Voting Psychology of Turkish Voters and Affecting Factors

Abdullah Murat Tuncer

Department of Political Science, AMT Consultancy, Ankara, Türkiye
Email: muratatuncer@gmail.com

Abstract

Voter trends are under the influence of different factors in different societies. In the Presidential and Parliamentary elections held in Turkey in May 2023, the Justice and Development Party and its alliance parties, which have been in power for over 20 years, came to power again. Especially in the region that experienced an earthquake disaster just a few months before the elections, where the political power made serious mistakes and was late in providing aid, the fact that the ruling parties won votes surprised the theorists regarding voter tendencies. This article briefly examines the factors that affect the voters' decisions despite the many economic and social negativities experienced and psychology in the country. The issue was discussed based on the data from the qualitative research conducted on 76 (seventy-six) people who voted in the elections.

Subject Areas

Politics, Psychology, Sociology

Keywords

Political Psychology, Vote, Democracy, Election, Polythink Syndrome, Psychological Trauma, Obedience to Authority, Türkiye

1. Introduction

It will be of interest to social psychologists and political scientists for a long time how a government that has failed in economics, domestic, and foreign policy for more than 20 years and turned its country into an immigrant pool is successful in re-election in 2023 with an election which legitimacy is questionable (Tuncer, 2023) [1].

Events that can frustrate the successful attempts of a highly unsuccessful op-
position, very high-level illiteracy, and deception among people can lead voters on the starvation line to choose a failed ruling party that has been in power for over 20 years (Tuncer, 2022) [2].

Are sustainable need and misery, a regime of oppression, and policies of intimidation enough to explain these, or are there different factors in the voter’s perception and psychology during the voting process?

With its actions over the last twenty years, Turkey’s ruling party has chosen to promote a closed-minded national identity in the context of complex conflicts rather than developing open-mindedness and critical thinking skills, which must be the primary goal of the education system (Bar-Tel, 2020) [3]. In fact, in their own words, they worked to “raise a spiteful generation,” and they were successful. The children born when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2003 were 20 years old and were raised in this highly biased education system. From the perspective of educators, it would not be wrong to see the young people who grew up in this period as a lost generation. Because many of the young people who grew up in this system now look at the world, democracy, humanity, civilization, and even educated people with hostile eyes.

The idea of rational choice regarding voting tendencies is invalid for the majority in dictatorial one-man regimes and populism, such as Turkey, based on widespread oppression and a lack of ideas.

In the last few years, especially after the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. elections, there has been a surge in academic interest in misinformation and disinformation (Pantazi, 2021 [4]; Zmigrof, 2023 [5]).

Individuals’ (and, by extension, societies’) vulnerability to misinformation is a significant factor for public bias. Factors and interventions that can increase individuals’ and societies’ resistance to misinformation (Tuncer, 2023) [6]. This was a critical point in the 2023 elections.

In addition to all these, the populist policies of the government created a populist society (Haas, 2022) [7]. The main effects of social populism are conspiracy mentality, moral disengagement, need for cognition, belief in simple solutions, and centrum and antielitism (Erisen, 2021) [8]. Directing and managing this type of society with political power is effortless. The ruling party, which entered the 2023 elections with serious disadvantages, managed to come to power again with such populist policies. In addition, considering that almost 2.5 million irregular immigrants, mostly Syrians and Afghans, were made citizens and voted, it became easier to win the election (https://multeciler.org.tr/suriyeliler-secimde-oy-kullanacak-mi? [9], https://tr.euronews.com/2023/04/08/14-mayis-secimlerinde-oy-kullanacak-suriye-ve-afganistan-kokenli-secmen-sayisi-kac [10]).

2. Qualitative Study on Voters Who Supported Different Parties and Individuals

A key characteristic of democratic politics is competition between groups, first of all, political parties. However, the unavoidably partisan nature of political
conflict has had too little influence on scholarship on political psychology. In the research on political parties and citizens, we do not systematically understand when and how political parties influence public opinion (Leeper, 2014) [11]. Political parties shape citizens’ opinions by mobilizing, influencing, and structuring choices among political alternatives. However, when and how parties influence citizens’ reasoning and political opinions depends on an interaction between citizens’ motivations, efforts, and information generated from the political environment.

One 76 (seventy-six) randomly selected people, regardless of which party or candidate they voted for in the Turkey 2023 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, their gender, and education, were interviewed about the strengths, weaknesses, and faults of the government and opposition. Their opinions were taken without interference. Participants were aged between 28 and 66. Fifty of the participants were women (65.8% women, 26 men (34.2%) were men, and 1.3% (1 man) were high school graduates. The remaining 98.7% are university graduates or continuing their education.

The views of 76 voters cannot reflect all voters. However, in qualitative studies, discussions were made in the light of opinions, not the representativeness of the number.

Participants in the research were asked about the factors and the psychology that were effective in winning the election and losing the opposition, as well as the evaluation of the voters’ perceptions and psychological evaluations. Voters who answered the questions were asked only open-ended questions, and their answers were not interfered with. The answers were then classified, analyzed, and summarized.

The majority of the participants (85.5%) believe that the main factor affecting the election result is the weaknesses, mistakes, inconsistencies, and inadequacies of the opposition and Kılıçdaroğlu’s personality traits rather than the government.

2.1. Mistakes and Weaknesses of the Opposition Parties Alliance

1) The opposition alliance underestimated the ruling alliance and did not work with due seriousness.

2) Presence of figures (such as party spokesperson and party general secretary in CHP) who see themselves as high among the public or make them feel that they do.

3) Inconsistent behavior of Meral Akşener, the leader of the İYİ Party, who is in the opposition alliance, as she was torn between ending the alliance or not, developing offensive discourses against the opposition, and repeating that she would be the prime minister even though it had no place in the Constitution. Even after it became clear that the presidential election had gone to the second round, Meral Akşener claimed she would become prime minister. However, an alliance that did not have a sufficient majority in the parliament and did not even have the power to change the Constitution carried out election propaganda.
by aiming to become the prime minister, only making sane voters smile.

4) DEVA Party leader Ali Babacan went beyond everyday discourse and gave the image of being the weakest link in the chain.

5) DEVA and Future Parties (GP), which left the AKP and founded a party, have the image of “betrayed” among the voters.

6) The opposition group’s most critical problem, especially the CHP, was the Polythink Syndrome. The word “Polythink” is derived from the word “poly,” meaning “many” ways of perceiving the same decision problem, goals, or solutions. In the opposition group, whose plural thoughts and exchange of ideas mostly turned into Destructive Polythink, there was a problem transforming this situation into Productive Polythink (Mintz, 2016) [12]. Polythink is the presence of disagreement and dissent within the group making the decision. It can be contrasted with the homogeneous, uniform, monolithic viewpoint of groups characterized by Groupthink. Although it was a correct approach for the opposition bloc to come together and for the prominent opposition leader to be the candidate of this bloc, the failure to form a monophonic opposition created a hostile atmosphere.

7) The widespread elitist (common thought that things should be controlled or owned only by the richest or best-educated people) thought among the core voters of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and CHP management team. This factor blocked the votes thought to go to CHP from other parties.

8) Including names that aroused bad feelings among CHP voters in the voter lists of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), in line with suggestions from alliance partners outside their cadre, led to many CHP voters not voting for their party.

9) They could not be active in the elections by focusing on their own party’s victory, not the alliance’s. Only the Saadet Party (SP) party organization carried out work. Many of their voters also turned to the ruling party alliance, not their alliance. Unfortunately, the Democratic Party (DP), the other party that emphasized contribution to the alliance, did not have a strong organization.

10) They could not effectively combat the slander and accusations produced by the ruling alliance promptly.

11) A sufficient struggle could not be put up to question the legitimacy of the elections and express the problems that the former president was nominated for the third time in violation of the Constitution, that immigrants were made citizens and allowed to vote, and that overseas votes could be cast in a few places.

12) CHP does not want to be in power. He is pretty happy with the current setup. So they did not work.

13) Their propaganda was very inadequate. Even though no one except the ruling parties could find coverage in the traditional media, they could have implemented a much better communication strategy.

14) The alliance they made with parties such as Deva and Future did not bring any votes, and on top of that, they annoyed their base, and the opposition votes were divided.
15) The three major mistakes of the opposition are lack of principle, the wrong candidate, and the pursuit of politics based on President Tayyip Erdoğan.

16) The main reasons for the CHP’s loss are that the people see them as an Alevi party, do not act as a principled opposition and do not persistently defend justice, that their leaders are not charismatic, and that they do not trust the people.

2.2. Strengths of Ruling Parties Alliance

Almost all government approaches were theoretically interpreted as weak and inconsistent (Tuncer, 2023) [1]. These weaknesses are no longer valuable since we look at it from the voters’ perspective.

1) The most vital aspect of the ruling alliance was the opposition parties, which displayed false rhetoric, incompetent attitudes, and indecisiveness.

2) Particularly, the parties in the opposition alliance entered the elections with the same list from a party that defines itself on the left, such as the Republican People’s Party (CHP), and the ruling bloc cooperated with the extremist Islamic parties, such as the Re-Welfare Party (YRP) and HUDAPAR, which will appeal to conservative and religious voters, and this increased the tendency of conservative voters to the ruling bloc.

3) The use of power and making it felt by large masses, sometimes with fear and sometimes with help, was reflected in the election.

4) The entry of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) into the elections with its logo, name, and lists was a critical and correct decision to keep the voters who would not vote for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the ruling alliance.

5) A perception of unity between the state and the ruling party was created. Voters started to see AKP as the State. This theme, as known from history, was Mussolini’s primary motto. It is a wrong behavior and perception but a mistake that pays dividends.

6) They could effectively and widely use populist discourses such as nationalism, religion and belief, sectarian and ethnic differences, and anti-LGBT sentiment through the media they captured.

7) Points were gained in domestic politics by taking an active role in the international dimension, especially in the Ukraine-Russia war, the following nutritional shortage, and the establishment of a grain corridor.

8) The country’s investments and developments in the war-Weapons industry and the work done with the country’s resources, such as the production of domestic electric cars, were attributed to a few political parties. Even the commercially developed uncrewed aerial vehicles and fake aircraft carriers of the President’s son-in-law were used as tools for election propaganda.

9) Days before the election, the discovery of newly discovered oil and natural gas resources was used effectively for the election. This unrealistic information, repeated before every election but did not come true, created hope and excitement in the voters for the future.
10) The ruling alliance achieved unity by creating a psychology of fear and timidity against the opposition in conservative, traditionalist, nationalist, and religious voters with the arguments it used.

11) They followed a logical communication policy. While the country was in this situation, its strategy of smearing its rivals instead of making promises was met with a response from the public.

12) The three significant successes of the ruling party are using their media power well, keeping the public asleep with perception, and hiding the alarming economic situation from the public.

3. Leading Factors Affecting Voter Tendency

The most important factors are social factors, including race, religion, degree of religiosity, social and economic class, educational level, regional characteristics, and gender. The degree to which a person identifies with a political party influences voting behavior, as does social identity.

The Milgram effect of obedience to authority was the most crucial factor in voters’ behavior. Some people have traits that predispose them to obey authority, regardless of whether that authority is asking them to do something harmful or wrong (Milgram, 1963) [13].

Misinformation can make people hold erroneous ideas about the world and engage in behavior detrimental to themselves and others. The most important of this misinformation was the lie that the opposition was cooperating with terrorists. However, the populist society was quickly convinced (Pantazi, 2021) [4].

A complex interplay of various factors influences voting behavior in elections. These factors can vary from one election to another and from one individual to another. Here are some of the critical factors that can affect voting behavior:

1) Political Ideology: A person’s political beliefs and values play a significant role in how they vote. In Turkey, political views and popular parties are like favorite teams. Even if they are wrong, they continue to be kept. The voter level has not yet reached or has not reached the level where they can make rational choices. Party loyalty is a strong predictor of voting behavior. Many voters consistently support the same political party in different elections.

2) Candidate Characteristics: Voters often consider the personal attributes of candidates, such as their charisma, trustworthiness, and competence, when making their decisions. Personal interests mainly drive this issue, and those who hold power recklessly use state resources for this purpose for their political interests. The thought of who will find a job for me and my family and who will protect me is at the forefront. However, the candidacy of some figures may cause problems for the highly educated elite. The uneducated segments support the leaders in some ways.

3) Economic Factors: Economic conditions, including unemployment rates, inflation, and overall economic performance, can impact voting behavior. Incumbent politicians are often judged based on their economic stewardship. This view is possible among more open-minded voters who can avoid populist influ-
ences. Personal experiences, including interactions with government services and the impact of policies on an individual's life, can affect voting choices. Family, friends, and social networks can influence voting behavior. People may be influenced by the political views of those around them.

4) Demographics: Age, gender, race, ethnicity, education level, income, and religion can influence how people vote. Different demographic groups may have distinct voting patterns. Even if it is not openly spoken in Turkey, fascist feelings against Kurds and Alevi continue in certain circles. Unfortunately, there has been no softening on this issue; on the contrary, polarization has gradually increased in the last 20 years. On the contrary, some gender tendencies are seriously excluded from society. Interestingly, those who appear in power and have different gender tendencies can be tolerated. This is a sign that the issue is being used for political purposes.

5) Media and Information: Information from news outlets, social media, and political advertisements can shape voters' perceptions of candidates and issues. Media coverage can also influence the salience of specific issues. Over the years, the government has taken over essential media organizations, and very few media organizations include the voice of the opposition. TRT (official Turkish Radio and Television) allocated 32 hours and 43 minutes to Erdoğan (President) and only 32 minutes to Kılıçdaroğlu (Presidential candidate of the opposition) (evrensel.net/haber).

6) Geography: Voters in different regions may have unique concerns and priorities. Regional issues, as well as the political climate in a specific area, can impact voting choices. In Turkey, there are significant differences in social life and cultural understanding between rural areas, big cities, and those living on the coastline, which was also experienced in the 2023 elections. More conservative groups made their choices in favor of the government. Interestingly, it gained power in the provinces that experienced earthquake disasters. Of course, these are evaluations made without considering possible illegal votes. Social norms, cultural values, and societal changes can influence voting behavior. Issues related to social justice, identity, and cultural values may be particularly salient for some voters.

7) Campaign Strategies: The effectiveness of a candidate’s campaign, including their ground game, advertising, and get-out-the-vote efforts, can impact voter turnout and choices. The repulsive attitudes of the opposition, especially the DEVA and Future Parties and the İYİ Party, which were established by separating from the CHP and AKP, and their leaders, and their behaviors and attitudes that belittled the voters were very psychologically effective in the elections. Behaviors that are the exact opposite of these attitudes gained points for the ruling party. The opinion that the opposition parties could have received more votes if they had not spoken at all was dominant among the voters.

It is important to note that these factors are interconnected and can vary significantly from one election to another. Additionally, individual voters may prioritize and weigh these factors differently when making their electoral decisions.
Understanding voting behavior is a complex field of study, and researchers continue to explore the dynamics that shape voters’ choices. Unfortunately, more accurate approaches to elections and social events are only possible after the events. However, making near-accurate predictions and taking precautions against possibilities, especially before the election, can only be achieved by carefully examining such articles.

4. Did Post-Election Events Justify Voter Bias?

What happened in the alliance of opposition parties after the election shows that the voters’ perception of them is correct. To summarize, it is as follows:

1) CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s assessment of the defeat as normal created a heavy disappointment in CHP voters. Afterward, he left the party chairmanship without taking any responsibility. Instead of being remembered for the positive things he did, his behavior without considering the psychology of the voters and his failure to take approaches that could keep the excitement high reinforced the voters’ perception of his incompetence.

2) After the lost election, the meaningless and fruitless discussions of some parties of the opposition alliance blaming each other, and especially the meaningless accusations of the İYİ Party leader strengthened the perception among the voters that “it is a good thing the opposition did not win, they could not govern the country by fighting with each other.”

3) While the disappointment of the opposition voters should be compensated and the democratic excitement should be kept alive, the problems of the voters and the country were almost pushed aside. The appearance of them fighting with themselves created an extremely hostile atmosphere for the upcoming local elections. Most CHP voters and almost none of the other opposition voters will vote for the CHP. The dominant situation in opposition voter psychology is exhaustion and helplessness. Regardless of which party they support, almost every voter knows this despair among CHP voters.

4) On September 28, 2023, the Supreme Court’s approval of the sentences of the detainees, including a person who was elected as a member of parliament in opposition to the European Court of Human Rights Decision, and its approval of the provisions related with Gezi Park Issue, and the Constitutional Court’s decision making the opposite of its previous decisions, are signs that the results of this vital election have begun.

5. Conclusions

Economic inequality has been found to have pernicious effects, reducing mental and physical health, decreasing societal cohesion, and fueling support for nativist parties and illiberal autocratic leaders (Jetten, 2021) [14]. It has been suggested that economic inequality may have even more far-reaching consequences than commonly believed. This effect continues to affect voters no matter how difficult the political power is.
Extensive literature in political science shows how citizens’ evaluations of politicians and their electoral behavior are affected by trait impressions of these politicians. However, more profound, interdisciplinary theory building that seeks to address when and for whom specific trait impressions come to guide candidate evaluations remains absent (Laustsen, 2021) [15].

It is possible to observe that as the social gaps in society deepen, social schizophrenia will increase in parallel with the increase in schizophrenia in people (Burns, 2014) [16]. The 2023 Turkish elections have been a critical laboratory test of whether most uneducated and battered people have lost their minds and consciousness enough to applaud a failed government of over 20 years. The effects of economic inequality on citizens’ sociopolitical behaviors may be increasingly important in today’s turbulent political and social landscape in Turkey.

Dealing with politics and being a good politician cannot be limited to winning elections. It requires taking ownership of the situation with the leadership qualities that must be possessed even after losing elections, listening to the voters’ excitement, doing what is necessary, and paying the price if necessary. Unfortunately, CHP voters could not see any political acumen in their leader and management team.

It seems that Turkish democracy and its voters will carry the psychological trauma of the 2023 elections, the following events, and the developments it caused for many years. These elections will be remembered as one of the turning points as crucial as the coup attempts in Turkey’s history.

In provinces where earthquake disasters occur and millions of people are miserable, supporters of the government celebrating election success by having fun among collapsed buildings and dead bodies is the picture that best represents the psychological trauma that Turkey is going through.

In order to make more accurate predictions in the next elections, politicians will need to put their interests aside, devote more time to such analyses and articles, and develop election strategies accordingly.

Focus group studies will be necessary for determining correct and effective strategies and election success. Political psychology seems to move from theoretical fields to practical approaches and applications.

In addition to qualitative studies, quantitative studies and in-depth research will enable us to obtain more detailed information on this subject.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**References**


https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12687


https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000498


