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A Democratic Retrograde Experience of a Developing Country, Turkey's Journey to Competitive Authoritarianism and the Public Consent

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Citation

Güngör, Ö. F. (2023). *A Democratic Retrograde Experience of a Developing Country, Turkey's Journey to Competitive Authoritarianism and the Public Consent*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

*A Democratic Retrograde Experience of a Developing Country, Turkey's Journey to
Competitive Authoritarianism and the Public Consent*

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MSc Political Science – Specialization: International Organization

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Wordcount: 9941 (excluding the appendix)

APA reference style seventh edition

16.01.2023

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to contribute to understanding how a competitive authoritarian leader manages to increase popular support in a situation where an electoral democracy experiences democratic backsliding. After the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016 in Turkey, Erdogan put the constitution aside and launched a new model for governing the state with decree laws under the state of emergency. However, Erdogan won the elections held in the following years by increasing his vote share, although he had explicitly turned into a repressive, authoritarian leader. In this study, I investigated how Erdogan strengthened his popular support in the elections held after 2016, despite his authoritarian turn and the deterioration of the socio-economic structure of the state. I focused on the manipulations carried out by the incumbents in the elections held after 2016 and tested whether these manipulations affected the election results in favour of Erdogan. I conducted a content analysis using the qualitative research method to explore this. Ultimately, I argue that the analysis of the data collected for this study provides strong evidence that election manipulations may have significant effects on the election results in favour of Erdogan.

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Introduction

Turkey is one of the countries that experience democratic backsliding in the second decade of the 2000s (Bechev, 2022). Justice and Development Party (AKP) has governed Turkey under Erdogan's leadership since 2002. The first decade of the AKP rule was relatively progressive, prioritising engaging with Western institutions, seeking peaceful neighbourhood relations in its region (Arin, 2016), and pursuing policies towards eliminating the polarization in the society (Bechev, 2022). After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Erdogan turned the parliamentary system into a presidential model with his victory in the referendum held in 2017, and he has become the only political figure with the utmost authority on top of the state (Akçay, 2021). While the emergence of an authoritarian regime/leader is a familiar political routine for some geographies of the world, Turkey, an EU candidate, one of the largest NATO members, and with strong political and cultural ties to Western institutions, is an interesting case to explore.

In his 20 years of rule, Erdogan turned the country into an oppressive, less democratic and kind of authoritarian regime. The failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016 became the official milestone for this turn, and Erdogan officially launched his authoritarian regime right after this juncture. On 21 July 2016, the constitution was put aside, the parliament was inactivated, the opposition was suppressed and a new model for governing the state with decree laws under the state of emergency was established. The State of Emergency was extended 7 times for 3-month periods and was lifted on 18 June 2018, only six days before the elections. The consequences of the state of emergency have had a heavy burden on the country's economy as well as on social life. The economic situation in Turkey has been worsening since 2016. The current economic crisis is more severe than the 2001 crisis, the Turkish lira has been in free fall since 2016 (\$1 was equal to ₺4.70 on 23 June 2018, it was ₺2.89 in July 2016 and ₺18.77 as of 05 Jan.2023 (TCMB - Kurlar, n.d.)). The unemployment rate was announced %17,7 in the report published by the biggest labour union in Turkey on June 2018 ("Haziran 2018 İşsizlik ve İstihdam Raporu," n.d.). Turkey's experience with similar economic crises caused the collapse of the governments and mainstream parties have been marginalized, leading people to seek alternative parties (Yilmaz et al., 2021). As the fundamental pillar of democratic accountability, voters punish unsuccessful performances of governments in the elections (Abus, 2022). In fact, in the 2018 presidential elections, Erdogan succeeded in increasing his vote share and received 52.59% of all votes (YSK Web Portal, n.d.-a). Erdogan managed to achieve this victory despite the deteriorating socio-economic and liberal

conditions in the country after 2016. Hence, the research question of this study is formulated as *“How does Erdogan enjoy popular support in the elections despite the deteriorating socio-economic and liberal conditions under his rule?”*

To answer this research question, I will investigate the role of electoral manipulations on Erdogan's success in gaining popular support in the elections held after 2016 in Turkey. To do this, I will conduct a content analysis and build it on the assumption of Levitsky and Way's (2002) competitive authoritarian theory that "although elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results" (Levitsky & Way, 2002). I am not the first to apply this assumption in the case of Turkey, but most studies overlook the extent of the effects of manipulations on election results, which are portrayed by incumbents as having public consent. This is because most of the existing research on the Turkish case focuses on the feasibility perspective rather than the effect of election manipulations. I argue that electoral manipulations have more meaning in Turkish politics than feasibility capacities. This thesis aims to evaluate the public's consent to Erdogan, who has lived an authoritarian turn in his rule of 20 years, by examining the validity of the election results. If adequate evidence is found that parallels the theory's assumption, it will allow me to draw inferences about how election manipulations provide a basis for Erdogan's appearance of garnering popular support.

I will first introduce the current regime structure in Turkey under the Erdogan Presidency and outline relevant academic propositions regarding the survival of the regimes having similar political approaches. Thereafter, I will outline my theoretical framework and expectations. The qualitative research method is applied through the content analysis of domestic and international academic writings, national and international observer reports and reputable press and (social)media outlets to achieve reliable conclusions. In the methodology section, I will demonstrate this process in detail. Electoral manipulations will be examined in the case of Turkey in order to explain the puzzle of how Erdogan gets popular support in elections despite regressing socio-economic and democratic standards. After tracing the empirics in the analysis section, I aim to reveal whether the popular support that Erdogan enjoys is essentially electoral fraud or not in the discussion section. This thesis expects to find out that the high vote share of Erdogan is mainly a result of electoral manipulations.

Literature Review

This research aims to understand how Erdogan receives popular support in the elections held after 2016 despite the significantly worsening conditions in the country, how he retained his seat and what method(s) he used to avoid losing his power through elections. Therefore, this literature review seeks to provide an overview of what the literature has to say about the case identified for this research.

After the failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkey went to the polls for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, and local government elections in 2019. In these elections, held under the state of emergency conditions, Erdogan should have received less than 50 percent of the total votes in the presidential elections held in 2018, even if the AKP had maintained its average vote share in the post-2016 elections¹. The AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) participated in the 2018 elections as a united block. In this context, although the total votes received by both parties explain the ballots received by Erdogan, the MHP had split within the party in 2017 and as a result of this split, the IYI Party (IYIP) was established. IYIP participated in the opposition block against the AKP-MHP coalition in the 2018 elections and received 9.96% of the total votes. Considering the MHP's average vote share in general elections during the AKP government, this split was expected to push the MHP below the threshold, while the MHP unexpectedly received 11.1% of the ballots. Also, before the 2018 presidential election, according to opinion polls by several different polling companies, Erdogan's predicted vote share with MHP support was between 43% and 48%². This recalls the possibility that election results may have been manipulated, and seems to be in line with the postulates of Levitsky and Way's (2002) theory of competitive authoritarianism to provide relevant explanations for the research question of this study. In this context, I argue that election manipulations, which are known to be widely applied in the elections in Turkey (Aygül, 2016; Marschall et al., 2016), can provide substantial answers to clarify this complexity.

Election manipulations in Turkey are examined in various dimensions in the literature. Gerrymandering, manipulation through redistricting, is one of these mechanisms employed by the Erdogan government in 2014 and it is still fruitful for the government, especially in gaining the majority seat in both the city councils and the grand assembly (Aygül, 2016;

¹ See Appendix 1

² See Appendix 2

Çicek, 2022). However, this does not have any impact on increasing the vote share in the elections. It still benefits the ruling party as a tactical adjustment to increase the number of seats in the parliament. Therefore, it will not be studied within the framework of this research.

On the other hand, practices such as ballot box stuffing, carousel voting, manipulating the voter registrars, and falsifying the results are frequently encountered both in the election minutes of the opposition parties and in the election reports of international observers (Aygül, 2016; Esen, 2021; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, 2019; Yıldırım et al., 2021; Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). The literature also highlights the use of state power by the government, such as providing free transportation to polling stations to increase voter turnout (Kingsley, 2017), mobilizing police forces against dissidents to suppress opposition in the campaigning periods (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018), interfering with the operations of the Supreme Election Board (YSK) and harming its impartiality (Cook, 2018), etc. For instance, in the 2017 Constitutional Amendment Referendum, despite the opposition's claim that it was against the law, 2.5 million unsealed votes were counted as valid with the YSK's decision upon the AKP's request. This decision led to criticism that the referendum was manipulated both by ballot box stuffing and by the intervention of the YSK, as the referendum ended with a small margin in favour of the AKP (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017).

The literature also draws attention to other manipulation mechanisms that AKP frequently resorts to in elections. Ballot boxes are relocated to distant stations in order to obstruct voters' access to the ballot boxes in provinces where the Kurdish population predominantly live, and examples of discriminatory treatment towards Kurdish voters are encountered at ballot boxes (Taşkın, 2021).

One of the manipulation practices in which state power is utilized to manipulate public perception in Turkey is intimidation of the media (Şen, 2022). With the decree laws issued after 15 July 2016, more than 100 journalists are imprisoned, nearly 200 media outlets have been shut down, and thousands of journalists lost their jobs (Özdal, 2021). The closure of the opposition broadcasting organizations and the suppression of those that were not, made the official news agency a monopoly to announce the election results to the public in the elections. Opposition journalists who are still trying to do journalism within this monopoly system are frequently exposed to harassment, threats and attacks, and are often detained and arrested by law enforcement on baseless allegations.

Although the election manipulations encountered in Turkey have been examined under different mechanisms, the lack of studies explaining whether the election success of the government is due to electoral fraud creates a gap in the literature. The literature addresses the manipulation issue regarding the government's ability to do so. However, despite the numerous irregularities encountered over the years, the extent to which election manipulations played a role in Erdogan's success in increasing his vote share and consolidating popular support has not yet been addressed. Therefore, this thesis aims to look at two elections held in Turkey after 2016 to examine whether and to what extent election manipulations answer the question of this research.

Theoretical Framework

After July 15, 2016, the Erdogan-led regime sharply reverted to an authoritarian course, and Erdogan's success in reinforcing popular support despite this transformation has prompted many academics to seek answers to this puzzling situation. The securitisation theory has been one of the leading propositions in explaining the success of Erdogan in consolidating popular support (Yilmaz et al., 2021). Securitisation is defined as raising political issues and identities to a significant level of threat, using speech acts and policies so that extraordinary measures can be implemented to address the difficulties arising from them (Sandal & Ozturk, 2022). "Political actors pushing a country towards authoritarianism are expected to initiate institutional change and bring the regime's relationship with political rivals and enemies to a level of urgency that justifies actions to suppress them" (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). Intimidation, patronage, centralization, repression, and co-optation are the applied mechanisms to create a securitised environment to consolidate public consent for severe policies (Akçay, 2021; Bayulgen et al., 2018; Bechev, 2022; Esen, 2021; Sandal & Ozturk, 2022; Yilmaz et al., 2021; Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). Some other opinions point to the existence of clientelist ties between the AKP and the electorate, referring to the theory of clientelism (Abus, 2022; Cinar, 2016; Esen, 2021; Marschall et al., 2016, 2016; Sandal & Ozturk, 2022). In this proposition, it is argued that the urban poor votes are bought with regular social benefits and votes are cast for the government (Abus, 2022; Cinar, 2016). It is also noted that the business class, play a role in the continuity of the current regime with the incentives and privileges offered by the incumbents (Bayulgen et al., 2018; Esen, 2021; Sandal & Ozturk, 2022).

Although these approaches reflect the practices applied by the incumbents in Turkey, they are not enough to explain the puzzle of how Erdogan achieved success in elections after he has lived an authoritarian turn in his rule. The securitization theory does not take into account other factors, such as Erdogan's ability to use populist rhetoric to influence popular support or his ability to use critical public institutions to his advantage in the electoral race. It is also not possible for a leader of a country of 80 million, who pursues victory in elections by securitizing the different components of society or by paying money to buy the votes of individuals, to be %100 percent sure about the colour of the votes in the sealed envelope. For this reason, I argue that there should be a mechanism that enables Erdogan to achieve an absolute victory in the elections without considering any risk or hesitation.

There is a majority acceptance in the literature that the regime in Turkey has turned into a competitive authoritarian structure, especially after 2016 (Bayulgen et al., 2018; Çalışkan, 2018; Esen, 2021; Esen & Gumuscu, 2019; Yıldırım et al., 2021; Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). Esen and Gümüştü (2016) define Turkey's journey under AKP rule as a transition from "tutelary democracy" to "competitive authoritarianism", where elections are still held and are functional to a degree, but under uneven conditions (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Esen & Gumuscu, 2019). As stated in this definition, elections in competitive authoritarian regimes are functional to some extent because the existence of regular elections risks losing power for those in power. This is also what we see in the current Turkish political equation. Erdogan sees the elections as a mechanism of legitimacy, and when he is politically criticized, he uses his victories in the elections as a shield against criticism (Bechev, 2022). On the other hand, there has been a sharp increase in the use of manipulation tactics in the elections held in Turkey since 2016. (Kahvecioğlu & Patan, 2021). Therefore, this thesis focuses on manipulation mechanisms utilized in the elections to trace the answer to the research question.

Competitive authoritarianism is described as a regime type in which 'formal democratic institutions exist and are widely used as the primary means of gaining power' (Akçay, 2021); competition is 'real but unfair' (Levitsky & Way, 2015); elections are manipulated (Diamond, 2002; Donno, 2013; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2015), state resources are exploited both for rigging in the elections and for any kind of benefits of the incumbents (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010). Constitutional rights remain de jure but ignored de facto (Diamond, 2002b; Donno, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002).

In such regimes, regular elections are essential for incumbents to be seen as legal, and hold public consent. As it is highlighted by Cinar, (2016) that “voters hold incumbents accountable for their performance during the electoral term, based upon their effort and performance” and take their support back for the alternatives when there is infelicity. Competitive authoritarian leaders attach utmost importance to holding elections on regular basis, yet, they are often held under a series of irregularities and electoral fraud (Donno, 2013; Esen & Gumuscu, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2015). Electoral fraud (vote buying, ballot-box shuffling, carousel voting, manipulation of voter lists, falsification of results), preventing opposition campaigns and utilization of the state power in favour of the government, etc. are the frequently encountered mechanisms in the elections in the competitive authoritarian regimes (Abus, 2022; Çicek, 2022; Esen & Gumuscu, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010; Slater, 2011). The practices outlined here may differ from one regime to another. The reason is that not all regimes abuse all areas of governance to the same degree.

It is also necessary for incumbents to reduce the risk of press surveillance if they intend to commit manipulative acts in elections. Governments impede free media through indirect fines, irrelevant publication bans and various methods of intimidation (Schedler, 2002). Freedom of expression and press are protected by law in competitive authoritarian regimes. Still, in practice, these freedoms are often violated and disregarded. Opposition journalists are frequently exposed to harassment, threats, and attacks and are often detained and arrested by law enforcement on baseless allegations (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Thus, the authoritarian leader enjoys the freedom of accountability and public power (Donno, 2013).

Competitive authoritarianism theory states that electoral fraud is one of the most characteristic mechanisms frequently used by competitive authoritarian leaders. The literature reveals that along with electoral fraud, other electoral manipulation mechanisms of the theory are also valid for the case of Turkey. In this context, this research proposes the following hypothesis: *The popular support enjoyed by Erdogan is an artificial manifestation of electoral manipulations.*

According to Turkey's new presidential election regulation, “the candidate who receives the absolute majority of the valid votes in the elections to be held with universal suffrage is elected President. If this majority is not achieved in the first ballot, a second ballot is held on the second Sunday following this election. The two candidates who received the most votes in the first ballot participate in this voting, and the candidate who receives the

majority of the valid votes is elected President” (*T.C. Resmî Gazete*, n.d.). In this setting, elections consist of a risk of failure for Erdogan when the majority of the voters unite against him in the second rally. Therefore, Erdogan seeks to ensure his victory on the first ballot. For this, the electoral fraud option comes to the fore as the most effective solution to sustain his power and to provide the legitimacy he wants to use against his opponents who criticize him for authoritarianism.

In this context, this thesis will examine the manipulation mechanisms in the context of electoral fraud (ballot-box stuffing, carousel voting, manipulating voter lists, falsifying results, etc.) and misuse of state power and analyse their effects on Erdogan's electoral success. The analysis to be made in the light of the collected data is expected to reveal that Erdogan rigged the elections and used the state power for his own benefit to win the elections, and therefore his election victories are substantially faked.

Methodology and Data Collection

This research applies Turkey as a typical single case study. A qualitative research method will be employed by the method of content analysis in this study to investigate the impact of election manipulations on Erdogan's public support. The Turkish case is interesting because the literature avoids assessing the extent to which electoral manipulations affect Erdogan's electoral success, instead focusing on Erdogan's ability to manipulate elections. The current authoritarian turn in Erdogan's political approach contradicts the proposition that authoritarian governments are more likely to lose popular support (Abus, 2022). To clarify this contradiction, this research will trace plausible answers by focusing on 2018 presidential and the 2019 local elections. Therefore, the research is suitable for cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data collection. As a matter of fact, in this focused period, as a result of the referendum held in 2017, the transition from a parliamentary democracy to the presidential model was completed, and it has been thoroughly felt that Erdogan became the ultimate authority in the state administration with his authoritarian practices (Bayulgen et al., 2018; Bechev, 2022).

As stated in the literature review, the common acceptance regarding the current regime in Turkey is that Turkey is a typical example of competitive authoritarianism. Therefore, this thesis examines the assumption that Erdogan may have achieved electoral success by

manipulating the elections, based on the prediction of Levitsky and Way (2002) for competitive authoritarian regimes. As the theory emphasizes that elections are held regularly, still, it stresses that they are often held under a series of irregularities and electoral fraud in such regimes. This approach was chosen because it provides a detailed understanding of the context surrounding the treated mechanisms and deep insights into Turkish politics' inner workings behind the scenes.

Specifically, this methodology includes searching the data obtained from the content of expert analyses, national and international observer reports, newspaper archives, social media posts, opposition party reports and minutes in Turkey from 2018 to today. I paid attention to the fact that the collected data consisted of pieces recorded/published after the voter lists were released (2 May 2018 and 4 January 2019). I conducted this process by researching three data sources: Google Scholar, Google, and Twitter Advanced Search.

First, a broad search was conducted by using keywords such as “electoral fraud”, “intimidation of opposition” “opposition”, “media surveillance”, and “abuse of state power” to locate published articles, reports, and other primary sources related to the electoral manipulations in Turkey. Documents and sources related to these topics were collected and classified for mechanisms of electoral manipulation. The classified data were then reviewed and refined until a comprehensive analysis scheme was developed. I cared to collect the data in the context of the focused elections, so as not to include any data irrelevant. This research's primary sources of information are academic writings on the irregularities detected in the elections, and election observation reports of reputable international organizations and local non-governmental organizations. The irregularities recorded in the ballot box minutes of the opposition parties were also taken into account in the data collection. When necessary, publications in the (social)media regarding irregularities were included in the data repository as a secondary source, after a meticulous examination. I applied two criteria while selecting the most comprehensive and representative samples among collected election irregularities from secondary data. First, I prioritized the reputation of the media sources and, if the data is cited from a lesser-known media source, I eliminated that data. Some of the data were overlapping in different sources, those repeated ones were preferred to be cited from well-known media sources. I also utilized the social media posts referenced in the official reports as data sources. The second criterion was that the data to be evaluated should be free from provocative purposes and indisputable, only documenting the real irregularity. This led to the exclusion of a significant amount of social media posts and duplicated data. However, an

adequate amount of remaining data will be analysed in detail to determine whether the irregularities attempted by the government officials, recorded in the 2018 and 2019 elections, have resulted in favour of the government, and if so, to what extent this has happened.

In the analysis section, the data collected will be examined under two determined manipulation mechanisms: electoral fraud and misuse of state power. A qualitative research method will be employed by the content analysis method to test these mechanisms' effects on election results. This will be done by meticulously evaluating the data collected under each manipulation mechanism title, evaluating them in terms of encountering systematics and projecting them throughout the country. This will allow me to determine whether the election manipulations yield results consistent with the expectations noted in the theoretical framework. This thesis aims to contribute to understanding how Erdogan maintains popular support in elections. A detailed examination of the evidence is expected to confirm the hypothesis that electoral manipulations ensured Erdogan's electoral success. Therefore, the research will deal with accurate evidence in both elections. The data to be obtained in the context of both elections will be evaluated as a complementary whole. In the discussion section, I will put forward my inferences based on the evidence given in the analysis section. The thesis will be concluded with the conclusion section where a brief summary of the content and findings of the study is revised.

ANALYSIS

Election manipulations in Turkey have been a hotly debated issue in domestic politics since 1946 when the multi-party system was adopted for the first time. The issue of manipulation in elections has not decreased in years, contrarily, it has become one of the most significant concerns of today's politics due to various irregularities experienced in recent years (Kahvecioğlu & Patan, 2021). The erosion of democratic gains in society over the years, the government's pressure on social life, the economic stagnation and the fact that the same political leader has been in power for more than 20 years are the factors that are expected to lead to changes in politics. Nevertheless, despite his explicit authoritarian turn in the post-2016 period, Erdogan managed to increase his vote share in the 2018 presidential election. This inconsistency fuels concerns and criticisms of electoral manipulations. Moreover, the existence of channels through which the news can spread rapidly, apart from the mainstream

media, thanks to the mass media, made the irregularities heard and visible more quickly.

In this part of the thesis, I will examine the irregularities recorded in the elections held in Turkey in 2018 and 2019. I will investigate to see if these irregularities solve the puzzle of Erdogan's success in increasing his vote share in the elections despite his authoritarian shift after 2016 and the worsening economic conditions under his rule. This will be done in the context of two manipulation mechanisms. In this context, the core focus of this thesis is the 2018 presidential elections. Because the candidate competing in the 2019 local elections was not Erdogan himself, but the AKP's mayoral candidates. The main purpose of including the 2019 elections in this research is that the 2019 election presents striking examples of the use of state power by the Erdogan government in favour of AKP candidates. Hence, the 2019 elections will only be treated in the context of the misuse of state power within the scope of election manipulations. After tracing the findings of the irregularities and manipulations encountered, the implications will be discussed in the discussion section.

1. Electoral Fraud

The 2018 Elections were held under a series of irregularities. Although a significant number of irregularities were documented by observers, no thorough investigation was conducted into the allegations and reported irregularities. After the electoral registrars were announced, it was revealed that a significant number of fake voters were registered to addresses where they did not live and even where such an address never existed (*Kısıklı'da olmayan binalara seçmen yazılmış*, n.d.). Even the YSK accepted the objections to the inconsistent records and corrected many encountered cases.

Another controversial anomaly encountered in the 2018 elections was the number of printed ballot papers. According to YSK records, the number of voters who will vote in the 2018 elections was 59,369,960 however, YSK printed 77.079.540 ballot papers (*YSK Web Portal*, n.d.-a). Despite the remarkable number of printed ballot papers and the opposition parties' insistence on a reasonable explanation from the YSK, the YSK did not explain why so many ballots were printed or how many were used and how many were not used in the elections.

From the very first moment of voting on election day, numerous irregularities and

video recordings began to be shared on social media. The most obvious attempt regarding electoral fraud, which has gone viral on social media, was detected in Şanlıurfa, a southeastern province of Turkey. In a car stopped by the police in the Suruç district, four sacks of ballot papers bearing the AKP stamp beforehand were found (“Turkey Election,” n.d.). Following this breaking news, videos of election rigging in favour of Erdogan in ballot boxes began to be shared on Twitter (*dokuz8haber Twitter’da*, n.d.; *İşte yeni hile görüntüleri! Şimdi ne olacak?*, n.d.). Although the YSK made an interim statement stating that they are investigating the cheating in the shared images (*Election Board to Look into Allegations of Vote-Rigging in Turkey’s Southeast - Türkiye News*, n.d.), voting continued at the polling stations where cheating was encountered.

OSCE/ODIHR observed the 2018 elections at 121 polling stations, upon the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. OSCE/ODIHR election observers noted that the election took place on an "uneven playing field", and the observers faced various difficulties in many polling stations during their mandate (*INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION*, 2018). OSCE/ODIHR 2018 election report recorded substantial irregularities such as stations that do not record the number of received ballot papers; the use of unsealed ballots (10% of stations); group voting (4%); some of the attendants' intervening in the voting process in some cases (12%); officers' intimidation of voters; etc. in the 121 observed polling stations (*INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION*, 2018). Moreover, the OSCE/ODIHR delegation announced that they could not send observers to Şanlıurfa due to security concerns (*Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018*, n.d.).

The OSCE/ODIHR report also stated that 17 (14%) of the 121 observations made during the vote counting and the collection of the minutes were evaluated negatively, and various procedural weaknesses were identified; one out of every four ballot box committees had difficulties while filling out the ballot box results report; in one-fifth of the counts observed, ballot box committees had previously signed blank minutes and purposefully violated procedures by deliberately falsifying the records in the minutes (*INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION*, 2018).

Similar irregularities have been documented and reported by also local organizations. On June 24, a total of 367 reports about 91 unique claims were received by teyit.org, 320 of which included claims specifically concerning vote rigging (*#Elections2018*, n.d.). Ballot box stuffing, boxes with votes for only one party/candidate, carousel voting, preventing observers

from entering polling stations, physical and psychological intimidation attempts by security forces and incumbent party representatives, photo taking in the cabin while voting and voting on behalf of someone else (spouse, child, mother, father, etc.) or voting out of the cabin, etc. were reported cases in the elections (*24 Haziran Seçim İhlalleri Raporumuz*, n.d.; *#Elections2018*, n.d.; *Raporlar*, n.d.; SeffafTr, n.d.-a).

Oy ve Ötesi, a civil movement of volunteers mobilized to promote and raise participatory democracy in Turkey, observed the 2018 elections with nearly 1,000 lawyers and 41,249 volunteers in 81 provinces on election day. However, since the number of volunteers was less than the number of ballot boxes, many polling stations could either employ one observer or not at all. Out of the 188,008 ballot boxes for each election (Presidential and Parliamentary), a total of 284,444 minutes of which 150,546 belong to the Presidential Elections and 133,898 to the General Elections of the Deputies, were instantly shared on the movement's website (*Raporlar*, n.d.). The above-mentioned irregularities were also published in their 2018 elections report.

Oy ve Ötesi report stated that 843 irregularities encountered in 1,304 ballot boxes were corrected by the intervention of volunteers, but 461 remained the same (*Raporlar*, n.d.). The report also identified that there were 12744 inconsistent votes cast in favour of Erdogan and his party in the ballot boxes they observed (124 Presidential ballot boxes, 337 Parliamentary ballot boxes); nevertheless, it was stated in the report that the aforementioned irregular votes, which were cast in favour of Erdogan and his party, were negligible (0.02%) compared to the total amount of valid votes counted in the election (*Raporlar*, n.d.). This inference made by Oy ve Ötesi will be discussed in detail in the discussion section.

The strategy of the opposition block in the 2018 presidential election was to carry the election to the second round and defeat Erdogan in the second ballot. Therefore, they endeavoured to keep Erdogan's vote share below the absolute majority. However, before the end of the vote count, Erdogan officially declared his victory and gave his traditional balcony speech to his supporters. When Erdogan declared his victory, only 39 percent of the ballot boxes were officially counted (Lyons et al., 2018). Despite the statements of opposition deputies and ballot box officials with instant shares from the election centres stating that the counting process has not yet ended and that Erdogan's action is an attempt to manipulate the results and gain a psychological advantage; the consideration that the results were finalized and Erdogan won the elections, spread among the dissidents after Erdogan's balcony speech

(*dokuz8haber Twitter'da*, n.d.). Erdogan's last move was effective. Erdogan declared that he had won the election before 61% of the votes had not yet been included in the system. Even though there were still uncounted votes and unassembled results, the people left the polling stations, and the remaining ballot boxes were counted without effective control. This manipulation, which was successful in the 2018 elections, was similarly tried in the 2019 elections. This time, while the vote count for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was not yet completed, advertisements were posted on the billboards in Istanbul that the AKP candidate had won the election (Duvar, 2019). However, this attempt was in vain with the persistent control of the opponents until the last moment and their organized struggle against manipulations. Thus, it was proved that AKP's candidate did not win. This manipulation attempt will be revisited in the next chapter.

2. Misuse of State Power

The 2018 elections were held just six days after the end of the state of emergency declared after the coup attempt in July 2016. At that time, the shadow of the state of emergency was still above the ballot boxes. YSK relocated or consolidated 1,090 ballot boxes in the eastern regions of Turkey, where the Kurdish population is dense, due to some security considerations. This practice affected 16 provinces and 120000 voters (*Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018*, n.d.). According to the People's Democratic Party (HDP)'s report on the 2018 elections, the number of voters affected by this intervention was 320000 (*24 Haziran Seçim İhlalleri Raporumuz*, n.d.). This was considered as a precaution aimed by the government at reducing the turnout of Kurdish voters, who were expected to cast opposition votes in the election (*HDP'den seçim kampanyalarına saldırı raporu*, n.d.).

The fact that almost all of the media in Turkey was under pressure from the government during the campaign made it difficult for the opposition to make their voices heard (Shaheen, 2018). It was stated in the report conducted by Transparency International that between 4 May-31 May, 2018, 105 minutes for President Erdogan, 37 minutes for İnce, 14 minutes for Aksener, 5 minutes for Karamollaoglu, 2 minutes to Perincek and 3 seconds to Demirtas were allocated on the evening news of the public channel TRT Haber (SeffafTr, n.d.-b). Throughout the campaign period, TRT featured 181 hours for Erdogan, 15 hours for

İnce, and only 32 minutes for Demirtas (Shaheen, 2018). Erdogan was disproportionately glorified and advertised in the media.

In a TV program called "Akıl Odası (The Mind Room)" on TVNET on June 20, 2018, the Election 2018 table of Anadolu Agency (AA), the official agency of the state, and various images were brought to the broadcast. In the screen, there were election results with fictitious percentages, according to the fictitious results, Erdogan's vote rate was 53%, Ince's (CHP) was 26%, Aksener's (İYİP) was 12%, Demirtas's (HDP) was 7%, Karamollaoglu's (SP) was 1, and Perincek's (VP) was 1% ("Turkish TV Station Airs Results 3 Days before Election," 2018). In the results shown in the table, which was introduced as the announcement screen of Anadolu Agency, where the election results will be announced, the image of Erdogan winning the election caused reactions in the opposition. In its statement on Twitter against the criticism that the election results were predetermined, AA stated that the results reflected on the screen were fictitious results produced from previous elections and that the image in question was distorted (*AA KURUMSAL Twitter'da*, n.d.).

HDP's candidate Demirtaş had to run his election campaign from prison, despite the absence of any finalized legal verdict (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018). For the first time in the history of Turkey, a presidential candidate pursued an election process that should take place under fair conditions for all participants behind bars.

Although every citizen has the right to follow the vote count, there have been cases where AKP and MHP representatives tried to prevent other party representatives (especially HDP) from watching the vote counting process, in some stations police forces involved in these practices (*24 Haziran Seçim İhlalleri Raporumuz*, n.d.; *Nurten Alkan Twitter'da*, n.d.; Kemal Kirisci, 2018; Shaheen, 2018).

On June 25, at 02:15, the YSK announced which parties had passed the threshold without giving their share of votes and that Erdogan had been re-elected as president, although the preliminary results have not yet been announced (*#Elections2018*, n.d.). This statement, which followed Erdogan's announcement of his election victory, gives the impression that the YSK made this move to close Erdogan's message for discussion.

Nine months after the presidential elections on June 24, 2018, Turkey went to the polls again on March 31, 2019, for the municipal elections. This time, the mayoral candidates competed in the election, not the parties' leaders. However, unlike other party leaders,

Erdogan carried out a strict election propaganda process and held rallies in 57 provinces and 14 districts in 48 days (*Liderler 31 Mart için yoğun mesai harcadı*, n.d.). Although the opposition leaders also organized rallies during the propaganda phase, they still preferred to stay in the background during this process so that the local mayor candidates could announce themselves to the voters in the regions they were nominated for and promote their projects. Irregularities and manipulations similar to those experienced in the 2019 elections were also encountered in this election. Attempts to impede the campaigning of opposition candidates; silencing the opposition media and uneven advertisements of the incumbent candidates in the media channels; fake voters in voter registrars and non-existed addresses filled with faked voters in the registrars; relocation and consolidation of ballot boxes in Kurdish-populated areas; printing unnecessarily extra ballot papers; intimidating to opposition party observers on election day; unsealed voting, carousel voting, group voting, ballot box stuffing; attempts to use of pre-signed result reports; police violence against opposition party officers and unauthorized party supporters' violence to observers; attempts to change the ballot box results, etc. were encountered and recorded by both local and international observers in 2019 election as in the 2018 election (*Abdullah Aydoğan Twitter'da*, n.d.; "Analysis | Electoral Irregularities Benefited Turkey's Ruling Party, Not the Opposition," 2019; "Her yerden sahte seçmen fışkırıyor" – DW – 16.01.2019, n.d.; *Raporlar | Uluslararası Şeffaflık Derneği*, n.d.; *Seçim İşleri Komisyonumuzun 31 Mart 2019 seçimlerine ilişkin raporları*, n.d.; Olkun & Saritaş, 2021; Renate, 2019; Şen, 2022; Taşkın, 2021; Yavuzyılmaz, 2021).

In terms of manipulation attempts in the 2019 elections, the most obvious distinction from the 2018 elections was in the announcement of the Istanbul Metropolitan Mayoral election results. Due to the experiences gained in the previous election, CHP initiated a new strategy to prevent manipulations and provide transparency in the election. By creating a well-organized election observation initiative for the local elections, CHP obtained instant information flow with the observers assigned to each ballot box and instantly shared this information with the voters through social media. This strategy made the results announced by the YSK controllable. Because while the CHP was updating the results received from the observers, it was instantly showing the stamped results reports for each ballot box. In this way, the electorate had an opportunity to follow the ballot box results from an alternative source for the results presented by the official news agency, the AA, and to check the validity of the announcements given by official channels (*23 Haziran'da Anadolu Ajansı'na alternatif geliyor*, 2019). When the first results were announced on the night of the election, although

the number of ballot boxes counted was still around 2%, AA started to broadcasting the AKP's vote rate as 60%. The first manipulation attempt aiming to influence the election result, which was successful in the 2018 elections, was started with AA's fake data. In the following hours, while the results of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayorship were about to be finalized in the direction of the CHP candidate's win, AA stopped updating data in favour of the AKP when the percentage of opened ballot boxes was 98%. At that moment, the AKP candidate stood in first place with 48.70%, and the CHP candidate was 48.65% (Renate, 2019).

This censorship applied by the official news agency during the announcement of the results is one of the explicit examples of interference in the election results. While the YSK has not yet announced the outcome, pictures of Erdogan and the AKP's candidate with posters announcing the victory of the AKP's candidate were hung on billboards and bridges in Istanbul (Duvar, 2019). Following the YSK's announcement that the CHP candidate had won the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality election (*YSK Web Portal*, n.d.-b), the AKP brought up the allegations that the opposition bloc rigged the election (Sabah, 2019). Upon the AKP's application to the YSK to cancel the Istanbul elections, the YSK annulled the Istanbul metropolitan municipality elections on 6 May 2019 with a debated decision and decided on a re-run on 23 June 2019 only for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayorship. The results for district mayorships were recognized as valid (AKP won 24, CHP won 14 and MHP won 1 district mayorship of Istanbul), although a single envelope was used for both the districts and the metropolitan mayoral ballots (*YSK Web Portal*, n.d.-b). CHP and IYIP objected to the decision of the YSK, which cancelled only the Metropolitan Municipality part of the Istanbul elections and accepted the results of the district mayoral elections as valid, stating that the district elections, in which the votes were put in the same envelope, should also be cancelled (Renate, 2019). Moreover, the cancelling reason for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality election by the YSK sparked a separate discussion. In its reasoned decision, YSK announced that it annulled the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayorship election because the chairman and members of the ballot box committee were not public officials despite the explicit provision of the law (*İşte İstanbul'da seçimin iptal edilme gerekçesi*, n.d.). The justification for this decision regarding the cancellation of only a part of the elections in Istanbul shows contradictions within itself in legal terms. This situation constitutes one of the examples of how the state power is mobilized in the elections in favour of the government.

In the re-election held on 23 June 2019, the CHP's candidate won the election once

again with a higher rate of votes than in the previous election (*YSK Web Portal*, n.d.-b). However, the use of state power in manipulation activities in favour of the ruling party in the elections has become explicitly visible, and the previous elections held under AKP rule have become questionable.

DISCUSSION

The data collected for both elections revealed that the ruling party resorted to manipulation tactics such as using public institutions in fraudulent acts, voting fraud and falsifying the results to legitimize and maintain its power with the election victory. While the vote-counting process in the 2018 elections was only halfway through, the manipulation mechanisms carried out with systematic methods yielded conclusions and broke the will of the citizens to monitor the vote counting. Erdogan's victory, of which we cannot be sure of reality, was hastily declared when only 39% of the votes were counted. The 2019 elections, in which AKP failed to win five of the six biggest metropolitan mayorships, are included in this study because of the examples in which the ruling party led by Erdogan reveals the extent of the manipulations that can be resorted to in the elections. In this context, data showed that the Turkish case confirms the proposition of Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism theory (2002) that competitive authoritarian leaders manipulate elections to maintain their power and legitimize their rule.

In both years, numerous national observer initiatives and international observers endeavoured to provide a transparent election. Interventions of the observers in the irregularities they encountered effectively achieved to prevent electoral fraud in many cases. On the other hand, it is revealed that the AKP government is prone to cheat elections unless an intervention is encountered. In this respect, it comes to mind that there may be irregularities in the ballot boxes where there is no effective observation mechanism.

OSCE/ODIHR observers observed 121 polling stations in the 2018 elections. A significant number of irregularities, such as stations not recording the number of ballots received, ballot boxes with more votes than registered voters, ballot boxes with support for only one party, use of unsealed ballots, officials interfering with the voting process, or group voting, carousel voting, lack of or prevention of observers entering polling stations, etc. were documented (*INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION*, 2018). Similar irregularities

were also reported by local observers and NGOs (*Abdullah Aydoğan Twitter'da*, n.d.; *Raporlar*, n.d., p. 2018; *Seçim İşleri Komisyonumuzun 31 Mart 2019 seçimlerine ilişkin raporları*, n.d.; Kemal Kirisci, 2018; Renate, 2019; SeffafTr, n.d.-a). Teyit.org announced that they received a total of 367 notifications regarding 91 original claims on 24 June 2018 alone, 320 of which specifically included allegations of election fraud (*#Elections2018*, n.d.). Yet, in the report of Oy ve Otesi (*Raporlar*, n.d.), of which teyit.org applies the data, it was stated that the controversial 12744 votes that the observers faced and reported to be valid in favour of the AKP were negligible (0.02%) compared to the total number of validated votes. Therefore, the report claims that the results announced by the YSK in the 2018 elections are reliable. However, this inference leads to an erroneous conclusion by misinterpreting the data. Considering that Turkey has more than 150,000 polling stations, it cannot be deduced from this conclusion how such findings, obtained from only a limited number of observations, might have affected the general election results. At this point, statistical election forensics can provide more reliable outcomes.

The forensics analysis findings on the 2017 Constitutional Amendment Referendum and the 2018 Presidential/Parliamentary Elections conducted by (Klimek et al., 2018), pursued using the OSCE/ODIHR report, have surprising results for the analysed elections. The analysis reveals that a systematic and important conclusion was reached regarding voter fraud and ballot stuffing in the 2018 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. According to the study, there might have been 15% vote rigging in Presidential ballots and 9% in Parliamentary ballots (Klimek et al., 2018). These estimates are also congruent with the polls done before the 2018 elections³. Because the abnormally high rate of votes of AKP partner MHP, which managed to increase its vote rate despite the votes İYİP took in the 2018 elections from it, becomes even more meaningful when these data are taken into account.

In some provinces, including Şanlıurfa, where vote rigging attempts in the 2018 elections were detected, the increase in both the voter turnout and the voting rate of the AKP+MHP bloc was remarkable (“Analysis | Why the Results of Turkey’s Election Are Surprising,” 2021; Klimek et al., 2018). This abnormal data suggests that, as a rigging method, the AKP may have developed a mechanism by increasing the voting rate of the party with which it participated in the elections by showing the participation high in regions with the low electoral turnout. Thus, the number of votes Erdogan needed in the 2018 Presidential

³ See Appendix 2

elections and the additional votes needed by the AKP+MHP bloc to reach the parliamentary majority could have been obtained with this method. Even though public institutions need to be impartial, the attitude of AA and YSK, which openly sided with the AKP in the 2019 elections, seem to be useful tools that will facilitate the operation of this rigging in a scenario where such an inference is real. Thus, this thesis provides strong evidence to confirm the hypothesis that popular support for Erdogan is an artificial manifestation of electoral manipulations.

As the study of Klimek et al. is the only available forensic analysis examining data from a single report, their results may not be sufficient to draw general conclusions. However, considering the evidence we have, it is a valuable study in terms of giving an idea.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored two mechanisms used by the Erdogan government to ensure Erdogan's popular power. The existing literature has overlooked the role of electoral manipulations, especially electoral fraud, which may be the primary explanation for solving the puzzling situation in Turkey. Therefore, I chose to focus on these two manipulation mechanisms in my work. I conducted a content analysis to explore the impact of the electoral fraud used by the Erdogan government to pretend to have popular support. This thesis allowed me to draw inferences about whether authoritarian leaders use electoral manipulations to create the image of having public support, and if so, by which methods. The outcomes enabled this thesis to defend the hypothesis vigorously that this thesis proposes; the popular support enjoyed by Erdogan is an artificial manifestation of electoral manipulations. The findings of this thesis also show that more research is needed to fully understand the extent to which electoral corruption affects election outcomes. To put it more clearly, this thesis focused on how Erdogan may have obtained the high rate of votes he gained in the elections he competed in despite the authoritarian transformation he went through after 2016 and his policies that dragged the country's economy into a worsening situation. However, I did not pursue statistical research to measure the extent of the fraud. In other words, I looked for signs of manipulation in the content, including electoral fraud, and revealed that authoritarian leaders apply to manipulate elections to maintain their ruling power by legitimizing their authority through elections, so the rate presented as popular support is dubious. I, therefore,

suggest that more quantitative research, such as forensics, be undertaken to calculate the extent of the dubious ratio of vote support held by competitive authoritarian leaders, as evidenced by the obtained data. In conclusion, I argue that such research can strengthen the awareness of democracy and public will, and contribute to overcoming the democratic backsliding that can be caused by the concentration of political power.

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Appendix 2⁵

Date	Pollster	Sample size	Erdoğan	İnce	Akşener	Demirtaş	Karamoll ağlu	Perinçek
16–17 Jun 2018	Gezici	1,812	48.2	29.Oca	11.Nis	10.0	1.Şub	0.1
13 June 2018	Plus Mayak	–	45.8	28.Eyl	13.Oca	10.Şub	1.Ağu	0.2
13 June 2018	AKAM	2,46	44.5	29.0	14.May	9.Mar	2.May	0.2
6–13 Jun 2018	REMRES	5,674	43.6	29.May	12.Mar	11.Nis	3.0	0.2
11 June 2018	CHP	–	45.6	32.2	8.Şub	10.Tem	3.Oca	0.2
8–11 Jun 2018	Mediar	2,41	48.0	29.Eyl	9.Şub	10.Şub	2.Oca	0.8

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Turkish_presidential_election