**The Reproduction of Fear in Populist Discourse: Analysis of Electoral Speeches (2015–2018) by the Justice and Development Party**

Emotions and ‘othering’ go hand in hand in the rhetoric of populist politicians. The populist discourse articulates categorizations, engaging with every aspect of politics, including stressing issues and (re)producing reactions through perceived grievances, threats, and insecurity. Critical moments drive a language of ‘we-ness’, which leads to the imagination of boundaries along with attachments. Through emotional attachment, contextual group differentiation defines the causes and subjects of narratives. In the existence of uncertainties, fear-based scenarios come to the agenda, mobilizing the audience with a language that constructs ‘pure/victim we-ness’ and ‘evil/culprit others’. In this sense, populism crafts shared experiences and feelings that transform the commonalities towards persuasion since the ‘we-ness’ constitutes a bond between leaders and the audience within an emotional discursive performance.

Wodak (2015) argues that ‘scapegoats’ or ‘enemies’ are inherent to populism and rely on contextual issues. A blaming narrative is often identified in terms of harm, a political or socioeconomic hazard, symbols, and impacts. The literature exhibits cases that cover the production of fear over perceived threats: the linkage between Muslim migrants and terrorism by the Swiss Peoples’ campaign; Geert Wilders’s fabrication of ‘economic threats’; manifestations against Islam and Muslims by Pauline Hanson; negative political advertisements about migrants by the Freedom Party of Austria; and Trump’s fuelling of concerns about Mexican immigrants – all are integral to depicting differences as criminal, and probing xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration sentiments (Schmuck and Matthes 2014; Levinger 2017; Betz 2018; Nai 2018; Couttenier et al. 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Sengul 2020). Populist entrepreneurs ebulliently imagine antagonistic camps that pit ‘others’ against ‘the people’ as they imagine them.

This paper examines the speeches of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) leaders, one of the textbook examples of populist parties (Aytaç and Öniş 2014; Yabancı 2016; Selçuk 2016; Çelik and Balta 2018; Aytaç and Elçi 2019; Erçetin and Erdoğan 2019; Gürsoy 2019; İlhan Demiryol 2020; Şahin 2021), during the elections that occurred in 2015, 2017, and 2018. By focusing on the rhetorical productions of the party leaders, we address how populist discourse produces fear, strengthening group differentiation through the distinction between ‘we-ness’ and ‘others’ within ‘critical moments’. We show how fear dominated the last three critical elections in Turkey. Specifically, the 2015 election framed security, values-based, and competing narratives through claims on terrorism, clashes, and the incapacity of the opposition; the 2017 election articulated crisis and issue-based narratives through the abortive coup and constitutional amendments; and the 2018 campaign involved issues, values, and a security-based narrative in producing fear. Our findings suggest that the AKP’s electoral campaigns from 2015 to 2018 exhibit both continuities and changes based on the exploitation of citizens’ threat perceptions. While bearing such arguments, we observe how populist discourse canalizes the division between the people and ‘others’, appealing to fear-driven messages.

To scrutinize the mechanism of fear production in populist discourses, the theoretical framework proposed here deals with the relationship between a social identity perspective and populism in tandem with fear-driven manifestations. Then, the methodology is used to explore the context from 2015 to 2018 and the prevalence of the AKP leaders’ discourse. The last section presents the findings while assessing how the populist narrative of the AKP leaders produced fear.

# Theoretical Framework

## Populism and the Social Identity Perspective

The literature illustrates the most commonly used perspectives under three definitions of populism: the *thin-centred ideology* perspective argues that populism articulates with other ideologies, separating ‘the homogeneous pure people’ from the ‘corrupt elite’ through moral antagonism and demanding the general will of the people (Mudde 2004; Albertazzi and McDonell 2008; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011); *discourse and style* devote particular attention to characteristics in communication and performance (Taguieff 1995; Panizza 2005; Hawkins 2010; Aslanidis 2015; Moffitt 2016); and the *strategy* perspective highlights specific policies that account for changes or reforms that demolished the establishment (Weyland 2001; Betz 2002; Enyedi 2005; Barr 2009).

Although frequent usage of populism emerges, blurring explanations, it appears to account for core contents that markedly contribute to a common understanding of the phenomenon: the construction of the homogeneous group, demanding sovereignty and the general will of the people (Kriesi 2014), and dichotomous language targeting elites and ‘others’ and emerging anti-pluralism in the ‘us-vs-them’ division (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Hawkins 2018). Claims on the superiority of the people and the morality of the ‘real’ representativeness of populist leaders cement cleavages, offering a positive portrayal of the self (Schulz et al. 2018); on the other hand, imagined ‘others’ hinge on an embodiment of negative stereotyping.

The articulation of a populist discourse over the ‘pure people’ and their ‘enemies’ can be mediated with the social identity perspective since the manifestation of populism relies on group-based divisions. In 1979, Tajfel and Turner depicted the group: ‘as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share same emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and their membership of it’ (40). The feeling of attachment explicitly comprehends the perception of members through shared experiences, values, emotions, opinions, beliefs, and norms (Brewer 2001) in the process of depersonalization. The construction of a collective identity generates a transformation from ‘I’ to ‘we’ as the basis of self-categorization and the perception of representativeness by the in-group members (Reicher 2004; Roccas et al. 2008; Hornsey 2008; Spears 2011; Yuki 2011).

The definition of ‘we-ness’ is chiefly buttressed by comparison with ‘others’; therefore, boundaries construct the out-group members in inter-group differentiation (Haslam and Turner 1992; Turner et al. 1994). According to Bauman (2001), members of ‘other’ camps do not share the same similarities with ‘us’, and they do not have a sense of belonging to ‘our home’. ‘Their’ existence induces the perception of a threat stemming from the evaluation as a potential source of harm to the unity and harmony of the ‘we-ness’. This situation’s source is lured by the positioning of groups with hierarchical categorization (Aslanidis 2018), while the in-group members attribute the positive image to the group that adopts a justification for failures or negative behaviours. Accordingly, the out-group members acquire a negative identity, being ‘evil’ or ‘blameworthy’ in stigmatizing temptation. Unsurprisingly, the reproduction of fear plays a crucial role in group differentiation in populist performance.

## Fear-Driven Populism

Fear arises with future-based uncertainties and the possibility of insecurity. It is triggered not only by a realistic, existential danger, but also by the probability of a threat (Frijda 1988; Svendsen 2007). Ahmed (2004) shows that the narratives on past experiences enrich today’s fears, giving the process a social dimension. As such, the manifestation of the feeling/perception of a threat and negative experiences may reflect current fear through discursive employment. Especially in the moments of uncertainty, when the lack of measures increases, coverage may contribute to fear formation (Lazarus 1991; Lu and Lee 2018). Fear has a vital function of constructing a sense of collectivity (Della Salla and Akchurina 2019). Specifically, fear is a ‘social phenomenon’ that is shared/experienced by the sense of uncertainty of in-group members, making it collective (Barbalet and Demertzis 2013).

Enhancing group differentiation with fear stems from the imagination of ‘others’. The perception of insecurity and distance towards the out-group members facilitates the feeling of threat. In contrast, being a victim elicits a group attachment in solidarity that symbolizes a suffering group due to the actions of ‘others’ rather than a failure of the self (Bar-Tal et al. 2009: 231; Nai 2018; Paterson et al. 2019). In this sense, political rhetoric yields the construction of scapegoats/sources as it conveys discontent for any crisis, economic decline, political instability, cultural breakdown, non-democracy, chaos, or insecurity, presenting a negative envisagement for ‘others’ and excluding adversaries.

According to Green (1994: 227), fear also generates distrust between groups, resulting in separation based on suspicion. Thus, a threat-based narrative of suspicion casts a shadow over group interactions, transforming doubts and perceived dangers into persuasion and group-based imagination (Mosgaard Andreasen 2019). As a result of expressing emotions, the political performance incorporates societal ideals by encouraging message receptivity (Sanchez Salgado 2020: 3). Such emotional responses to perceived difficulties propagate vivid language that evokes a sense of injustice and danger (Cossarini 2019). Hence, emotional mobilization generates the influence of persuasion on the audience, who face status-based inquiries or a sense of loss (Obradovic et al. 2020). Political speech causes a leveraging effect by provoking a sense of vulnerability and inducing dread while asserting possible foes and dangers (Nabi 2003). This allows us to examine the fear-based narrative as a major component of populist language (Heinisch 2003; Ungureanu and Popartan 2020).

Populist discourse resonates with the in-group through the construction of a homogeneous group of people and identification with a leader, whereas ‘corrupt elites’ and ‘dangerous others’ become members of the out-group (Mudde 2004; Panizza 2005). The ‘we-ness’ is represented by the people and those who are like-minded. The ‘real people’ and ‘real candidates of the people’ enact glorification for an idealized and reasonable category. According to Inglehart and Norris (2016), populist language invigorates non-privileged groups, labelling them as ‘deprived’ concerning their feelings of victimization. Still, the people are portrayed as superior and as the source of power (Canovan 1999). As prototypical members, populists assert themselves as ‘those among the group’ who can struggle for their interests or grievances. These representatives frame themselves as sharing commonalities with the audience (Yla-Anttila 2017).

Homogeneous group divisions in populism originate from the mechanism of fear-driven messages with blaming and victimizing narratives. Out-group members are made to evoke fear as they are considered an ‘evil’ that can harm the ‘pure’ people (Pelinka 2013; Pappas 2014). The discourse reverberates ‘others’ as a source of threat and insecurity in terms of their negative identity and behaviours (Vasilopoulou et al. 2014; Hameleers et al. 2017); shortly, all miseries become ‘theirs’ (Palaver 2019; Hameleers et al. 2020). Demonizing language distinguishes ‘the real victims’ (the in-group) and ‘the culprits’ (the out-group) in a relevant context (Lazarus 2001; Lozada 2014; Cap 2017). As primary ‘others’, populism exhibits elites and actors/institutions of the establishment as engaging in mischief. Particular descriptions of elites, such as ‘greedy, corrupt, and selfish’, cause members of the in-group to blame them for ignoring the needs and demands of the people, running their agenda, and enacting destructive policies against the people (Kazin 1995; Rooduijn et al. 2014). Due to differences in values, opinions, beliefs, and lifestyles between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘others’ manifest as ‘dangerous’; this applies not only to elites, but also to members of the opposition, refugees, minorities, migrants, feminists, industrialists, the media, and more (Albertazzi and McDonell 2008; Goodhart 2017; Noury and Roland 2020). Different reasons for uncertainty in economic, cultural, or political spheres underpin fear, prompting populist actors to offer blaming and exclusionary statements (Salmela and von Scheve 2018). The uncertainty of losing a socioeconomic position and lifestyle triggers the feeling of being threatened (Kenny 2017). Appealing to experiences differentiates ‘dark days’, given that this represents a shared threat for a particular group and the reason for its grievances (Boukala and Dimitrakopouou, 2017: 45).

Negative campaigning has an important role in the populist playbook. As Nai (2018) shows, these attacks have two dimensions. The first brings issue-based or policy attacks that enshrine the in-group’s policies, adorning them with the denigration of ‘others’. Secondly, person-based or character attacks frame the other camp’s values or actions as corruption (Nai 2018: 6). In a similar vein, populist discourse declares its leaders as offering ‘hope’ for the people (Mols and Jetten 2015), and addresses how they can mitigate the challenges of the people relying on commonalities (Wodak 2013; Müller 2016; Wirz 2018). Hence, a positive definition of the ‘saviour role’ for populists reproduces fear and frames crises, insecurity, and danger through a negative redefinition of ‘others’, while calling for unity with the ‘victims’ (i.e. the people) and their ‘guardians’, or populist leaders (Barbalet and Demertzis 2013).

Hence, framing experiences and dangers is essential for inducing anxiety and reinforcing group distinctiveness within populist rhetoric. As a result, emotions generate these sorts of attitudes (Marcus 2000; Bonansinga 2020), and we may match this with the adoption of exclusive strategies. Imaginary terror originates from the divide between the superior/victim in-group and the evil/corrupt out-group, intensifying group division by forming a negative image in the repertory of blame. According to Svendsen (2007), anxiety results from the separation between terrified group members and dangerous ‘others’; populist speech defines the will and interests of the people, legitimizing the role of leaders.

# Methodology

## The Context: From 2015 to 2018

To understand the dynamics of the populist rhetoric of the AKP in Turkey, the historical context has to be taken into account. The period between 2015 and 2018 consistently involved critical historical moments. Following the elections of 7 June 2015, the parliament failed to produce a government and parliamentary elections repeatedly brought a single-party victory to the AKP (Kalaycıoğlu 2017; Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016). The period between two elections overlapped with ontological threats to the country, terror attacks by the IS, a military operation called Shah Euphrates, a bomb explosion in Diyarbakır, a suicide attack in Suruç, clashes between the PKK and the Turkish military, the end of the peace process in the division between Turkey and the Kurds, a declaration of a state of emergency in Cizre, and a suicide bombing in Ankara. All of these attacks and clashes aggravated the issue of security, and fear became the primary factor affecting voters’ decisions (Erişen and Erdoğan 2019).

On 15 July 2016, the country experienced a failed coup, and this date became symbolic, constructing narratives about ‘martyrdom and a rebirth of the nation’ (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016). The president invited people to engage in combat in the streets (Gürsoy 2019); by the end of the long night, 248 people had lost their lives, and 2,191 injured individuals participated in the struggle against the coup attempt (Altınordu 2017). Following the coup attempt, the country’s regime dramatically changed,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the government announced a state of emergency, which lasted 728 days; it procured significant power for the government (Çelik and Balta 2018).

In 2017, the parliamentary regime of Turkey was replaced by the presidential system, which gives enormous powers to the president, such as appointing all ministers without having to obtain any approval, and governing the country by decrees. The constitutional change has been accepted with a disputable majority after an asymmetrically unfair campaign process that led to further polarization in the country (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017; Bilgin and Erdoğan 2018; Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım 2018). Approaching the constitutional referendum in 2017, the opposition party’s (the Peoples’ Party – HDP) co-presidents were arrested for establishing a terror organization, being a member of a terror group, and breaking the law on behalf of an organization. Because of sentencing the Republican People’s Party (CHP) deputy, the party’s leader Kılıçdaroğlu launched a ‘march for justice’from Ankara to İstanbul. Journalists were also imprisoned and accused of providing aid to several terror organizations.

In 2018, the snap elections took place; security concerns and a fluctuating economy allowed for the election to be held earlier than planned (Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım 2018). In the elections, the AKP could not achieve a majority in the parliament. However, the MHP supported the AKP, which enabled a continuous negotiation process between the two parties. With the support of MHP, Erdoğan became the president of the new system, which involved broadened powers (Gürsoy 2019); this fulfilled the development of the new presidential system, and brought about a newly established political party, the İYİ Party (Good Party).

## Research Design

Rhetoric politicizes issues and identities (Betz 2018), and populism is more efficient in influencing the emotional bond between leaders and the audience while articulating adversarial statements and transferring political actors’ positions (Block and Negrine 2017; Muis and Immerzeel 2017). According to Immerzeel and Pickup (2015), elections are a touchstone for populists to mobilize, while candidates follow opinions and emotions that enhance political engagement. Similarly, Grbesa and Salaj (2018) evaluate electoral rallies as more ‘spontaneous and cognitive’, creating opportunities to make natural observations of issues rather than studying controlled texts. Consequently, this study focuses on three electoral campaigns to understand how populist discourse by the leaders of the AKP produces fear and formulates the concepts of ‘we-ness’ and the ‘other’.

We analysed the electoral campaigns of 2015 (general elections), 2017 (constitutional referendum), and 2018 (presidential election) using the speeches of the AKP leaders who were involved. The analysis explores 39 transcribed speeches by the former Prime Minister Davutoğlu and 38 speeches by President Erdoğan in 2015, 51 speeches by the latest Prime Minister Yıldırım in 2017, and 31 speeches by Erdoğan in 2018. The transcribed speeches were collected from the websites of the prime minister and the party. All the data were coded in NVivo, and a content analysis was conducted. The content analysis allows us to display the linkage between actors or conditions in terms of their statements (Mannheim and Rich 1994). Using a dictionary codebook may involve challenges in matching; for instance, the whole coded words may not be a suitable reference to populist themes, or populist indicators may not be framed openly in texts.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to Pauwels (2011), human-coded content analyses feature contexts, issues, and actor differences, portraying narratives over experiences and conditions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hence, sentences are more comprehensively informative (Aslanidis 2018), and a full text becomes the unit of analysis (Dai 2018) rather than a cluster of words. We examine the AKP in the Turkish context using the core approaches of populism, as described above. Along with defining the AKP’s style of populism, our paper examines how the populist discourse of AKP leaders produces fear in electoral campaigns, enhancing group-based differentiation.

# Findings

## 2015 Elections

The electoral campaign of 2015 framed a security-based and value-based narrative to produce fear. This burgeoning narrative has been further formulated by blaming ‘others’ and appealing to shared experiences of the in-group. The first dominant narrative, that which is security-based, frames the victimization of the people that persists in the feeling of danger from terrorism and conflict; secondly, a value-based language reproduces perceived threats to the peoples’ beliefs, values, and lifestyle; lastly, the combination of the two creates the competitive narrative of administrative failure by the opposition parties and elites.

The values-based discourse by AKP leaders regarding the opposition (the CHP and HDP) emphasizes the restrictions on the in-group’s values and lifestyle, which are considered fundamental in targeting the elites. The electoral speeches, especially, connect the CHP to controversies with the people’s values, specifically religious attachment, and define the party as ‘white Turks’ instead of representative of Turkey’s entire population, specifically those who are conservative. Demonization implies that opposition elites are disconnected from religious matters. This values-based narrative articulates a moral competition, building boundaries between CHP elites and the people. Wielding the Prophet’s laconism and claiming to represent those principles reflects a values-based attack by differentiating the party’s position (12 August 2015). The portrayal of distance between the ‘others’ and the conservative lifestyle appeals to the peoples’ concerns about a potential electoral victory by the opposition. During the campaign, the narrative expands uncertainty by mobilizing Islamic notions and the conservative lifestyle. Concerning breaching the people’s values and lifestyles, the opposition appears as the potential ‘threat’. On the one hand, the AKP appears as ‘heir/representative’ of those values, constituting a negative image for the opposition that separates republican/secular elites: ‘They do not have a tolerance for any opinion different from theirs. They do not esteem any words if they are different than their words. They do not have respect for any kind of way of life than theirs’ (Erdoğan, 26 October 2015).

Yet another strand of this fear-driven repertoire stems from a security-based narrative that highlights terrorism and instabilities that clearly distinguish between the ‘victims’ and the ‘culprits’. Accordingly, opposition parties, academics, the media, and terror organizations are overwhelmingly visible in the designation of this insecure context. We observed the leaders following contextual issues, such as terror organizations, the end of the ceasefire, and ongoing clashes, that feature categorizing messages. A victimizing language is inherent to delineate perceived insecurity about those conditions.

The security-based narrative primarily identifies the opposition party, HDP, as the agent that is primarily responsible for the clashes, bombings, and terror that occurred between the June and November elections. The negative portrayal of the party and its actors as ‘destructive’ or ‘separatist’ contrasts with the ‘native and national’ categorization of the in-group. Thus, the securitization discourse employs the distinction from a national/native image. The HDP was depicted as ‘the party in the direction of a terror organization’ in a criminalizing frame:

[The] terror organization spills the blood, and its controlled party is provoking the streets trying to legitimize violence. Is it the duty of a political party to be a curtain on terrorism? Is it a duty of a political party to kill the Kurdish brother of his own ethnic identity? Should a party repose upon a terror organization rather than the people? Should a member of parliament embitter issues? Is politics about targeting security forces by lies and being a shield for terrorists? (Erdoğan, 16 September 2015)

Apart from political parties, a range of organizations and actors are tangible, narrating insecurity and reproducing the potential threat. Particular organizations, such as PKK, PYD, ISIS, DHKP-C, and YPG, reveal the consideration of motivations and harms against the people. The AKP leaders connected terror organizations/acts with the opposition; in other words, they were all clustered into a single out-group by the security-based narrative. A call on voting preferences appeared; leaders asked for a decision on citizens’ voting preferences, which offers ‘either voting for security or chaos’: ‘there is one preference: “I’m with my state” or “I’m with [the] terror organization”; we will make this choice’ (Erdoğan, 19 August 2015). This demonizing construct canalizes a definition of ‘terrorist’ that demonstrates how ‘dangerous’ groups can challenge the people. ‘This election is important for you. Look, both the CHP and the HDP provide votes to each other. If you vote for the CHP, each vote will be useful for the HDP. If you vote for the MHP, each vote will be useful for “old” Turkey and the parallels [the Gülen movement]. Please protect your vote; please protect Turkey’ (Davutoğlu, 18 May 2015).

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu distinctly associate the media, especially the Doğan Media Group, with ‘the mentality of a coup d’état’. Portraying the ‘other’ media’s coverage as one of the reasons for inflaming terrorism, Erdoğan defines particular journalists’ pens as ‘full of blood rather than ink’ (19 August 2015); this articulates anti-elitism through fear: ‘In this betrayal, there is also another side, which is media. They try to show terrorists as “cute” and security forces as “offensive”’ (Erdoğan, 16 September 2015). Fuelling the message of ‘support for terrorism’ politicizes precarious conditions, which is one of the paramount security problems. Claiming that the opposition are ‘supporters of terrorism’, the campaign speeches spread the idea that ‘others’ consistently intend to harm the interests and harmony of the people. The campaign makes another negative categorization by labelling ‘so-called academics/intellectuals [as] real darkness’ (19 October 2015). The speeches connect ‘terror actions and methods’ with academics who signed the peace petition announcing that they will not be part of a ‘crime’. From the political arena to the media and intellectual elites, the AKP’s populist discourse illustrates how the people’s security and status can be threatened, linking the opposition with ‘terror’.

The rhetorical extension of ‘others’ to terrorism appeals and grievances on insecurity signals that the only saviour is the AKP. The campaign is likely to frame people-centrism in the division between fear and hope; therefore, the struggle against terrorism is overly associated with the party. Messages on reforms, legal regulations, and democratic acts remain as promises to eliminate ‘threats’ that underline the capacity to engender confidence (Erdoğan, 17 October 2015). The second (November) election demonstrates contextual impact; as the terror acts increased approaching November, we observed the use of more intense blaming discourses on insecurity: ‘To criticize the government and state institutions, some groups under the name of opposition are trying to legitimize supporting terrorist organizations and political organizations under the guidance of separatists. Several media institutions, academicians, and politicians have dropped everything, and they have been transformed into propaganda machines of the terrorist organization’ (Erdoğan, 19 October 2015).

Campaign speeches demonize ‘others’ to persuade the audience; for example, the leaders depict the Gülen movement by claiming the existence of a collaboration with the ‘Armenian diaspora or lobby’ that externalizes the group. This facilitates socializing perceived threats that escalate the level of uncertainty by deepening hostility. This is not only related to the Gülen movement; the campaign also involves demonization that highlights the threat of the out-group members. The speeches simultaneously resonate with Gezi protestors or LGBTI associations, linking them in an imagined ‘coalition’. Statements narrate a fictional entity with specific values, orientations, and ideologies securitizing the groups. This transfers exclusionary and polarizing manifestations of the 2015 campaign appealing to securitization and uncertainties of lifestyle: ‘Pennsylvania, Kandil, Gezi, the Armenian diaspora, [and] LGBT associations involved the opposition while claiming its nationalism and representing the old coalition of Turkey’ (Davutoğlu, 4 June 2015).

In the last 13 years, they created obstacles constantly. They called me ‘dictator’. There is a common goal behind the Gezi protests, the 17–25 December coup, and the revival of terror. Now, there is also a parallel state-based structure. It has religion in its roots, but the trade in the midst of it. They all act with the separatist terror organization. They have no limit to their malignancy. (Erdoğan, 26 September 2015)

During the campaign, the opposition also pointedly remained at the centre of perceived danger due to ‘governmental failures’. Strengthening anti-elitist discourse, the speakers stimulate voters to focus on the incompetence of the opposition by using a competitive tone. For instance, the leaders addressed the inability to establish a coalition in previous years. This reflects failure and an unwillingness to serve the people. Improvements on the foundations of barrages, bridges, and airports are subject to investigation but were stalled by the opposition. This applies particularly to the party when incumbents rule the country through favourable activities. So, the populist language of the AKP drives competition through the use of statements highlighting the future inabilities of the opposition, which also serve to critique political elites.

Instability, terrorism, failures in governing, and shared values are framed by perceived threats, producing negative emotions with respect to people’s uncertainties. The 2015 elections demonstrate how ‘others’ are homogeneous; therefore, the leaders define two opposition parties, CHP and HDP, as ‘CHDP’. The ‘others’, as viewed by the AKP, are portrayed through a monolithic imagination, displaying ‘dangerous/harmful’ camps that threaten the people’s security, values, and daily life. This tells us that populist actors’ appeals to negative emotions create a distance between ‘others’ and the people and portray the AKP as ‘reasonable’ and ‘legitimate’, connecting their rivals with these threats. By doing this, an ideal and safe choice was provided to the audience: ‘We did not leave you to gangsters, terrorists, and barons. We will not leave you. We will not leave you to others who want to harm our unity. That’s why we are here. We are here for you. Thus, we are looking you in the eye. Thus, we are talking to your heart‘ (Davutoğlu, 29 October 2015). ‘In 2001, we took Menderes’s words, “Enough! Word is the people’s”, and added: “the decision belongs to the people”. Then, we made changes to elect the president by the people directly’ (Erdoğan, 9 May 2015).

## 2017 Referendum

Moffitt (2016) finds that crisis is one of the ways to assess a party’s performance. Because populist discursive performance shapes crises in relation to the audience’s needs and demands, it describes failures and issues in light of unfavourable conditions or system blockages. Former Prime Minister Yıldırım described various crises, such as the last abortive coup and the referendum blocks. Thus, the 2017 campaign presents crisis-based and issue-based narratives in articulating fear. The issue-based statements frame the referendum as the justification of AKP’s rule. The crisis-based narrative reflects the abortive coup and the stability and blockage of the country.

The referendum divided the people into two blocks: ‘the yes vote’ and ‘the no vote’. The AKP supported the ‘yes block’, becoming a pioneer for the constitutional amendments and the transformation towards ‘the Turkish type of presidentialism’. Hence, the campaign reconstructed the ‘we-ness’ encompassing the ‘yes block’ and placed ‘the idealized people’ into this camp. Moreover, the ‘yes vote’ became a unique representative of a ‘safe and stable future of the country’. In the speeches, the ‘yes block’ appears as a source for positive developments to defeat terror organizations or enhance public welfare. Stated simply, narratives on the ‘yes block’ constructed the ‘safe’ camp: ‘Today, the constitution is over. When we look at the past, we see that this system did not bring stability. Turkey’s fear will continue as long as the system exists’ (Yıldırım, 8 March 2017). ‘Turkey has a decennial coup d’état; does it deserve this? Is Turkey an African country? Why is Turkey experiencing coups? Why is the decision of the people not accepted? Here, our new system will not include a coup; there is only the decision of the people; you are the boss’ (Yıldırım, 11 April 2017).

Underpinning the constitutional amendments is an issue-based narrative that frames particular issues, such as the tutelage, the coup d’état, crises, governmental weakness, obstacles to the sovereignty of the people, and the rule of law. We observed that the campaign securitizes the constitutional changes, driving uncertainties. The speeches articulate ‘a new stability’ achieved through changes and overcoming ‘structural challenges’. Specifically, the issue-based narrative transfers messages on the disadvantages of the current system, stating that changes will empower the people’s will. Accordingly, the reproduction of perceived threats on the existing system’s issues legitimizes the ruling party’s status through the victim status and superiority of the people. The AKP’s statements identify how the existing system will negatively create limitations, thereby uncovering the new system’s opportunities for the sovereignty of the people. Defining the AKP as ‘the party of the people’, the constitutional amendments were portrayed as the ‘solution/hope’ to given issues.

The out-group comprehends miscellaneous threatening images with the ‘no block’ by referring to securitization. Narratives elaborate on the opposition camp and terror organizations and delineate the potential threat of a possible win by the ‘others’. Connecting the ‘no block’ with the terror organizations, Yıldırım efficiently builds a wall between the rivals. Securitization and homogenization versus the out-group (the ‘no block’) exist with certain depictions: supporters of terror organizations, propaganda of terror organizations’ campaigning, and the position with terror organizations. Similar to the 2015 elections, this discourse associates the opposition with terrorism through separatism and societal degradation. Ultimately, the division of ‘yes and no votes’ exhibits ‘causes of and solutions to’ particular issues. The blaming narrative targets groups concerning the victimhood of terrorism and the existence of the ‘no block’: ‘My dear siblings, CHP and HDP are connected; they began to sing for the “no vote”. They may say “no”, but terror organizations also say “no”. What a coincidence. FETÖ says “no”, PKK says “no”. Why? Additionally, their protector countries support the “no vote”’ (Yıldırım, 4 March 2017). ‘If all terror organizations are making propaganda for the “no vote”, there is a sign for our citizens, people, and country, we have to remind you of this’ (Yıldırım, 14 February 2017).

For populists, direct communication with the people consists of commonalities and group loyalty whereby symbolic threats and common experiences cement populist language (Pappas 2014; Matthes and Schmuck 2017); those experiences are part of collective memory and represent the past with its instruments (Teeger 2014). In the case of a shared experience and representative memory, the most significant difference in the 2017 electoral speeches is the abortive coup of 15 July. The coup attempt enabled the AKP to reshape collective memory to perceive an idealized homogeneous group of the people by targeting common enemies and reminding the people of the past. For the AKP leaders, the 15 July narrative is a hallmark experience manufacturing the hostile acts of their chosen enemies and the suffering of ‘we-ness’: ‘we neither forget 15 July nor permit others to forget’ (Yıldırım, 8 April 2017). Manifestation of the 15 July connects the ‘no block’s’ actors to stigmatization and strategic performance. To put it differently, the ‘other’ block of the referendum has been associated with the threatening acts of the 15 July crisis. This shows that populists endeavour to reproduce crises that can affect the audience’s conditions, consolidating the negative image of ‘others’. Additionally, this performance supports the argument that the relevant agenda is strategically legitimized in conjunction with symbolic crises, which elicits fear: ‘After 15 July, it turned out that this system, this current order, had to change’ (Yıldırım, 2 April 2017).

During the campaign, identification with the AKP voters over the shared crisis and the coup struggle established a connection symbolizing common victimization for the in-group and justifying the party’s moral position. To that extent, Erdoğan’s statement seems supportive: ‘Right now, this attempt, this act, is a great blessing from Allah. This is an act that will be instrumental in the cleansing of the Turkish Armed Forces’. Similarly, he had written a piece stating: ’15 July was instrumental in the goodness of our country, our nation, and our future with its consequences’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The process allowed Erdoğan to define 15 July as ‘the second War of Independence for the Turkish nation’ (Taş 2018: 12). On the night of the coup attempt, President Erdoğan spoke on television and called supporters to fight against plotters in the streets. Most people on the streets were supporters of the AKP, indicating identification and emotional connection between the people and the party (Baykan et al. 2021: 8). After the attempt, the streets were full of billboards by the ruling party: ‘We are the people. We do not leave Turkey to coup d’état, terror’. The slogan demonstrates who has the power: the people/the ‘we-ness’, and imperative measures to combat terror.

Yıldırım’s speeches construct the in-group’s symbolic experience with 15 July, conveying a possible continuity for unstable conditions. He appeals to the group’s facts, underlining who was the victim and hero and clarifying whose behaviours/acts were unreasonable. According to Altınordu (2017), Erdoğan and AKP politicians successfully framed the ‘enemy image’ regarding the military-based incidents because they have a background in military interventions in previous Islamic parties. This experience ensured a steady ground, declaring a victorious contest while appealing to the will of the people (Altınordu 2017: 154). Hence, the crisis-based narrative on the abortive coup has no difficulty attracting the masses. Conversely, its reproduction socializes the group’s collective memory, canalizing the identification with the people in emotional appeals because the description of 15 July as an ‘attack against the people’ motivates a fear-based populism.

Referring to the night of the coup attempt, Yıldırım stressed that the victims were ‘the people and the will of the people’, and he blamed FETÖ, representatives of opposition parties, and the ‘corrupt’ media by making certain categorizations: ‘traitor, terrorist, coup plotter, enemies of the national will’. The speeches suggest that being ruled by these groups is not ideal; therefore, anyone who is reasonable will support their elimination. While Yıldırım narrates the people’s victimhood, he also depicts the people through heroism and moral superiority. Hence, the people who struggled against the coup plotters were ‘heroes, nationals, victims, native, and loyal’. Yıldırım dignifies the people as ‘fighters’ against tanks, bombs, and bullets: ‘The 15 July is a milestone in Turkey. You showed that there is no space for individuals if the power of the people does not support them’ (Yıldırım, 1 March 2017). ‘On that night, traitors lost, and the people won’ (Yıldırım, 2 March 2017). ‘On that night, the power of the people defeated the power of the tank’ (Yıldırım, 16 March 2017).

Our findings also indicate that the campaign homogenized ‘the mentality of 28 February and the night of 15 July’, criticizing the republican establishment and the elites. Yıldırım explicitly scrutinized the ‘evil side’ of ‘the mentality’, binding past experiences with the new context.

To summarize, the proposals for the system by the AKP were justified through fear; the abortive coup and the potential danger of ‘others’ were effective in a crisis-based narrative. Framing crises and constitutional changes to overcome system-based issues is the primary justification in populist speeches by the AKP. The campaign exhibited that voting in the referendum would decide whether the country would face either stability or crises.

## 2018 Elections

Because Erdoğan was directly elected, he can promote authenticity on people-centrism. In the speeches, the ‘we-ness’ represents unity and solidarity with the people He regularly ended electoral rallies with a song whose lyrics feature a collective sense using particular words: ‘we walked together on these roads’. Voicing past experiences reproduces collective fear regarding the value-based narrative, which is imbued with instability and societal cleavages. Within this repertoire, military coups and coalitional governments shape collective memory. These specific incidents, such as 28 February, frame a common victimization and blaming narrative towards the republican and military elites and justifies the portrayal of a perceived threat. Framing values-based threats highlights the continuity of the AKP’s repertoire. The 28 February process symbolizes the common discontent of the conservative people and the suppression of political Islam by the secular establishment (Gümüşçü and Sert 2010). The process led to the ban on headscarves in universities, the closure of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) by the Constitutional Court, and a five-year ban on the political activities of the leader, Necmettin Erbakan (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Çınar 2003). This polarizing language surfaces ‘responsible’ actors. Articulating the collective grievances and negative experiences of the conservative block, Erdoğan displays potential issues of the future. For instance, he implicates the current opposition groups in the ‘oppressive and fearful’ days, claiming that the opposition has a goal of taking the country back to the 28 February process. Solidifying the identification with the people, the speeches refer to family-based stories, framing victimization and blaming expressions together:

Before our rule, young women cried due to their headscarves at the door of universities. My daughters were like this. My daughters could not study in this country. Also, my sons could not study in this country; because they were students of Imam Hatip schools. They increased the coefficient to enter universities, my daughters had obstacles with the headscarf, and I had to send them abroad. … We saw problems with thousands of children who could not access the schools or do their jobs. There was a state understanding, which oppressed. Who was the state? The CHP mentality. … Elhamdülilah, this country saw a president who studied at the Imam Hatip school. Who decides this? The people decide this. But they do not believe the people. (Erdoğan, 2 June 2018)

The campaign also furnishes a security-based frame with other candidates over anti-elitism. Almost all speeches involve notions about the leader of HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş,[[5]](#footnote-5) connecting him with terrorism. One of the manifestations references visits by the CHP’s candidate, Muharrem İnce, to Demirtaş in prison. The statements remonstrate two opposition leaders’ inability to sort out security issues to prevent terror. In many ways, the security-based deployment of fear supports implications that broadly tackle the opposition’s ‘inefficacy’ and ‘unwillingness’ to care for the people. Relevant questions generate fear over distrust, stating that the ineffective struggle of the opposition against terrorism and the march of justice from Ankara to Istanbul[[6]](#footnote-6) was described with the support of terror organizations (Erdoğan, 11 June 2018).

For the 2018 campaign, the security-based narrative is more dominant and reflects the morality of the AKP while considering the ‘safety of the people’. This also relies on external dimensions through the possibility of insecurity beyond the territories. For instance, one of the references was Operation Olive Branch against the People’s Protection Units (YPG), affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, in the Afrin. We should note that the AKP had a timing strategy; because the operation was launched before the elections and it took 58 days, the president was able to declare that Afrin had been brought under control on 18 March, Martyr’s Day, which was also the 103rd anniversary of the Çanakkale Victory.[[7]](#footnote-7) Mentioning Operation Olive Branch illustrates two dimensions: one is related to appealing to the perceived threat of terrorism, and the second articulates the government’s capacity to control borders through a superior geographical position. The latter refers to the AKP’s status as ‘the guardian of the people’: ‘I will do everything for the peace of my people. … Because no one will disrupt peace, welfare, and security of this country; but a government with wisdom is necessary’ (Erdoğan, 11 June 2018).

We observed that the spatial characteristics and background also frame security-based articulations. On 3 June, Erdoğan visited Diyarbakır[[8]](#footnote-8); the discursive differentiation utterly mediated an opinion on the security forces’ endeavours to ensure peace in the region. It is worth emphasizing that the contextual projection and spatial relevancy constitute some sort of intimacy by Erdoğan as ‘the man of the people’. The propensity of state-based references manifests susceptibility towards the regional peace, stability, security, and access to rights that articulate threatening circumstances for the Kurdish people: ‘none of the terrorist group can lay hold of people or extort. No one can take my Kurdish siblings’ children to the mountain forcefully’. Having explained this in Mardin, the division with ‘others’ torment’ is diverged from the conversation of the ‘we-ness’ (20 June 2018). When the AKP actors visit various cities known as the most prominent places for the Kurdish populated regions, the victimization of Kurds and the marginalization of ethnicity/regional conflict are essential. This performance tells us that the populist rhetoric of the AKP follows a chameleonic style.

To avoid the representativeness of the establishment, the reluctant acts to ameliorate the Kurdish question were centred in the regional campaign repertoire; therefore, Erdoğan prioritized the argument, stating that the ‘party does not express “there is no Kurd”, but it advocates “there is no Kurdish question”’. To the extent that one of the strongest political parties in the region, the HDP, is a target, the blaming narrative replicates the ‘us-vs-them’ division, consisting of the classification of ‘culprits’ who were accused of shattering mosques and schools and bombing houses. Yet, those speeches in 2018 demonstrate continuity for the AKP’s populist repertoire as a fear-based scenario, particularly in the Kurdish region.

In addition, the impact of the city also enhances issue-based legitimacy over comparison with the establishment: ‘We removed denial policies; we lifted assimilation. Which Kurds in this country are excluded just for being Kurds? Never, because they are my siblings, and it is impossible to accept this kind of pressure. If anyone is doing this impudence, they find me firstly, then find our state with its law and police forces; this is us’ (Erdoğan, 19 June 2018).

Issue-based reflection is subjected to both economic and political dimensions. The high levels of inflation and unemployment, and the failure to elicit convenience goods, such as oil, sugar, flour, and tea, are transmitted as economic deficiencies by the AKP, who negatively remark on other political elites and the establishment through continuous tropes. The political dimension addresses ideological camps, bombings in coffee shops, and denial and assimilation policies before the AKP period. It narrates performative content to distinguish positive images from the establishment. Appealing to the reproduction of negative experiences, both political and economic issues were adopted by Erdoğan’s speeches that define scapegoats and mobilize people over fear; this targets the perceived failures that trigger uncertainty, constructing a ‘threatening image’. Erdoğan uses a definition of a ‘destruction team’ to declare the opposition as an ‘enemy of the people’, accusing them of having an eye for the people’s gain (11 June 2018). There exists a wide range of negative categorizations using anti-establishment references that generate the potential threat of ‘others’ to endanger economic and political life: ‘Are you going to stop all investments? There is no performance, instead only ruining their life. Their grandfathers were also like this, this is the CHP mentality’ (Erdoğan, 5 June 52018). According to Green (1994: X), ‘the feeling of suspicion towards others diminishes consistency by fear’. So, the reproduction of the imagination of ‘failure’ or ‘atrociousness’ also designs fear; Erdoğan’s speeches imply the climate of discredit that surrounds hostile emotional receptions.

Continuing from 2015, Erdoğan drives the imagination of hope as the prototypical member of the group. Electoral speeches heighten ‘being of hope’ through the claims of acting and serving the people. In what follows, the leaders precisely formulate anti-elitist language to distinguish their position for the people. For instance, Erdoğan glorifies their policies and actions, reflecting them as ‘serving the people’: ‘We saved our country from the threat of coup plotters, and we saved the opposition from being a shadow of them. We saved our country from backwardness and the opposition from prosperity over backwardness. We saved our country from fears and the opposition from exploiting those fears … For my peoples’ peace, we will do whatever it takes’ (11 June 2018).

The speeches describe the ‘new period’ as solving issues related to the highest level of freedoms, from social life to the political arena, investments in the construction of roads and social services, combatting terror organizations, and the growing economy. In the simplest terms, Erdoğan highlighted the last 16 years as a reference, which led to labelling himself and the AKP as superior (27 May 2018): ‘As much as we are full of love to serve the people, we are waging an uncompromising struggle against terrorists’ (Erdoğan, 12 June 2018).

# Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that the AKP’s electoral campaigns have both continuities and changes. First, the 2015 elections frame security and values-based narratives. Expressing the perceived threat of terrorism and clashes, the security-based language is dominant and describes the victimization of the people. The values-based narrative encapsulates uncertainties through values and beliefs. As we noted, the campaign of 2015 shows more usage of a security-based narrative approaching the second election in November.

In 2017, the constitutional referendum highlighted crisis-based and issue-based narratives. The issue-based topics framed the blockage of the system with the offer to regulate the constitution, addressing issues such as political crises, governmental weaknesses, law, the tutelary regime, and restrictions on the sovereignty of the people. The AKP campaign securitized constitutional changes by categorizing the ‘no block’ as a negative image. This securitization discourse of the referendum justifies the constitutional offers by the AKP itself, whereas it reflects ‘others’ with a threatening image. After 2015, the most significant difference was the crisis-based narrative was related to the aborted coup on 15 July. The speeches combine actors of the ‘no block’ and those involved in the 15 July in the same category. We argue that the campaign demonizes and homogenizes out-group members over a crisis. This performance supports the argument that the relevant agenda or policies of populists are strategically legitimized with symbolic crises in a collective sense, which is constructed as a shared experience with the people.

Although a values-based narrative is essential in campaigns, it was more dominant in 2015 and 2018. The electoral campaign of 2018 framed a security-, issues-, and values-based narrative. The security-based narrative was shaped through internal and external dynamics. Internal dynamics transferred the danger of terrorism to the opposition. However, external statements focused on the operation in Afrin, claiming the objectives to protect the people and the borders from terrorism. The security-based narrative illustrated spatial relevancy that defined the AKP’s populism with a chameleonic style. The issue-based narrative investigated political and economic issues.

The relationship between populism and emotions constitutes a clear group differentiation. In this sense, the AKP articulates fear-driven messages to mobilize voters and legitimize their policies and proposals. Two simultaneous frames, victimization and blaming, construct boundaries of the ‘us-vs-them’ division, enhancing the division through ‘evil images and safety’. Blaming the out-group members associates their existence or behaviours with perceived threats and the feeling of danger, thereby producing fear. Reproducing negative experiences or crises affecting a homogeneous group of people, populist rhetoric drives fear scenarios to the audience, enhancing uncertainties with the out-group. Hence, populists frame the victimization of the people whose status can be affected, articulating people-centrism. This spreads the idea that ‘others’ consistently intend to harm people. Lastly, messages of fear facilitate declaring populists as the ‘saviours’, which attracts voters by appealing to their uncertainties. Hence, narratives on threat and insecurity justify the morally superior position and policies of populists. This tells us that populism appeals to emotions, creating a distance between ‘others’ and the people who are portrayed as ‘reasonable’; it also connects rivals with a threat. This discursive performance strategically reproduces crisis or insecurity, which produces fear in the collective sense.

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1. After the coup attempt, the government initiated institutional changes in different spheres. The official names of the Bosphorus Bridge, bus terminal, parks, and bus stops were changed. Reforms on the military, Turkish Armed Forces, military schools, curricula, and institutions have been revised. New decree laws were induced to dismiss civil servants, launch cases, close institutions such as universities, trade unions, newspapers, associations, television channels, schools, and so on, and trustees were appointed to typically elected municipal offices. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For details, see Popping (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Please also see Roodujin and Pauwels (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Please see: https://www.diken.com.tr/allahin-lutfunda-ikinci-perde-erdogana-gore-15-temmuz-hayirlara-vesile-oldu/, accessed on April 30, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Selahattin Demirtaş is the former leader and ex-candidate of the HDP. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more details, see: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/09/world/europe/turkey-march-for-justice-istanbul.html, accessed on 13 March 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Please see further details at: https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/91811/now-the-symbols-of-peace-and-security-are-waving-in-afrin-not-the-rags-of-the-terrorist-organization, accessed on 15 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Diyarbakır is the city known as the most essential place for the Kurdish populated region. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)