

Exploring Opposition Voting Patterns: The Role of Negative Partisanship and Affective Polarization

*By Can Büyükbay**

This study analyzes the voting behavior of the interviewees who voted for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the May 14 and 28, 2023 presidential elections on the basis of data obtained through in-depth interviews. Findings from in-depth interviews reveal that negative partisanship and affective polarization are evident in opposition voters' preference for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The findings show that voters do not have a strong emotional bond with Kılıçdaroğlu, but voted for him out of a desire to change the current government. The study sheds light on the emotional and identity aspects of political leadership and voter behavior during the presidential election process.

Keywords: *Negative partisanship, affective polarization, voter behavior, in-depth interview.*

Introduction

The presidential elections in Turkey on May 14 and 28, 2023, offer valuable insights into voter behavior amid significant political rivalry and growing social polarization. The contest between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu highlighted how emotional and identity-driven factors influenced voter preferences.

The literature highlights negative partisanship as a rising trend in contemporary democracies, particularly in the United States, where it plays an increasingly influential role in shaping political preferences.¹ Furthermore, negative partisanship often characterizes polarized societies, and Turkey's current political climate exemplifies this theoretical framework. In-depth interviews revealed the tangible effects of this phenomenon, with many Kılıçdaroğlu supporters basing their preferences primarily on opposition to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the government.

The study goes beyond quantitative short surveys and aims to examine the attitudes, emotions and political imagination of voters through in-depth interviews. The study's contribution to the literature lies in its in-depth exploration of identity and leader-voter dynamics within Turkey's electoral processes.

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¹Abramowitz and Webster, *Negative Partisanship*, 119; Abramowitz, “The Great Alignment”, 5.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, political science literature has developed numerous theories to analyze voter behavior. Notably, the concepts of negative partisanship and affective leader polarization have become crucial in explaining voter preferences within modern democracies.

Negative Partisanship

Research on voter behavior in political science indicates that voting decisions are shaped not only by economic interests and political promises but also by emotional connections between leaders and voters, as well as negative attitudes toward opposing political identities. With the rise of identity-based politics, voters are polarized during elections not just by political ideology but also through emotional ties and a sense of belonging. This leads voters to identify with a group or affiliation through positive or negative partisanship directed at specific leaders or political figures.²

Voter dissatisfaction with opposing parties and leaders can grow so intense that, despite concerns about their own party's candidate, voters are often reluctant to shift support. Negative partisanship often involves excluding and marginalizing opposing political identities, while affective leader polarization is fueled by deep emotional bonds fostered through leader-focused rhetoric and symbols. Ultimately, negative partisanship occurs when voters base their preferences more on opposition to a candidate than on the qualities of the candidate they support.³ In this form of identification, voters' motivation to participate is rooted less in support or approval and more in a desire to block the opposing side. This drives voter preferences toward a negative stance, compelling them to cast a strategic vote aimed at preventing a figure they dislike or oppose.⁴

To sum up, negative partisanship sharpens the divide between "us" and "them" in polarized societies, with voters primarily motivated to back their party as a means to prevent the other from winning. In this framework, negative feelings toward another group or leader significantly influence electoral outcomes. Accordingly, voters' political judgments are largely shaped by negative perceptions of opposing groups, leading to decisions driven more by emotional antagonism than by rational choice. Negative partisanship heightens political polarization not only within individual voter preferences but also across society. Voting as a means of opposing a particular candidate, rather than supporting another, raises crucial questions about democratic processes. Understanding the role of negative partisanship in shaping elections, especially in highly polarized societies, is essential for devising future electoral strategies. Following this exploration of negative partisanship, the concept of affective leader polarization will be further examined.

²Abramowitz, "The Great Alignment," 173.

³Abramowitz and McCoy, United States, 146–47.

⁴Bankert et al., *Measuring Partisanship*, 13.

Affective Leader Polarization and its Effects on Voter Behavior

Affective leader polarization⁵, a concept in political science and social psychology, explores how voters' emotional responses to political leaders influence the broader polarization process. Within this framework, leaders' charisma, rhetorical style, and emotionally charged messages can polarize voters along ideological or identity-based lines.⁶ Strong emotions such as admiration for one's leader or hostility toward opposing leaders can significantly shape political preferences, leading to profound societal polarization.⁷

Emotional Leadership and Polarization Dynamics

Emotional leadership often centers on a leader's emotional intelligence, empathy, and impact on followers.⁸ The concept of affective polarization through leaders highlights how the powerful emotional bonds or negative reactions they evoke affect both their supporters and opponents.⁹ This suggests that individuals may polarize not just due to political beliefs but also as a response to emotional reactions against the opposing side.¹⁰ These emotional influences shape voter behavior beyond rational or ideological motivations, creating responses rooted in emotional reactions. In this sense, leaders' language, rhetoric, and the identities they embody can deeply affect voters' emotions and sway their voting preferences. Affective polarization through leadership fosters a strong sense of belonging among a leader's supporters, distinguishing them from other political groups—especially in nations where populist leadership is prominent.¹¹

The Effects of Affective Polarization on Voters and Society

Affective polarization not only intensifies voter loyalty to certain leaders but also fuels negative partisanship toward opposing leaders and their supporters. As Huddy et al. (2015) suggest, there is a strong link between voters' loyalty to their chosen leaders¹² and negative sentiments toward opposing groups, which can lead voters to view political opponents as threats, especially under the influence of affective polarization.¹³ This leader-centered theory of affective polarization enhances leaders' ability to foster a strong sense of belonging among supporters while driving polarization and marginalization among opponents. Thus, affective

⁵Selçuk, in the “The Authoritarian Divide,” examines the concept of affective leader polarization, where populist leaders increase polarization among voters through inclusive and exclusionary discourses.

⁶Iyengar et al., *Affect, Not Ideology*, 406.

⁷Mason, “Uncivil Agreement,” 4.

⁸Goleman, “Emotional Intelligence.”

⁹Abramowitz, “The Great Alignment,” 109.

¹⁰Iyengar et al., *Affect, Not Ideology*, 407.

¹¹Moffitt, *Global Rise of Populism*, 4.

¹²Huddy et al., *Expressive Partisanship*, 3.

¹³Iyengar and Westwood, *Fear and Loathing*, 690.

leader polarization not only mobilizes a particular constituency but also heightens mutual distrust and conflict within society at large.¹⁴

To conclude, the effects of affective polarization on leaders are crucial for political systems and democratic culture, deepening voter attachment to leaders and intensifying polarization toward opposing groups. Consequently, political dynamics are shaped not only by ideological divides but also by emotional and identity-based schisms. Affective polarization through leaders manifests when voters form positive or negative emotional bonds with certain leaders, with political preferences shaped more by intense emotions like love or hatred than by specific policy proposals. In this scenario, voters choose based on emotional attachment or opposition rather than a rational assessment of the leader's policies. Traditional theories of political behavior suggest that voters make decisions based on rational self-interest.¹⁵ However, affective polarization centered on leaders often leads voters to stray from this rational framework, making choices rooted in emotional responses. This means that voters may be swayed more by the leader's charisma or ideology than by concrete policy proposals. Emotional attachments to leaders can undermine rational thinking, leading to less objective, emotionally driven choices.¹⁶

Research Method

This study was based on semi-structured interviews with 21 participants aged 19 to 66, utilizing the in-depth interview technique, a qualitative research approach. All participants supported Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections, with most voting for the Republican People's Party (CHP). Participants were selected from various regions across Turkey according to Konda's data, achieving a balanced representation of gender (11 males and 10 females), education levels (7 below high school, 8 high school graduates, and 6 university graduates), age, socioeconomic status, and occupation. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse provinces, providing varied perspectives on electoral motivations. Conducted in June 2023, after the 2023 elections, each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and analyzed the reasons behind voters' support for Kılıçdaroğlu.

The research methodology involved two stages. First, data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These were recorded via telephone in June 2023, and later transcribed. In July 2023, the author developed a research framework and semi-structured questionnaire. To keep responses open-ended, guiding topics, concepts, and questions were used during interviews. Questions focused on:

- Demographic information,
- Voting behavior,

¹⁴Mason, "Uncivil Agreement," 4.

¹⁵Suzuki, "Rationality of Economic Voting," 624-42.

¹⁶Iyengar and Westwood, Fear and Loathing, 691.

- Evaluation of the chosen party/candidate (Kılıçdaroğlu and opposition promises, assessment of Kılıçdaroğlu and motivation to vote),
- Assessment of the government (attitudes towards Erdoğan and government rhetoric).

The second stage involved data analysis. Each interview's internal consistency and relationships, as well as comparisons across different categories and demographics, were analyzed. A theory-driven approach was applied using foundational literature, with responses coded around themes related to negative partisanship and leader-based affective polarization.

It is essential to note that these interviews were conducted after the electoral loss. Thus, the responses reflect perspectives formed in a context where the electoral outcome was definite. Consequently, the analysis should be understood as assessing attitudes shaped after the resolution of the electoral possibilities.

Findings

This study examines the behavior and motivations of voters who supported Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu¹⁷ in Turkey's 2023 presidential elections, interpreting these dynamics through the lenses of negative partisanship and leader-based affective polarization theories.

Findings indicate that voters' preferences were largely driven by opposition to Erdoğan, with Kılıçdaroğlu struggling to forge a strong emotional connection with his supporters. Kılıçdaroğlu's and the opposition's discourse had limited influence on these voters, revealing a gap in fostering a shared passion and message. The study concludes that Kılıçdaroğlu's communication with his base, referred to as interdiscursivity, was notably weak.

A general sense of hesitation and reluctance marked the participants' voting behavior, with many indicating they voted for Kılıçdaroğlu primarily due to a perceived lack of alternatives. Kurdish voters, in particular, mentioned that they were influenced by Selahattin Demirtaş's rhetoric and cast their votes for Kılıçdaroğlu out of a sense of necessity rather than genuine enthusiasm. As a result, it is evident that Kılıçdaroğlu's voters struggled to build a strong emotional affinity with him.

¹⁷Konda Barometer, December Barometer, 2022. The Konda surveys reveal that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was the only leader who evoked more negative emotions than his party and had the highest level of negative partisanship nationwide leading up to the elections. My findings align with Konda's quantitative data: Despite this negative view, due to the opposition voters' strong negative partisanship towards Erdoğan they voted for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. See also, Evren Balta's analysis on Negative Party Partisanship in Konda Barometer, 2212.

Reason to Vote for Kılıçdaroğlu: Role of the Negative Partisanship and Affective Leader Polarization

The research findings indicate that the majority of voters who chose Kılıçdaroğlu did so primarily out of opposition to Erdoğan. Most participants reported that their decision was driven more by a desire to see a change in the current government than by commitment to Kılıçdaroğlu's promises or political stance, highlighting the significant role of negative partisanship in shaping voter preferences.

As one participant put it, *"The main reason I voted for Kılıçdaroğlu was my opposition to Erdoğan; there was no other option"¹⁸*, underscoring how opposition to Erdoğan served as a primary motivator.

The impulse to vote for Kılıçdaroğlu was generally weak and reluctant. Many participants expressed voting for him due to a lack of alternatives. For instance, one participant noted, *"No, I only voted for Kılıçdaroğlu out of obligation. None of his promises or statements impressed me; it was just out of necessity"¹⁹*. Another added, *"I decided to vote with a single purpose... I was aware nothing would change even if Kılıçdaroğlu won, I just made this kind of preference to break a chain for a while"²⁰*. This sentiment underscores negative partisanship, where voters cast their vote not for an appealing leader but out of opposition to the current one. Phrases like *"out of obligation"* or *"to break the chain"* suggest that voters chose Kılıçdaroğlu as a reaction to the existing system rather than out of active support for him. This indicates that electoral preferences were influenced less by candidates' positive attributes and more by negative opinions of the government and the current system.

The comment, *"I knew that nothing would happen even if Kılıçdaroğlu came to power,"* reflects a sense of hopelessness within this negative partisanship. One participant further echoed this reluctance: *"I'm not someone who likes Kılıçdaroğlu... I didn't vote for him willingly; it was out of necessity. Otherwise, I'd say, 'I wish I hadn't voted for him.' I regret it"²¹*. These quotes illustrate that voters' preferences were driven more by emotional opposition or a sense of compulsion than by rational decision-making. For these three voters, their decision to support Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was rooted in a sense of obligation rather than a genuine preference.

Overall, support for Kılıçdaroğlu appears to stem from necessity, despair, and a reaction against the status quo rather than from enthusiastic commitment. Voters struggled to find a figure in politics that truly represented them, ultimately basing their preferences on a desire for change and dissatisfaction with the current administration. This pattern was also reflected in other interviews, showing a consistent theme of reluctant support rooted in opposition to the existing leadership.

In-depth interviews indicated that voting for Kılıçdaroğlu was largely driven by negative partisanship toward the opposing party and by affective polarization directed against Erdoğan:

¹⁸Interviewee 3.

¹⁹Interviewee 20.

²⁰Interviewee 11.

²¹Interviewee 21.

To put it plainly: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu didn't quite possess the stature or ability to serve as president; let's be clear about that upfront. But, as previously mentioned, we voted for him out of necessity. Overall, he didn't instill much confidence... We cast our votes as those who either support Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or oppose him — it was more a matter of those who wanted him and those who didn't.²²

The concept of affective leader polarization offers a crucial theoretical perspective for understanding how individuals' emotional responses to political leaders and their sense of closeness or distance to them heighten societal polarization. Hence, political divisions are shaped not merely by ideological or policy differences but also by strong emotional reactions toward leaders. The statement, "*We cast our votes as those who either support Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or oppose him*" highlights the significant role of emotionally driven leader polarization in shaping voter behavior.

It was already clear who we weren't going to vote for. We focused on choosing a candidate who could prevent that person from staying in power, and ultimately, we voted for his opposition.²³

As illustrated in this excerpt, the participant states that their preference was based not on their preferred candidate's qualities or promises but rather on a desire to prevent the opposing candidate from gaining power. This approach reflects voting behavior driven by negative sentiments toward the opposing leader rather than a positive political commitment. According to affective polarization literature, voters often select a candidate not because they view them as the "best option" but as the most viable alternative to "prevent the opposing candidate" from winning.²⁴

This behavior demonstrates how affective polarization is reinforced through leaders, shaping elections around an "oppositional identity" rather than constructive alignment:

To put it this way: we were at a point where we would vote for a glass if it came to that — and honestly, I still feel the same. We thought, "Whoever it is, it can't be worse than this." Whether the candidate was announced or not, our direction was clear. I was already following the opposition closely every day, down to each of their speeches.²⁵

While Kılıçdaroğlu's personality, promises or policies cease to be of primary importance, the main factor determining voting behavior is based on the aim of not supporting the opposing leader. This perspective shows that affective polarization has become a powerful motivator in politics.

With the statement "*Whoever it is, it cannot be worse than this*" the interviewee emphasizes the negative image of the current leader figure in their eyes rather than the candidate. This discourse reflects the tendency of voters to develop extremely negative attitudes towards the opposing group, which is frequently discussed in the affective polarization literature.

²²Interviewee 4.

²³Interviewee 16.

²⁴Abramowitz, "The Great Alignment," 170.

²⁵Interviewee 5.

By constantly following the opposition and observing the differences in the discourse of the leaders, the voter in this excerpt reinforces the negative feelings she has developed against the current leader figure. Yet another interviewee makes similar statements:

Nothing directly influenced me, but rather, it was the other side that drove my decision. That's why I voted, to put it simply.²⁶

Kurdish voters were also influenced by the rhetoric of Selahattin Demirtaş and again voted compulsorily/unwillingly:

Well, we cast our vote reluctantly, but what could we do? Mr. Erdoğan is old; we voted, albeit unwillingly, hoping he would step aside and make way for someone else, maybe even bring some change to the current order. And, honestly, we did it because "Selahattin Demirtaş mentioned it."²⁷

If it were just a personal decision, based solely on sentiment, maybe we wouldn't have gone to vote. But, in a way, we also listened to the HDP or the Green Left Party because they advocated for it.²⁸

There are also some interviewees who are skeptical about why Kılıçdaroğlu ran for office when he knew he could not win:

Of course, when Kılıçdaroğlu was nominated, I spoke with my teacher friends and thought, "Oh no," as Kılıçdaroğlu seemed to be exactly who the other side wanted.²⁹

At this stage, a sense of reluctant, even hopeless, voting emerges among participants. It appears that neither the opposition nor Kılıçdaroğlu managed to inspire a shared passion or hope among voters. Political alienation, defined as a feeling of indifference or distrust toward the political system, is discussed in the literature in terms of feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness.³⁰ The excerpts show that voters lack faith in Kılıçdaroğlu's ability to drive change, even if he were to win. This aligns with political alienation, as voters feel ineffective within the political system. Those with a sense of powerlessness believe that any elected candidate would have limited impact, leading them to cast protest or anti-system votes rather than supporting anyone within the system.

Opposition to Erdoğan was a primary motivation among opposition voters, with many indicating that they saw Kılıçdaroğlu not as a hopeful or ideal leader but as the only alternative to Erdoğan. This underscores the extent of political polarization in Turkey and the influence of negative partisanship on voter behavior.

²⁶Interviewee 3.

²⁷Interviewee 4.

²⁸Interviewee 6.

²⁹Interviewee 13.

³⁰Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," 783.

Ideal Candidate Assessment

The characteristics that should be present in the ideal leader are the opposite of the aspects that opposition voters complain about President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When we asked the participants about the characteristics of the ideal leader and what kind of a leader should govern Turkey, characteristics such as "fair, defending freedom of thought, honest, inclusive" came to the forefront:

A fair leader in every aspect, one who may be uncompromising when necessary...³¹

I place honesty at the forefront, because people truly need the truth now — someone genuinely committed to protecting the rights of even the unborn child, someone who does things by the book.³²

In other words, the ideal leader should be someone who meets the country's and society's core needs, independent of political affiliation. They should be inclusive and unifying, not a source of division within society.³³

Such a leader should be highly knowledgeable, deeply honest, free from deceit, and capable of inspiring trust and belief among all people.³⁴

When talking about the characteristics of an ideal leader, the participants stated that Kılıçdaroğlu would be a better president than Erdoğan. This expectation is shaped by the fact that the characteristics that the participants define as the ideal leader (just, honest, inclusive, etc.) are the opposite of Erdoğan's criticized characteristics. Negative partisanship becomes evident here as a process of identification developed against Erdoğan; participants define their ideals in opposition to the characteristics they dislike in the current leader.

In this context, it is observed that voters determine their preferences based on their negative feelings towards the discourses of the current leader, which they perceive as marginalizing and polarizing. This process coincides with the tendency of voters to form their own identities by excluding the opposing camp.³⁵ While the participants stated that an ideal leader should have inclusive, honest, just and unifying characteristics, it is noteworthy that these values are defined in opposition to Erdoğan's discourse and policies.

Leader-based affective polarization creates a strong sense of belonging among Erdoğan's supporters, whereas it creates feelings of anger and alienation among the opposition. On the other hand, in the process of negative partisanship, criticism against Erdoğan contributes to Kılıçdaroğlu's support. Thus, support for Kılıçdaroğlu is reinforced through negative feelings towards Erdoğan, and the expectation of an ideal leader is set in opposition to Erdoğan's shortcomings.

³¹Interviewee 1.

³²Interviewee 5.

³³Interviewee 7.

³⁴Interviewee 13.

³⁵Iyengar and Westwood, *Fear and Loathing*, 690.

The majority of respondents said that Kılıçdaroğlu was not the ideal candidate and that it was difficult for him to win from the beginning:

If you asked anyone, they would say they already knew Kılıçdaroğlu couldn't win. He seemed to be the only one who didn't realize it.³⁶

I'm not sure if the election outcome could have been different, but I don't believe he was the ideal candidate.³⁷

In the public's eyes, Kılıçdaroğlu became a point of failure, a red mark, because he couldn't secure a win. I think another candidate might have had a chance — Yavaş could have won, İmamoğlu could have won.³⁸

Emotional leadership refers to a leader's ability to manage own emotions and the emotions of others and emphasizes the role of emotional intelligence in leadership. In emotional leadership, leaders are expected to effectively regulate their own emotions and the emotions of others, thus strengthening group dynamics such as cooperation, cohesion and motivation. Emotional leadership theory also suggests that leaders' ability to create a positive mood within the group can have a positive impact on performance.³⁹ In this framework, based on the above quotations, it is seen that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has not performed adequately in terms of emotional leadership.

Participants think that Kılıçdaroğlu's vote corresponds to the minimum number of votes and that strategically Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu are close to winning. Participants tend to categorize the leaders as winners and losers:

Naturally, well-known candidates like Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş come to mind first, and I believe both would have garnered more votes than Kılıçdaroğlu. To put it simply, I think Kılıçdaroğlu's vote count was already the baseline, and if you or I had run, we probably wouldn't have received fewer votes — that's my humble opinion.⁴⁰

There's also the fact that İmamoğlu and Yavaş won the elections they contested, establishing themselves as winners. This would have created an extra impact, a momentum boost. In contrast, Kılıçdaroğlu's record of not winning elections automatically cast him as a losing candidate.⁴¹

In my view, if İmamoğlu had been the candidate, he would have achieved a higher vote percentage.⁴²

When these quotes are evaluated in terms of the concepts of affective polarization and negative partisanship, it is understood that voters' perceptions of Kılıçdaroğlu's

³⁶Interviewee 21.

³⁷Interviewee 1.

³⁸Interviewee 10.

³⁹Bass, "Leadership Beyond Expectations."

⁴⁰Interviewee 3.

⁴¹Interviewee 16.

⁴²Interviewee 14.

candidacy are determined by both lack of emotional commitment and hopes for other leader figures. The statements of the participants reveal that although they support Kılıçdaroğlu, they do not see him as the "ideal candidate" and think that his chances of winning are low from the beginning.

Participants' perception of Kılıçdaroğlu as a "defeated" and "outdated" leader contributes to Kılıçdaroğlu not being perceived as a unifying leader. This situation shows voters' negative partisanship tendency towards leaders who do not meet their expectations and their search for an alternative leader figure. As stated in the literature, voters identify leaders by emphasizing their shortcomings rather than an element of belonging, which can be explained by weak emotional attachment and the search for alternatives.⁴³

Promises of Kılıçdaroğlu and the Opposition

In general, respondents think that the opposition and Kılıçdaroğlu have failed to express themselves clearly:

...If they had articulated their stance just once, things might have turned out differently. They failed to communicate their policies effectively...⁴⁴

Question: Well, is there anything you remember from Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches during this campaign period?

Answer: I suppose not; I never watched them — I just cast my vote for him.⁴⁵

Interviewees believe that Kılıçdaroğlu is unable to express himself clearly and present a concrete leadership vision. This shows that Kılıçdaroğlu has difficulty in establishing an emotional connection as a leader. In this section, it is noteworthy that the opposition's promises did not impress the voters sufficiently and the ones that stuck in their minds were general and abstract issues.

Attitudes towards Erdoğan

When the participants were asked how they felt when Erdoğan won, sadness, disappointment and hopelessness came to the fore:

*I mean, I remained neutral, really, because, as I said, I'm still young, and I haven't fully grasped what has impacted my life or how. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has always been the president, for as long as I can remember. So, I didn't feel much about it — it's always been him, it still is, so whatever I feel seems pointless.*⁴⁶

In the first participant's statement, the neutralized emotional response indicates that the long-term rule of the leader creates a "habit" and emotional wear and tear in the individual. Hence, under long-term leadership, voters sometimes develop a

⁴³Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*; Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*.

⁴⁴Interviewee 11.

⁴⁵Interviewee 20.

⁴⁶Interviewee 1.

neutralized or accepting attitude instead of extreme polarization. This suggests that leader-based polarization may not only create overly positive or negative emotional reactions, but sometimes it may also be reflected as emotional neutrality.

The fact that Erdoğan's winning the election is seen as a commonplace among opposition voters reveals a state of "emotional dissatisfaction" that this affective polarization may create. One of the respondents expressed that "*Erdoğan has always been the president*", and thus, the election result was met with insensitivity. Voters' apathy towards Erdoğan's victory also points to a lack of leader-voter bonding and individual ineffectiveness:

Well, it wasn't a big disappointment for us; it was already expected. Like we said, when the votes were being counted, he started with only a few percent. Thanks to Anadolu Agency, as soon as the ballots were opened, they placed him in first, and that was that. So, we didn't feel much disappointment. We had estimated about a 10 percent chance for Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu to win, maybe 10 percent.⁴⁷

The participant's statement is an expression of acceptance that the election outcome was expected and a certain degree of disappointment. These quotes suggest that leader-based affective polarization can also generate a certain degree of emotional acceptance and indifference among voters, rather than strong opposition or support. In this context, these quotes suggest that leader-based affective polarization not only increases emotional intensity through polarization, but can also lead to less intense reactions such as acceptance of the opposing leader or emotional neutrality.

In addition, it is observed that the emotion that stands out in almost half of the participants is anger.

There was anger and shock, but in my personal life, it was more of an "I told you so" — it was clear that things would turn out this way.⁴⁸

In the participant's statement, his anger at the outcome of the elections is mixed with a personal affirmation of "I told you so". This sentiment reflects a kind of "realistic" acceptance of the political system while feeling anger towards it. The quote suggests that this type of anger can occur within leader-based polarization, especially in the context of a sense of defeat. Instead of experiencing an emotional shock after the results, voters may develop a strategy to reduce anger through a sense of "anticipation" or "living up to expectations".

Let them sink a little deeper — I don't mean the well-off, who've only gotten richer and richer. I'm talking about the people struggling to survive on pennies, those suffering from hunger. Let them hit rock bottom, and then they'll finally see their day.⁴⁹

The above participant's statement expresses a much more intense anger, and this anger is not only directed at the leader, but also at the leader's supporters and social base. Such a strong expression of anger indicates, leader-based affective

⁴⁷Interviewee 4.

⁴⁸Interviewee 3.

⁴⁹Interviewee 2.

polarization sharpens not only political differences between individuals but also societal conflict.

In this context, the fact that the reaction to Erdoğan's victory was expressed in a language of anger and social segregation reveals the impact of negative partisanship. This anger towards Erdoğan's supporters, while holding them responsible, also reveals the marginalization dimension of negative partisanship by placing them in a morally and economically "inferior" position. In the perspective of negative partisanship, this is the tendency to direct anger towards the opposing group and to perceive this group more negatively in the event of the loss of the ideal leader. Thus, the process of negative partisanship increases distrust and anger towards Erdoğan supporters, while at the same time deepening the emotional distance between voters.

This analysis reveals that Erdoğan's victory elicited a variety of reactions such as despair, anger and acceptance among the participants and that these reactions are linked to affective leader polarization and negative partisanship processes. This situation provides an example of both the emotional depth of leader-voter relations and the negative effects discussed in the literature on how polarization in society is reinforced.

The following excerpts reveal how a significant negative perception of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is shaped within the framework of leader-based affective polarization. In this context, the fact that Erdoğan is characterized with negative images such as authoritarian and demagogue shows that Kılıçdaroğlu voters perceive this leader figure negatively as a result of affective polarization:

For one, he's the president of all of Turkey, yet he uses such derogatory, divisive language. Can someone who speaks that way really govern all of us? He should be speaking in a unifying way, defending the rights of everyone.⁵⁰

In the quote, the description of Erdoğan's language as divisive and derogatory reveals the effects of affective polarization. Hence, the language used by leaders can lead to emotional reactions among voters, causing them to develop an emotional positioning towards political leaders. This feeling creates an emotional rupture over common values in society and increases polarization:

Q: What comes to your mind when you think of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan?

A: Authority, repression, polarization.

Q: So, how do you find the current administration of the country?

A: You can probably tell I'm not satisfied. To put it simply, the administration is irrational, unscientific, unpredictable, lacking merit, and frankly, completely disgraceful.⁵¹

Q: What comes to your mind when you think of Erdoğan?

A: Demagoguery. In the simplest terms, staying in power by manipulating people's emotions, telling them what they want to hear. He's a powerful demagogue, a strong orator... implementing entirely wrong policies leading the country to disaster.⁵²

⁵⁰Interviewee 8

⁵¹Interviewee 3.

⁵²Interviewee 5.

In this context, views such as Erdoğan's "staying in power by exploiting emotions" and "leading the country to disaster with wrong policies" reflect a perspective that criticizes not only the leader's policies but also his existence, and that is morally and emotionally incompatible with his political line. This can be explained as a reaction of the opposition voters not only to the leader's actions but also to the leader's personality.

... No sir, actually they should feel sorry for being put in that situation, I mean, "People have fallen in love with their executioners", what can I say.⁵³

Finally, voters' anger against Erdoğan also causes them to emotionally distance themselves from the masses who support him. The expression "people in love with their executioners" illustrates how affective polarization damages social cohesion by creating a distinction between "us" and "them" in a society. Affective polarization affects voters' relations not only with the opposing leader but also with the leader's supporters, which can pave the way for social conflicts. According to the literature, leader-based affective polarization deepens conflict in society, making it difficult to develop a common understanding and perpetuating social divisions in the long run.⁵⁴

By evaluating the quotes within the framework of affective leader polarization and negative partisanship, we can examine how negative emotional reactions towards Erdoğan and the polarizing effect of his leader image are shaped. The participants' frustration, anger and helplessness towards Erdoğan reflect the fact that the leader's discourse and policies have created widespread discontent in the society and led to alienation among the opposition due to the weakness of this emotional bond. In this context, the negative attitude towards Erdoğan becomes evident as an element that strengthens the participants' opposition identity.

Conclusion and Evaluation

This study analyzed the voting behavior of voters who voted for Kılıçdaroğlu in Turkey's 2023 presidential elections. The findings revealed that opposition voters' emotional opposition to Erdoğan and the government was the main motivation for voting for Kılıçdaroğlu. Voters were motivated by a reaction against Erdoğan rather than a belief in Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership. This shows the depth of affective leader polarization in Turkey and how negative partisanship shapes voter behavior.

In this analysis, we see how emotional reactions to Erdoğan are intertwined with emotional leader polarization and negative partisanship processes. While Erdoğan's charismatic yet perceived authoritarian image creates a distinct emotional divide between his supporters and opponents, his divisive language, repressive policies and the perception of dependency created through social benefits lead to a strong negative partisanship among the opposition.

⁵³Interviewee 2.

⁵⁴Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 405.

The most prominent impression from the interviews is that the voters who voted for Kılıçdaroğlu did not vote for Kılıçdaroğlu because the promises of Kılıçdaroğlu and the opposition gave them excitement or hope, but because of their strong tendency to oppose the government. This shows that Kılıçdaroğlu failed to establish a strong emotional bond with his voters. These findings reveal how Kılıçdaroğlu's lack of emotional leadership affects voters' decision-making process. There is a general hesitation and abstention in the voting behavior of the participants. In general, it is observed that they voted for Kılıçdaroğlu out of a sense of forced lack of choice.

Affective leader polarization is an important indicator of how leaders deepen political polarization in relation to strong emotional reactions in individuals. This polarization can make political divisions in society deeper and more persistent, and the emotional effects of leaders can shape voter behavior and overshadow rational choices. The literature predicts that increased affective polarization may make social cohesion more difficult and weaken political functionality.⁵⁵ In Turkey, affective polarization towards leaders is a factor that greatly affects voter behavior. In the presidential elections, emotional reactions towards leaders were a determining factor in voters' preferences.

Future research could examine the long-term effects of affective leader polarization and negative partisanship in Turkey. Moreover, a more detailed examination of the effects of political leaders' emotional leadership skills and discursive strategies on voter behavior could provide important insights into the functioning of democratic processes.

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⁵⁵Abramowitz, "The Great Alignment," 164.

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