protection, these are of secondary importance. The average importance of issues increases from January–February to April as the campaign develops but falls back to the initial observations as the public debates recede in June.

The importance-weighted performance evaluations of President Erdoğan's administration are two-dimensional. The first dimension brings together issues that favour the incumbent, which has relatively higher weighted average evaluations compared to the second dimension, which groups together issues favouring the opposition with a relatively lower average performance score. This dimension is strongly associated with foreign policy and security, as well as conservative concerns like the turban issue and the preservation of moral values.<sup>20</sup> LGBTQ and Kurdish issues, which have the lowest importance scores, and critical economic issues such as the provision of economic welfare and bringing inflation down, which have amongst the lowest performance ratings, all appear in the second dimension, suggesting that this is the dimension that brings together issues that favour the opposition.

These evaluations also display a highly partisan divide with AKP voters displaying significantly higher evaluations. The importance-weighted performance scores are consistently higher for the first dimension for both the AKP and CHP voters. For the AKP, the difference between the two dimensions is much wider than for the CHP.

Pocketbook and socio-tropic versions of economic evaluations for the past and future 1-year period can be used to grasp economic voting dynamics. From a descriptive perspective, prospective evaluations of socio-tropic or pocketbook versions are more optimistic during the 2023 campaign from January to May 2023 and during the immediate post-election period in Turkey than retrospective ones (see also Aytaç, 2024). The retrospective evaluations remain quite negative and stable. Prospective evaluations improve from January–February to April but then significantly deteriorate in the post-election period. AKP supporters are more optimistic, and CHP supporters are more pessimistic than the overall averages.

<sup>18</sup> Although Turkey has clearly problems in its democratic credentials, 'democracy' is the term commonly used in surveys.

<sup>19</sup> For descriptive details of these survey data and sampling procedures, see Baruh and Çarkoğlu (2024) and Çarkoğlu (2024).

<sup>20</sup> Identifying which of Turkish President Erdoğan's foreign policy positions are favoured by his constituents is challenging. Nevertheless, his unwavering stance against the Assad regime in Syria, his exploitation of the PKK issue to stall Finland and Sweden's NATO membership, his strong backing of the Palestinian cause and his notable achievements in Turkey's military technology advancements are all likely to garner public approval.

In short, the dual character of performance evaluations gave Erdoğan a chance to reduce his losses in one set of issues, including the economy, Syrian refugees, Kurdish and LGBTQI issues, with gains in relatively better evaluations in foreign policy, national security and conservative issues such as the turban use in public spaces. These performance evaluations also exhibit a deep partisan divide, providing an opportunity to exploit the dual character in Erdoğan's favour via partisan argumentation. Economic evaluations also display a partisan divide and appear to be relatively optimistic looking prospectively, which again provides yet more ground for reducing the negative influence of retrospective evaluations.

Focusing on the choice between the two candidates in the second round of the May 2023 presidential election, several patterns emerge, clarifying who Erdoğan's voters were. There is no gender gap between the two candidates, but age was a significant factor in the election, with relatively younger voters below 52 positively inclining to vote for Erdoğan. Since high school and university level education is already controlled, these younger voters are relatively low educated. Relatively better educated voters who are high school and university graduates are significantly more likely to vote for the opposition candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu. In contrast to our expectations, shantytown (17% in our sample) or rural residents (22% in our sample) appear insignificantly different from dwellers of the metropolitan centres. Sectarian and ethnic minorities of Alevi and Kurds are less likely than the Turkish Sunni majority to vote for Erdoğan. As the religious worship frequency of the Sunni majority rises, the likelihood to vote for Erdoğan also rises.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, individuals moving to the right end of the left–right self-placements are significantly more likely to vote for Erdoğan.

Only the prospective pocketbook version exhibits some statistical significance amongst the economic condition evaluations. As prospective evaluations of the respondent's family improve (worsen), the likelihood of voting for Erdoğan rises (falls). Given the dismal performance of the Erdoğan government on the economic front before the elections, this finding partially explains his electoral survival. Erdoğan's attempts to ease the economic difficulties of the working groups by raising the minimum wage and providing early retirement to a significant group of people appear to have neutralized the damaging influence of retrospective evaluations. Instead, the appeal of the promises for the future, which raise relatively more positive prospective expectations, appears to help his candidacy.

Amongst the two importance-weighted performance evaluation dimensions, the first one, covering those issue areas with high-performance ratings that favour the incumbent, positively impacts the likelihood of voting for Erdoğan. The magnitude of this impact is the largest amongst all variables. Erdoğan's emphasis on foreign and security policies and sensitive issues for the conservative constituencies gave his campaign an advantage over worse evaluations in the second dimension, which is statistically insignificant.

Misinformation campaigns over different issues do not appear to have affected the vote towards Erdoğan significantly. Neither the misinformation claim that 'the opposition alliance supports the LGBTQ' nor the claim that 'the opposition alliance has entered into cooperation with a terrorist organization' appear significant.

<sup>21</sup>On Alevi in Turkey, see Çarkoğlu and Elçi (2018). For Kurds, see Yeğen et al. (2020), amongst others.

Those who are more satisfied with the way the Turkish democracy works, however, appear to prefer to vote for Erdoğan. At the same time, Kılıçdaroğlu voters are more likely to be amongst the relatively less satisfied. This finding is in line with an earlier argument by Rose (2008) that Turkish voters who are on the winning and losing side appear to disagree in evaluating the performance of the country's institutions, reflecting polarization in the evaluations of the fundamental rules of the political game. Although the overall level of satisfaction with democracy does not appear to be high or even above the mid-point of the scale, the partisan divide in these evaluations helps attract those who are satisfied to vote for Erdoğan.

## Conclusion

Economic concerns persisted in shaping vote choice despite opposition party struggles and earthquakes. The expectation of improved performance evaluations in these areas may have driven Erdoğan's focus on security and foreign policy. The performance evaluations, considering foreign policy and security as well as other important issues for conservative voters, have a significant impact on the decision to choose Erdoğan over Kılıçdaroğlu.

Analyses suggest that the youth vote remains divided. Younger voters who do not have a high school or higher university education are more likely to vote for Erdoğan. Ethnic Kurdish and sectarian minorities of Alevi were both negatively predisposed to vote for Erdoğan. After controlling for demographic and attitudinal factors, we observe no geographical differentiation between residents of rural areas or the outskirts of metropolitan areas. Erdoğan's vote predominantly comes from right-of-centre voters who declare high religious worship. Even though democratic backsliding has accelerated over the past decade, Erdoğan appears to comfortably attract voters who are satisfied with the way Turkish regime works. Reflecting traits of polarized pluralism, Erdoğan voters are more satisfied, and Kılıçdaroğlu voters are less satisfied.

The misinformation campaign claims concerning the opposition collaborating with a terror organization or supporting the LGBTQ agenda did not have a significant impact on the vote choice between Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu. More important impacts were not due to issues on the LGBTQ demands, Syrian refugees or even the prioritization of fighting against inflation as opposed to unemployment in economic policy. The older debates around the identity issues concerning the resolution of the Kurdish problem, or the tension between the secularists and pro-Islamists, appear more potent in determining the vote choice between Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu.

Though the presidential system in Turkey was criticized by the opposition, those who favoured it supported Erdoğan. The opposition campaigned on the issue of the presidential system and blamed its unchecked executive powers for all failures. However, the outcome of the May 2023 elections makes it unlikely that Turkey will revert to a parliamentary system unless Erdoğan changes his stance.

There is overwhelming agreement that these elections were partly free but not fair.<sup>22</sup> The lack of fairness and continuing pressures on democratic principles and the rule of

<sup>22</sup>See <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/turkeys-election-mostly-free-anything-but-fair/> and <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/30/turkish-election-free-but-not-fair-say-international-observers>.

law are likely to keep the tension between the opposition on the losing side and Erdoğan on the winning side. Demands for fairer campaign processes will remain on the country's agenda. However, the factors influencing the Erdoğan vote remained overwhelmingly stable. Erdoğan relied on his conservative constituencies with low-educated younger voters. His performance in select groups of issues around conservative sensitivities, security and foreign policy helped him remain afloat.

The election's outcome had implications for Turkey's economic, democratic and foreign policy prospects. Erdoğan will likely adopt a rational economic policy to create economic relief with lower inflation and growth before the 2028 elections. Likely challenges to his popularity due to rising political stars like the Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and possibly others could disrupt his plans, leading to more populist responses in economic and other policy areas to address opposition challenges. Amongst these policy areas, security and foreign policy are likely to occupy an important space due to his already well-established credibility and success in the face of his conservative constituencies.<sup>23</sup> Given his bewildering victory and the resulting firm grip over all executive powers, Erdoğan is likely to feel reassured of his uncompromising and increasingly autonomous new foreign policy vision. Rising populist right-wing in Europe is also likely to keep Europe more willing to look the other way as Turkey's democratic credentials continue to deteriorate, which is comforting for Erdoğan, who critically depends on his conservative allies to maintain control of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. This, in turn, will mean a continuation of the status quo and continued autocratization on the domestic front until a new electoral window of opportunity arises to oust Erdoğan's regime. It is unlikely that following this victory, however questionable from the perspective of free and fair election practices, a new wave of democratization will follow. Especially when, despite strong discomfort with the Erdoğan regime's democratic credentials, the opposition leadership does not seem to press their constituencies' demands for democratic reforms, unilateral democratization reforms are very unlikely.

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<sup>23</sup>For the foreign policy implications of Erdoğan's victory in 2023, see Altunışık and Martin (2023), Charouz (2023) and Tziarras (2023).

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