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How Voters Respond to Presidential Assaults on Checks and Balances: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Turkey

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How Voters Respond to Presidential Assaults on Checks and Balances: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Turkey

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Abstract

Why do voters support executive aggrandizement? One possible answer is that they do so because they think this will ease their preferred leader's hand in putting *their* partisan vision into action, provided that the leader will continue winning elections. We study this phenomenon through a survey experiment in Turkey, by manipulating voters' perceptions about the potential results of the first presidential election after a constitutional referendum of executive aggrandizement. We find that voters from both sides display what we call "elastic support" for executive aggrandizement; that is, they change previously revealed constitutional preferences in response to varying winning chances. This elasticity increases not only when citizens feel greater social distance to perceived political "others" (i.e., affective polarization) but also when voters are concerned about economic management in a potential post-incumbent era. Our findings contribute to the literature on how polarization and economic anxiety contribute to executive aggrandizement and democratic backsliding.[1]

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democratic backsliding, executive aggrandizement, referenda, voter behavior, polarization

Democratic backsliding frequently occurs today through executive aggrandizement—elected political executives dismantling the constraints of constitutional systems of checks and balances (Bermeo, 2016). The path to executive aggrandizement is often paved as incumbents attempt to garner voters' approval in referenda for such initiatives (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). But why would voters support institutional changes that make the incumbent less accountable and constrained?

One frequently hypothesized explanation is that voters do so when they think that it could be good for their side. Aspiring autocrats rely on their partisan supporters' belief that any move away from democratic constraints will ease his hand in putting *their* partisan policy vision into action and entrench their dominance in society. But major constitutional institutions are sticky and have effects that are lasting beyond a single electoral cycle. In settings where there is some electoral uncertainty, buying into the autocrat's vision entails a risk for the voters because once put in place, authoritarian institutions can be used against them if and when an opponent wins elections and comes to power. Generating an aura of invincibility and reducing electoral uncertainty is thus useful for would-be autocrats because this assures their followers that lending support to executive aggrandizement can only serve to strengthen the place of their preferred policies in the public policy mix and/or buttress their political dominance.

This idea is intuitive, but has not been subject to much empirical testing. In this study, we present a test relying on a population-based experiment where we artificially manipulate electoral uncertainty and examine how voters' support for executive aggrandizement changes in response. We also explore the attitudes that induce people to change their constitutional choices opportunistically in response to varying electoral uncertainty. When there is a high level of partisan polarization, the stakes are higher for the decision of endorsing authoritarianism—because a "wrong" electoral outcome can lead to the strengthening of a highly undesired rival vision. Similarly, when voters regard the incumbent as *uniquely* capable in policy management, their choices on how to allocate political power would respond to variations in electoral certainty. For people whose opinions on positional or valence considerations are more distant from the other side, then, the variation in expected election outcomes should be a more important determinant of constitutional choice.

In this study, we examine the phenomenon of popular support for executive aggrandizement in Turkey, a quintessential case of democratic backsliding in

the contemporary era (Bermeo, 2016). In 2017, Turkey held a national citizen referendum on whether to shift from a semi-presidential to an autocratic super-presidential system by removing the prime minister's office and significantly weakening checks and balances on presidential executive power. The incumbent president Tayyip Erdoğan and his party AKP campaigned for a "yes" vote and the main opposition parties did the opposite. Existing research shows that the voters' behavior in the referendum closely followed their partisan identities (Aytaç et al., 2017). A year later in 2018, however, in the run-up to the first presidential election of the new regime, opposition candidates seemed to put on a surprisingly powerful campaign for the presidency. We utilized this setting to administer a survey experiment a week before the presidential election, where respondents were given varying information about the re-election chances of the incumbent candidate. We explored whether voters changed their previously revealed views in support of, or against, executive aggrandizement upon receiving new information about their preferred candidate's chances of winning. To preview our findings, despite our weak treatment, at least 10% of voters have elastic support for executive aggrandizement, that is, they change their institutional preferences opportunistically upon new information. This attitude is existent in both pro-government and anti-government camps (some of whom start supporting a previously rejected authoritarian setup upon updated winning chances), though in different degrees.

In addition, we explored competing logics that could push voters to shift their institutional preferences opportunistically on the basis of their preferred candidate's winning prospects: The tendency to change views may hinge on levels of affective positional polarization; or, it may depend on a valence judgment about how the important of their candidate for economic management. While these are not mutually exclusive hypotheses, they correspond to two rival models of electoral authoritarian legitimacy—those that emphasize the degree to which political leaders exploit affective partisan polarization to bolster their power (Svolik 2019, 2020; Nalepa et al., 2018) and those that emphasize the degree to which "informational autocrats" manage to convince the public of their economic management competence (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). If the first consideration is strong, the power-seeking incumbent could find it useful to increase polarization by appealing to the desires and fears of one side only. If, on the other hand, voters are most swayed to support an incumbent by arguments about economic competence of the executive, the incumbent would have to form a broader appeal and deliver on economic performance. We find evidence of both motivations, though the affective polarization dynamic is more important.

There is a growing literature on the effects of heightened partisan polarization. Our contribution to this debate is an analysis of its implications for regime change: if partisan reasoning extends to voters' preferences on the

basic constitutional design of the rules of the game, then would-be autocrats can exploit partisan sentiment to form temporary majorities that will support their constitution-altering initiatives. They can then remove institutional safeguards that protect democracy, and do so with popular approval. The literature on democratic backsliding typically analyzes elite-level strategies of power grab (Bermeo, 2016; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). We supplement this approach by contributing to a recent burgeoning of theoretical and empirical work on how voters respond to these elite-level efforts (e.g., Svolik 2019; Nalepa et al., 2018).

Democratic Backsliding, Executive Aggrandizement, and Voter Responses

Executive Aggrandizement and "Elastic Support" for It

Executive aggrandizement is a common mode of democratic backsliding today in which incumbent executives undertake sweeping legal and constitutional changes to weaken judicial and legislative constraints on the executive branch, thereby giving themselves new powers (Bermeo, 2016, 11–12). Political incumbents often initiate such constitutional changes via democratic channels such as referenda. Thus, voters play a central role in either endorsing or resisting authoritarianism. The challenge, as Weingast (1997, P. 251) reminds us, is that citizens' collective punishment of politicians who deviate from democratic norms and rules is a "massive coordination problem" because the incumbent can be strategically selective about which group's rights he/she will transgress, often in cooperation with other social groups.

There are at least two reasons why voters may not want to block a move toward executive aggrandizement. First, voters may genuinely believe that the country needs a stronger executive office. As the debate on comparative institutions makes clear, there are many reasons to think why more or less powerful executives would be optimal, especially in the face of economic, public health, or national security crises (Lijphart, 2012; Tsebelis 2002). In this sense, a politician bent on executive aggrandizement may take advantage of a genuine search for institutional improvement among the public (Forteza & Pereyra, 2019). Alternatively, in a world of partisan loyalties and preferences, it is possible that voters do not actually have genuine institutional preferences other than opting for the system best suited to empower their preferred political party or leader. In other words, their support for executive aggrandizement may be opportunistically elastic—going along with whatever system that they perceive as generating a competitive advantage for their preferred representatives.

This latter expectation would be in line with a strand of research in political science that is skeptical of the ability of the general public to develop views on

institutional rules without the influence of strategically oriented political elites and partisan social identification (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Converse, 1964; Zaller 1992). This view also resonates with recent experimental research pointing to voters' willingness to trade off democratic principles for partisan political victories (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik 2020) and their inclination to regard any institutional reform proposed by their partisan opponent as illegitimate (Ahlquist et al., 2018).

However, even if the voters view an authoritarian institutional setup as enhancing their preferred leader's position, they have to consider the possibility that the tables can turn in another election. Where there is some understanding that the institutional setup cannot be changed very easily and, conversely, a minimal degree of electoral uncertainty exists, this is an important risk. Generating an aura of invincibility and reducing electoral uncertainty is thus useful for the would-be autocrat because this assures his followers that lending support to executive aggrandizement can only serve to strengthen their side. Political leaders can do this through a variety of methods, including media control and the selective application of coercion. The perceived invincibility of hegemonic parties has already been recognized as an important factor in settings ranging from Japan to Mexico, but mostly in reference to the clientelistic management of material inducements (see Magaloni, 2006). What we are considering is the effect that perceived winning chances may have on preferences even when there are no direct payments attached: High uncertainty about who will win, that is, a Rawlsian veil of ignorance, is expected to push people into power-sharing arrangements (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) and democratic constraints. By contrast, less uncertainty—favoring one's preferred side—can be exploited to build support for an authoritarian takeover (Aghion et al., 2004).

In this study, we administer a survey experiment to study the phenomenon of voters' support for executive aggrandizement by taking advantage of a unique political episode in Turkey's recent history. In 2017, a constitutional referendum was held to expand presidential powers to a level that international democracy observers like Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy viewed as undemocratic. This was followed in turn by a hotly contested presidential election in June 2018. We conducted a survey experiment a week before this presidential election in which we first ask respondents how they voted in the 2017 constitutional referendum. In the experimental section, we then provided respondents with varying information about the prospective winning chances of the incumbent president for office. We followed this up by asking respondents how they now—in light of new information on the incumbent's electoral prospects—regard the desirability of expanded presidential powers and probed whether our manipulation leads to a change in institutional preferences compared to the recalled referendum vote. Since information about winning prospects was randomly assigned, associated variation in

preference updating can be considered as its causal effect. When support for executive aggrandizement hinges on who is winning, we call this "opportunistically elastic." The first testable hypothesis is thus:

> **H1:** The more a voter expects the other side to win the presidency, the less his/her likelihood of expressing support for the new system of enhanced presidential powers.

The value of our survey experiment lies in its ability to randomly manipulate winning expectations. This is important because in any real-world situation it is very difficult to know which choice motivations are at play just by observing that voters approve certain institutional proposals. In elections and referenda, after all, voters do not give reasons for their vote. Also, observational data from survey questions asking about voters' motivations are not likely to reveal causal mechanisms. This is not only because respondents often fail to reveal their true motivations when these are asked explicitly, but also because they may have developed expectations about competitive winning chances in a way that is not exogenous to their other political attitudes. For example, opposition voters who are the most opposed to enhanced executive powers may also become the most convinced that the incumbent will soon lose office and will not be able to use the enhanced powers—because of a commonly observed cognitive condition that psychologists call as "desirability bias in foresight" (Krizan & Windschitl, 2007; Windschitl et al., 2010). This would produce associations in the opposite direction of our hypothesis and would not reveal the true independent impact of "winning chances" on preferences. We can overcome this problem if respondents' expectations about winning chances are randomly manipulated through a controlled information experiment.

As we explain in the experimental design section below, our experiment offers a relatively "weak treatment" in terms of its potential impact on the respondents' perceptions on the winning chances of candidates. Therefore, our findings probably rest on lower bound estimates of the actual opportunistic elasticity that may exist. But even if a small share of the electorate changes its support for executive aggrandizement as a result of a weak, albeit randomly assigned, experimental manipulation, this indicates the existence of a behavioral tendency among voters that threatens democracy. In the next section, we ask which background attitudes of voters can be associated with this behavioral tendency.

Motivators of Elastic Support for Executive Aggrandizement

What encourages a voter to display an elastic support for executive aggrandizement? To answer this question, we analyze the interaction between our experimental manipulation (regarding the incumbent's probability of

winning) and a set of pre-treatment respondent attitudes that may increase the likelihood of an opportunistic change in institutional preferences. Based on existing theoretical accounts of authoritarian legitimacy we focus on two sets of attitudes in particular: affective polarization and anxiety over economic management.

First, the elasticity of institutional preferences may depend on the degree of affective polarization, or how socially distant a voter perceives his/her partisan rivals (Iyengar et al., 2019). The extent of affective polarization within democratic publics—and political leaders' ability to exploit that polarization to bolster their power—is increasingly being recognized by scholars as critical to democratic stability (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik 2019, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). If polarization is taken to mean greater social distance, especially over fundamental "identity" issues such as religion, secularism, and ethnicity (Mason, 2018), it can be expected to lead to greater willingness to tolerate major institutional reforms to block partisan opponents' access to power, and to institute "winner take all institutions" to entrench one's own side's preferences (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Robinson & Torvik., 2016), provided that there are *ex ante* expectations about who will win office. In line with this reasoning, we hypothesize the following:

> **H2:** The more socially distant a voter feels to the other side of the political spectrum, the greater his/her likelihood to update his support for enhanced presidential powers depending on the expected winner (and thus display elastic support for executive aggrandizement).

In addition to the impact of affective polarization, which is a positional phenomenon, a third hypothesis is that "opportunistic elasticity" in institutional preferences will depend on how anxious voters are about the future state of the economy under different candidates for executive office, due to valence considerations. Some voters for whom economic management prospects are important might consent to an incumbent's executive aggrandizement only if the incumbent is going to retain the presidency, and they might change their institutional preference if they receive new information indicating that the office will go to someone else. This idea rests on the observation that fighting economic downturns and the skills of economic management have often been a chief argument used to buttress executive powers, in democratic and hybrid regimes alike. In an example familiar to Americans, in March 1933 during the darkest days of the Great Depression, the newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the occasion of his inaugural address to make a powerful and popular appeal to increase his authority,

> I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis: broad executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe (Alter, 2006, 785).

While Roosevelt was ultimately denied some of the powers for which he asked, similar yet more successful and pernicious examples can be observed in different contexts. Treisman (2011) demonstrates that Putin's growing strength in office followed improvements in economic management during his term after the downturn associated with his predecessor. Guriev and Treisman (2019) describe leaders such as Putin and Erdoğan as "informational autocrats," who aspire to be loved rather than feared, and who bolster popular support for their regimes by presenting themselves as "capable managers." If voters believe that a particular political leader is uniquely able to sustain or improve economic performance, then they may be more likely to consent to an institutional system that will empower that political leader. As a result, voters with greater economic anxiety about a future without the incumbent are expected to respond more strongly to a manipulation of his winning chances when evaluating the desirability of winner take all institutions. Thus, we propose a third hypothesis:

> **H3:** The more a voter fears that replacing the incumbent would harm the economy, the greater his/her likelihood to negatively update his support for enhanced presidential powers following an expectation of incumbent loss.

Hence, H1 presents a test of whether voters are opportunistically elastic in their institutional preferences—changing them according to who is likely to win office, whereas H2 and H3 propose alternative sources of this democracy-eroding behavior. While H2 and H3 are not mutually exclusive, they do correspond, as we have noted, to two rival models of electoral authoritarian legitimacy—those that emphasize the degree to which political leaders exploit social and partisan polarization to bolster their power and those that emphasize the degree to which "informational autocrats" attempt to convince the public of their economic management competence. In the next section, we describe how we test these hypotheses with data from Turkey.

A Survey Experiment in Turkey

Case Background

Although interrupted several times by military coups, Turkey regularly held competitive multiparty elections since 1950 under a parliamentary system in which the executive was led by the prime minister, while the president, elected by the parliament, acted as a non-partisan, symbolic figurehead. A gradual shift to a presidential system began in 2007 when the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP after its Turkish initials), led by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, turned the presidency into a popularly elected office. When the next presidential election came in 2014, Erdoğan campaigned for the position and became Turkey's first popularly elected president.

In June 2015, the national parliamentary election produced no clear majority (a hung parliament) and the parties could not form a coalition government. Although winning the snap election a few months later, Erdoğan's AKP argued that the parliamentary system was no longer functional and started to campaign for a sweeping constitutional change. Within a year, a military coup attempt failed to overthrow Erdoğan in July 2016, and the government declared a state of emergency during which Erdoğan started to rule the country through presidential decrees, sidelining the parliament. In April 2017, under the ongoing state of emergency, Erdoğan's AKP initiated a popular referendum for a constitutional amendment to abolish the prime minister's office altogether and to give the president enhanced executive powers, that is, an executive aggrandizement initiative. The ballot count for the referendum was highly contested, but the amendment ultimately passed by a margin of two percentage points, and Turkey adopted a super-presidential regime.

Although many Turks continue to believe that they live under a democracy,[2] international observers agree that the new regime departs from democratic versions of presidentialism in several important ways.[3] First, Turkey has kept its highly centralized unitary structure and a unicameral parliament, so there are no autonomous administrative units and no senate to represent them. Second, unlike traditional democratic presidential systems in which checks and balances operate, the Turkish president can dissolve the parliament directly by calling for an early election, although this would also mean an early presidential election and the parliament can do the same on the basis of a qualified majority. Third, the presidential and parliamentary elections are held simultaneously, increasing the chances that an elected president will enjoy a parliamentary majority to back his initiatives. Fourth, through a variety of new provisions, the president enjoys substantial control over the appointment of supreme court judges and other important members of the judiciary. Fifth, and most importantly, the constitutional amendment significantly curbed the powers of the parliament. For example, in contrast to democratic presidential systems, the legislature does not have a say in the president's cabinet and bureaucratic appointment process, and only limited veto power over the president's proposed annual budget. Furthermore, the president is given almost free rein to execute any decisions through presidential decrees. In short, the post-2017 Turkish constitution represents a striking instance of executive aggrandizement single-handedly leading to major deterioration in Turkey's already weak democratic credentials.[4]

Both before and after the 2017 referendum, the opposition argued that the amendment amounted to the establishment of an authoritarian regime and advocated a "no" vote. However, when the presidential election came in June 2018, rather than boycotting the election, the opposition chose a strategy of engagement—finding itself in a position to campaign for an office whose legitimacy it had previously contested. Furthermore, energized by a string of

new candidates cooperating with each other, the opposition seemed to put up a surprisingly powerful campaign in the run-up to the election, despite a media landscape heavily biased in favor of the incumbent. In the two-round system that was adopted to elect the president, Erdoğan needed a majority of the votes the win the race in the first round. But election forecast polls that were conducted in the time period covering 3 days before and 3 days after our data collection (June 7-June 20, 2018), put Erdogan's expected vote share in the first round between 43.6 and 52.7%, with 48.6% as the average.[5] The pledges between the opposition leaders suggested that if Erdogan did not win the majority in the first round, he could lose the presidency in the run-off election that would take place between the top two contenders. At this time, some observers even reported that Erdoğan was regretting the switch to the two-round system for the presidential election.[6]

This unexpected electoral uncertainty due to an opposition alliance gave us the opportunity to administer a survey experiment, which we conducted during the week before the June 2018 presidential election, in order to see whether voters change their institutional preferences when the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" about who is winning is artificially manipulated.

Operational Hypotheses

In the experiment, we first asked respondents how they voted in the 2017 referendum to diagnose whether they were originally "yea-sayers" or "nay-sayers" for the executive aggrandizement initiative. Then we gave survey respondents randomly varying information about the reelection chances of the incumbent president Erdoğan. We anticipated that increased expectation of incumbent loss would be associated with a change in support for the super-presidential system—an institutional preference that voters had revealed in the 2017 referendum. We can now express our hypotheses in more precise fashion, applying the terms of the case at hand, and reporting predictions separately for voters with opposite initial preferences.

H1.1: Those who voted for executive aggrandizement in 2017 (initial yea-sayers) will negatively update their support for enhanced presidential powers (i.e., express less support for it) just before the 2018 presidential election if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

H1.2: Those who voted against executive aggrandizement in 2017 (initial nay-sayers) will positively update their support for enhanced presidential powers (i.e., express *more* support for it) just before the 2018 presidential election if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

Since our experiment was conducted just a week before the election, voters' prior beliefs about the winning chances of each candidate were already

likely quite solidified. This suggests that any evidence we find about treatment effects should be seen as a lower bound estimate.

Next, we turn to the question of what background attitudes encourage opportunistic change in institutional preferences. Which factors render voters more likely to make their system preference conditional on winning prospects of the political leader that they support? We answer this question by examining the *interaction* between preexisting attitudes of respondents and our experimental manipulation of the likely election winner in order to assess which attitudes predict a greater effect of winning prospects on a change in institutional preferences. H2, explained earlier, focuses on the impact of affective polarization, which resonates well with the Turkish case. The literature suggests that the Turkish electorate has recently been defined by intense affective polarization—growing animosity associated with political party identification—between pro-Erdoğan voters and anti-Erdoğan voters (Aytaç et al., 2017). Building on already existing cleavages in Turkish society and reinforced through more than a decade of partisan political struggle, the separation of these two groups of voters reflects itself in two respective, mutually exclusive socio-cultural value systems. While Erdoğan supporters are more likely to favor a traditional "way of life" fused with a certain interpretation of Islamic practices and values, anti-Erdoğan voters tend to adopt secular values with a limited room for religion in their lives (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycioglu, 2009). Laebens and Öztürk (2020) document in Turkey a widespread agreement with the statement "If the party I support is not in power, my rights and freedoms and those of others like me will be restricted," and demonstrate that this fear is closely associated with the strength of partisan identities. Against this background, the president in a super-presidential system would have extraordinary powers which she/he can then potentially use to impose her/his socio-cultural values on the rest of the society. Knowing this, voters who feel a heightened sense of social distance to the "other" side would be more likely to opportunistically change their preferences on presidential powers. This leads us to our second set of hypotheses.

H2.1: The more the initial yea-sayers (i.e., initial supporters of expanded presidential power) feel socially distant from opposition supporters, the more likely they will negatively update their preferences (i.e., switch from support to no support) for enhanced presidential powers if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

H2.2: The more the initial nay-sayers (i.e., initial opponents of expanded presidential power) feel socially distant from government supporters, the more likely they will positive*ly* update their preference (i.e., switch from no support to support) for enhanced presidential powers if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

Hence, the predicted results should display the interaction effect displayed in Figure 1.

The H3 focuses on economic management considerations which also appear to resonate well with the Turkish case. In the early 2000s, Erdoğan's AKP was credited for putting Turkey on a path of economic growth with low inflation, a combination that the country had not experienced for decades. This historic achievement is generally regarded as a major reason for Erdoğan's enduring electoral appeal (Çarkoğlu, 2012). The recent deterioration in Turkey's economic fortunes should not cloud the fact that at the time of our survey in June 2018, Turkey was still enjoying government-stimulated, credit-fueled growth, and serious problems with currency devaluation and inflation had not yet appeared. As Turkey's polity becomes more autocratic and its economic prospects more fragile, arguments about the incumbent's importance for the economy have remained undiminished. Because the economic policy environment has become highly dependent on Erdoğan, even many of his detractors fear that any change in the political status quo may bring economic collapse (Yagci and Oyvat, 2020). Also, the government frequently argued that the country needs to concentrate executive power in order not to backtrack into economic instability during both the referendum and the presidential election campaigns. This points to the third set of hypotheses:

H3.1: The more the initial yea-sayers (i.e., supporters of expanded presidential power) fear that replacing the incumbent would make the economy worse, the more likely they will negatively update their preference (i.e., switch from

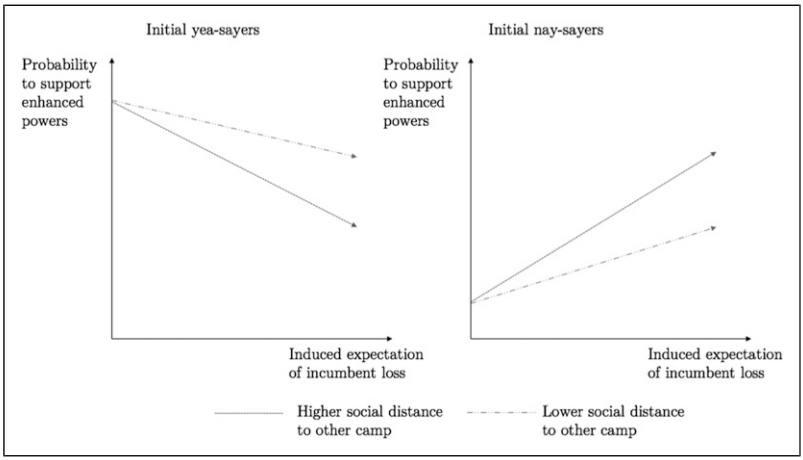

Figure 1. Social distance moderating update of support for enhanced presidential powers.

support to non-support) for enhanced presidential powers, if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

H3.2: The more the initial nay-sayers (i.e., opponents of expanded presidential power) fear that replacing the incumbent would make the economy worse, the less likely they are to positively update their preference (i.e., switch from non-support to support) for enhanced presidential powers, if they are induced to expect that the incumbent will lose the election.

This last set of hypotheses may not seem as straightforward as the previous two and deserve further elaboration. Consider that citizens who voted "Yes" in the 2017 referendum might include those who did this enthusiastically, as well as those who might have done so despite possible misgivings about an authoritarian presidency. Hypothesis 3 presumes that the belief in Erdoğan's importance to the economy would have a discounting effect on any misgivings about the system of an authoritarian presidency proposed by him. For those with a greater belief in Erdoğan's importance to the economy, information update suggesting that he will not be president after all, will activate these misgivings about the new system, and therefore will be more likely to lead to a negative preference update against it.

Conversely, if some citizens voted "No" in the incumbent-proposed 2017 referendum despite believing that removing the incumbent would seriously harm the economy, then presumably this is a signal for a very strong preference against the new regime type. Such citizens should be less likely to change their preference depending on candidates' winning prospects, compared to those who gave the same vote with low anxiety about what would happen to the economy without the incumbent Erdoğan. Figure 2 illustrates the predicted results.[7]

The next section describes the specific operations of the survey experiment and the measurements used to test these predictions.

Experiment Design

We conducted the survey experiment in June 2018, a week before the presidential election, with 2018 adults living in the Istanbul province. We utilized clustered sampling for a representative sample of Istanbul's voting age population. Data were collected from 125 neighborhoods of Istanbul which were selected randomly through PPS from the complete list of approximately 900.[8] As a city that receives migration from all parts of the country, Istanbul can serve as a plausible political microcosm for Turkey: For the country and the province, respectively, the share of the "yes" vote in the 2017 referendum was 51.4% and 48.6%; the pro-incumbent vote in the 2018 presidential election was 52.6% and 50%, and the pro-incumbent vote in the parliamentary

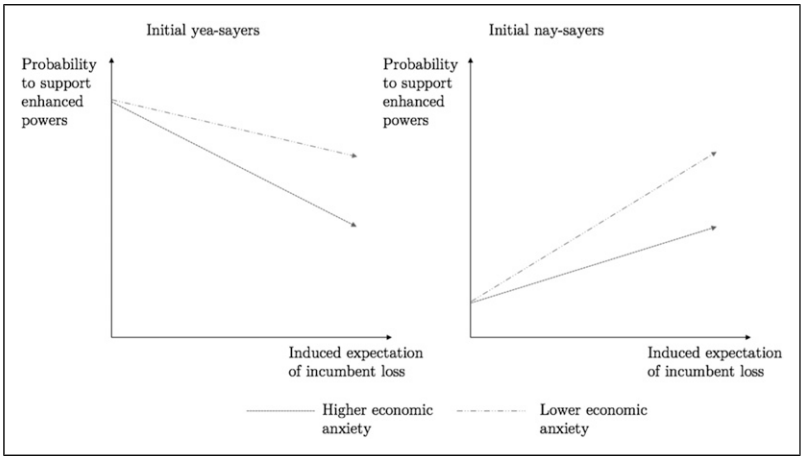

Figure 2. Economic anxiety moderating update of support for enhanced presidential powers.

election held on the same day was 42.6% and 42.7%. While 16.1% of Turkish population holds a higher education degree, for Istanbul this number is 20.2%. In short, though not perfectly representative of Turkey as whole, Istanbul manifests the important political trends of the country.[9] That said, our primary goal is not to document the true frequency of certain attitudes for the broader population, but to analyze how they relate to each other under experimentally manipulated conditions.

In the survey experiment, the respondents were first asked how they voted in the 2017 referendum to diagnose whether they were originally "yea-sayers" or "nay-sayers" for the executive aggrandizement initiative. Then, all respondents were randomly assigned to two priming treatments in which latest poll results were cited by the enumerator. Half of the respondents were told that the polls show a high probability of the incumbent losing the upcoming presidential elections ("treatment condition 1"), and the other half were told that there is a high probability that the incumbent will win ("treatment condition 0"). After the treatment, the respondents were asked questions about their preference for the institutional design of the government and their justifications for this preference.

In administering the treatment, establishing credibility was a problem to be taken into account (see Mutz, 2011: 63–67). In contemporary Turkey, electoral polling is a contested practice since media outlets tend to report polling results selectively, depending on whom they favor. With these considerations in mind, we made a basic assumption that the yea-sayers in the 2017 referendum, disproportionately consisting of pro-incumbent voters,

would find a pro-government TV channel as a credible source, and the nay-sayers, overwhelmingly consisting of opposition voters, would find a pro-opposition TV channel as a credible source (see Yagci and Oyvat, 2020 for a discussion of media credibility and effects).

Thus, to enhance credibility, the treatment took a particular form conditional on the reported referendum vote: To identify a source for the latest poll results, the enumerator cited the names of ATV—the major pro-government TV outlet, and Fox TV—Turkey's major opposition outlet, to those who voted "yes" and "no" for the 2017 referendum, respectively. Hence, in the resulting treatment, the enumerator read the following text to the respondent, in which the bracketed part […] featured different information sources conditional on initial preference, and the underlined words provide the random variation applied across all groups.

> *Treatment condition 0: Now I will read to you a news story and would like you to answer the questions that follow in light of this news. According to the latest polls reported on […] evening news, there is a very high probability that Tayyip Erdoğan will win the presidential election. If this happens, Erdoğan will serve as president for five more years and will be able to use broad powers given to him by the new constitution.*

> *Treatment condition 1: Now I will read to you a news story and would like you to answer the questions that follow in light of this news. According to the latest polls reported on […] evening news, there is a very high probability that Tayyip Erdoğan will lose the presidential election. If this happens, one of the opposition candidates will serve as president for five years and will be able to use broad powers given to him/her by the new constitution.*

In this the way, the experiment effectively divides the sample into four main groups, as seen in Figure 3. The goal is to analyze whether the respondents, who have previously revealed themselves to be yea-sayers or nay-sayers to the new regime, change their preference depending on the random treatment to which they were subjected.[10] 209 respondents without an initial preference form an additional pair of groups, which were excluded from the analyses reported in this paper.

The outcome variable we aimed to measure in our survey experiment is "support for the executive aggrandizement initiative." It was measured with several questions on the new system's institutional features, asked in the following order, right after the treatment.

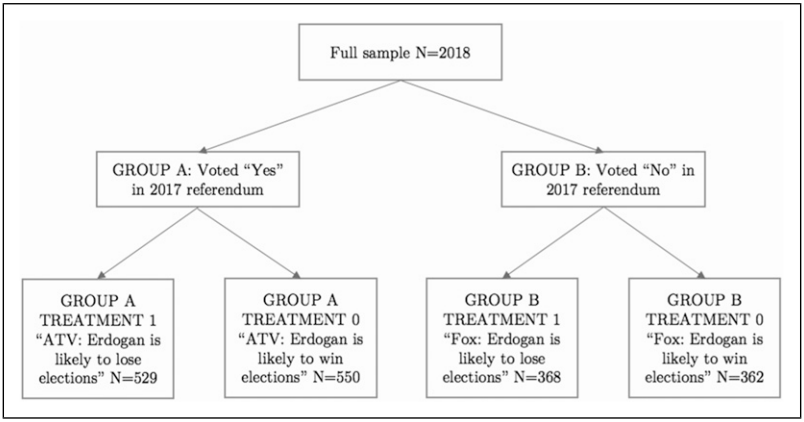

Figure 3. Sub-samples produced by the survey experiment.

Decree: "In that case, should the president to be elected use his power to make laws through executive decrees?"
0 No
1 Yes

Budget: "Who should make the public budget?"
0 The parliament
1 The president

System endorsement: "What is your current opinion about the governmental system that was accepted in 2017 referendum?"
1 I am totally against it.
2 I am mostly against it but it has some positive aspects.
3 I mostly support it but it has some negative aspects.
4 I totally support it.

Partisan president: "What type of a president would you prefer?"
0 A non-partisan president with symbolic powers.
1 A partisan president with broad powers.

No return: "Do you think Turkey should return back to the parliamentary system?"
0 Yes, it should.
1 No, it should not.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of outcome measurements.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean (T0: Incumbent wins)	Mean (T1: Incumbent loses)	Difference of means
Panel A: Initial Yea-Sayers								
Support for decree power	959	0.700	0.459	0	1	0.779	0.617	−0.162***
Support for budget power	1001	0.518	0.500	0	1	0.525	0.511	−0.014
System endorsement	1046	3.664	0.720	1	4	3.665	3.664	−0.001
Support for partisan pres.	1023	0.817	0.387	0	1	0.806	0.829	0.024
No return to parlmnt. system	1007	0.871	0.335	0	1	0.878	0.863	−0.015
Panel B: Initial Nay-Sayers								
Support for decree power	698	0.116	0.321	0	1	0.084	0.148	0.064***
Support for budget power	705	0.050	0.217	0	1	0.049	0.051	0.002
System endorsement	706	1.313	0.726	1	4	1.318	1.308	−0.010
Support for partisan pres	711	0.079	0.270	0	1	0.099	0.059	−0.040**
No return to parlmnt. system	692	0.081	0.273	0	1	0.078	0.083	0.005

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Data and Analysis

Analyzing Treatment Effect on Institutional Preferences

Table 1 lists t-tests for the difference between treatment groups in terms of how they responded to the questions about institutional preferences. The t-test gives us the magnitude of the change in preferences (compared to the recalled vote on the 2017 referendum) associated with the treatment.

The responses to the first question on decree power display the pattern predicted by the H1. When provided with exogenous information pointing to low reelection chances for Erdoğan, 16% of those who voted yes for the super-presidential system in 2017 start opposing broad executive decree powers, on top of any baseline changes. Likewise, the same information leads to 6% of those who voted no in 2017 to start supporting these powers. For the small group of those who had no clear initial preference, the treatment is not associated with any significant difference in opinion.[11]

The descriptive statistics show that treatment effect was strongest for the first institutional preference question, and weaker or non-existent for the others. We discuss this finding below. But before doing so, we run the tests to analyze the effect of the treatment on the outcome measures by adding control variables, in order to take into account respondent characteristics that can affect the elasticity of the respondent's institutional preferences. Given the relatively low statistical power of our experimental test, their effects could be large enough to mask the magnitude or even the true direction of the treatment effect.

First, our experimental treatment manipulated information about Erdoğan's winning prospect, premised on the assumption that those who were yea-sayers in 2017 referendum were primarily Erdoğan supporters; nonetheless, even if this is largely true, there may be respondents who have since become disillusioned with Erdoğan as a presidential candidate, and vice versa for some nay-sayers. Respondents would not display change in their institutional preference in the direction we expect as a result of our treatment, if they already changed their opinion on Erdoğan. Hence, to provide a more precise estimate of the treatment effect, we control for whether the respondent intends to vote for Erdoğan in the first round of the upcoming presidential election. Second, we control for ideological orientation. In Turkey, the push for executive strengthening and a presidential system has been traditionally associated with a right-wing ideological tradition (Türk, 2014). We therefore include the respondent's self-placement on the left-right spectrum on a scale of 1–5. Right-wing yea-sayers and left-wing nay-sayers may hold their institutional preferences more dearly and be less willing to change them. Third, issue knowledge or attention to politics may matter for institutional preferences. If the respondent has not paid attention to the regime change taking place in Turkey over the last few years, it is likely that their preference on this

question is non-existent or unstable, and hence the treatment may not have a systematic effect. To account for differences in knowledge/attention in a simple way, we use a measure of knowledge about regime characteristics. The respondents were asked "Before Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became president, who elected the president of Turkey?" If they were able to pick the correct option ("The Parliament/members of the Parliament"), then we coded them as knowledgeable and attentive on this matter, as opposed to everyone else. Below we present multivariate analyses of treatment effects with controls for these respondent characteristics. For each measure, Table 2 presents the analysis first for initial yea-sayers and then for initial nay-sayers, that is, people who reported that they said "No" to executive aggrandizement in 2017 referendum. Hypothesis 1 predicts that for all measures, the treatment effect should be negative for yea-sayers and positive for nay-sayers.

Column 1 in Table 2 suggests that among the yea-sayers, an exogenous decrease in the winning prospect of the incumbent leads to a significant drop in the support for president's authority to legislate through executive degrees. Column 2 shows that for nay-sayers too, the same treatment also leads to a significant change in support for decree authority.

For yea-sayers, the expected treatment effect also attains significance for "no return to parliamentary system" (Column 9). In other words, upon learning that Erdoğan might not become president after all, some among those who initially supported the presidential regime now say that returning to the parliamentary system may be a good idea. The effect of the same on the nay-sayers is in the predicted direction but not statistically significant (Column 10).

For the remaining measures, the results do not warrant confident conclusions. We do not detect significant results predicted by the Hypothesis 1 for either group. Unexpectedly, we find that the prospect of Erdoğan winning the election is significantly associated with greater *support for a partisan president* (as opposed to a non-partisan, symbolic president) among nay-sayers, contrary to what we hypothesized. This may be because the election featured opposition candidates hailing from competing partisan traditions and an incumbent loss would not automatically mean victory for a given candidate. Some among the nay-sayers, even if they were against the creation of an authoritarian presidency, might see Erdoğan as more suitable for such an office than an unspecified political opponent. Indeed, this turns out to be the case for those nay-sayers who are right-wing, and whose responses are producing the unexpected result.[12]

More generally we attribute weak findings for our outcome measures other than "decree power" to wording and sequencing of the questions. Probably, most respondents considered only the first question in connection to the treatment since only the first question was preceded with an "in that case" statement and alluded to the "president to be elected," whereas the remaining questions, which were asked later, referred to more abstract and impersonal concepts.[13] In the remainder of the study, we focus on decree power as the

Table 2. Treatment effects.

	Dependent variable									
	Decree power		Budget power		System endorsement		Partisan president		No return to parl. system	
Estimation	Logistic		Logistic		Ordered logistic		Logistic		Logistic	
Initial preference	(1) Yea	(2) Nay	(3) Yea	(4) Nay	(5) Yea	(6) Nay	(7) Yea	(8) Nay	(9) Yea	(10) Nay
Treatment: Incumbent loses	−1.004***	0.732***	−0.179	0.101	−0.144	0.157	0.015	−0.621**	−0.373*	0.111
	(0.183)	(0.272)	(0.133)	(0.337)	(0.159)	(0.209)	(0.179)	(0.274)	(0.204)	(0.349)
Will vote for incumbent	1.529***	2.012***	1.922***	1.810***	1.987***	2.692***	2.263***	2.159***	2.182***	2.229***
	(0.312)	(0.479)	(0.335)	(0.658)	(0.227)	(0.419)	(0.276)	(0.457)	(0.290)	(0.578)
Issue knowledge	0.454**	−0.656**	0.713***	−0.120	−0.088	−0.157	0.375*	0.821	0.094	−0.828**
	(0.212)	(0.334)	(0.177)	(0.450)	(0.210)	(0.287)	(0.192)	(0.534)	(0.249)	(0.389)
Rightism	0.140	0.010	−0.017	−0.004	0.732***	0.503***	0.213*	0.207*	0.285**	0.219*
	(0.112)	(0.114)	(0.100)	(0.138)	(0.088)	(0.085)	(0.109)	(0.109)	(0.116)	(0.132)
Constant	−0.917*	−2.063***	−2.048***	−3.016***			−1.621***	−3.512***	−0.995**	−2.517***
	(0.551)	(0.453)	(0.468)	(0.551)			(0.483)	(0.578)	(0.499)	(0.585)
Observations	922	655	950	657	995	661	970	667	959	648
Log likelihood	−512.51	−219.38	−617.51	−126.71	−605.87	−378.14	−396.14	−168.18	−315.86	−158.53
Pseudo R-sq.	0.085	0.059	0.060	0.032	0.144	0.119	0.126	0.091	0.140	0.087

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$. Clustering-robust standard errors are presented in parentheses. For the ordered logistic regression, clustering-robust standard errors are calculated via block-bootstrapping (5000 iterations of resampling).

dependent variable to test H2 and H3 by interacting the treatment effect with the hypothesized moderators. In fact, for measures other than decree power as well the treatment effect reaches substantial magnitudes—in the hypothesized directions—for people with high values on the moderator variables (see Supplemental Appendix Section 2 for details). However, we focus on decree power in the rest of our presentation for greater simplicity and confidence.

The control variables themselves yield some interesting results, too. Having a pro-right ideological self-placement is generally associated with support for super-presidentialism among both among yea- and nay-sayers. This is expected given the conservative and authoritarian tendencies (Isiksel, 2013) within the Turkish right-wing ideological tradition. However, issue knowledge has a divergent relationship with support for super-presidentialism across the yea- and nay-sayer camps. While more knowledgeable people among the yea-sayers are likely to support super-presidentialism, among the nay-sayers they are less likely to do so.[14] This is in line with the somewhat troubling yet widely observed phenomenon of politically sophisticated voters being better in identifying, justifying and sticking to the positions held by their party (Gaynes et al., 2007; Zaller, 1992).

Moderators of the Treatment Effect: Social Distance and the Economy

Since we have established that elastic support for executive aggrandizement is observable both among pro-government voters and pro-opposition voters, we can now ask the following: what type of considerations is more likely to motivate the tendency of opportunistic change in institutional preferences, that is, elastic support for executive aggrandizement?

As explained above, voters' tendency to change their institutional preferences based on who might win the election may be related to affective polarization and economic anxiety. In order to operationalize affective polarization at the level of individuals, following a common approach (Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Cassese, 2019), we utilized three questions to measure the "social distance" respondents feel toward the supporters of the opposite political stance in the country. These questions are (i) "Would you like to do business with a […] supporter?" (ii) "Would you like your daughter to get married with a […] supporter?" and (iii) "Would you like to be neighbors with a […] supporter?" As with the experiment treatment, the wording in the brackets was conditional on the respondent's initial reporting of their vote in 2017 referendum preferences: If the respondent was a yea-sayer, the question asked "opposition," and if the respondent was a nay-sayer, it asked "government." For each of these questions, a scale was used from 0 to 3, where 0 ("I would like it") represents no social distance, whereas 3 ("absolutely not") represented highest level of social distance. We then

constructed an additive index out of the answers given to three questions, giving the respondent's social distance score. Yea-sayers and nay-sayers exhibit similar levels of social distance to the other: For example, 31% of yea-sayers and 28% nay-sayers reported that they would "absolutely not" want their (hypothetical) daughters to marry somebody that supports the other side.

Regarding economic considerations, if the voters think that the incumbent is a valuable economic manager and the national economy might suffer in his absence, then they might be likely to support executive aggrandizement proposed by the incumbent only when the incumbent will hold the broadened powers. To operationalize this, we asked the respondents the following question: "In your opinion, if someone other than Erdoğan comes to power in the upcoming election how would the economy would be affected?" The answers lead to a 5-point ordinal variable of *post-incumbent economic anxiety*, where −2 represents the least amount of anxiety (effectively enthusiasm) and 2 represents the highest level of anxiety. Post-incumbent economic anxiety is higher among initial yea-sayers than among nay-sayers, as one would expect; but there is enough variance among both groups to enable a test of H3. Descriptive statistics of the moderating variables shown for yea- and nay-sayers, are presented in Table 3. They suggest that (a) both moderators are highly varied among both initial yea-sayers and nay-sayers[15] and (b) randomization in the experiment worked for all questions.

Tables 4 and 5 below present multivariate logistic analysis of the moderating effects of social distance and economic anxiety, respectively. Table 4, interpreted together with Figure 4, shows that social distance makes voters more likely to opportunistically update their institutional preferences—both among initial yea-sayers and nay-sayers. Among the yea-sayers who are most socially distant to the opposition voters, that is, unwilling to engage with them in business, familial, and neighborly relations, 82% is predicted to support the decree power in case the incumbent will be able to use this power and only 47% in case an opposition figure will use it. In other words, the average treatment effect for the high level of social distance is 35 percentage points among yea-sayers. Among nay-sayers, the equivalent average treatment effect is 16 percentage points: Four percent of the most socially distant nay-sayers support the decree power if the incumbent will be able to use it as opposed to 20% if an opposition leader will be able to use it. Predicted percentages of high social distance people supporting the decree power can be seen in Figure 4 with green-colored point estimates and confidence intervals around them. Among the people who are not socially distant to their political rivals (red points and lines in Figure 4), the exogenous manipulation of the winning prospects of the incumbent does not change institutional preferences. In other words, less social distance to the "political other" means more commitment to the impersonalized rules of government. Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2 empirically hold.[16]

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of moderating variables.

Statistic	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean (T0: Incumbent wins)	Mean (T1: Incumbent loses)	Difference of means
Panel A: Initial Yea-Sayers								
Post-Erdoğan economic anxiety	1019	0.812	1.227	−2	2	0.824	0.799	−0.025
Social distance (business)	1058	1.228	1.113	0	3	1.207	1.249	0.042
Social distance (marriage)	1044	1.467	1.171	0	3	1.490	1.444	−0.045
Social distance (neighborhood)	1054	1.302	1.146	0	3	1.305	1.299	−0.006
Social distance additive	1038	4.002	3.163	0	9	4.000	4.003	0.003
Panel B: Initial Nay-Sayers								
Post-Erdoğan economic anxiety	678	−0.370	1.349	−2	2	−0.419	−0.322	0.096
Social distance (business)	719	1.253	1.058	0	3	1.216	1.291	0.074
Social distance (marriage)	709	1.494	1.1	0	3	1.461	1.527	0.066
Social distance (neighborhood)	719	1.356	1.121	0	3	1.321	1.391	0.070
Social distance additive	709	4.093	3.028	0	9	3.980	4.207	0.226

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Elasticity in preferences moderated by social distance.

	Dependent variable			
	Decree power			
	Initial yea-sayers		Initial nay-sayers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment: Incumbent loses	−0.014	−0.235	−0.196	−0.097
	(0.249)	(0.268)	(0.401)	(0.433)
Social distance	0.059	0.039	−0.131*	−0.098
	(0.044)	(0.047)	(0.069)	(0.070)
Will vote for incumbent		1.554***		1.994***
		(0.323)		(0.485)
Issue knowledge		0.430**		−0.660**
		(0.205)		(0.333)
Rightism		0.126		−0.031
		(0.121)		(0.116)
Interaction: Treatment * Social distance	−0.188***	−0.187***	0.210**	0.198**
	(0.055)	(0.059)	(0.089)	(0.092)
Constant	1.023***	−1.020*	−1.914***	−1.616***
	(0.187)	(0.553)	(0.278)	(0.465)
Observations	936	900	679	638
Log likelihood	−547.677	−491.117	−237.864	−212.176
Pseudo R-sq.	0.042	0.101	0.026	0.065

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Clustering-robust standard errors are presented in parentheses.

Moving on to Hypothesis 3 about economic considerations, Table 5, interpreted together with Figure 5, suggests that it is confirmed for yea-sayers. Among those who scored "2" on anxiety about post-incumbent economy, that is, who think that the Turkish economy would be affected very adversely if somebody other than Erdoğan is elected, 84% is predicted to support the decree power if the incumbent is expected to win the presidency as opposed to 59% in case the incumbent loses the upcoming elections. Among initial yea-sayers, there is a group who do not express anxiety about post-incumbent economy, and they are less likely to update their institutional preferences in the case of an incumbent loss. This lends strong support to Hypothesis 3.1.

Among nay-sayers, the level of post-Erdoğan economic anxiety does not have a moderating effect for the treatment. In Hypothesis 3.2, we predicted that for this group the opportunistic updating of institutional preferences

Table 5. Elasticity in preferences moderated by economic anxiety.

	Dependent variable			
	Support for decree power			
	Initial yea-sayers		Initial nay-sayers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment: Incumbent loses	−0.548***	−0.752***	0.579**	0.711**
	(0.182)	(0.208)	(0.258)	(0.283)
Post-Erdoğan economic anxiety	0.281***	0.115	0.358***	0.301**
	(0.104)	(0.111)	(0.127)	(0.132)
Will vote for incumbent		1.550***		2.130***
		(0.329)		(0.507)
Issue knowledge		0.531**		−0.757**
		(0.227)		(0.341)
Rightism		0.201*		−0.038
		(0.119)		(0.122)
Interaction: Treatment * Post-Erdoğan economic anxiety	−0.378***	−0.325**	−0.155	−0.111
	(0.123)	(0.133)	(0.159)	(0.179)
Constant	1.110***	−1.347***	−2.294***	−1.813***
	(0.136)	(0.580)	(0.212)	(0.451)
Observations	915	888	657	619
Log likelihood	−533.427	−486.509	−229.766	−204.949
Pseudo R-sq.	0.039	0.094	0.032	0.079

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** denotes $p < .01$. Clustering-robust standard errors are presented in parentheses.

should be more observable among people with low post-incumbent economic anxiety. Yet, our findings suggest that exogenous information about the winning prospects of the incumbent has a similar effect for those with high and low post-incumbent economic anxiety alike. In other words, for opposition voters, economic anxiety takes a backseat when it comes to institutional design, in the presence of strong opposition to Erdoğan's institutional initiatives on wider grounds.

It may be asked whether the variance on the two hypothesized moderators of the treatment effect—affective polarization and post-incumbent economic anxiety—measure similar phenomena, springing from a common fundamental incumbent-opposition cleavage. Yet, the observed correlation between the two variables are 0.07 and −0.01 among the yea-sayers and nay-sayers,

respectively, indicating that they are distinct constructs.[17] Moreover, when the two moderator variables are added to a model simultaneously, the results are substantially and statistically similar to those obtained from the separate regressions presented above (see Supplemental Appendix Section 5 for details). Our finding suggests that post-incumbent economic anxiety and affective polarization play independent roles in motivating the likelihood of changing institutional preferences in response to who seems likely to use extended powers.

To summarize our findings, when given exogenous information pointing out that incumbent Erdoğan may lose the 2018 presidential race, those who initially supported the authoritarian presidential regime (yea-sayers) significantly reduced their support for the president's power to pass laws by decree as well as their opposition to a possible return to the parliamentary system, and nay-sayers increase their support for the same. Furthermore, affective polarization in the form of social distance is a substantial moderator of opportunistic elasticity across both initial supporters and opponents of super-presidentialism. Among both those who supported and opposed the new regime in the 2017 referendum, it is those with greater social distance to the other side who opportunistically change their support for enhanced executive powers when hearing that the opposite candidate is probably going to win the 2018 presidential race. Among those who initially supported the new regime in the 2017 referendum, post-incumbent economic anxiety also motivates the opportunistic change in institutional preference: Those who are more concerned about the management of economy in a hypothetical post-Erdogan period are more likely to withdraw their support from expansive presidential powers if their supported leader might lose the election. Thus, in addition to affective polarization, valence considerations of the incumbent can also be a source opportunistic change in institutional preferences, in the authoritarian direction.

A somewhat surprising finding of our study is that opportunistic change in institutional preferences exists among the initial nay-sayers, as well. This was, after all, the camp that opposed the authoritarian tendencies of the incumbent in the referendum. One should avoid direct comparisons across the yea- and nay-sayers due to two reasons: First, the media channels cited in the experimental treatment texts were different across groups, and there might be a difference between the reliability of the pro-government TV channel among the yea-sayers and pro-opposition TV channel among the nay-sayers. Moreover, the level of electoral uncertainty one can instigate with an experimental treatment can also vary across the different camps, as it is context-dependent. Even with these caveats, on the other hand, our experiment suggests that a sizable group within this camp with a high degree of social distance toward the political other may support the expanded presidential decree powers, if their preferred leader is going to become the

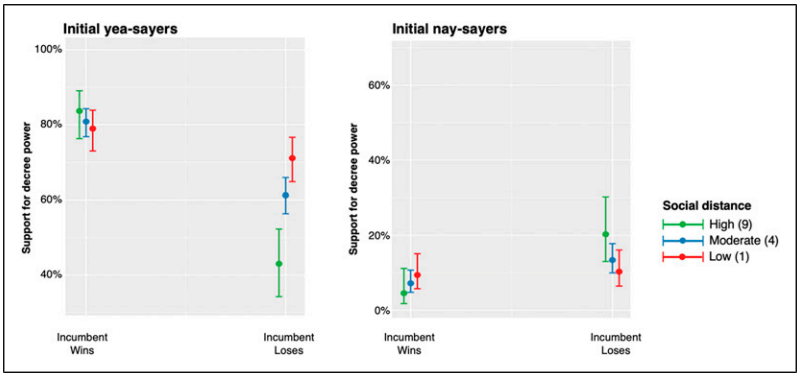

Figure 4. Predicted treatment effects moderated by social distance.

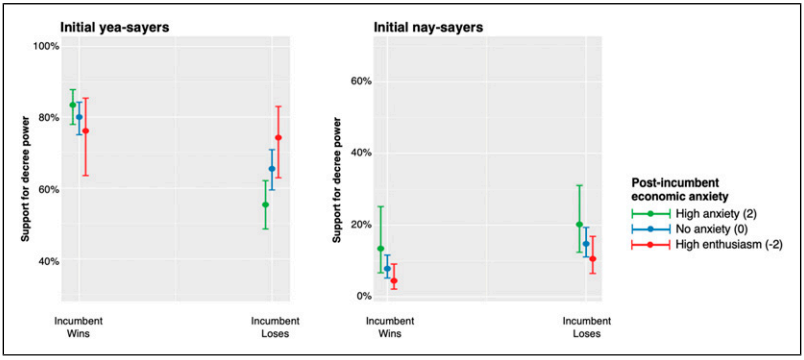

Figure 5. Predicted treatment effects moderated by economic anxiety.

president. This is yet another sobering finding about the difficulties of maintaining democracy under the circumstances of high polarization: Polarization may push both incumbents and anti-incumbents to see each other as existential threats and eschew rule-based politics, contributing to authoritarian spiral that may last beyond the career of the original authoritarian leader.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that high levels of affective polarization make citizens opportunistically alter their support for executive aggrandizement in a way that can erode democracy. If citizens view each other as existential threats, they are less inclined to commit to a set of general rules, and more likely to

support changes to constitutional rules depending on who is expected to win a particular election. In line with other recent work on voters and affective polarization (Mason, 2018; Svolik 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019; Nalepa et al., 2018), we document that among Turkey's pro-government and opposition voters alike, it is those who feel more socially distant to the other side that are more responsive to a variation in winning prospects while deciding on whether to allow a removal of checks and balances on the government.

In addition, and perhaps more surprisingly, we find that not only affective partisanship, but also valence considerations can lead to elastic support for executive aggrandizement. Voters who had initially supported the super-presidential system and were more worried that the economy would be harmed by replacing the incumbent president, responded to the news that he may be losing the election more elastically—withdrawing their support from the super-presidential system that they had previously voted for—*even when level of affective polarization is statistically controlled for* (Supplemental Appendix Section 5). This finding suggests that scholars need to look beyond affective partisanship to understand the sources of democracy-eroding behavioral tendencies better.

It could be argued that in a country with pluralistic values or, for example, a stronger civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1963) and emancipatory values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), voters might be sufficiently vigilant against giving extraordinary powers to the executive office so that such opportunistic change in institutional attachment would be less likely. We are skeptical about such an argument. Findings from our research suggests that aspirant autocrats can exploit the timing of constitutional reforms that entrench their power: They can introduce them at a time of diminished electoral uncertainty after which instigating further polarization would help their aim of receiving a popular approval for their authoritarian move.

Research in other contexts has also shown that dynamics of partisan polarization and economic anxiety counteract expectations about electorate being sufficiently vigilant against executive aggrandizement. For example, Graham and Svolik (2020) present experimental evidence that a substantial portion of American voters are willing to vote for a hypothetical candidate with a weak commitment to democracy but who would fight for their partisan interests. Similarly, partisan-motivated reasoning has been seen to lead to democracy-eroding institutional reforms in Hungary (Ahlquist et al., 2018) and in Venezuela (Svolik, 2020); and has been shown to play out in backsliding more generally (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). The consequences of economic anxiety too might be plausibly expected to exacerbate democratic backsliding, as a broad literature in comparative politics suggests (see Waldner and Lust, 2018). Finally, formal theory exercises suggest that our core insight travels: if the same political leader controls both the formulation of a referendum question and the triggering of

the referendum he can get the policy close to his most preferred point by exploiting divergent preferences among competing societal actors (McKelvey, 1976; Hug & Tsebelis, 2002). In short, the detailed evidence drawn from Turkey in this paper suggests a sobering general conclusion for the study of democracy in Turkey but also beyond Turkey's borders: When voters have a tendency to support executive aggrandizement initiatives and when they are open to the manipulations of the autocrats they cannot be relied upon to be a last line of defense against democratic erosion.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Replication materials and code for this study can be found at Şaşmaz et al. (2021).
2. For example, the World Values Survey indicates that as of 2018, 60% of Turkish voters polled still reported that they believed they lived in a democracy. Moreover, there was not a change in their perception of "how democratically their country is governed" across waves of WVS between 2006 and 2018 despite the observations of various research groups.

3. According to Freedom House (2018) during 2017—the year of the constitutional change, Turkey's democratic status declined from "Partly Free" to "Not Free," its political rights rating declined from 4 to 5, and its civil liberties rating declined from 5 to 6—a drop attributed by the Freedom House to the constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency: "When fully implemented (…), the changes will radically increase the power of the presidency and reduce democratic checks and balances," Varieties of Democracy too downgraded Turkey's "electoral democracy" and "liberal democracy" scores in 2017 (V-Dem 2017). For an account of how the referendum moved Turkey in the direction of authoritarianism, see Yilmaz and Turner (2019).
4. For the effect of the amendment on the power of the Turkish parliament, see Supplemental Appendix Section 1.
5. See Supplemental Appendix Section 6 for the details of the public opinion polls taken into consideration.
6. See, for instance, Weise (2018). Following the 2018 elections, Erdogan and his party repeatedly floated ideas of abolishing the two-round presidential system, offering that a plurality of votes should suffice or the threshold in the first round should be decreased to 40% from 50%. This has not been realized yet.
7. Note that H2 and H3 are symmetrical to each other in their logic. However, H2 is expressed generically about the "other side," while H3 is expressed explicitly in terms of one side (Erdogan); hence, the predicted results graphs are different across the two hypotheses.
8. Four streets in each neighborhood are randomly selected in advance by the central office of the research company. The same office also randomly selected the door number at which the data collection started, and the number of houses/flats to skip in case of a refusal or non-contact. In total, the data collection team attempted 10,979 doors, and the AAPOR response rate 1 was realized at 18.4% (2018 complete interviews, nine partial interviews, 4151 refusals and break offs, 4767 non-contacts, and 34 unknowns).
9. We also checked whether the partisan polarization levels in Istanbul and in the rest of the country are comparable, in the publicly available CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) dataset, which included a household survey on partisan and populist attitudes in Turkey in 2018. The mean partisan distance was 6.2 and 6.3 in Istanbul and the rest of the country, respectively; with no statistically significant difference (CSES 2021).
10. The "No" vote appears to display some underreporting, compared to the "No" share in the official referendum result. We discuss the potential reasons of this difference and its implications in the Supplemental Appendix Section 7. We conclude that the difference is likely to stem from the non-response bias of actual "No" voters and does not have substantial implications for findings we present here.
11. We also asked the respondents about their anticipated winner *prior* to the treatment in the survey. It turns out that the treatment effect among the initial yea-sayers

comes mostly from those with a contrary ("Erdogan highly likely to win") prior expectation. Because preference update relies on belief update, those yea-sayers who already believe that Erdogan will lose are not much affected by exogenous information pointing in the same direction. We do not observe the same kind of prior belief-based differentiation among the nay-sayers though, presumably because that group includes relatively few people with a prior belief in an Erdogan win and all observed effects are smaller for that group, making it harder to observe interactions. See Supplemental Appendix Section 10 for the results.

12. We demonstrate and discuss this in Section 9 of the supplemental Appendix.
13. One empirical implication of this assumption is observed when we undertake an analysis of the moderators: coefficients for the interaction term between the treatment and the moderator gradually weakens as the questionnaire progresses from the decree power to the other questions (see Supplemental Appendix Section 2).
14. Alternative categorizations of the rival camps (according to the recalled vote in 2015 elections or according to the vote intention in 2018 elections) lead to very similar results. See Supplemental Appendix Section 8.
15. To see the details of the variation, see Supplemental Appendix Section 3.
16. Following an alternative approach toward identifying partisan affective polarization (Lauka et al., 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019), we also used a second measure based on the difference between feeling thermometer scores respondents express vis-à-vis the incumbent and main opposition parties. Descriptively, polarization in this sense is more severe than partisan social distance among the respondents. But when this measure is interacted with the treatment, both the substantial and statistical significance of the interaction effect shrinks (see results in Supplemental Appendix Section 4).
17. These two constructs also have different demographic correlates. See Supplemental Appendix Section 5 for these findings.

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