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ABSTRACT

Contemporary politics face rising affective polarisation – hostility and distrust across partisan lines. This study examines the contours and consequences of polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 general election. While Turkey ranks among the world's most polarised societies, individual-level analyses remain scarce. Using nationally-representative survey data, we reveal significant variation in polarisation across party supporters, with notably high levels among incumbent AKP and pro-Kurdish HDP supporters. Polarisation increases with age, political interest, and social media use, while decreasing with education. Crucially, affective polarisation significantly bolstered AKP voter loyalty, likely contributing to the party's electoral success despite severe economic and social challenges. These findings have important implications for understanding electoral accountability in polarised societies and affective polarisation's role in democratic backsliding.

KEYWORDS

Affective polarisation; democratic erosion; elections; partisanship; partisan animosity; electoral accountability; public opinion; Turkey

Contemporary politics around the world are increasingly characterised by 'hostility, distrust, and incivility across partisan lines' (Gidron, Adams & Horne 2019), a phenomenon known as affective polarisation (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). Affectively polarised individuals display favouritism towards their own party's supporters while harbouring negative sentiments and antipathy towards those of opposing parties. In this way, affective polarisation goes beyond policy- or ideology-based disagreement and is considered as an outgrowth of partisan social identity (Iyengar et al. 2019). While initial research on affective polarisation was confined to American politics, recent comparative studies have shown that it is observed in many countries (Boxell, Gentzkow & Shapiro 2024; Gidron, Adams & Horne 2019; Wagner 2021).

Research on affective polarisation constitutes 'one of the most influential literatures in contemporary social science' (Broockman, Kalla & Westwood 2023, p. 808) because of its potentially pernicious consequences for societies. High levels of

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affective polarisation might erode voters' support for democratic norms (Kingzette et al. 2021), increase support for extremist politicians (Iyengar et al. 2019), and reduce trust in political institutions (Hetherington & Rudolph 2015), all of which could contribute to democratic backsliding (McCoy & Somer 2019). Affective polarisation distorts individuals' behaviour outside politics as well; affectively polarised individuals discriminate against supporters of opponent parties and maintain social distance from them in everyday life (Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019). Consequently, there is a growing scholarly interest in better understanding the dynamics of affective polarisation in various contexts.

This article contributes to these efforts by focusing on the case of Turkey ahead of the critical 2023 general election. Cross-national comparisons indicate that Turkey exhibits one of the highest levels of affective polarisation in the world (e.g. Reiljan et al. 2024; Wagner 2021). At the same time, the country experienced one of the most severe cases of democratic backsliding globally in the past decade (Papada et al. 2023). Some scholars suggest that these two trends may be related, with rising levels of polarisation contributing to democratic backsliding (e.g. Orhan 2022; Somer 2019). Yet, there is a surprising dearth of empirical analyses on the fundamental patterns of affective polarisation in Turkey. We address this gap by drawing on original, nationally-representative survey data from the pre-election wave of the 2023 Turkish Election Study (TES). The 2023 election is widely considered a critical turning point in modern Turkish politics (e.g. Esen, Gümüşçü & Yavuzyılmaz 2024; Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024): it marked the end of the new presidential system's first term, President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) faced important economic and social challenges, and the opposition parties were united behind a joint presidential candidate with the hopes of defeating Erdoğan and preventing further autocratization of the country. By using data from the pre-election period, our study presents the contours of affective polarisation in such a context and gives hints at how it might have affected election results.

We find that supporters of the incumbent AKP and pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) display higher levels of affective polarisation than supporters of the other three major parties – the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Good Party (IYI), and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – and independent voters.[1] While these differences are not particularly large, they are statistically significant after controlling for several relevant factors. The deliberately polarising politics employed by the AKP elites (Somer 2019; Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024) and the strong political identity and threat perceptions among HDP supporters (Laebens & Öztürk 2021) likely play a role in the high levels of polarisation among these groups. While an individual's level of education is negatively correlated with affective polarisation, age and political interest are positively related. We do not find

[1]We use the terms 'partisan' and 'supporter' interchangeably in the rest of the paper for ease of reading.

any significant relationship between individuals' affective polarisation scores and their gender, wealth, Kurdish ethnicity, or zone of residence (urban vs. rural). These results are broadly in line with the relevant literature; factors influencing the strength of individuals' partisan identification seem to play a major role in determining their affective polarisation levels as well. We also find that using social media as the main source of political news is positively associated with affective polarisation, a finding consistent with accounts pointing to the polarising effects of social media (e.g. Settle 2018; Törnberg 2022).

Our results also show that high levels of affective polarisation might have played a role in the AKP's victory in this election: after controlling for several factors typically used to predict vote choice in Turkey (e.g. Aytaç 2022), we find that affective polarisation is positively correlated with voting for the AKP among individuals who feel an affinity for the party. That is, consistent with the theoretical expectation that affective polarisation makes it more difficult for individuals to abandon their party's candidates (e.g. Iyengar & Krupenkin 2018), we find that AKP sympathisers with higher levels of affective polarisation were more likely to vote for the AKP. This observation might help explain the AKP's electoral resilience despite the economic and social challenges the party faced as the incumbent in addition to concerns about democratic backsliding.

Together, our findings constitute one of the first characterisations of affective polarisation in contemporary Turkey. The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we present a brief overview of the literature on affective polarisation, followed by a discussion of the Turkish context ahead of the 2023 election. We then present our theoretically-driven hypotheses and introduce in detail our data and measures used in the analyses. The subsequent section presents our empirical analyses, which explore the contours of affective polarisation across partisan and demographic groups and test its electoral consequences. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and several directions for future research.

Affective polarisation

The concept of affective polarisation is rooted in Social Identity Theory (SIT), which postulates that identification with a group leads individuals to develop positive sentiments for members of their own group and negative feelings towards those belonging to opposing groups (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel & Turner 1979). From this perspective, affective polarisation refers to the cognitive and behavioural biases that individuals exhibit when partisanship becomes a salient social identity and determines in-group and out-group membership (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). Iyengar et al. (2019) note that partisanship can be a particularly powerful group identity for two reasons: it is acquired at a young age mostly through family socialisation and rarely

changes over the life cycle, and it is repeatedly being reinforced by election campaigns.[2]

Initial studies on affective polarisation were almost exclusively U.S.-centred, as scholars of American politics have diagnosed increasing levels of polarisation in society. The most widely-used measure in this literature is the so-called 'feeling thermometer' survey question where respondents are asked to rate their affect towards political parties or their supporters on a numerical scale (typically from 0 to 10 or 100), with larger values corresponding to more positive affect. Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2024), for instance, report that while in 1978 the average American partisan rated co-partisans 27 points higher than supporters of the opposing party on a 0–100 scale, this difference more than doubled to 56 points by 2020. A similar negative trend is observed in social relations: the proportion of Americans who would be displeased if their child married someone from the other party increased from 5 per cent in the 1960s to more than 40 per cent by 2010 (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). There is evidence for increasing polarisation in other countries as well; Gidron, Adams and Horne (2019), for example, report that in several countries including Spain, France, the UK, and Switzerland, supporters of different parties expressed intense mutual dislike in the past decade.

Scholars have proposed a number of explanations for the increasing levels of affective polarisation. A first culprit is the proliferation of partisan media outlets, which leads to greater partisan bias in information consumption and reinforcement of one's own views, both of which contribute to polarisation (Levendusky 2013). Second, the increasingly negative campaigning of political elites may also foster animosity between different party supporters (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). Yet another explanation suggests that increasing ideological differences between parties might lead to stronger partisan affect (Rogowski & Sutherland 2016).[3] Finally, a decline in cross-cutting identities (Mason 2015, 2018) and the increasing overlap of partisan and other salient social identities, a process known as partisan sorting, may be responsible for the rise of affective polarisation (Levendusky 2009).

Regardless of its sources, affective polarisation is considered to have serious detrimental effects on democratic governance. Scholars have argued that affective polarisation could lead to democratic backsliding primarily by weakening electoral accountability and support for liberal democratic norms (e.g. Graham & Svolik 2020; Orhan 2022; Kingzette et al. 2021; Pierson & Schickler 2020).[4] Affectively polarised individuals might be less likely to punish politicians from

[2]While one might question the relevance of partisanship in a developing country like Turkey due to high levels of party system volatility and frequent interruptions of democracy, scholars have argued and provided evidence that partisan attachments could be transferred across generations in such a context, albeit under different party labels (e.g. Çarkoğlu 2012; Kalaycıoğlu 1994, 2008).

[3]Moral and Best (2023) present corresponding cross-national evidence with respect to mass ideological polarisation: party polarisation leads to an increase in mass ideological polarisation, especially among politically engaged and sophisticated individuals.

[4]There is a lively debate in the literature about whether exogenous decreases in affective polarisation can lead to improvements in support for democratic norms. Broockman, Kalla and Westwood (2023) and Voelkel et al. (2023), for instance, find no such effects drawing on experiments conducted on U.S. convenience samples.

their own parties for violations of democratic norms and rule of law. They might also be more supportive of restricting political rights and civil liberties of political opponents. Thus, would-be autocrats in highly polarised settings could exploit these biases of voters and gradually erode liberal democracy without facing a backlash from their supporters. Given these potentially pernicious consequences, there is an intense scholarly interest in devising interventions to mitigate affective polarisation (e.g. Voelkel et al. 2024).

The Turkish context

In this study we focus on affective polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 general election. Cross-national analyses identify Turkey as one of the most polarised countries globally (e.g. Reiljan et al. 2024; Wagner 2021), yet research on the individual-level correlates of affective polarisation in this important case is surprisingly scarce. To the best of our knowledge, Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2018) is the only published work featuring such an analysis. Using survey data from 2017, they report that while individuals' nationalist sentiments and 'perceptions of commonality' with their co-partisans are positively associated with affective polarisation, factors like gender, age, level of education, place of residence (urban vs. rural), and religiosity are not. The measure of affective polarisation used in these analyses (perceptions of closeness towards party supporters) is different from what is typically used in the relevant literature (party affect), however, making the results difficult to interpret in light of previous work. The Turkish political system has also changed substantially since 2017, with a transition to a presidential system and the emergence of two major electoral alliances.[5]

The Turkish party system had five major players in the period leading to the 2023 general election: the pro-Islamist, conservative AKP as the incumbent party since 2002; the social democratic, secularist CHP as the main opposition party during this entire period; two right-wing, (Turkish) nationalist parties, the MHP and its offshoot IYI established in 2017; and the pro-Kurdish HDP. Two major electoral alliances were formed among these parties to contest the 2023 election: the AKP and MHP led the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), while the CHP and IYI formed the backbone of the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*).[6] The HDP, on the other hand, formed an alliance with a number of small left-wing and socialist parties.[7] The leader of the AKP and incumbent President Erdoğan ran as the

[5]Türkoğlu et al. (2022) also present an analysis of how polarisation shapes social media discourse on different understandings of democracy in Turkey.

[6]A number of smaller parties had also joined these alliances.

[7]Several pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey were closed by the Constitutional Court in the past, and the HDP faced a closure case ahead of the 2023 election as well. Due to this potential closure of the party, the HDP candidates in the election ran under the list of the new party, the Party of the Greens and the Left Future (*Yeşiller ve Sol Gelecek Partisi*, abbreviated as *Yeşil Sol Parti*, YSP). In our survey we made references both to the HDP and YSP whenever appropriate. In October 2023, the YSP changed its name to Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, DEM Parti).

presidential candidate of the People's Alliance while the leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, was the candidate of the Nation Alliance.

This party configuration can be mapped onto two major cleavages that characterise modern politics in Turkey (Çarkoğlu & Hinich 2006). One of these cleavages is based on religiosity, corresponding to the tensions between devout Muslims and less observant, secular groups, while a second, ethnicity-based cleavage reflects tensions between the Turkish majority and the Kurdish minority. The AKP, and to a lesser extent the MHP, are closer to devout Muslims, whereas the CHP, HDP, and to a lesser extent the IYI, attract more pro-secular groups. With respect to the ethnicity-based cleavage, the MHP and IYI are staunch Turkish nationalists while the HDP is the main Kurdish political organisation. In the period ahead of the 2023 election, the AKP adopted a more (Turkish) nationalist stance and moved closer to the MHP and IYI, while the CHP has been more careful not to alienate Kurdish and conservative voters.

Scholars of Turkish politics have noted that these two major cleavages have repeatedly resulted in periods of polarisation in modern Turkey (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu 2021; Somer 2019). Yet, they also point out that the level of polarisation in Turkish politics took a significant upward turn after the 2007 general election when the AKP won its second term in power. Somer (2019) presents a detailed account of how the AKP elites and in particular Erdoğan emerged as a 'polarising political entrepreneurs', taking advantage of primarily the religiosity-based cleavage in Turkish society, to consolidate their power and mobilise their constituency during this period. This process was accompanied by the strengthening of partisan identities, which became closely linked to perceptions that opposing political parties pose a threat to one's economic wellbeing and political freedoms (Laebens & Öztürk 2021).

Our temporal focus, the period immediately preceding the 2023 general election, marks a critical phase in modern Turkish politics given the significance of this election for both the incumbent and the opposition (Esen, Gümüşçü & Yavuzyılmaz 2024). From the incumbent's perspective, winning the election was of paramount importance for the consolidation of the new presidential system, as it followed the first term of the new regime. Yet the salience of the economic hardships (Aytaç 2024) and the fallout of the devastating earthquakes just months ahead of the election meant that winning the election was far from certain (Çarkoğlu et al. 2025). The opposition, on the other hand, sought to take advantage of these vulnerabilities and fielded joint presidential candidate and parliamentary lists. A crucial theme in the opposition's campaign was that the election presented a choice between democracy and authoritarianism, and that an opposition victory would mean a return to democracy in Turkey.

The high stakes of this election made the campaign period notably polarised. The incumbent alliance in particular relied heavily on negative campaigning and an exclusionary populist discourse (Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024). Their campaign depicted the opposition as an existential

threat to the nation, often drawing on nationalist and religious cleavages mentioned earlier. The opposition was branded with derogatory labels such as 'alliance of abasement', 'puppets of oppressors', and 'evil front'.[8] Both the AKP leader Erdoğan and the MHP leader Bahçeli repeatedly accused the opposition Nation Alliance of collaborating with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist armed group designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and many countries, at one point circulating a doctored video that spliced together footage of the CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu with images of senior PKK commanders, creating a false association.[9] This polarising discourse was reinforced by religious appeals that portrayed the opposition as anti-Islamic or 'non-believers', referencing opposition presidential candidate Kılıçdaroğlu's minority sect background.[10]

In contrast, the CHP-led National Alliance campaign strategy has been characterised as 'a deliberate effort to depolarize ethnic and religious divisions', by emphasising democratisation, good governance, and a 'radical language of love' (Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024, p. 268). This inclusiveness had materialised in the Nation Alliance bringing together six ideologically diverse parties, from the secular CHP to the nationalist IYI Party and three splinter conservative parties.[11] However, after the inconclusive first round of presidential elections where Kılıçdaroğlu trailed Erdoğan by four percentage points, Kılıçdaroğlu also abandoned the conciliatory and depolarising campaign that had characterised his first-round effort, and employed a discourse with strong nationalist and anti-immigrant tones.[12] Taken together, these dynamics illustrate that the 2023 election campaign was marked by polarised rhetoric, especially with the ruling bloc amplifying ethnic and religious cleavages to mobilise its traditional support base, and the opposition oscillating between inclusive appeals and reactive nationalist tones to maintain a broad-based coalition of diverse constituencies.

Hypotheses

Based on theories on affective polarisation, previous findings in the literature, and the specifics of the Turkish political context as discussed earlier, we derive several testable hypotheses regarding the patterns and consequences of affective polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 election. We organise these around

[8]T24. (2023), 'Bahçeli'den muhalefete: Münafık muhterisler', available online at: https://t24.com.tr/haber/bahceli-den-muhalefete-munafik-muhterisler,1107077.

[9]Euronews. (2023), 'Turkey's disinformation election: Fake videos and wildly misleading claims', available online at: https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/16/turkeys-disinformation-election-fake-videos-and-wildly-misleading-claims.

[10]Bianet. (2023), 'Alevilik diye bir dinimiz yok, dinimizin tek adı var, o da İslam'dır', available online at: https://bianet.org/haber/alevilik-diye-bir-dinimiz-yok-dinimizin-tek-adi-var-o-da-islam-dir-277672.

[11]BBC. (2023), 'Altılı Masa 'Millet İttifakı'na dönüştü, cumhurbaşkanı adayı için 13 Şubat'ta yapılacak toplantı işaret edildi', available online at: https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/clkxen2mzj8o.

[12]BBC. (2023), 'Seçimin muhasebesi: Kutuplaşma dili kaçınılmaz mı?', available online at: https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c6p3mkyeyj6o.

three dimensions: (i) partisan group differences, (ii) individual-level socio-demographic characteristics, and (iii) electoral behaviour consequences.

With respect to partisan group differences, our first expectation is that partisans should express higher affect towards their alliance partners than towards parties in opposing alliances. In line with the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), electoral alliances should create 'extended in-groups' that create warmer affect within alliances compared to across them:

> **Hypothesis 1a (Alliance effects):** Partisans express higher affect towards alliance partners than towards parties in opposing alliances.

Second, scholars of Turkish politics highlight that the AKP elites have deliberately adopted a strategy of 'top-down polarization' to consolidate their power (e.g. Somer 2019), and an exclusionary, divisive, and fear-based discourse permeated AKP election campaigns (e.g. Erçetin & Erdoğan 2023). The 2023 election campaign was no exception in this regard (Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024). Given the impact of elite cues on affective polarisation (Huddy & Yair 2021), the divisive discourse of the AKP elites should result in high levels of affective polarisation among their supporters. On the other hand, Laebens and Öztürk (2021) report that the pro-Kurdish HDP partisans exhibit the strongest political identity and threat perceptions from rival parties among all party supporters in Turkey. The long-standing economic and political exclusion of Kurds and the criminalisation of the HDP by the state and nearly all major parties may have led HDP supporters to perceive a high level of threat, which in turn likely fostered stronger in-group identification than other groups of voters (Nugent 2020). For these reasons, we expect AKP and HDP partisans to exhibit higher levels of affective polarisation than other party supporters:

> **Hypothesis 1b (Party effects):** AKP and HDP supporters exhibit higher levels of affective polarisation than other party supporters.

Moving to our hypotheses regarding individual-level socio-demographic characteristics, partisan identities typically strengthen with age (e.g. Converse 1969; Dalton & Weldon 2007), and given that affective polarisation is rooted in the strength of partisan identities, older individuals should be more likely to be polarised (Mason 2015; Riera & Madariaga 2023; Hernández, Anduiza & Rico 2021). Several factors may account for this pattern: older individuals have more cumulative experience with the party system, campaigns, and voting opportunities that reinforce partisan attitudes (Converse 1976), they possess more established social networks (Phillips 2022), and they may be more resistant to attitude change than younger individuals (Stoker & Jennings 2008). Thus, we expect age to be positively related to affective polarisation:

> **Hypothesis 2a (Age effects):** Older individuals display higher levels of affective polarisation than younger individuals.

Education is also likely to be an important factor. Partisanship is essentially a heuristic for citizens to navigate the complexities of politics, and the need for such a heuristic may be less pronounced among highly educated individuals, who possess better resources and skills to make sense of politics (Dalton 2008). In addition, education may help develop critical thinking skills, facilitating the recognition and consideration of diverse opinions and values (Han 2022). In line with these considerations, most studies report a negative relationship between the level of education and affective polarisation (e.g. Mason 2015; Riera & Madariaga 2023; Hernández, Anduiza & Rico 2021).

Hypothesis 2b (Education effects): Higher levels of education are associated with lower affective polarisation.

Higher levels of political interest are linked to higher levels of partisanship in general (e.g. Arzheimer & Schoen 2016), and political engagement should increase exposure to partisan cues and campaign messages, thereby reinforcing group identities. Therefore, we expect higher political interest to be associated with greater affective polarisation:

Hypothesis 2c (Political interest effects): Higher political interest is associated with higher levels of affective polarisation.

Social media users are more likely to be exposed to information from like-minded individuals, and computer algorithms also curate the users' content in line with their previous behaviours (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015; Conover et al. 2011). These patterns are likely to reinforce individuals' partisan predispositions, leading to increased polarisation (Sunstein 2017; Settle 2018). The lack of editorial oversight on social media platforms also makes them a primary channel through which misinformation spreads online (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nagler & Tucker 2019). Such content may be especially divisive and inflammatory, as these attributes make it more likely to be shared and consumed on social media (Tucker et al. 2018), further fuelling polarisation.

Hypothesis 2d (Social media effects): Greater social media use is associated with higher levels of affective polarisation.

Finally, moving beyond patterns of affective polarisation to its consequences, we hypothesise about its effects on Turkish citizens' vote intentions ahead of the 2023 election. This question is especially relevant for supporters of the incumbent AKP, as many analysts had expected defection among them given the significant economic and social challenges the government faced (e.g. Esen, Gümüşçü & Yavuzyılmaz 2024). The literature on affective polarisation, however, suggests that such defections should be unlikely among individuals with high levels of polarisation. Highly polarised individuals tend to see elections as a high-stakes group conflict (Ward & Tavits 2019) and display greater loyalty to their party (McCoy, Rahman & Somer 2018). As such, among individuals who

declare partisan affinity for the AKP, those with higher levels of affective polarisation should display a greater propensity to vote for the party than others:

> **Hypothesis 3 (Electoral consequences):** Among AKP sympathisers, higher levels of affective polarisation will be associated with greater likelihood of voting for the AKP.

In the following, we test these hypotheses using our original survey data.

Data and methods

To analyse individual-level patterns of affective polarisation in Turkey, we draw on original data from the pre-election survey of the 2023 Turkish Election Study (TES 2023). This survey was fielded shortly before the 2023 general election on a probability sample ($N = 1{,}869$) of Turkey's voting-age population.[13] By analysing data from the pre-election period rather than the post-election context, we gain insight into voters' attitudes as they approached the election, free from biases that could arise from knowing the electoral results.

The key variable of interest in our analyses is an individual's level of affective polarisation. Following the widely-used procedure proposed in Wagner (2021), we measure affective polarisation based on the spread of an individual's positive and negative affect scores towards political parties.[14] In many surveys, respondents are asked to declare the extent to which they like or dislike the main parties in their country, typically on a 0–10 scale. The spread of these party like-dislike scores is a good measure of affective polarisation: respondents who declare similar levels of affect for all parties will have a low spread, indicating low affective polarisation, while those with very different levels of affect for different parties will have a high spread, corresponding to high affective polarisation. Specifically, the spread is the average absolute party like-dislike difference relative to each respondent's average party like-dislike score. The spread for any individual i is calculated as

[13] The sampling procedure starts with the use of Turkish Statistical Institute's (TUIK) 26 NUTS-2 regions. Due to the major devastation caused by the twin earthquakes of February 6th in the provinces of Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, and Osmaniye, the NUTS-2 region comprising these provinces (TR63) was excluded from the sample frame. The target sample was distributed according to the remaining 25 region's share of urban and rural population. Next, TUIK's block data were used with block size set at four hundred residents. Twenty voters were targeted from each block and no substitution was used. The selection of individuals in households is done based on the reported target population of eighteen years or older in each household according to a lottery method. All interviews were conducted face to face in respondents' households by Frekans Research between April 10 and May 10, 2023.

[14] Affective polarisation scores are calculated for all respondents who report a level of affect for at least two parties. As a robustness check, we also use two alternative measures of affective polarisation in the multivariate analyses: the Affective Polarisation Index as laid out in Reiljan (2020) and the difference between in-party and out-party scores (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). We obtain substantively similar results with these alternative measures that are reported in the appendix (Tables A4 and A5).

$$Spread_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^{p} \left(like_{ip} - \overline{like_i}\right)^2}{n_p}}$$

where p is the party, and $like_{ip}$ is the like-dislike score of party p given by individual i. For example, a hypothetical respondent who rates two parties at 10 on a 0–10 scale and the remaining three parties at 0 would have a spread score of 4.9, corresponding to a very high level of affective polarisation. In contrast, if a respondent rates a party at 10, two at 5, and two at 4, her spread score would be 2.2, a much lower level of polarisation. A respondent who rates three parties at 5 and two parties at 4 would have a very low spread score of just 0.5.

Respondents in our survey were asked to indicate the degree to which they like or dislike each of the five major political parties (AKP, CHP, HDP, IYI, and MHP) on a scale from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like).[15] These were the only parties that won seats in parliament in the previous 2018 general election. To identify partisans in our sample, we asked respondents whether they feel close to a political party; those who answered affirmatively were then asked to name that party in an open-ended format. This measure is widely used in comparative analyses of partisanship (e.g. Huber, Kernell & Leoni 2005; Lupu 2015; Singh & Thornton 2019). As a result, about 76 per cent of respondents in our sample are identified as partisan. This high rate of partisanship is in line with previous studies on Turkey that use similar or alternative measures (e.g. Laebens & Öztürk 2021).

Our empirical analyses proceed in three steps. First, we present a broad view of the patterns of affective polarisation in Turkey by analysing how the average levels of affective polarisation differ across different partisan and socio-demographic subgroups of the sample. Next, we turn to multivariate analyses of the individual-level correlates of affective polarisation where we utilise ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with respondents' affective polarisation scores as the dependent variable. In line with our hypotheses, we consider a range of independent variables in this analysis: respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, religiosity, Kurdish ethnicity, place of residence, wealth),[16] political interest, dummy variables for individuals who declare television or social media as their main source of political information, and partisanship.[17] We also employ regional fixed-

[15]The exact wording of the question is as follows: 'I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I read a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so'. This question is borrowed from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) surveys.

[16]We operationalise wealth as the sum of the ownership status (1 = yes, 0 = no) of the following 8 items in the household: dishwasher, plasma or LCD television, a property providing rent income, a summer house, a private car, credit card, computer, and savings account in a bank. We refrained from using the reported average monthly household income of respondents because of the high non-response rate to this question (about 20 per cent of the sample). We reach substantively similar findings if we use income instead of wealth.

[17]In the analyses we include partisans of the five major parties and independent voters only. About 4 per cent of the sample consists of partisans of smaller parties, but these small parties have very divergent ideological platforms, making interpretation difficult. Our results are substantively similar if we include these supporters of smaller parties into analysis as well.

effects in the models. Finally, to test our hypothesis on the electoral consequences of affective polarisation, we construct logistic regression models predicting vote intention for the AKP using variables frequently employed in studies of electoral behaviour in Turkey (e.g. Aytaç 2022; Aytaç & Çarkoğlu 2021; Çarkoğlu 2012). These variables include respondents' gender, age, level of education, ethnicity (Kurdish), religiosity, urban or rural residence, wealth, and retrospective economic evaluations. The definitions, coding procedures, and summary statistics of all variables employed in the analyses are presented in Tables A1 and A2 of the appendix.

Contours of affective polarization in Turkey

The average like-dislike scores for the parties in our sample, with associated standard errors in parentheses, are 5.0 (0.10) for the AKP, 4.0 (0.09) for the CHP, 1.9 (0.07) for the HDP, 2.7 (0.07) for the IYI, and 3.5 (0.09) for the MHP. In Table 1 we present the average in-party and out-party scores of different partisan groups; that is, the average like-dislike score given by a partisan group to their own party (in-party) and to the remaining four parties (out-party). We see a large difference between in-party and out-party scores: while the average in-party scores range from 8.1 to 9.6, the range of out-party scores is just 2.2 to 2.5. Party supporters tend to give very high scores to their own parties and very low scores to others, which is a first indication of the strength of affective polarisation in Turkey. The largest in-party and out-party difference belongs to HDP partisans (7.4) followed by AKP partisans (7.0), while MHP partisans exhibit the lowest difference (5.6).

The distribution of these party like-dislike scores across partisans of different parties is presented in Figure 1, where a couple of patterns are identifiable. As expected, each partisan group expresses the most favourable score for its own party. Supporters of parties in an electoral alliance also give relatively favourable scores to other parties in that alliance. Thus, we observe relatively high scores for the AKP from MHP partisans and vice versa in the incumbent camp, and high scores for the CHP from IYI partisans and vice versa in the opposition camp. Beyond these affinities, however, the scores that individuals give to parties in opposing camps are strikingly low. For example, the average like-dislike scores that CHP and IYI partisans gave to the AKP and MHP are at or below one (on the 0–10 scale), and the corresponding average scores that AKP and MHP partisans gave to the CHP and IYI

Table 1. Average in-party and out-party scores of different partisan groups.

	Average in-party score	Average out-party score	In-party and out-party difference
AKP Partisans (N = 736)	9.2	2.2	7.0
CHP Partisans (N = 401)	8.9	2.4	6.5
HDP Partisans (N = 100)	9.6	2.2	7.4
IYI Partisans (N = 34)	8.6	2.2	6.4
MHP Partisans (N = 43)	8.1	2.5	5.6

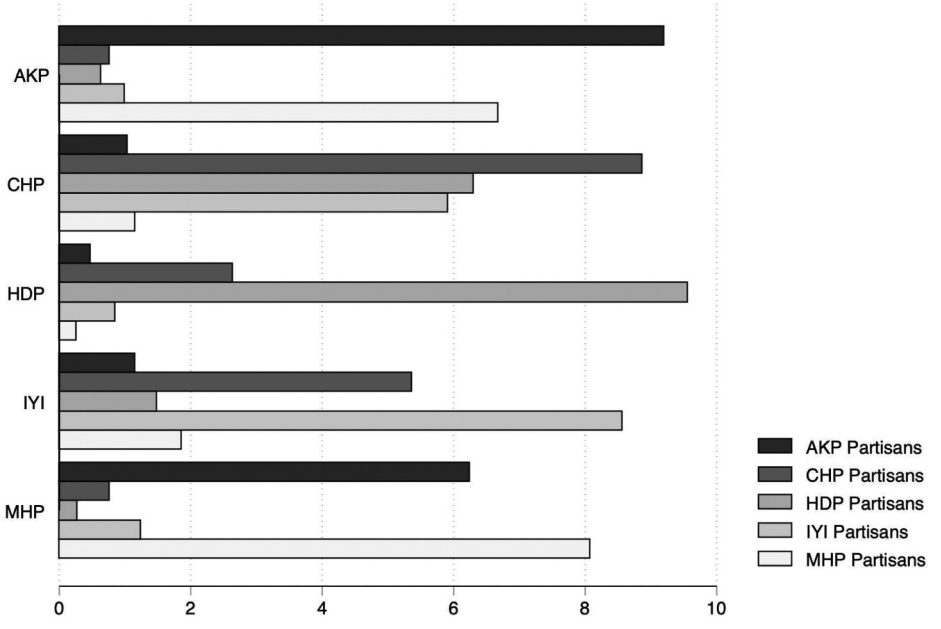


Figure 1. Distribution of party like-dislike scores across partisan groups.

are also around one. These very low scores given to parties in opposing camps suggest that one pillar of affective polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 election was the high level of dislike across two major alliances. These results provide support for our Hypothesis 1a (alliance effects), as partisans express higher affect towards alliance partners than towards parties in opposing alliances.

Another important observation is the status of the HDP, the party of the Kurdish nationalist movement. The HDP has the lowest average like-dislike score (1.9) among the parties considered, and Figure 1 shows that it received very low scores from supporters of all four other parties. The supporters of the CHP give the HDP relatively higher scores than other parties' supporters, but even their average affect is just 2.6 out of 10. These results suggest that widespread dislike of the HDP, the main Kurdish political organisation, was another significant pillar of polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 election.

The distribution of respondents' affective polarisation scores, calculated using the party like-dislike scores as discussed above, is presented in Figure 2. As expected from the polarised nature of party evaluations, the affective polarisation scores are mostly concentrated at higher values. The scores in the sample range from 0 to 5, with a mean of 3.3 and a median of 3.6.

Which groups of individuals exhibit higher levels of affective polarisation? First, we consider the mean affective polarisation scores across different partisan

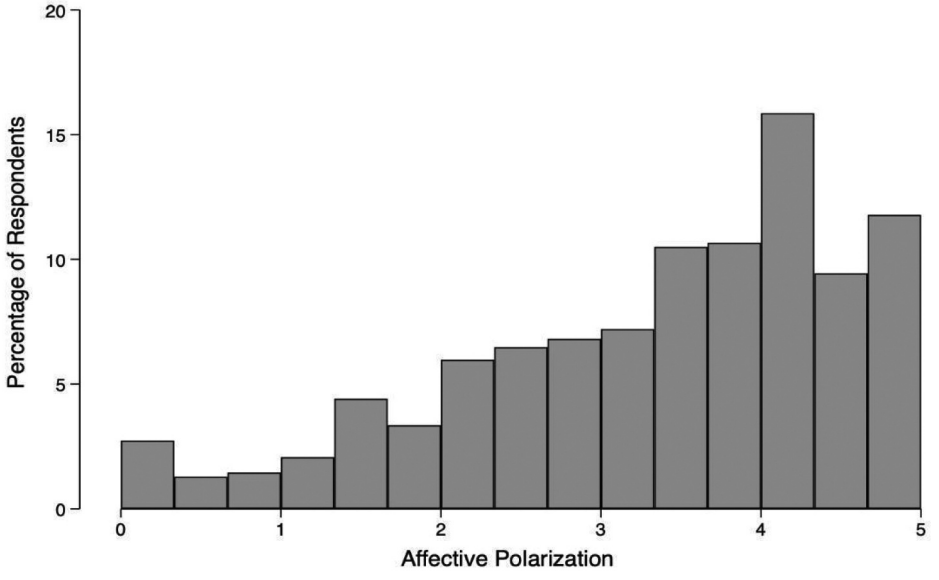


Figure 2. Distribution of affective polarization scores in the sample.

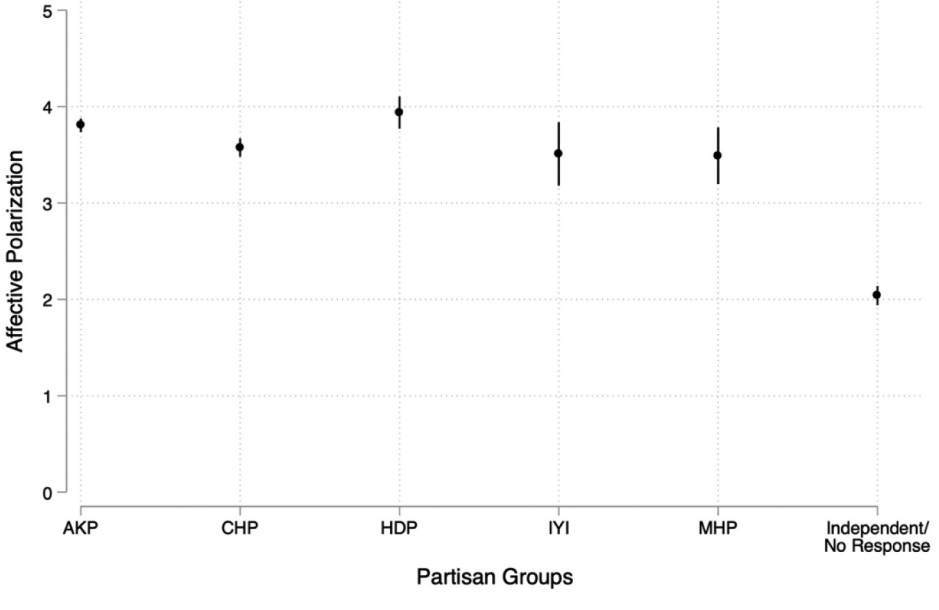


Figure 3. Mean affective polarization scores across different partisan groups.

groups, as shown in Figure 3. We see that supporters of the incumbent AKP and the HDP have the highest affective polarisation scores with means of 3.81 and 3.94, respectively. The mean scores of CHP, IYI, and MHP partisans are slightly lower and very close to each other, ranging from 3.49 to 3.58. Finally, those who

did not declare feeling close to any party or did not answer the partisanship question (*Independent/No Response*) have considerably lower affective polarisation scores. This is expected, as affective polarisation is rooted in partisan identities. Two-sample *t*-tests confirm that the mean affective polarisation levels among AKP and HDP supporters are significantly higher than those of all other respondents ($p < 0.001$). These results provide supporting evidence for Hypothesis 1b (party effects).

Next, we explore affective polarisation levels with respect to different socio-demographic subgroups of the sample. In Figure 4, we focus on respondents' gender, age, education levels, ethnicity (proxied by the ability to speak Kurdish), and place of residence (urban vs. rural). The results provide supporting evidence for our hypotheses on age and education effects: older individuals display higher levels of affective polarisation than younger individuals (Hypothesis 2a), while higher education is associated with lower affective polarisation (Hypothesis 2b). These differences are highly statistically significant.[18] We observe no statistically significant differences in mean affective polarisation levels between men and women, between Kurdish-speaking individuals and others, or between rural and urban residents.[19] While there are studies that report higher

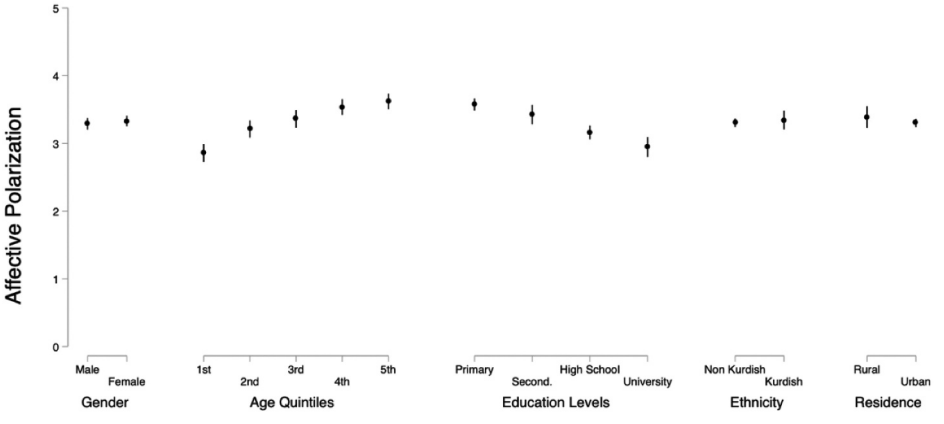


Figure 4. Respondents' characteristics and mean affective polarization levels.

[18]The mean differences in affective polarisation between the first and fifth age quintiles and between primary school and university-level education categories in Figure 4 are highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

[19]Earlier we had seen that partisans of the pro-Kurdish HDP display highest level of affective polarisation among partisan groups, yet there are no significant differences in the mean affective polarisation levels between Kurdish and non-Kurdish respondents. What we observe is that there is a significant difference in affective polarisation among Kurdish respondents, depending on whether they consider themselves as HDP partisans or not. The mean affective polarisation score among Kurds who are HDP partisans is 3.93 while it is significantly lower at 2.96 (difference $p < 0.001$) among Kurds who are not HDP partisans. This explains the interesting pattern: while there are no differences in affective polarisation between Kurdish and non-Kurdish nonrespondents in general, Kurds who are HDP partisans display significantly higher level of polarisation. These results suggest that Kurds who are politicised into the left-wing, opposition HDP show a distinct pattern of polarisation in comparison to Kurds who are not politicised (independents) or are more sympathetic to other parties.

levels of affective polarisation among women than men (e.g. Hernández, Anduiza & Rico 2021; Ondercin & Lizotte 2020), we do not observe such a pattern in the Turkish case.

Multivariate analyses on the correlates and consequences of affective polarization in Turkey

The results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with respondents' affective polarisation scores as the dependent variable are presented in Table 2. Model (1) considers only respondents' socio-economic characteristics, while model (2) also includes partisanship. Among the socio-demographic characteristics we considered, age and education levels have consistently statistically significant relationships with affective polarisation. While age is positively correlated with affective polarisation, individuals with

Table 2. Correlates of affective polarisation in Turkey ahead of the 2023 general election.

	(1)	(2)
DV: Affective Polarization	Model with socio-demographics only	Model with partisanship
Female	0.11*	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.05)
Age	0.01***	0.01**
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education	−0.17***	−0.07**
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Kurdish	−0.14	−0.17
	(0.12)	(0.10)
Urban	0.01	0.03
	(0.08)	(0.07)
Wealth	0.04*	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Religiosity	0.06	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.03)
Political interest	0.18***	0.08***
	(0.03)	(0.02)
Main source: TV	0.12	0.07
	(0.08)	(0.06)
Main source: Social media	0.35***	0.25***
	(0.09)	(0.07)
AKP partisan		1.72***
		(0.08)
CHP partisan		1.45***
		(0.08)
HDP partisan		1.84***
		(0.12)
IYI partisan		1.18***
		(0.18)
MHP partisan		1.36***
		(0.19)
Constant	2.21***	1.42***
	(0.22)	(0.19)
Observations	1,618	1,618
R-squared	0.17	0.45

Note: OLS regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include regional fixed effects (not shown). ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

higher levels of education appear to be less affectively polarised. These results are compatible with the bivariate analyses presented earlier and again provide evidence for Hypotheses 2a and 2b, respectively. The age effect in our data translates to approximately 0.15–0.23 points higher polarisation for someone aged 60 compared to someone age 30 on our affective polarisation scale, corresponding to a change about a sixth of its standard deviation. The education effect indicates that moving from primary to university education reduces polarisation by approximately 0.22–0.51 points. These effect sizes are compatible with previous literature (e.g. Mason 2015; Riera & Madariaga 2023; Hernández, Anduiza & Rico 2021).

We also see that individuals with higher levels of political interest and those who use social media as their preferred source of political news show higher levels of affective polarisation. These results support our hypotheses on political interest (Hypothesis 2c) and social media effects (Hypotheses 2d), respectively. On average, a respondent who follows politics very closely is about 0.30–0.73 points more polarised than a respondent who does not follow politics at all. Similarly, respondents who get their news from social media are about 0.25–0.35 points more polarised than other respondents on average. These results likely reflect the polarised media environment in Turkey. Respondents' gender, speaking Kurdish, wealth, religiosity and residing in urban areas do not seem to have a consistent association with affective polarisation.

As expected, being a partisan of any of the five major parties is positively related to affective polarisation in comparison to independent voters (the omitted category in the model), since affective polarisation is considered an outgrowth of partisan social identity (Iyengar et al. 2019). Looking at the coefficients for partisanship, we see that the strongest effects are for HDP and AKP partisanship, as observed in the bivariate analysis earlier. These two coefficients are statistically significantly higher than the coefficients of the other three partisanship variables, providing further support for Hypothesis 1b (party effects).

Given the evidence in the literature that affective polarisation might be linked to ideological polarisation (e.g. Webster & Abramowitz 2017; Rogowski & Sutherland 2016), we also consider a model, reported in the appendix, that includes self-placement on the ideological left-right scale and perceived ideological polarisation of parties on the left-right scale.[20] In Table A3 of the appendix, we observe that while respondents' self-placement on the ideological left-right scale does not appear to have a significant relationship with affective polarisation, perceived ideological polarisation is positively associated with it. This result is compatible with the literature highlighting a reinforcing relationship between ideological and affective polarisation (e.g. Rogowski & Sutherland 2016; Webster & Abramowitz 2017).

[20]To calculate respondents' perceived ideological polarisation of political parties, we take a similar approach to the calculation of affective polarisation: we use the spread of respondents' placement of the five major political parties on a 1–10 ideological left-right scale (1 = most left, 10 = most right).

Finally, we test our hypothesis on the electoral consequences of affective polarisation, specifically the conjecture that among individuals who declare a partisan affinity for the AKP, those with higher levels of affective polarisation should display a greater propensity to vote for the AKP (Hypothesis 3). A logistic regression predicting vote intention for the AKP is presented in model (1) of Table 3. In model (2), we add to this model a dummy variable for AKP partisanship, respondents' level of affective polarisation, and the interaction of these variables.[21]

In model (1) we see that women and individuals with higher levels of religiosity and better economic evaluations are more likely to vote for the AKP, while age, Kurdish ethnicity, and higher levels of education and wealth are negatively related. These findings are in line with previous studies of Turkish electoral behaviour. When we consider the interaction of AKP partisanship and affective polarisation in model (2), we see that it has a positive and statistically significant effect on vote intentions for the AKP after controlling for several relevant factors. That is, in line with our expectations, those AKP sympathisers with higher levels of affective polarisation were more likely to vote for the AKP. Figure 5 displays this moderation effect of affective polarisation on the predicted probability of voting for the AKP among AKP partisans.

Table 3. Correlates of vote intentions for the AKP ahead of the 2023 general election.

	(1)	(2)
DV: Voting for the AKP	Without partisanship and polarization	With partisanship and polarization
Female	0.34*	0.33
	(0.15)	(0.26)
Age	−0.01*	−0.01
	(0.00)	(0.01)
Education	−0.33***	0.01
	(0.08)	(0.12)
Kurdish	−0.90**	0.32
	(0.29)	(0.42)
Religiosity	0.69***	0.29
	(0.10)	(0.16)
Urban	0.09	0.11
	(0.20)	(0.36)
Wealth	−0.13**	−0.20*
	(0.05)	(0.09)
Econ. Eval.	0.63***	0.44***
	(0.04)	(0.05)
AKP partisan		3.37***
		(0.84)
Affective polarization (AP)		0.24
		(0.13)
AKP partisan*AP		0.56*
		(0.24)
Constant	−2.27***	−4.90***
	(0.49)	(0.99)
Observations	1,618	1,618

Note: Logistic regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include regional fixed effects (not shown). *Econ. Eval.* refers to respondents' retrospective sociotropic economic evaluations, collected on a 0–10 scale. Other variable descriptions are the same with previous regressions. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

[21] As a robustness check, we also use two alternative measures of affective polarisation with substantively similar results, reported in appendix Table A6.

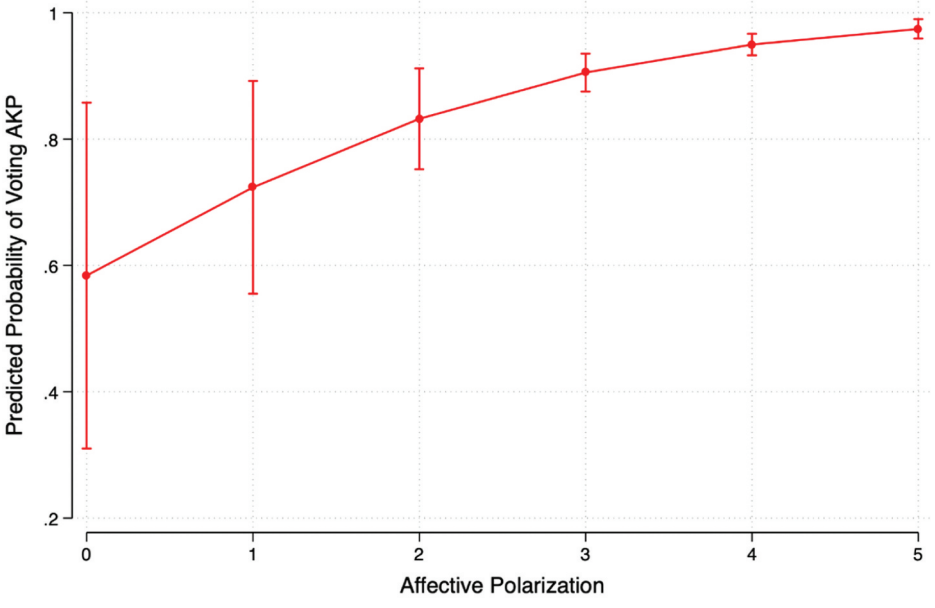


Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of voting for the AKP across different levels of affective polarization among AKP partisans.

These results suggest that one potential way high levels of affective polarisation influenced the 2023 election results was by making incumbent supporters less likely to abandon their party. We saw earlier that AKP supporters constitute one of the most affectively polarised partisan groups in the electorate and that the AKP's exclusionary and divisive election campaign likely played a role in this (Yardımcı-Geyikçi & Yavuzyılmaz 2024). Our findings imply that this may be a deliberate strategy by the AKP leadership to keep their supporters from defecting to other parties in the face of significant economic and social challenges, which proved effective to a certain extent. In substantive terms, holding other variables at their sample means, a one standard deviation increase in affective polarisation among AKP supporters in our model corresponds to an increased likelihood of voting for the AKP comparable to that produced by a one standard deviation improvement in economic evaluations, one of the most significant predictors of voting for the AKP.

Discussion and conclusion

About a decade ago, traditional approaches to studying political polarisation focused on ideological and policy-based differences among political elites and the masses (e.g. Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Hetherington 2009). Since then, however, scholars have noted another, perhaps more consequential, conceptualisation of polarisation based on 'the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group' (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012, p. 406). This affect-based polarisation is related to the emergence of partisanship as a salient social

identity and involves elements of in-party favouritism, out-party animosity, and growing social distance between different party supporters. As rising levels of affective polarisation are considered a serious threat to democratic governance (e.g. Finkel et al. 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021), there is intense scholarly interest in understanding its origins, most affected groups, consequences, and ways to mitigate it (Iyengar et al. 2019).

In this article we presented an analysis of the fundamental contours of affective polarisation in Turkey ahead of the critical 2023 general election. Drawing on a nationally-representative pre-election survey, we tested several theoretically-driven hypotheses on its patterns and consequences. Our findings highlight that the Turkish electorate is affectively polarised across incumbent and opposition alliances. The levels of affective polarisation among supporters of the incumbent AKP and the pro-Kurdish HDP are particularly high. Older individuals and those with higher levels of political interest and lower levels of education are more polarised than others as well. We also find that individuals who get their political news primarily from social media are more affectively polarised than those who rely on TV or other sources. Moreover, we also provided evidence for a likely consequence of affective polarisation in this critical election. Specifically, we found that highly polarised sympathisers of the incumbent AKP are more likely to vote for the AKP than those with lower levels of affective polarisation, even after controlling several relevant factors.

Our empirical results have several implications for theories of affective polarisation and its consequences. First, our findings speak to the nature of political competition in hybrid regimes like that of Turkey. In such contexts, incumbents have disproportionately more access to state resources and the media (Levitsky & Way 2010), and they can use these resources to create top-down, asymmetric polarisation to maintain cohesion among their supporters. When faced with challenges to its performance legitimacy, such as the serious economic and social challenges the AKP has recently faced in Turkey, an incumbent may strategically stoke polarisation to fortify its base against defections in elections. We observe such a dynamic in our data: incumbent AKP supporters display higher levels of affective polarisation than opposition supporters except for the pro-Kurdish HDP sympathisers, and those AKP supporters with higher levels of affective polarisation are less likely to defect in elections than their less polarised co-partisans.

These findings advance our understanding of the relationship between affective polarisation and electoral behaviour as well, underlining how polarisation may make electoral switches less likely among highly polarised individuals. Overall, asymmetric affective polarisation in hybrid regimes may be an important tool of incumbents to create 'pernicious polarization' (McCoy & Somer 2019) that undermines democratic accountability, which in turn contributes to further democratic erosion. This observation also contributes to theories of electoral manipulation (Schedler 2002) by identifying the deliberate increase of affective polarisation as a subtle but powerful tool for maintaining power.

Thus, in hybrid regimes, affective polarisation does not just reflect partisan preferences; it actively shapes electoral outcomes by weakening traditional mechanisms of electoral accountability, reinforcing electoral loyalty, and potentially helping incumbents maintain power despite poor performance.

Our results suggesting the polarising effects of social media use also contribute to the comparative literature on affective polarisation. While there are scholarly accounts pointing to the polarising effects of the social media in established democracies (e.g. Settle 2018; Törnberg 2022), we present evidence that social media use may have a similar effect in hybrid regimes as well. In such contexts, the traditional media is tightly controlled by the government and many opposition-minded individuals turn to social media for news; Turkey is no exception in this regard (Andı, Aytaç & Çarkoğlu 2020). A likely contributor to the polarising effects on social media use, in addition to echo chambers and algorithms, is the fact that social media is rife with misinformation due to lack of editorial oversight (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). This effect may be especially salient in hybrid regimes like Turkey, where traditional media outlets also lack credibility and unbiased editorial oversight.

Our findings suggest several directions for future research. First, while we proposed several explanations derived from the literature for the patterns of affective polarisation we observe across different sub-groups of the electorate (e.g. why HDP and AKP supporters are more polarised), our data do not allow us to make causal claims. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs that take advantage of exogenous variations in the salience or strength of partisanship, elite discourse, and political information sources would be better suited to pinpoint the drivers of affective polarisation in the Turkish context and why some individuals might display lower or higher levels of polarisation.

Second, in our analyses we employed a specific measure of affective polarisation (spread of party dislike/like scores) that is widely used in multi-party systems like Turkey, though we also explored the robustness of our findings with two additional measures. Yet there are other measures available, such as focusing on the affect voters display towards party *supporters* rather than parties, or considering the social distance between different party supporters, that is, the extent to which they feel uncomfortable interacting with each other in social settings (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). Another approach is to ask individuals to rate how well various positive (e.g. patriotism, generosity) and negative (e.g. selfishness, hypocrisy) traits describe different party supporters. We do not know whether our findings would still hold with these alternative measures of affective polarisation.[22]

[22]Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2018) present an analysis of social distance, political tolerance, and feelings of moral superiority in the Turkish electorate. Yet, their analysis is restricted to individuals' views towards party supporters that they 'feel most distant from' only. The majority of respondents in their sample (about 53 per cent) declare feeling most distant from the supporters of the pro-Kurdish HDP; therefore, these analyses mostly consider a single and rather small party's supporters as the outgroup.

Third, our temporal focus on the period immediately preceding the election may give disproportionally large weight to the effects of the campaigns in our results. It is plausible that the patterns of affective polarisation would look different in the election's aftermath, once the intensity of campaigning has subsided. Moreover, election outcomes themselves could alter patterns of polarisation: winners may display reduced animosity towards out-groups, while losers may exhibit amplified negative sentiment. Testing such conjectures requires data collection during non-electoral periods.

Finally, future studies could explore interventions aimed at ameliorating effective polarisation. Designing affective depolarising interventions would be especially valuable in the Turkish context, given its very high level of affective polarisation and concerns that it is causally linked to the serious democratic backsliding the country has recently experienced (e.g. Somer 2019).[23] While there are several proposals in the literature on how to mitigate affective polarisation, such as correcting misperceptions about opposing party supporters (Ahler & Sood 2018), emphasising common identity (Levendusky 2018), or highlighting cooperative behaviour of political elites (Huddy & Yair 2021), we lack evidence about the effectiveness of such interventions in the Turkish context. Our findings on which groups of voters appear to be the most affectively polarised could constitute a good starting point for designing potent interventions.

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[23] Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2022) entertain some ideas on how to decrease affective polarisation in Turkey that are derived from expert opinions and focus group discussions, yet they do not test the feasibility or effectiveness of the interventions considered.

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