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When polarization meets backsliding: Affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

While the corrosive effect of affective polarization on democratic norms is a major concern, existing research has largely overlooked its dynamics outside established democracies. This study addresses this gap by examining Turkey, a paradigmatic, highly polarized hybrid regime where democratic norms are actively contested. Drawing on original, nationally representative survey data from spring 2024, we investigate how affective polarization shapes citizens' willingness to endorse concrete violations of electoral fairness and civil liberties, moving beyond abstract measures of democratic support. We find that higher levels of affective polarization are strongly associated with greater endorsement of undemocratic practices motivated by both out-party discrimination and in-party favouritism, though the association is somewhat stronger for the latter. This relationship holds among both government and opposition supporters, challenging the assumption that tolerance for such practices is unique to incumbent partisans. Contrary to recent evidence from Western democracies, we find no curvilinear relationship: affective polarization in Turkey consistently predicts greater tolerance of democratic violations. By analysing a case of sustained democratic backsliding, we extend debates on affective polarization beyond consolidated democracies, showing how it can create a permissive environment for illiberal practices and undermine citizen commitment to democratic norms.

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Across diverse political systems, ordinary citizens increasingly sort the world into partisan 'us' versus 'them'. This phenomenon, coined as affective polarization, is characterized by positive feelings towards one's own party (in-party favouritism) and animus towards opposing parties (out-party discrimination)

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(Iyengar et al., 2012). A large body of research seeks to understand its dynamics and consequences for democratic governance, as affective polarization has been linked to institutional distrust, support for extremist politicians and a diminishing willingness to compromise (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Pierson & Schickler, 2020; Somer & McCoy, 2025). Perhaps most consequentially, affective polarization may erode citizens' commitment to democratic principles (Foa & Mounk, 2025; Kingzette et al., 2021): highly polarized individuals may be more likely to support restrictions on opposition rights, tolerate electoral manipulation, or endorse executive aggrandizement when their party is in power.

Existing evidence on these questions, however, is concentrated in contexts of established democracies, especially the United States and Western Europe (e.g., Kingzette et al., 2021; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2019, Broockman et al. 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2025). Accordingly, these studies typically presume contexts in which democratic norms are widely shared, violations are relatively rare, and elite attempts to subvert democratic institutions are exceptional events. Hybrid regimes strain those presumptions: electoral competition coexists with systematic restrictions on civil liberties, opportunistic rule changes, and politicized administration of elections (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In such settings, citizens receive conflicting elite signals about what 'democracy' means (Wunsch, 2025); for instance, some elites may invoke popular sovereignty to maintain legitimacy while downplaying civil protections as dispensable. Through this framing, political elites actively seek to shape citizens' democratic attitudes, encouraging them to support or oppose certain practices. Therefore, how affective polarization shapes citizens' commitment to democratic norms in hybrid regimes remains an open question. Do polarized citizens in hybrid regimes selectively tolerate some violations (e.g., civil-liberties restrictions) while rejecting others (e.g., electoral manipulation), or does polarization erode support for democratic principles more generally? And through which aspect of polarization (out-party discrimination or in-party favouritism) does this erosion occur?

In this paper, we address this gap with an original, nationally representative facetoface survey fielded in Turkey in spring 2024 ($N = 2{,}096$). Turkey is a paradigmatic hybrid regime that has experienced sustained democratic backsliding while maintaining multiparty elections. The Turkish case might be considered an analytically valuable 'crucial case' (Eckstein, 1975) for understanding the dynamics of democratic erosion also seen in other large, polarized hybrid regimes such as Hungary (Vegetti, 2018) and India (Tudor, 2023), where similar questions about citizen complicity in democratic erosion are salient. Turkish citizens are highly familiar with various forms of undemocratic behaviour, and the coexistence of meaningful electoral competition with democratic violations renders norm contestation highly visible to citizens. This allows us to measure attitudes towards context-specific infringements of democracy rather than relying on abstract democratic-value items. Moreover,

cross-national studies identify Turkey as one of the most affectively polarized countries globally (Reiljan et al., 2024; Wagner, 2021), and partisan identities are very salient (Laebens & Ozturk, 2021). This combination provides a good opportunity to investigate whether affectively polarized citizens may be more predisposed to support undemocratic practices, especially in a context where democratic institutions are vulnerable to erosion.

To preview our results, we find that higher affective polarization robustly predicts greater public support for undemocratic practices in Turkey, across both electoral fairness and civil liberties domains. These associations are substantively similar across government and opposition supporters, and they apply to support for undemocratic practices primarily motivated by both in-party favouritism and out-party discrimination, albeit somewhat more strongly for the former. Contrary to evidence from some established democracies (Janssen & Turkenburg, 2024), we do not find a negatively curvilinear (i.e., an inverted U-shape) relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices. That is, the association between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices in Turkey is consistently positive across the entire polarization range of citizens.

This study makes several contributions. First, it contributes to ongoing debates about how citizens in hybrid regimes evaluate different dimensions of democracy (e.g., Wunsch et al., 2025). A plausible expectation is that citizens in hybrid regimes would draw a firmer red line at core electoral rights than at civil liberties, given the prevalence of the latter violations in such regimes. Our findings suggest otherwise; highly polarized citizens in Turkey are more likely to accept both rights restrictions *and* measures that tilt the electoral playing field. Second, we show that the corrosive effects of affective polarization are not confined to incumbent supporters but are shared across incumbent and opposition camps, even though mean polarization levels may differ. Third, methodologically, we contribute to recent advances in the democratic attitudes literature by eliciting evaluations of granular, concrete democratic violations rather than abstract endorsements of 'democracy' (Claassen et al., 2025). Overall, our results speak to central debates about how mass attitudes may enable or restrain democratic erosion by extending them to a hybrid regime context and suggest that affective polarization can create a permissive environment in which citizens are rather willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan advantage.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first outline the theoretical mechanisms linking affective polarization to support for domain-specific democratic violations. We then provide an overview of the Turkish context, followed by a description of our data and key measures. Next, we present the results of our multivariate analyses. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for the comparative studies of polarization, democratic erosion and resilience.

Affective polarization and support for violations of democratic principles

Affective polarization denotes warmer affect towards one's own camp (in-party favouritism) coupled with colder affect towards rivals (out-party discrimination) (Iyengar et al., 2012). It reflects identityladen, emotional evaluations across partisan lines that extend beyond programmatic or ideological disagreement. Empirically, affective polarization is typically captured with survey instruments that elicit affective responses towards political groups. One of the most widely used is the 'feeling thermometer', in which respondents rate in-party and out-party supporters on a numerical scale of 'warmth' or 'coldness', with higher scores indicating more positive affect. Additional measures include questions about individuals' willingness to socially interact with opposing partisans or the traits they attribute to rival party supporters (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012). Across many countries, the long-run rise in affective polarization has been driven primarily by intensifying out-party animus rather than surging in-party warmth (Garzia & da Silva, 2024; Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). That is, we observe increasing affective polarization because individuals harbour increasingly negative feelings towards opposing party supporters rather than feeling warmer towards their own co-partisans.

The overall increase in affective polarization attracts scholarly attention because of its potentially detrimental effects on society, both within and beyond the political sphere (Iyengar et al., 2019). Outside politics, affective polarization leads individuals to discriminate against opposing party supporters when it comes to friendship, romantic relationships, and marriage (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2019), economic transactions (Michelitch, 2015), professional decisions (Hersh & Goldenberg, 2016), and residential preferences (Gimpel & Hui, 2015). Individuals with high levels of partisan animosity tend to spend less time with opposing party supporters and are less willing to engage in social interactions with them as well (Chen & Rohla, 2018; Settle & Carlson, 2019).

Regarding the political consequences of affective polarization, a central concern is whether it contributes to democratic erosion by increasing citizens' tolerance of, and sometimes active support for, violations of democratic principles. At least three non-exclusive mechanisms may underlie this effect. First, a psychological mechanism posits that high polarization fosters a sense of existential threat (McCoy & Somer, 2019), framing politics as a 'catastrophic' zero-sum conflict (Finkel et al., 2020) where any means are justified to prevent the 'other side' from winning. This mechanism predicts that highly polarized citizens will endorse democratic violations when they perceive such measures as necessary to prevent out-party victories, regardless of the specific domain of violation. Second, an elite-cue mechanism

(Druckman et al., 2021; Kingzette et al., 2021) argues that polarized citizens have greater incentives to signal partisan identity and thus are more receptive to partisan signals. Consequently, as political elites politicize democratic principles in line with their interests, polarized citizens would be more likely to adopt anti-democratic justifications provided by their preferred elites. This mechanism posits that polarized citizens will selectively adopt undemocratic positions that align with cues from their preferred political elites. Third, an instrumental mechanism suggests that as polarization increases, citizens are more likely to prioritize partisan advantage over democratic principles (Foa & Mounk, 2025; Gidengil et al., 2022).[1] That is, they would support democratic norms only when it benefits their side (Krishnarajan, 2023; Simonovits et al., 2022). This mechanism suggests that polarized citizens will evaluate democratic norms conditionally such that they would support violations when they advantage the in-party while opposing identical violations when they benefit opponents. These three mechanisms could operate simultaneously and provide links between affective polarization and democratic erosion.

Evidence linking affective polarization to support for violations of democratic principles is rather mixed, however, and perhaps more importantly, limited to the context of established Western democracies, particularly the U.S. Kingzette et al. (2021), for instance, report that Americans with higher levels of affective polarization exhibit lower support for constitutional protections and political tolerance. Similarly, Foa and Mounk (2025) present evidence that as affective polarization increases, Republicans and Democrats have become more likely to favour institutional norms that offer their own side political advantage.[2] In contrast, experimental studies conducted on convenience samples of American citizens find that experimentally induced decreases in affective polarization do not result in higher support for democratic norms (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023). Janssen and Turkenburg (2024) offer a more nuanced perspective, suggesting a negatively curvilinear (an inverted U-shaped) relationship between affective polarization and support for democratic norms: drawing on surveys from Germany, the UK, and the US, they show that both very high and very low levels of affective polarization are associated with lower levels of support for democracy.

We contribute to the existing scholarship by examining the relationship between affective polarization and support for violations of democratic principles in a hybrid-regime context. Such regimes are characterized by meaningful multiparty elections that are not fair due to politicized state institutions, captured media, and frequent violations of political rights and civil liberties (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In recent years, these regimes have represented the largest share of governments worldwide, with approximately 31 per cent of all countries categorized as hybrid regimes, including important countries such as Russia, Turkey, and India (Nord et al., 2025).

These contexts differ significantly from established democracies in ways that are relevant when examining mass support for undemocratic practices. Because executive constraints are already weak and state institutions are often captured for partisan ends in such regimes, politics becomes a high-stakes contest among partisan camps, potentially amplifying the psychological mechanism. The elite-cue mechanism may also be particularly potent in hybrid regimes: unlike in established democracies where democratic principles are largely taken for granted and respected, in hybrid regimes democratic principles and norms are actively contested and routinely violated, especially by incumbents. In such a context, frequent elite transgressions may provide justificatory narratives for undemocratic practices that polarized citizens can adopt. The instrumental mechanism, too, may operate with greater force: because weak institutional constraints mean that electoral victory translates more directly into unchecked power, the perceived payoffs from norm violations that advantage one's own side are correspondingly higher. Finally, a common claim for hybrid regimes is that citizens will protect core electoral rights while tolerating erosions of civil liberties. If that is the case, we may expect differentiated support for violations of democratic principles across different domains (e.g., across electoral fairness and civil liberties).

The precise way contextual features condition the relationship between affective polarization and support for democratic violations is theoretically ambiguous, however, as one could form competing expectations.[3] On one hand, the very prevalence of democratic violations in hybrid regimes could plausibly dampen the effect of polarization. In established democracies, where violations are rare, they are highly salient events that can easily trigger partisan-motivated reasoning. In hybrid regimes, conversely, citizens are continuously exposed to illiberal practices, which may 'normalize' democratic violations and make them less attitudinally consequential, weakening the impact of polarization. On the other hand, the mechanisms discussed earlier suggest that the structural realities of hybrid regimes may amplify the effects of polarization: higher electoral stakes intensify threat perceptions across partisan camps, frequent elite transgressions supply ready justifications for undemocratic behaviour, and weak institutional checks raise the instrumental payoffs of norm violations. Adjudicating between these competing theoretical expectations requires empirical investigation in contexts where democratic violations are not hypothetical but part of lived political reality.

In the following, we explore the interplay between affective polarization and support for violations of democratic principles in Turkey, a non-Western hybrid regime marked by severe democratic erosion and intense political polarization. Engaging with this question in a hybrid regime allows us to contribute to emerging debates on citizen complicity in democratic backsliding and democratic resilience. While institutional approaches emphasize

formal checks and balances, recent scholarship highlights how citizen attitudes can either constrain or enable democratic backsliding (e.g., Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2019; Wunsch, 2025). In particular, we extend this 'citizen complicity' framework by exploring whether and how affective polarization creates the attitudinal micro-foundations of citizen complicity in the face of violations of democratic principles in a hybrid regime. This approach allows us to examine how polarization may undermine the mass democratic resilience often presumed to serve as a check on would-be autocrats (e.g., Lührmann, 2021; Riedl et al., 2025).

The Turkish context

Turkey's political trajectory over the last two decades provides a stark example of democratic backsliding occurring in parallel with deepening societal divisions. When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, it initially pursued a reform-oriented agenda, building a broad electoral coalition on promises of economic growth and democratization (Öniş, 2009). However, after consolidating its power in the late 2000s, the AKP government pivoted away from its pluralistic discourse. This shift initiated a period of sustained democratic erosion characterized by systematic violations of civil liberties, increasing executive control over the judiciary and media, and the degradation of electoral integrity. While Turkey continues to hold regular multiparty elections, the system has transformed into a competitive authoritarian regime, where the ruling party uses state resources, suppresses opposition voices, and manipulates institutional rules to entrench its power (Nord et al., 2025).

Parallel to this democratic erosion, Turkish society has experienced intensifying affective polarization that ranks among the highest globally (Reiljan et al., 2024). This polarization stems from multiple reinforcing cleavages that the AKP has strategically activated and deepened (Somer, 2019). The secular-religious divide, historically central to Turkish politics, has been reframed as a struggle between 'authentic' Muslim Turks and Westernized elites. The ethnic cleavage between Turkish and Kurdish citizens intersects with partisan divisions, as the pro-Kurdish party faces constant delegitimization and criminalization (Somer, 2019). The Turkish context is also characterized by strong partisan identities, which came to be closely linked to perceptions that opposing political parties pose a threat to one's economic well-being and political freedoms: Laebens and Ozturk (2021), for instance, report that about half of partisans in Turkey across the government and opposition camps express concern that their economic opportunities depend on the party in power. The extensive use of state resources for partisan gains, coupled with discrimination against opposition supporters in various realms of social and economic life (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2022; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016) means that

partisan identities have tangible consequences for citizens' careers, access to services, and standing in the community (Oyvat et al., 2025).

These features of the Turkish case make it particularly valuable for examining the relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices in hybrid regimes. As Turkey represents a setting where democratic principles are actively contested and routinely violated, Turkish citizens have direct and varied experience with democratic infractions. This context allows us to assess how affective polarization shapes citizens' tolerance, and even active endorsement, of democratic violations in an environment where such violations are not hypothetical but part of lived political experience, thereby enhancing external validity. Moreover, understanding how polarization shapes citizen responses to such incremental backsliding has implications beyond Turkey for the growing number of democracies that are facing similar threats. As democratic backsliding increasingly unfolds through incremental and legalistic means, the Turkish experience offers early warnings and comparative insights into the social and psychological foundations of erosion, especially regarding how citizens' attitudes can become complicit in the dismantling of democratic institutions. Consequently, this study assesses how affective polarization shapes tolerance for undemocratic practices under realistic conditions, offering insights into the micro-foundations of democratic backsliding that are difficult to generate in settings where democratic norms are not under constant threat.

Our study contributes to the recent and growing body of literature exploring the micro-foundations of democratic backsliding, with a focus on polarization, political tolerance, and democratic attitudes in Turkey. Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2018, 2022), for instance, study the individual-level contours of affective polarization in Turkey, and show that it is accompanied by social distance, moral prejudice, and political intolerance. They frame this antagonism through a mechanism of 'othering' (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2025) with the potential to erode the ethical foundations of democracy. Similarly, Erişen and Erdoğan (2018) show that Turkish citizens' perceived threat and existing prejudice against political out-groups are key drivers of increased political intolerance. Research also shows that populist attitudes in Turkey correlate with an illiberal as well as a majoritarian understanding of democracy (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Çarkoğlu & Elçi, 2023) and that anger across an array of political issues is associated with populist attitudes, which in turn reinforces authoritarian and nationalist tendencies (Erişen, 2024). Focusing on attitudes towards democratic violations specifically, Şaşmaz et al. (2022) find that polarization increases Turkish citizens' support for executive aggrandizement conditionally on their side's likelihood of winning. In another key study, Svolik (2023) uses the 2019 Istanbul election rerun as a quasi-experiment to show that Turkish voters do punish politicians for brazen democratic violations of electoral integrity.

Our survey was fielded in the spring of 2024, shortly after the local elections. The Turkish party system at this time comprised five major parties that structure partisan identities and affective evaluations. The AKP continued its two-decade dominance through an alliance with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), together controlling the presidency, parliament, and most local governments. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) had faced internal divisions over strategy and replaced its chairman following its defeat in the 2023 presidential elections. The party subsequently returned to its secular-social democratic agenda and emerged as the leading party in the 2024 local elections, both winning major municipalities and securing the highest national vote share for the first time in over four decades. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) operated under constant threat of closure and criminalization; its predecessors have been repeatedly banned. The centre-right nationalist Good Party (IYI), founded by MHP defectors in 2017, struggled to maintain a distinct identity between Turkish nationalism and democratic opposition.

In the immediate aftermath of the local elections, there was a brief period of rapprochement between the AKP and CHP. However, this was soon followed by renewed pressure on the CHP by the AKP, extending the government's criminalization efforts from DEM to the main opposition CHP. By October 2024, the legal operations targeting CHP municipalities had already begun, leading to the arrest of several mayors of major cities, including the rising opposition figure and potential presidential candidate Ekrem Imamoğlu in March 2025. This competitive yet deeply polarized and repressive environment provides fertile ground for investigating how citizens' partisan animosities may shape their willingness to forego democratic principles.

Data and measures

We draw on data from an original, nationally representative, face-to-face survey conducted with a probability sample of 2096 voting-age individuals in Turkey in the spring of 2024. Information about the sampling methodology and descriptive statistics of the sample are provided in the appendix. In our analysis, we include only the respondents who identified themselves as partisans, who are the most relevant group for testing theories of polarization.[4] We identify partisans using a two-step process: respondents were first asked if they 'feel close to' a political party, and those who did not were asked a follow-up question about whether they 'feel closer' to one party than others. Respondents answering affirmatively to either question were classified as partisans, corresponding to about 63 per cent of the sample (N = 1,326). About 80 per cent of these partisans reported an affiliation with either the incumbent AKP or the main opposition CHP.

Our primary independent variable, affective polarization, relies on a standard 0–100 feeling thermometer scale. While there are other measures of affective polarization, such as measures of social distance, trait attribution, or behavioural avoidance of out-partisans that we highlighted earlier, scholars have shown that the feeling thermometer is a valid measure of partisan affect in multi-party systems, correlating closely with other measures of affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2022). In particular, lower scores in this scale are associated with more negative trait judgements of out-party supporters, heightened social-distance preferences, and increased discrimination in economic decision-making games.[5]

Respondents in our survey were asked to rate their feelings towards supporters of Turkey's five major political parties (AKP, CHP, DEM, IYI, MHP), where 0, 50, and 100 on this scale indicated 'very cold or unfavorable feelings', 'no positive or negative feelings', and 'very warm and favorable feelings' towards the groups, respectively. We follow Reiljan's (2020) methodology to calculate the Affective Polarization Index (API) for each partisan respondent, defined as the feeling thermometer score for their in-party minus the average score given to the other parties.[6] About 6 per cent of respondents whose self-declared in-party was not one of these five major parties were assigned either AKP or CHP as their in-party: AKP for supporters of smaller ruling coalition parties, and CHP for all other party supporters. To assess the sensitivity of our findings to this design choice, we replicate the analyses using a sample restricted to the AKP and CHP partisans only and reach similar conclusions, as reported in the appendix.

Figure 1 displays the box plots of API scores among opposition supporters and government supporters. The mean API is approximately 68 for opposition supporters and 52 for government supporters. This suggests that, on average, opposition voters in Turkey are more affectively polarized than government supporters. Moreover, the taller box for opposition supporters reflects a wider interquartile range, suggesting greater heterogeneity in their levels of polarization. In contrast, government supporters' API scores are more tightly clustered around a lower median, with a narrower spread.

Early measures of mass support for democracy in the literature often relied on abstract questions about broad endorsements of 'democracy', which are criticized for failing to capture the nature and depth of democratic commitment (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris, 2011). As Inglehart (2003) notes, such responses frequently amount to 'lip service' rather than offering a meaningful reflection of democratic entrenchment. Moreover, even when respondents possess a clear notion of democracy, interpretations of its core attributes vary both within and across countries (Canache, 2012; Carlin & Singer, 2011; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). Another limitation of the abstract measurements is their failure to account for the inconsistency of democratic values as individuals may endorse democracy as a regime while simultaneously

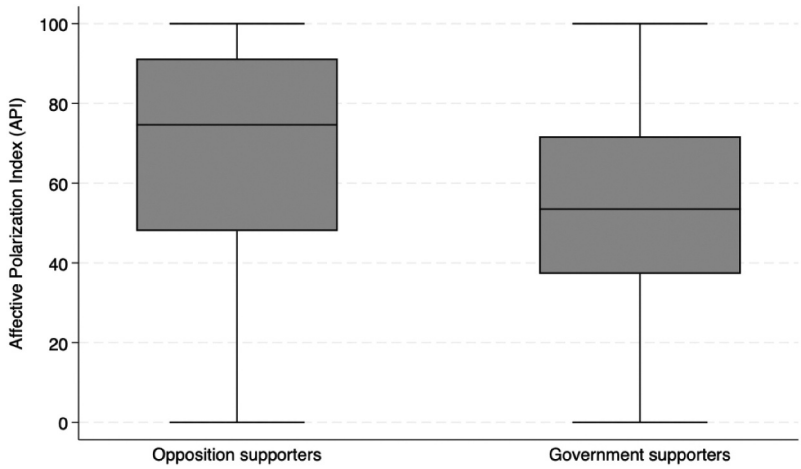


Figure 1. Distribution of affective polarization index (API) across government and opposition supporters. The y-axis represents the API score (0–100), where higher values indicate greater polarization. The thick center line represents the median, the box represents the interquartile range (25th–75th percentiles), and the whiskers extend to the minimum and maximum values.

rejecting its core principles and institutions (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). Therefore, recent approaches for assessing mass support for democracy focus more on attitudes towards specific liberal democratic rights and institutions (Claassen et al., 2025).

Building on these recent approaches, we measure support for undemocratic practices by presenting respondents with some political proposals that undermine key democratic principles of electoral fairness and civil liberties, and asking them whether they would support them or not on a 1–5 scale (1: do not support at all, 5: fully support). These undemocratic proposals are presented in Table 1 and include six items structured along two dimensions: the first comprises three statements that erode *electoral fairness* by limiting universal suffrage and undermining free and fair elections, while the second includes three statements that restrict fundamental *civil liberties*, particularly freedoms of expression and association. This structure not only enables a more nuanced understanding of democratic principles but also helps mitigate the effects of social desirability bias among survey participants by avoiding an explicit reference to 'democracy' (Claassen et al., 2025).

Each statement also includes references to respondents' 'in-party' or 'out-party' so that the proposals have clear objectives of in-group favouritism or out-group discrimination. For each partisan respondent, we identify the 'in-party' simply as the party that she or he feels close to (partisan affiliation). In Turkey's multiparty setting, the out-party is defined as the principal antagonist parties across the government and opposition camps: for ruling-camp

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for undemocratic practices.

	Undemocratic practices	All sample	Government supporters	Opposition supporters
Electoral Fairness	Making it harder for citizens to vote in areas that heavily support [OUTPARTY]	2.3	2.1	2.4
Electoral Fairness	Changing constituency boundaries to give [INPARTY] more MPs	2.9	2.7	3.0
Electoral Fairness	Making it harder for [OUTPARTY] politicians to campaign in elections	2.5	2.3	2.6
Civil Liberties	Preventing [OUTPARTY] supporters from demonstrating, even peacefully	2.5	2.4	2.5
Civil Liberties	Restricting media outlets that consistently report positive news about [OUTPARTY]	2.7	2.5	2.9
Civil Liberties	Launching criminal investigation against journalists who accuse [INPARTY] politicians of misconduct without citing sources	3.1	3.1	3.1

Reported values are mean values for partisan respondents. Responses are measured on a 1–5 scale (1: do not support at all, 5: fully support), with higher values corresponding to greater support for undemocratic practice.

partisans (AKP and allies), we designate the main opposition CHP as the out-party; for opposition-camp partisans, the incumbent AKP is considered as the out-party. This assignment strategy follows the approach proposed by Amsalem and Zoizner (2024) in their analysis of affective polarization in Israel's multi-party context.

We constructed these items by drawing on recent democratic violations in the Turkish context, contributing to their external validity. On the electoral fairness dimension, our statements reflect documented practices such as making it more difficult for supporters of the pro-Kurdish DEM Party to vote by strategically relocating polling stations in areas with a high Kurdish population,[7] moving voters to new constituencies to provide advantage for the ruling AKP,[8] and not allowing the opposition candidates to hold rallies at public places where AKP leaders have held rallies previously.[9] The civil liberties statements similarly reflect contemporary democratic violations in Turkey, including the prohibition of opposition party rallies and public meetings under vague 'public order and security' concerns,[10] broadcast suspensions on pro-opposition TV channels over critical comments made by news anchors,[11] and the initiation of criminal investigations against journalists who published unfavourable reports about AKP politicians.[12] By grounding our survey items in these documented patterns of institutional bias and rights restrictions rather than hypothetical scenarios, we ensure that respondents evaluate practices they recognize as part of Turkey's current political reality, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of our democratic norm violation measures.[13]

As reported in Table 1, support for these undemocratic practices varies, with mean ratings ranging from 2.3 to 3.1 on the 1–5 scale, and an overall average of 2.7. The proposal with the lowest level of support is

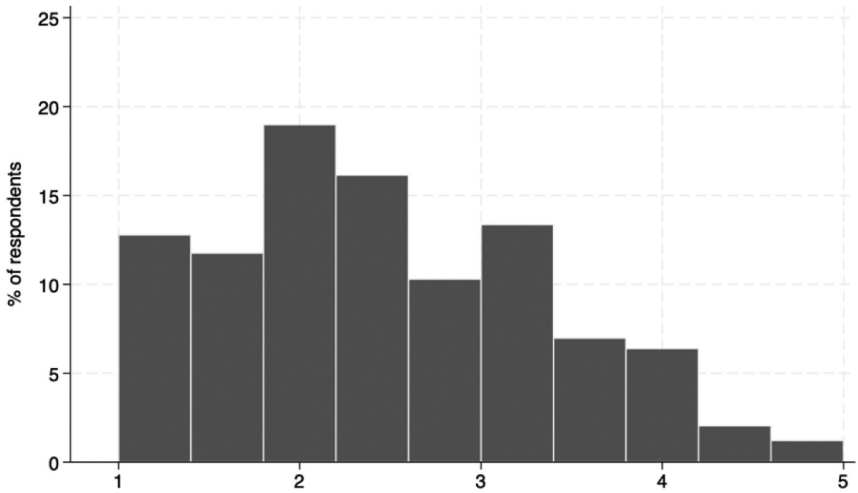


Figure 2. Distribution of support for undemocratic practices (combined index). Responses are measured on a 1–5 scale (1: do not support at all, 5: fully support), with higher values corresponding to greater support for undemocratic practices.

'making it harder for citizens to vote in areas that heavily support [OUTPARTY]', endorsed to some extent by only 16 per cent of respondents. In contrast, the proposal receiving the highest level of support is 'criminal investigation against journalists who accuse [INPARTY] politicians of misconduct without citing sources', which is somewhat or fully supported by 45 per cent of respondents. We see that among these undemocratic practices, the two items that are related to in-group favouritism receive higher levels of support than the remaining four items that suggest out-group discrimination. Table 1 also illustrates the mean responses regarding support for undemocratic practices among government and opposition supporters. Opposition supporters consistently exhibit higher support for undemocratic practices than government supporters.[14]

Using responses given to these statements, we create three additive indices: the electoral fairness index comprises only the three electoral fairness items, the civil liberties index is constructed using the three civil liberties items, and a combined index of all democratic violation items.[15] All indices show good reliability with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.79, 0.71, and 0.85, respectively. The pairwise correlation between electoral fairness and civil liberties reveals a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.7321$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 2 displays the distribution of support for these violations of democratic principles based on the combined index. The distribution of support related to the electoral fairness and civil liberties indices is presented in the appendix.

Table 2. Correlates of support for violations of democratic principles in Turkey.

	DV: Combined index		DV: Electoral fairness index		DV: Civil liberties index	
Variables	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*
Affective polarization	0.156***	0.166***	0.134***	0.153***	0.178***	0.177***
Index (API)	(0.031)	(0.036)	(0.031)	(0.037)	(0.034)	(0.040)
Government supporter	−0.129*	−0.133*	−0.159**	−0.167**	−0.099	−0.098
	(0.055)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.059)	(0.061)	(0.062)
API*Government		−0.028		−0.060		0.003
supporter		(0.056)		(0.058)		(0.062)
Female	0.052	0.052	0.029	0.029	0.078	0.077
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.052)
Age	−0.020	−0.019	−0.022	−0.022	−0.005	−0.015
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Education	−0.016	−0.015	−0.002	0.000	−0.036	−0.028
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Kurdish-speaking	0.011	0.012	0.107	0.110	−0.068	−0.078
	(0.116)	(0.115)	(0.123)	(0.122)	(0.128)	(0.125)
Religiosity	0.038	0.038	0.057	0.057	0.010	0.017
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Political interest	0.088**	0.088**	0.113***	0.112***	0.072*	0.064
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Constant	2.543***	2.547***	2.541***	2.347***	2.730***	2.731***
	(0.062)	(0.064)	(0.062)	(0.066)	(0.068)	(0.069)
Observations	1255	1255	1255	1255	1255	1255
R-squared	0.173	0.173	0.220	0.221	0.113	0.113

Cell entries are OLS regression standardized beta coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include regional fixed effects (not shown). * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Analyses

We employ multiple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices. Table 2 presents ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results examining how affective polarization predicts support for violations of democratic principles across three indices: combined support for all undemocratic practices (Models 1 and 2), only those related to electoral fairness (Models 3 and 4), and those related to civil liberties (Models 5 and 6). All models include controls for gender, age, education, ethnicity, religiosity, political interest (operationalized as political news consumption levels), partisanship (operationalized as a dummy for government supporter), and regional fixed effects. We report standardized beta coefficients to facilitate comparison across predictors measured on different scales. Details on variable construction and descriptive statistics are provided in the appendix.[16]

Models 1, 3, and 5 examine the direct relationship between the Affective Polarization Index (API) and support for undemocratic practices. Across all three specifications, API emerges as a strong and statistically significant predictor. A one standard deviation increase in affective polarization corresponds to a 0.16 standard deviation increase in overall support for undemocratic practices ($p < 0.001$), with slightly stronger effects for civil liberties

violations ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) than electoral fairness violations ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$). These effect sizes, while moderate in absolute terms, are substantively meaningful when considering that they persist after controlling for multiple political and demographic factors. These findings suggest that Turkish citizens with higher affective polarization are more likely to endorse violations across both democratic domains.

Among control variables, political news consumption consistently predicts higher support for undemocratic practices, particularly regarding electoral fairness ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$). Theories of cue-taking (e.g., Druckman & Lupia, 2000; Zaller, 1992) highlight that partisan cues have a greater effect among individuals who have more exposure to them; in line with this, our findings suggest that in the polarized environment of Turkey where undemocratic elite cues are common, political engagement indeed predicts more support for undemocratic practices. In addition, government supporters express lower support for undemocratic practices than opposition supporters, particularly regarding electoral fairness violations ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.01$). This pattern likely reflects the different strategic positions of government and opposition supporters: those already in power may feel less need to endorse norm violations, while opposition supporters may view such violations as necessary to level an already tilted playing field. In hybrid regimes such as Turkey, where opposition parties routinely face disadvantages, the erosion of losers' consent may translate into greater openness among opposition supporters to undemocratic practices to offset systemic bias. These results are robust to additional analyses controlling for perceived ideological polarization and partisan strength, reported in the appendix.

Models 2, 4, and 6 introduce interaction terms between API and government support to test whether polarization's effects differ across partisan groups. The consistently insignificant interaction terms indicate that affective polarization predicts support for undemocratic practices similarly across government and opposition supporters. This null finding carries important theoretical implications: the corrosive effects of polarization on democratic commitment are not confined to those seeking power (opposition) or defending it (government) but operate symmetrically across partisan lines. Thus, while opposition supporters report higher average levels of both polarization and support for undemocratic practices, the strength of the association between polarization and those attitudes is comparable across partisan groups.

As citizens develop stronger partisan biases, they may begin to view democratic institutions not as neutral mechanisms of governance, but as instruments for advancing their own party's interests. This perception fosters ingroup favouritism and reinforces discrimination against the opposition. To further examine how affective polarization is related to biased intergroup attitudes, in Table 3 we analyse our items based on their primary framing:

Table 3. Correlates of democratic violations framed primarily as out-party discrimination versus in-party favoritism in Turkey.

	DV: Items framed primarily as out-party discrimination		DV: Items framed primarily as in-party favoritism	
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Affective polarization	0.118***	0.134***	0.239***	0.235***
Index (API)	(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.043)
Government supporter	−0.210***	−0.217***	0.021	0.023
	(0.058)	(0.059)	(0.069)	(0.070)
API*Government supporter		−0.050		0.013
		(0.059)		(0.067)
Female	0.062	0.062	0.034	0.034
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Age	−0.027	−0.026	−0.008	−0.009
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Education	−0.027	−0.025	0.005	0.005
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Kurdish-speaking	−0.019	−0.016	0.053	0.052
	(0.113)	(0.112)	(0.150)	(0.150)
Religiosity	0.042	0.042	0.027	0.026
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Political interest	0.097**	0.097**	0.071	0.071
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Constant	2.353***	2.349***	2.936***	2.937***
	(0.063)	(0.063)	(0.078)	(0.078)
Observations	1,255	1,255	1,255	1,255
R-squared	0.195	0.196	0.107	0.107

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression standardized beta coefficients with associated robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include regional fixed effects (not shown). Results from Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) models are consistent with those from OLS, indicating that cross-equation error correlation does not materially affect the results.

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

practices framed primarily as out-party discrimination (Models 1–2) versus those framed primarily as in-party favouritism (Models 3–4).[17] While affective polarization significantly predicts both types of violations, the effect is larger for items framed as in-party favouritism ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) than those framed as out-party discrimination ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$). One interpretation of this difference is that affective polarization in Turkey may operate more powerfully through a desire to advantage one's own group than through a desire to harm opponents. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that both mechanisms are intertwined, as some items (such as gerrymandering) might be conceived as simultaneously advantaging the in-party and disadvantaging the out-party, making it difficult to cleanly isolate different motivations. Given this conceptual overlap, we interpret the difference in effect sizes as suggestive rather than definitive.

In addition, government supporters show significantly lower support for undemocratic practices related to out-party discrimination than opposition supporters ($\beta = -0.210$, $p < 0.001$), approximately one-quarter standard deviation less hostility towards opponents. We do not observe such a pattern on

support for undemocratic practices related to in-party favouritism; that is, government and opposition supporters are not different from each other in this regard. This pattern might be again due to the experience of being an opposition supporter in a hybrid regime: the continuous violations of their political rights and civil liberties may lead opposition supporters to have a relatively more positive view of undemocratic measures targeting the out-party (the government), perceiving such practices as a way to offset systematic bias and level the political playing field. Further research is needed to pinpoint the precise determinants of these patterns.

Given findings from established democracies suggesting curvilinear relationships between polarization and democratic support (Janssen & Turkenburg, 2024), we also checked our data for non-linearities. First, we estimated models including a quadratic term for the API, but the results suggest that the relationship is adequately captured by a linear specification (reported in the appendix). Next, to probe potential non-linearities more flexibly, we estimated generalized additive models (GAMs) that impose no functional form assumptions. The results, reported in the appendix and visualized in the GAM plots in Figure 3, do not show evidence of an inverted U-shaped relationship. Instead, the association between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices is consistently positive. For electoral fairness, the relationship is essentially linear across the entire polarization range. The civil liberties and the combined index models suggest slight non-

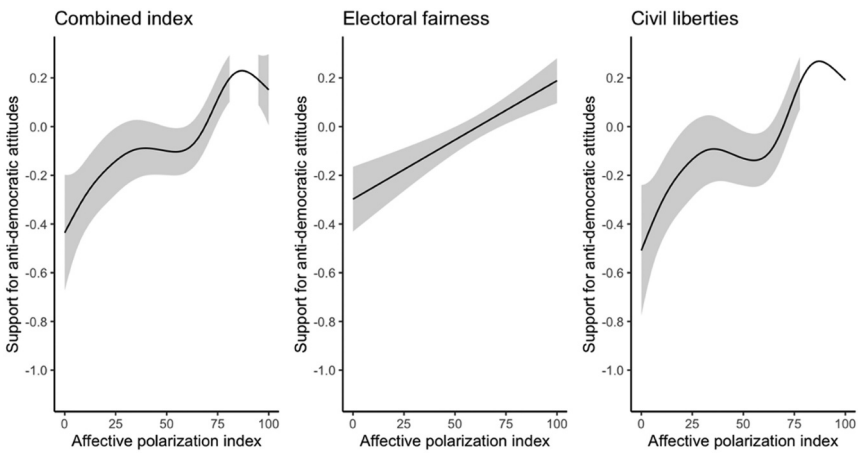


Figure 3. Affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices. Non-linear estimates of the relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices. Plots show Generalized Additive Model (GAM) smooths with 95 per cent confidence intervals (shaded regions). The x-axis represents the Affective Polarization Index (0–100), and the y-axis represents the predicted support for undemocratic practices.

linearity at extreme polarization levels, with effects potentially accelerating, but confidence intervals indicate these deviations from linearity are not statistically significant.

These patterns contrast with the inverted-U relationships reported by Janssen and Turkenburg (2024) for Germany, the UK, and the US. In those established democracies, moderate polarization initially strengthened democratic support before becoming corrosive at high levels. We find no such 'sweet spot' in the Turkish context where polarization leads to greater democratic support. Instead, even at lower levels, increases in affective polarization predict greater support for undemocratic practices. This divergence likely reflects fundamental differences in regime context: in hybrid regimes where violations are normalized and the meaning of democracy is contested, polarization lacks the democracy-reinforcing potential it may retain in more consolidated systems. In addition, differences in how democratic attitudes are measured across studies may also contribute to the divergence: while the authors rely on a broad index of democratic support, including both overt endorsement of democracy and rejection of explicitly authoritarian alternatives, our dependent variables capture more specific domains, such as electoral fairness and civil liberties, which may be more sensitive to polarization under hybrid regime conditions.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored a critical question at the heart of contemporary democratic debates: how does the rising tide of affective polarization shape citizens' commitment to the very principles that sustain democratic governance? While scholars have long warned that affective polarization may corrode the normative foundations of liberal democracy, much of the empirical investigation has been confined to established Western democracies. Our research extends this frontier by examining the relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic practices within Turkey, a paradigmatic hybrid regime characterized by years of sustained democratic backsliding. In doing so, we offer a crucial comparative perspective on how citizen attitudes can either restrain or facilitate democratic erosion in contexts where it is an ongoing reality, not a hypothetical threat.

Drawing on data from an original, nationally representative survey, we find that higher affective polarization levels robustly correlate with greater public support for undemocratic practices in Turkey, a relationship that holds across both the electoral and civil liberties domains. This suggests that as citizens come to view politics through a Manichean 'us versus them' lens, their willingness to sacrifice democratic principles for partisan gain increases significantly. This corrosive effect operates symmetrically for both government and opposition supporters; while their baseline levels of polarization and

undemocratic sentiment may differ, the fundamental relationship is the same across partisan camps. In addition, while polarized citizens are willing to endorse undemocratic practices primarily motivated by both in-party favouritism and out-party discrimination, the association between polarization and support for undemocratic actions is slightly stronger when those actions aim to secure advantages for one's own side rather than harm the opposition, though it is difficult to completely isolate these two objectives.

Whereas some research in Western contexts has suggested curvilinear effects where moderate polarization can briefly reinforce democratic commitments before becoming corrosive, our results for Turkey reveal a consistently positive relationship between affective polarization and democratic erosion. Even modest increases in affective polarization are associated with greater endorsement of undemocratic practices, whether related to electoral fairness or civil liberties. In established democracies with robust democratic norms and rare elite violations, moderate polarization may mobilize citizens to defend democratic institutions against perceived threats. However, in hybrid regimes where democratic violations are routine, political elites actively contest the meaning of democracy itself, and politics becomes a high-stakes contest among partisan camps, even modest increases in polarization appear to undermine rather than strengthen democratic commitment. The constant exposure to elite transgressions is likely to provide readily available justifications for undemocratic practices that polarized citizens can readily adopt.

Finally, our study also advances methodological approaches to measuring democratic attitudes by focusing on concrete, context-specific violations rather than abstract democratic endorsements. The grounding of our survey items in documented Turkish political practices enhances ecological validity while avoiding the social desirability biases that plague broad 'support for democracy' measures. This approach reveals nuances in democratic commitment that generic measures often miss, particularly the distinction between in-party favouritism and out-party discrimination as mechanisms of norm erosion.

These insights carry significant implications for the study of democratic backsliding. In particular, they speak to emerging debates on citizen complicity and democratic resilience by showing that affective polarization can erode the mass-level democratic commitment and further weaken constraints on would-be autocrats. Our findings highlight that affective polarization can create a permissive environment in which citizens, motivated by partisan loyalty, become complicit in undermining democracy. In hybrid regimes like Turkey where electoral competition coexists with systematic norm violations, polarization reinforces the erosion of losers' consent, encourages selective application of democratic principles, and legitimizes restrictions on opposition rights. In such settings, polarization does not merely reflect elite strategies but actively facilitates the consolidation of authoritarian practices.

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, while we establish a strong correlational link, further inquiry is needed to fully disentangle the causal mechanisms at play, since our cross-sectional data cannot isolate the mechanism(s) linking affective polarization to greater support for violations of democratic norms. Moreover, recent research has shown that divergent attitudes towards democracy itself could lead to polarization in countries experiencing significant democratic backsliding, hinting at reciprocal causation (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025). Thus, experimental approaches could illuminate the causal mechanisms linking polarization to democratic attitudes while exploring the potential for reverse causality. Longitudinal research designs would also be valuable in this regard: Tracking citizen attitudes over time would allow scholars to observe how democratic commitments evolve in response to specific political events, such as contentious elections, constitutional crises, or periods of elite-led polarization or depolarization.

Second, while in this study we focus exclusively on mass attitudes, future research could examine how affective polarization interacts with elite behaviour to influence democratic trajectories, particularly in environments where information is strategically manipulated. Third, future research could explicitly test whether the corrosive effects of affective polarization are even stronger when the 'stakes' of the democratic violations are higher, such as the disqualification of major opposition candidates or refusing to certify unfavourable election results. In this sense, it is plausible that our findings represent a conservative estimate of polarization's full impact.

Finally, comparative analyses across hybrid regimes, particularly those with similar high polarization dynamics, such as Hungary or India, would help determine whether the Turkish case is distinctive or emblematic of broader global patterns of polarization and democratic backsliding. The institutional configuration of Turkey, a high-stakes, 'winner-take-all' presidential system with weak checks and balances, may have acted as an amplifier for the corrosive effects of polarization on democratic attitudes. Future research could examine how institutional variations across hybrid regimes may moderate the relationship between mass polarization and support for undemocratic practices. As the number of hybrid regimes continues to grow globally, understanding how polarization facilitates democratic erosion remains an urgent challenge.

Notes

1. While Graham and Svolik (2020) emphasize partisan and policy interests as drivers of tolerance for democratic norm violations, they do not directly address how partisan animosity shapes democratic attitudes. Their findings reveal that many voters prioritize party loyalty over democracy.

2. They report diverging effects of polarization on democratic attitudes: increased polarization has led Republicans towards anti-establishment populist attitudes that distrust institutions of accountability like the judiciary and media while maintaining support for civil liberties, whereas Democrats have shifted towards technocratic preferences favouring expert decision-making over popular sovereignty.
3. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting these points.
4. This is a standard practice in studies focusing on affective polarization and democratic attitudes, see, e.g., Broockman et al. (2023), Voelkel et al. (2023).
5. As a robustness check, we replicate our main analyses with social distance items as a measure of affective polarization and obtain substantively similar results, as reported in the appendix.
6. Reiljan's (2020) methodology measures affective polarization only among respondents who declare affiliation with a political party, that is among partisan respondents. Wagner's (2021) methodology, by comparison, is based on the spread of feeling thermometer scores, and allows for the calculation of affective polarization for both partisan and non-partisan respondents. Applying Wagner's method, the mean level of affective polarization is 54 (sd = 26) among all respondents (including non-partisans) and 62 (sd = 22) among partisan respondents only.
7. https://www.euronews.com/2018/05/28/turkey-to-relocate-ballot-boxes-kurd-party-cries-foul.
8. https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/secmen-listelerinde-ysknin-reddettigi-saibe-iddialari-neler-haber-1669866.
9. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/erdoganin-miting-yaptigi-meydanda-chpye-izin-verilmedi-wp6792108.
10. See, e.g., https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cn9d49vlnw7o; https://www.birgun.net/haber/valilik-erdogan-mitingi-gerekcesiyle-hdp-nin-halk-bulusmasini-iptal-etti-218927.
11. See, e.g., https://www.birgun.net/haber/valilik-erdogan-mitingi-gerekcesiyle-hdp-nin-halk-bulusmasini-iptal-etti-218927; https://www.paturkey.com/news/2025/turkeys-opposition-broadcasters-being-unplugged-22097/.
12. See, e.g., https://www.mlsaturkey.com/tr/akpli-adayin-sikayeti-uzerine-gazeteci-candemir-hakkinda-sorusturma-baslatildi; https://bianet.org/haber/sansur-yapan-sirket-akp-li-vekilin-iddiasinda-gazetecilere-sorusturma-270119.
13. Our battery deliberately omits higher-stakes violations of democracy, such as disqualifying opposition candidates or refusing to certify unfavourable results for several reasons. First, we sought to capture the incremental nature of democratic backsliding by focusing on 'procedural' manipulations that cumulatively undermine democracy, a process central to the backsliding literature. Second, we aimed to avoid potential floor effects: items involving brazen violations might have generated near-universal disapproval, limiting our ability to detect meaningful variation in partisan tolerance. Finally, while such high-stakes violations have been part of Turkey's most recent political experience, particularly with the post-2024 crackdown on the main opposition, the procedural violations we list were more frequent at the time our survey was fielded in Spring 2024. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.
14. The mean levels of support for undemocratic practices among non-partisans range between 1.9 and 2.5 on a 1–5 scale, resulting in an overall mean of 2.1, well below that for partisan respondents.

15. For each index, we only include respondents who answered at least two out of the three items to ensure that no single item could dominate the index.
16. As a robustness check, we also replicate our analyses by focusing on AKP and CHP partisans only, the two major parties in contemporary Turkish politics. Our results, reported in the appendix, are substantively similar.
17. We stress that this categorization reflects the explicit primary framing of each item rather than a clean theoretical separation; in practice, many democratic violations simultaneously advantage the in-party and disadvantage the out-party.

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