Why Didn't Economic Voting Work? Voting Behavior and Political Campaign Analysis in the 2023 Turkish Elections

Abstract

This study examines why Erdoğan won the 2023 Turkish general elections despite poor economic conditions, challenging the economic voting theory. It highlights the role of factors such as national security narratives, leadership perception, political polarization, voters' reaction to uncertainty, and strategic errors by the oppositions in shaping the electoral outcome. Additionally, the research aims to analyze Turkey's political culture and voter behavior, including aspects beyond economic concerns. It examines how these factors contribute to the endurance of long-term incumbency, providing insights into the mechanisms of authoritarian persistence in competitive electoral environments.

Introduction

Turkey held its general election on May 14, 2023. This election was considered a historic one since it posed a serious challenge to the 21-year-long rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The struggling economy was one major factor that fueled expectations of a change. Additionally, the weight of being in power for over two decades had started to take its toll on President Erdoğan and his party. The devastating earthquakes on February 6, 2023, which caused the deaths of over 50,000 people, were seen by many as the final blow to the AKP.

An opposition bloc, composed of six parties, was formed to oppose Erdoğan. However, despite these unfavorable conditions, Erdoğan still managed to win the election, although he did not secure victory in the first round. In this article, **we analyze how Erdoğan succeeded despite the economic downturn**. We also assess the opposition's strategy, as some argue that their candidate choice was a key mistake.

In short, we argue that **economic performance was not the decisive issue in this election**. Erdoğan and his campaign team shifted the narrative toward national security and were **more successful in setting the agenda than the opposition**. Moreover, internal disagreements within the opposition alliance, called the Nation Alliance (also known as the Table of Six), regarding the presidential candidate, cabinet structure, and ideological inconsistencies weakened their campaign.

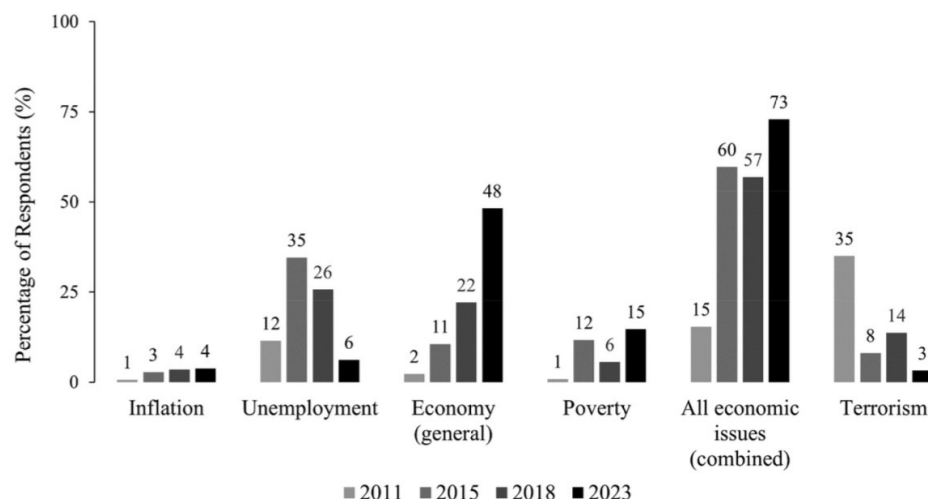## Why Economic Voting Did Not Work: Voting Behavior in the 2023 Elections

Economic voting theory suggests that people tend to support the incumbent government if the economy is doing well. This belief is also common in Turkey. Former President Süleyman Demirel famously said, "*No government can withstand an empty pot*" implying that poor economic

performance usually leads to electoral defeat. However, this was not the case in 2023.

The official inflation rate reached 86% in 2022(Reuters, 2022) and despite the worst economic conditions in AKP's 21-year rule, Erdoğan still managed to win in the second round against Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance, which included six political parties.
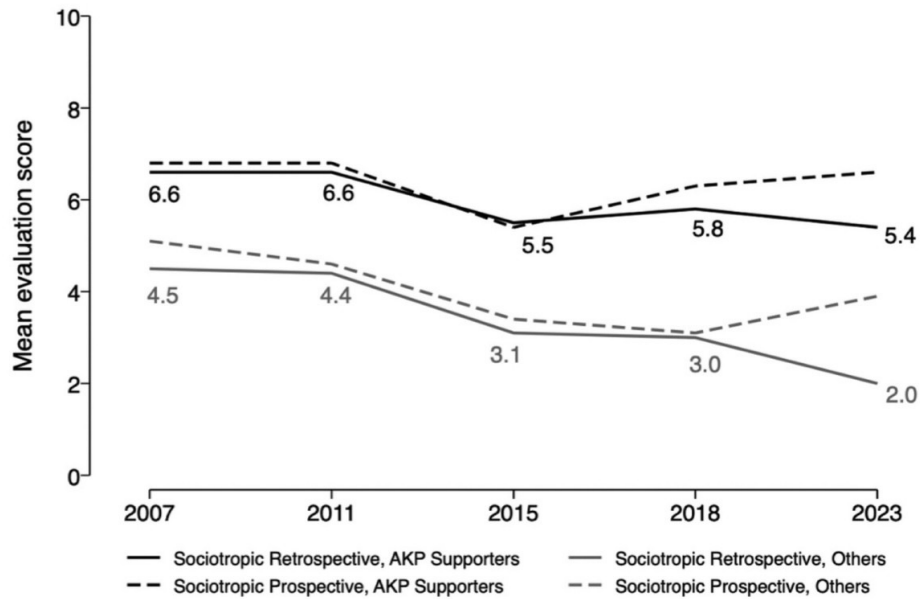
According to surveys (see Table 1), the economy was perceived as the biggest problem by most citizens (Aytaç, 2024). Polls were saying the same thing. %56 of the population has seen the economy as the "Turkey's biggest problem" just one month before the election (Sencar,2023).

Table 1: The most important problem facing the country, 2011 to 2023 (Aytaç, 2024)

The key question was who could best manage and fix the economy. Research by Aytaç shows that the **Nation Alliance failed to convince AKP voters that Kılıçdaroğlu would be better at economic management** (2024). Some AKP voters believed the economy had already hit rock bottom and thought it could only get better, which gave them a sense of optimism in their prospective economic evaluations (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mean scores of sociotropic(retrospective and prospective) economic evaluations of AKP supporters and others, 2007 to 2023 (Aytaç, 2024)

Legend:
— Sociotropic Retrospective, AKP Supporters — Sociotropic Retrospective, Others
-- Sociotropic Prospective, AKP Supporters -- Sociotropic Prospective, Others

While Nation Alliance voters believed their candidate could fix the economy, **People's Alliance supporters still thought Erdoğan was more competent than Kılıçdaroğlu** (see Tables 3 and 4). This difference in perception made it difficult for Kılıçdaroğlu to win over Erdoğan's core voters.

Table 3: Perceptions of how the economy would perform in cases of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu victories in the 2023 election- among respondents with below high school education and among respondent with high school and above education. (Aytaç, 2024)

Among Respondents with below High School Education

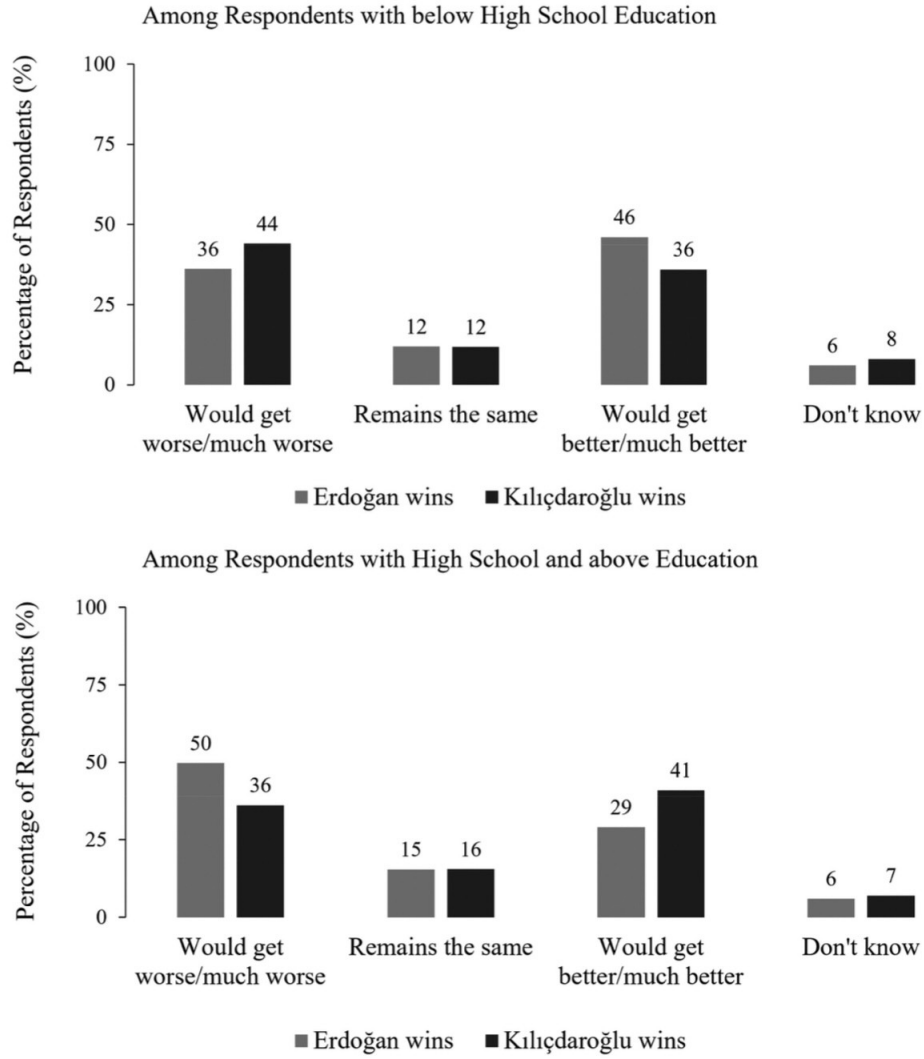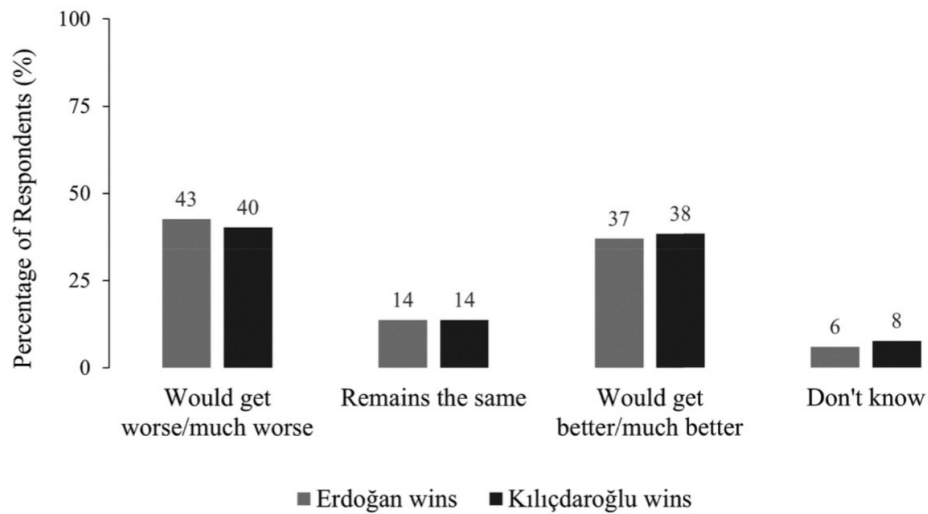## Among Respondents with High School and above Education

Table 4: Perceptions of how the economy would perform compared to present in cases of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu victories in the 2023 general election (Aytaç, 2024)

Research by Kocapınar and Kalaycıoğlu indicates that partisanship played a significant role in the 2023 elections (2024). *Affective polarization*—where people not only disagree with but also dislike opposing political groups—limited voter transitions between the alliances. Although voter volatility was measured at 22%, **most vote shifts occurred within the same ideological camps** (right-wing to right-wing or left-wing to left-wing), rather than across blocs (Kocapınar & Kalaycıoğlu, 2024). Another research similarly shows high levels of intra-alliance vote shifting within both alliances, for example in the ten provinces where CHP (Republican People's Party) lost significant votes, Good Party, its coalition partner, registered some gains. (Esen et al, 2023).

Akbiyik and O'Donohue (2024) demonstrate that Erdoğan leverages his agenda-setting power—afforded by an uneven playing field—to influence public attitudes, particularly by promoting **mega-projects and economic nationalism**. In other words, Erdoğan, benefiting from the advantage of being the incumbent for 21 years, used his past achievements as a basis to regain trust in his economic management. He particularly leveraged mega-projects and economic nationalism; interestingly, **these narratives were more effective on voters who did not support Erdoğan in 2018**(Akbiyik and O'Donohue, 2024). Although the vote shift appears to be minor, it can be said that this situation increased doubts within the opposition base regarding their own candidate's ability to manage the economy.

Why Kılıçdaroğlu Failed to Convince Voters: The Role of Uncertainty and Trust in Turkish Political Culture

Every country has a unique political culture, so while universal theories about voting behavior exist, local dynamics also matter. In Turkey's case, *Hofstede's* cultural dimensions show that the country scores high on uncertainty avoidance (The Culture Factor Group, 2023). This means **Turkish citizens are generally uncomfortable with ambiguity**. In addition, World Values Survey data ranks Turkey among the lowest in interpersonal trust(World Values Survey Wave 7, 2017-2020). These findings suggest that Turkish voters want predictability and seek candidates who inspire trust. Going into the 2023 elections, Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation Alliance failed to build that trust and instead created uncertainty.

As Balta and Demiralp (2024) noted, voters may prefer a known but flawed option over an unknown one due to the high cost of uncertainty. First, **the process of selecting the presidential candidate** became a key indicator of the difference in uncertainty between the two alliances. The Nation Alliance's presidential candidate was announced very late, and the decision-making process was not transparent. In contrast, the People's Alliance had long declared their candidate. The MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), the second-largest party in the alliance, used the slogan

"Aday belli, karar net" ("*The candidate is clear, the decision is firm*")—a direct reference to the opposition's indecisiveness. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1:

Another issue was the **uncertainty around the future government structure**. Erdoğan was solely responsible for appointing ministers and vice presidents, which added a sense of stability. On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu announced that there would be seven vice presidents, including two prominent mayors Mansur Yavaş (Mayor of Ankara) and Ekrem İmamoğlu(Mayor of İstanbul). This multi-headed structure created confusion. Moreover, the number of vice presidents — which was criticized even by Erdoğan himself — further weakened perceptions of the Nation Alliance's economic competence(Akbıyık and O'Donohue, 2024).

Furthermore, there **was no clarity on who would manage key ministries under the Nation Alliance**. While Meral Akşener (leader of the Good Party) suggested that Prof. Dr. Bilge Yılmaz would manage the economy, Kılıçdaroğlu released videos with Ali Babacan, a former Minister and member of the Nation Alliance, implying he would take the role. This contradiction added to voter uncertainty. In another interview, Ahmet Davutoğlu (a former Prime Minister and Nation Alliance member) stated that all decisions would be made jointly by the alliance and that disagreements could lead to a **crisis**. These types of public statements amplified doubts.

Another important factor for uncertainty was about **weak/strong ties within the alliances**. Unlike the Nation Alliance, whose members held diverse ideologies, the People's Alliance was more ideologically cohesive. As Ong's study on Malaysia's opposition alliance shows, minimizing

ideological differences and focusing on common goals is crucial for opposition coalitions (2022).

So, Erdoğan capitalized on all these uncertainties by emphasizing that the Table of Six would lead to political instability and a management crisis (Haber, 2023), drawing parallels to the frequently collapsing coalitions of the 1990s to consolidate his power.

Opposition Candidate and Campaign Comparison

As mentioned earlier, the process of selecting the Nation Alliance's candidate was long and difficult. Despite the popularity of Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu—who had successful mayoral wins in 2019—Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was nominated. Kılıçdaroğlu **struggled to gain support from the voter base of the Good Party**, the second-largest member of his alliance, whereas other potential candidates, İmamoğlu and Yavaş, appeared unlikely to face such difficulties (Baruh and Çarkoğlu, 2024). We know that **candidate personality and image matter in elections** (Marsh, 2007; Garzia, 2013). For opposition alliances, a charismatic and unifying candidate is especially important. Kılıçdaroğlu had already lost to Erdoğan multiple times, which raised concerns about his chances and damaged his charisma.

In terms of the election campaign and political communication, the Nation Alliance fell short compared to its rival. Campaign visuals of the Nation Alliance often featured multiple leaders from the Table of Six and two mayors, giving the impression of a **fragmented leadership** (see Figure 2). In contrast, Erdoğan's campaign focused solely on him with the slogan "Doğru zaman, doğru adam" ("Right time, right man") and a **strong visual identity** (see Figure 3).

Figure 2:

Türkiye kazanacak!

Figure 3:

TÜRKİYE YÜZYILI İÇİN
DOĞRU ZAMAN
DOĞRU ADAM

Also, Kılıçdaroğlu frequently shared the stage with other leaders and mayors during rallies, which diluted his individual appeal. Meanwhile, different Nation Alliance members used their own campaign slogans and images. For example, İYİ Party (Good Party) ran a separate campaign with the slogan "Türkiye Tarih Yazacak" ("Turkey Will Make History"), featuring its own leader Akşener (see Figure 4). This **lack of unity** sent mixed signals to voters.

Figure 4:

The Agenda-Setting Power of the AKP: National Security and Foreign Policy

While economic theory suggested Erdoğan should lose, it is important to remember that he also used tools of fiscal expansion—such as raising the minimum wage and launching early retirement programs—to ease economic pressure. Moreover, with heavy media influence, the AKP managed to shape the political agenda around **national security and terrorism**. For instance,Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the MHP, repeatedly accused Nation Alliance members of having ties with terrorist organizations like FETÖ (Fetullahist Terrorist Organization) and PKK (Geyikçi and Yavuzyılmaz, 2024).

The People's Alliance focused on national defense projects such as domestically-produced drones, warships, jets, and electric car TOGG. Erdoğan even changed his profile picture on social media to one where he wore military clothing, reinforcing this image (Geyikçi and Yavuzyılmaz, 2024).

On the other hand, the Nation Alliance **lacked strong figures or clear policies on defense and foreign polic**y. In surveys conducted in 2021, religious and conservative voters believed Erdoğan was more competent in **national security and combating terrorism** than the Nation Alliance

(TEAM, 2021). Therefore, the Nation Alliance should have given more priority to the issues regarding the foreign policy and national security.

The Nation Alliance failed to inform voters about who would be in charge of key ministries like foreign affairs or defense. In countries like Turkey, which are located in geopolitically tense regions, foreign policy can significantly influence voting behavior. Also, in times of crisis, security may be the most important issue for voters, this has been shown in studies on U.S. elections (Saldin, 2008; Gadarian, 2010). There are several important studies that show **Turkish voters are interested in foreign policy and that foreign policy can influence their voting decisions**, to varying degrees. (Aydın et al, 2022, Kalaycıoğlu, 2009; Şenyuva, 2009) In the end, national security concerns and Erdoğan's narrative overshadowed the economic issues (Esen et al, 2023).

Conclusion

The May 14, 2023, elections showed that defeating long-term incumbents requires more than just an opposition alliance. They also challenged the idea that economic performance alone determines electoral outcomes. While the economy matters, other factors such as partisanship, polarization, trust, avoiding uncertainties, and national security are equally important. The opposition must not only unite but also present a coherent, conflict-free, and credible alternative. Lastly, the personal appeal and leadership qualities of the candidate remain crucial to Turkish voters.

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