

# Populism in Turkey



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## 1 Introduction

In this chapter we focus on populism in Turkey, a country with a long electoral experience since the first free and fair elections in 1950. A particular attraction of the Turkish case for studies of populism is that a party with a populist agenda, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), has long been the incumbent party in Turkey. Studies about mass populist attitudes have typically focused on cases where populist actors or parties have been in the opposition, and their findings highlight discontent as a key factor in the appeal of populism. Would we observe a similar dynamic in countries with populist parties in power? Studying cases of populism in power, like Turkey, allows us to address this question.

The chapter is organized as follows. First we present an overview of the history of populism in Turkey. We argue that the central cleavage of Turkish politics, first articulated by Mardin (1973), has provided a fertile ground for certain parties to do politics on a strongly populist platform. Next we present a descriptive account of the main populist party in contemporary Turkish politics, the incumbent AKP. The subsequent section lays out how Erdoğan, the long-time leader of the AKP, embraced the dimensions of populism as a political strategy.<sup>1</sup> Here we also highlight the institutional changes the AKP implemented that strengthened the power of the executive branch. The penultimate section turns to voters, and presents an analysis of mass populist attitudes in Turkey, drawing on a nationally representative survey. Our findings reveal that populist attitudes are quite prevalent in the Turkish electorate, and support for populism is significantly and positively related to being a partisan of the incumbent AKP. Rather than discontent, the driver of mass populist attitudes in

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<sup>1</sup>We heavily draw on Aytaç and Öniş (2014) for this analysis.

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Turkey is the fact that a party with a populist agenda has long been in power, and supporters of this party seem to have internalized the core premises of populism. We conclude the chapter by discussing the implications of our findings.

## 2 The History of Populism in Turkey

To identify populist movements retrospectively, it is helpful to delineate the central cleavage(s) of a given society, since populists typically build and expand their constituency by tapping into those cleavages and exacerbating the societal divide (Barr 2009). In the Turkish context, Şerif Mardin (1973) has provided a widely used framework that identifies a central cleavage shaping modern Turkish politics.

Mardin (1973) argued that Turkey inherited a sociocultural divide from the Ottoman Empire that pitted the ruling elites of the “center” against a culturally heterogeneous “periphery” (Kalaycıoğlu 1994; Çarkoğlu 2012). While the imperial house and its ruling apparatus constituted the center in the Ottoman polity, in the Republican era (1923–), the center comprised of the quasi-autonomous bureaucracy, especially that of the judiciary and military, in alliance with large, state-dependent businesses and the mainstream intellectual community and academia. The periphery, in turn, consists of a mixture of traditionalist ethnic, religious, and regional groups that have been systematically kept out of the power-wielding institutions of the state. One could argue that this exclusion has effectively ended, at least for certain groups, with the consolidation of power by the AKP, as we will elaborate later.

Kalaycıoğlu (1994, p. 403) characterizes the center as “the estate of a coherent body of nationalist, centralist, laicist elite which holds the view that it represents and protects the state.” Thanks to their tight control of the state institutions in the early Republican period, the center adopted a top-down modernization and Westernization program that further alienated the conservative, peripheral masses. While the center has traditionally relied on the support of groups with a more urban presence, higher levels of education, lower levels of religiosity, and lower concentration of ethnic minorities, the peripheral constituencies were dominated by rural, devout Muslim and lowly educated groups. A reflection of this “center-periphery cleavage” in Turkish politics finds itself in the self-placement of voters along the left-right ideological dimension. Those holding centrist values, especially with respect to secularism, identify themselves on the left, while religiosity, a central characteristic of peripheral masses, is strongly associated with a position on the right (Çarkoğlu 2012).

In the electoral scene, the founding party of the Republic, the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), has long been considered as the bastion of the centrist values and constituencies. With the introduction of multiparty elections in 1946, the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) emerged as the representative of the periphery and won the first free and fair elections in 1950. The parties of the periphery have since dominated centrist parties in elections, despite several interruptions by the military, thanks to the consistent support of the society’s religious and conservative majority. Yet these electoral successes have had relatively

little impact on the status and value system of the center (Kalaycıoğlu 1994). The dominance of the center has been perpetuated by the “ownership” of the state apparatus and cultural hegemony. Moreover, the key institutions of power, such as the military, high judiciary, and foreign services, were able to insulate themselves from the influence of the elected politicians through their recruitment and promotion practices.<sup>2</sup>

This structure of relations between the center and peripheral parties has provided a fertile ground for the latter to employ a populist strategy. The parties of the periphery have characterized the Turkish political scene as a struggle between the conservative, pious majority (“the people”) and the Western-oriented secular “elites,” who are holding the key institutions of power despite their electoral defeats (Taşkın 2012). The Western-oriented elites are depicted to be alienated from ordinary people’s values, and they are accused of imposing their “foreign” lifestyle against the will of the people (Bora and Erdoğan 2006; Bora 2006). Contrary to the secular and Westernized nation-building efforts of the Republican elites, parties of the periphery have emphasized nationalist conservatism, nativism, and Islamism (Taşkın 2015). They have a strictly majoritarian and moralistic understanding of democracy where only the conservative majority of the Turkish society is considered as “the people,” and opposition to the government representing this “people” is framed as “desecration to the people’s will” (Bora and Canefe 2008).

As mentioned earlier, the DP could be seen as the first in a succession of right-wing parties that draw heavily on the support of peripheral groups. Having won the 1950 election, the peaceful transition of power to Adnan Menderes, the leader of the DP, signified a new era in Turkish politics. Menderes considered the electoral victory of 1950 as a “national uprising” and was critical of what he characterized to be the tutelage of the non-elected authorities, such as the judiciary, over elected ones (Neziroğlu and Yılmaz 2014). According to him, the parliamentary majority should have been the only source of constitutional power, and the separation of powers was actually detrimental to exercising people’s will (Taşkın 2015). As the popularity of his policies and party deteriorated in the second half of 1950s, Menderes has become increasingly critical of dissenting voices in society, arguing that the opposition (CHP), the press, and the academics were united and mobilized against the DP, which represented the values of the ordinary people (Türk 2014). In 1960, the governing DP went as far as establishing the infamous Committee of Inquest (*tahkikat komisyonu*) in parliament, which vested a group of DP legislators with judicial powers to scrutinize the activities of the CHP and the press, clearly violating the separation of powers principle (Ahmad 1993). This move is widely considered as the trigger of the first military coup in the history of the Republic on May 27, 1960, which deposed the DP government. Menderes was put on trial for high treason and executed the following year.

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<sup>2</sup>We should again emphasize that this characterization of the dominance of the center does not apply in the aftermath of AKP’s consolidation of power, which roughly corresponds to the post-2011 period.

The coup of 1960 and the execution of Menderes have traumatized the peripheral groups, as it was the first of successive interventions of the military in politics. This vindicated the narrative that the Republican elites would not hesitate to take power from elected governments by force and treat the elected representatives of “the people” with contempt and even hostility (Çınar and Sayın 2014). The new Constitution of 1961 drafted in the aftermath of the coup was another source of resentment, as it prioritized judicial independence and separation of powers by creating and empowering institutions of horizontal accountability. These steps, designed to check the elected governments, were derided as “instruments of tutelage” by the peripheral groups (e.g., Arslan 2012). Even after more than 50 years, in a speech following his victory in the first popular presidential election, Erdoğan remarked that “today the 27 May 1960 parenthesis is finally closed. The particular understanding of presidency that was imposed by 27 May [coup] as an instrument of tutelage is now over.”<sup>3</sup>

In the post-1960 era, the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP), founded in 1961 by some ex-members of the DP, emerged as the party of the periphery. It won the 1965 elections, and its charismatic leader Süleyman Demirel became the prime minister. In line with the majoritarian view of democracy, Demirel was critical of the strict separation of powers set out in the Constitution of 1961. He complained that it was impossible to rule the state with the existing constitution, referring to the expansive powers of the institutions of horizontal accountability, such as the Constitutional Court (Ahmad 2003). The characterization of Turkish politics as a struggle of “the people” against “oppressive elites” was a major theme in Demirel’s discourse as well; in 1965 he lamented that while colonial rule was disbanded even in Africa, “there were still those who wanted to treat the Turkish nation as a colonized people” (Mert 2007).

The Turkish party system became increasingly fragmented in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially as different parties emerged to “represent different shades of beliefs and interests of the periphery” (Kalaycıoğlu 1994, p. 406). Notables among those were the Islamist National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP) and ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP).<sup>4</sup> Another military coup in 1980 closed down all of these parties, though they gradually returned to the political scene, albeit under different names, after the reintroduction of free and fair elections. What we observe in the post-1980 era is the branching of the peripheral DP-AP generation into two major parties—the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) of Turgut Özal and the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP) of Süleyman Demirel. During this period, and especially during the 1990s until 2002 when they effectively became irrelevant in the Turkish political scene, these parties have adopted a softer populist tone. The securitization of politics due to the intense armed conflict with the Kurdish separatist organization, the PKK, gave the military an upper hand in politics. Successive economic crises and fragile

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/08/140810\\_cumhurbaskanligi\\_secim](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/08/140810_cumhurbaskanligi_secim)

<sup>4</sup>MSP was the successor of the short-lived National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*, MNP) that was closed down in 1971 by the Constitutional Court.

coalition governments further tarnished the power of civilian politicians during this period (Cizre Sakallıoğlu 1997; Jenkins 2001).

The most vocally populist movement in the post-1980 era has been the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*) led by Necmettin Erbakan. As an Islamist ideology with anti-Republican and pro-Ottoman characteristics, *Milli Görüş* builds on an antagonistic discourse of a struggle between the materialistic, secular, and imperialistic “West” and the oppressed, moral, and abstemious Muslim community (Erbakan 1975; Hadiz 2016). As such, its appeals do not just limit themselves to the Turkish society but aspire to establish a “just order” (*adil düzen*) against the dominance of the West that encompasses the whole Muslim community (*ümmet*), with frequent references to a positively nostalgic view of the Ottoman period (Atacan 2005). This Islamist movement was against the totality of the establishment in Turkey (i.e., the elites of the center), not just against the party in power, as they consider the elites to be the local collaborators of Western dominance against the will of the people (Türk 2014).

Many of the leading members of the current incumbent AKP have started their political careers within the *Milli Görüş* movement.<sup>5</sup> Erdoğan has occupied various crucial positions in the movement since 1976, including the mayor’s office of Istanbul. Abdullah Gül, the former president of Turkey, has been the deputy of the RP since 1991, and a minister in the RP-DYP coalition government (1996–1997). The former parliamentary speaker and Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç also entered the politics as a deputy of the RP. In the late 1990s, however, some younger members of the *Milli Görüş* movement led by Erdoğan distanced themselves from the older generation of Islamists and created a new political faction that culminated in the AKP in 2001 (Coşar and Özman 2004). The AKP came to power as a single-party government as a result of the 2002 general elections and, as we discuss in detail, inherited the essential populist characteristics of the DP and *Milli Görüş* lineage.

### 3 Current Populist Parties and Actors

As of 2018, the Turkish party system has four major players. The AKP has won pluralities in all of the five legislative elections since its founding in 2002, 2007, 2011, June 2015, and November 2015. The party has been holding the majority of seats in the parliament and ruling with a single-party government for 16 years as of 2018, except the brief period between June 2015 and November 2015 elections. The main opposition party during the incumbency of the AKP has been the CHP, the oldest political party in Turkey with a left-wing, social democratic, secular ideology.

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<sup>5</sup>*Milli Görüş* movement is associated with a series of political parties that succeeded each other as they have been repeatedly banned by the Constitutional Court. These parties were the MNP, MSP, Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP), Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, FP), and Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP). Only the SP is still functioning.

Another major opposition party is the MHP with a right-wing, Turkish nationalist ideological outlook. And the fourth major player in the Turkish party system as of 2018 is Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP). HDP is the latest of a number of successive political parties, many of them closed down by the Constitutional Court, associated with the Kurdish political movement.

We argue that among these political parties, only the AKP could be considered as a populist party, since it is the only one harboring the core characteristics of populism.<sup>6</sup> The AKP was founded in 2001 by younger members of the *Milli Görüş* under the leadership of Erdoğan, who had fallen out with the leadership of the Virtue Party, then the standard-bearer party of the movement. Öniş (2015) divides the incumbency of AKP into three distinct subperiods in terms of the party's relative success in economic policies and democratic governance. He considers the period from 2002 to 2007 as the party's golden age. At the outset of their incumbency, the leaders of the AKP had defined themselves as "conservative democrats" rather than Islamists, drawing a parallel with the Christian democratic parties in the West, and had explicitly distanced themselves from the *Milli Görüş* movement (Akdoğan 2004). This period was characterized by swift economic recovery and growth, helped by favorable global economy, together with significant democratization reforms and improved foreign relations. Öniş (2015) highlights that these achievements were mutually reinforcing processes, strongly influenced by the prospect of EU membership.

The second phase of the AKP's incumbency spans from 2007 to 2011, a period of relative stagnation in terms of economic performance and democratization. During this period, Turkey's economic indicators had lost its momentum, the democratic reforms were stalled as the formal negotiation process with the EU reached an impasse, and Turkey's relations with its neighbors and allies deteriorated. Furthermore, this period was characterized by a critical showdown between the AKP and the military and judicial elites. Finally, the third phase of AKP's incumbency, from 2011 to the present, marks a period of disappointing economic performance, rising authoritarianism, and problematic relations for Turkey with its neighbors (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016; Öniş 2015). Many scholars of Turkish politics agree that Turkey has been going through a period of de-democratization and has evolved into a competitive authoritarian regime, especially since 2015 (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Somer 2017).

While the AKP adopted populism as a strategy of appealing to the Turkish electorate from its inception, in line with its political and ideological lineage (Taşkın 2013), certain key developments during its incumbency further increased the appeal of populism for the party. These events exacerbated the lack of trust between the

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<sup>6</sup>One question at this point might be whether the HDP could be considered a (left-wing) populist party as well. Adopting a radical democratic ideology and being a staunch supporter of minority rights, the HDP also employs antiestablishment appeals with a heavy emphasis on "the people" (Tekdemir 2016). However, the HDP does not favor plebiscitarian linkages between the people and rulers but advocates a bottom-up movement with expansive participatory mechanisms in decision-making. Therefore, in line with Barr's (2009) emphasis on preferences for plebiscitarian linkages being a key component of populism, we do not consider the HDP as a populist party. Yet we recognize that this is a contentious issue.

AKP leadership and the elites of the “center,” notably the military and judicial elites, and reinforced the sense among the former that the establishment would not allow a party of a periphery to rule given the opportunity.

A major crisis in this regard was over who was going to succeed president Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2007, as his 7-year term was about to end (Kalaycıoğlu 2015). The 1982 Constitution bestowed considerable powers upon the president, and the office was considered to be the linchpin of the establishment. The AKP had nominated Abdullah Gül, one of its founding leaders and then foreign minister, and was confident in his election, given that the president was to be elected by the members of the parliament and the AKP held majority of the seats. Yet, Gül’s candidacy provoked a strong reaction from the elites of the “center” due to his Islamist background. The military issued a public statement in the evening of the first round of votes in the parliament, declaring their strong discomfort with the prospect of Gül becoming the president of the Republic. The main opposition party CHP, which had boycotted the vote in the parliament, filed an appeal to the Constitutional Court on the grounds that the necessary quorum of members of parliament was not present and therefore the election was not valid. In a controversial decision, the Constitutional Court backed CHP’s appeal and annulled the election process.

While one could have expected the AKP leadership to back down in these circumstances given how political actors of the “periphery” have traditionally behaved in the face of strong reactions from the “center,” this was not the case in 2007. Drawing on its popularity at home and abroad largely thanks to the economic and democratic reforms of the 2002–2007 period, the AKP government immediately and publicly criticized the statement of the military, called for an early general election, and proposed constitutional amendments that stipulated direct popular election of the president. The general election of July 2007 was a resounding victory for the AKP; in the aftermath of the election, Gül was again nominated for presidency and subsequently elected by the newly formed parliament. Moreover, the constitutional amendments were approved by a referendum in October 2007, setting the stage for the first direct presidential election at the end of Gül’s term in 2014.

Less than a year after the crisis of the presidential election, the AKP faced another serious challenge when the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court Appeals filed a lawsuit to the Constitutional Court in March 2008. The chief prosecutor demanded that the AKP be closed down and its leader cadre, including Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül, be banned from politics on the charges of the party becoming “a focal point of anti-secular activities.” The filing of the lawsuit followed shortly after the AKP passed some constitutional changes in parliament, together with the MHP, that lifted the so-called headscarf ban in universities, only to be annulled by the Constitutional Court a few months later. The Court handed down its verdict in July of the same year, and while it acknowledged evidence supporting the charge, the AKP narrowly avoided closure by just one vote and was instead required to pay a heavy fine.

Meanwhile, the Istanbul police had started an investigation in the summer of 2007 on the suspicion that a group of military personnel intended to destabilize the country through a series of bombings and assassinations (Kalaycıoğlu 2012). This

investigation was quickly expanded to active and retired members of the military and police, journalists, businessmen, academics, civil society actors, and politicians in what came to be referred to as the “Ergenekon case.” It was alleged that a broad, clandestine network of secularists and nationalists within the military, bureaucracy, and civil society conspired to overthrow the government. This was just the beginning of a series of high-profile trials that continued until 2013 and witnessed the detention and imprisonment of hundreds of senior active and retired military officers, including the former chief of staff, accused of plotting a coup. Later, it was found out that these trials were initiated and supervised by police officers, prosecutors, and judges who were followers of the Islamist Gülen movement, now designated as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state, and were based on fabricated evidence and violation of due process. Their aim was to curb the political power of the military by tarnishing its image, sacking secular and nationalist senior officers in order to make way for lower-ranking officers who were clandestine Islamists and followers of the movement, and to intimidate the opponents of the AKP within the bureaucracy and civil society (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016).

The AKP leadership welcomed and actively supported these investigations and trials until they fell out with the Gülen movement in 2013 (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). When opposition parties, some members of the high judiciary, and civil society organizations had criticized the investigations by pointing to the violations of due process and inconsistencies in the evidence, the AKP accused them of providing moral and political support to “coup plotters” (Kalaycıoğlu 2012). The practical implications of these conspiracy-based trials, that is, the subduing of the armed forces as well as of the secularist opposition, were very appealing to the AKP so that one could talk of an AKP-Gülenist alliance behind them (Somer 2017). The pro-AKP and pro-Gülen media outlets went to great lengths to present these trials as heroic efforts to root out Turkey’s “deep state,” and these propaganda efforts were quite effective in Turkey and abroad, even among some leftist and liberal circles.

Emboldened by the trials’ success at paralyzing the military elite, in 2010 the AKP moved to redesign the high judiciary through a series of constitutional amendments in a time of heightened tensions between the government and high judiciary (Kalaycıoğlu 2012). While the amendments contained some provisions that expanded civil liberties, the crux of the changes was aimed at breaking the dominance of the secularist judges in the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors (Özbudun 2014). They also narrowed judicial privileges and the immunities of the military. The amendments were adopted in a highly polarized referendum with 58% of the votes in favor of them (Kalaycıoğlu 2012). Özbudun (2014, p. 156) notes that the new structure of the high judiciary as a result of the constitutional amendments “significantly weakened the possibility of challenges to the AKP government from the military and/or the judiciary.”

In short, during its tenure, the AKP faced the fundamental challenge that parties of the “periphery” have traditionally been subject to in the Turkish context—a deep suspicion, even hostility, by the elites of the “center” that wielded tutelary powers and acted to restrict the political arena when feeling threatened. Unlike its many

predecessors, however, the AKP did not back down during times of crises and successfully “moved” the crises to the electoral arena, confronting the elites in elections and referenda. The AKP has consistently emerged triumphant at the ballot box due to its impressive economic and democratic performance during its first term (2002–2007) and the charisma and political shrewdness of Erdoğan in playing to the dominant cleavage structures in the Turkish society.<sup>7</sup> This strategy depended on a heavy use of populist appeals, as we describe in the following section.

## 4 Populist Agendas and Strategies

We agree with Weyland (2001) that an analysis of populist actors’ strategies should not be focused on economic and distributive policies, socioeconomic structures, or social constituencies. Rather, populist strategies should be understood as a pattern of *political* rule with certain characteristics. The prevailing “minimal” definitions of populism that we employ to identify populist actors, especially those of Barr (2009) and Mudde (2007), explicate these characteristics as (1) a Manichean outlook of politics as a struggle of “the people” against the “power elite” where the populist leader represents “the people” and (2) an emphasis on the centrality of “people’s will” in politics, with an accompanying disdain for institutions of horizontal accountability, and a preference for direct, plebiscitarian linkages between the leader and citizens.

To analyze the agenda and strategies of Erdoğan, it is analytically useful to divide his tenure into two phases. As we have mentioned earlier, there is a scholarly consensus that the political regime of Turkey could be characterized as a “tutelary democracy” when the AKP came to power in 2002—the Turkish military, in alliance with the secular-republican elites that dominated high-level judiciary and bureaucracy, determined the contours of democratic competition and held a veto power over elected officials (Özbudun 2000; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). The nature of the regime was changed substantially by the end of AKP’s second term in 2011, when the AKP had subdued the elites of the “center” (Sommer 2017). This temporal distinction is important because it has a direct impact on how Erdoğan constructs an “us versus them” understanding of political conflict.

Two sensitive issues in Turkish politics from the perspective of these secular-republican elites have typically been the perceived twin threats of political Islam and Kurdish separatism (Jenkins 2001; Sommer 2017). Heightened threat perceptions in these areas have led the military and its secular-republican allies to intervene in politics. These interventions have taken the form of party closures, stripping of politicians of their political rights, and pressuring elected governments to pursue certain policies or to resign from power, as it happened in 1997. In addition, there were severe limitations regarding the expression of religiosity and Kurdish ethnicity

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<sup>7</sup>There is also systematic evidence that the AKP engaged in large-scale vote buying (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015) and strategically allocated public spending (Aytaç 2014).

in public institutions (e.g., use of Kurdish language, headscarf, etc.). All these interventions and policies were a source of resentment among the Kurdish minority as well as among the conservative majority of the Turkish population.

As such, this structure of Turkish politics presented Erdoğan with ample opportunity to construct an “us versus them” understanding of politics. In Erdoğan’s discourse, Turkish politics could have been summarized as a struggle between the conservative masses of Anatolia (the people) and the secular-republican elites who are disconnected from the values of the people:

Either the people will win and come to power, or the pretentious and oppressive minority—estranged from the reality of Anatolia and looking over it with disdain—will remain in power.<sup>8</sup>

In this Manichean view of politics, Erdoğan portrayed the secular-republican elites, embodied in the institutions of the army, the Constitutional Court, the presidency, and the like, as “the enemies of the people” since they “formed an alliance to prevent people from achieving power” (Dinçşahin 2012, p. 632). Naturally, Erdoğan presented himself and his party as the true representatives of “the people” in this struggle. His “outsider” status and humble socioeconomic background when he first rose to power facilitated his use of antiestablishment appeals (Barr 2009; Aytaç and Öniş 2014). During the 1980s and early 1990s, Erdoğan had served as a district and province head of the Islamist Welfare Party, and thus he was not considered part of the mainstream political establishment of the time. He had entered into political spotlight after a surprise win of the Istanbul municipality with just 25% of the votes in 1994. During his tenure, Erdoğan was handed a 10-month prison sentence and a ban from politics for reciting a poem with militant Islamist tones.<sup>9</sup> This allowed Erdoğan to present himself as a victim of the political establishment and to stress that his political trajectory reflected the struggle between the people and the elites in the Turkish politics.

In line with the populist principle of the centrality of “people’s will,” Erdoğan has a strictly majoritarian understanding of democracy and an accompanying disdain for institutions of horizontal accountability and preference for direct, plebiscitarian linkages between the leader and citizens. He often highlights the supremacy of the ballot box (e.g., “the degree of one’s power solely relies on the number of votes received from the people. A minority should not overpower the majority”<sup>10</sup>) and emphasizes that the decision-making authority rests firmly on “the people”: “It is going to be as you want. The Prime Minister and the President will be those whom you want. Of course, they will also be like you, one of you.”<sup>11</sup> When opposition leaders highlighted the virtues of institutions of horizontal accountability, such as the courts and presidency, Erdoğan rebuked them: “Because our source of legitimacy is

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Yağcı (2009, p. 116).

<sup>9</sup>The controversial verses read: “the mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the believers our soldiers.”

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Dinçşahin (2012, p. 634).

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Yağcı (2009, p. 135).

the people but theirs is not. They are trying to take legitimacy from certain institutions. And the people are saying ‘Don’t come to us if we are not the source of your legitimacy. Go and receive votes from dark chambers.’”<sup>12</sup>

Erdoğan’s hegemonic position in Turkish politics and “conquest of the state” (Somer 2017) by the end of AKP’s second term in 2011 required an adjustment to his populist strategy. As the institutions of the military and judiciary had effectively been subdued and even co-opted, they could no longer serve as targets of his populist discourse. Therefore in the post-2011 era, we do not observe Erdoğan framing the military and judiciary as part of the “elite” against “the people.” The targets of his populist strategy in this period have been the main opposition CHP, academics, intellectuals, and journalists who are not aligned with the government, the Western powers, and some vague actors that are imagined to plot against Turkey.

While Erdoğan had targeted the CHP in populist terms throughout his incumbency, he ratcheted up his attacks in the post-2011 period. He went on as far as accusing the CHP of operating in tandem with terrorist organizations.<sup>13</sup> Erdoğan’s discourse against opposition-minded intellectuals and academics was even harsher:

If you do not give up the fight with the people, with the people’s values, history, culture and their representatives, you will drown in your own ugliness. . . What kind of men are these? Who cares if you are an artist, a professor? First you will respect this people; you can never look down to this people.<sup>14</sup>

As Erdoğan has grown increasingly powerful against his domestic rivals, the need for a target in his populist strategy has led him to broaden his imagined antagonistic front against “the people” to international actors as well, especially after the coup attempt in 2016. He openly accused “the West” of supporting the coup attempt, emphasizing that it was quashed by ordinary people.<sup>15</sup> And he frequently refers to an international “mastermind” (*üst akıl*, which can also be translated as “higher intellect”), without specifying the actors, that “plays games over Turkey to divide, to weaken, and to swallow it if they can.”<sup>16</sup> This mastermind is a very flexible enemy for Erdoğan as he accuses it for being the real culprit behind a diverse set of events, such as the Gezi protests,<sup>17</sup> recognition of Armenian genocide by the German

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Yağcı (2009, p. 133).

<sup>13</sup><http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-40602395>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2016/06/22/cumhurbaskani-Erdoğandan-o-akademisyenlere-sert-tepki>

<sup>15</sup><http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/Erdoğan-bati-darbeden-yana>

<sup>16</sup><http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1219150-cumhurbaskani-Erdoğan-ust-akil-turkiye-uzerinde-oyun-oyunuyor>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/turkey-erdogan-corruption-foreign-plot-offense-charges.html>. See Ayaç et al. (2017) for an overview of Turkish government’s response to Gezi protests.

parliament,<sup>18</sup> the support of the USA to Kurdish groups in Syria,<sup>19</sup> and rising interest rates in Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

These populist appeals of Erdoğan have been accompanied by institutional changes that strengthened the power of the executive branch. Three constitutional amendments were especially significant in this respect: the 2007 amendments that stipulated election of the president by popular vote rather than the parliament, which largely rendered irrelevant the check-and-balance role of the presidential office against the government; the 2010 amendments that damaged the autonomy of the judiciary against the executive and legislative branches; and the 2017 amendments, the content of which was drafted behind closed doors and became public only after it was submitted to the parliament, that introduced an executive presidency dominating the legislative branch. It should be noted that none of these amendments were accepted in the parliament by consensus; rather, they were only approved after highly polarized referendums. Rather than seeking ways for reconciliation with the opposition groups over the content of these amendments, which often bundled non-related issues together, Erdoğan decided to present them in a take-it-or-leave-it manner to “the people,” confident of his popularity among the Turkish electorate.

Other institutional practices and changes have further weakened horizontal accountability. The AKP has increasingly relied on omnibus bills (*torba kanun*) that amend a large number of disparate, unrelated laws together (Hazama and Iba 2017). Often approved in late-night emergency sessions, omnibus bills are justified by the AKP on the grounds that they speed up the legislature, where they have a majority of seats anyway. Naturally, omnibus bills prevent a meaningful debate or careful scrutiny of the proposed changes and reduce the parliament into a rubber stamp institution (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016). This practice has taken a different form during the state of emergency declared in the aftermath of the coup attempt in July 2016, which still continues today, where executive decrees with the force of law have become the dominant form of law-making. In violation of the Constitution, the AKP amends laws that are not related to the state of emergency using these decrees and thereby completely sidelines the parliament. The parliament has taken further blows when members of parliament were stripped of their immunity from prosecution in 2016, a move that primarily targeted HDP legislators, and when changes in its internal regulations were adopted in 2017, which reduced the duration of speeches and discussion opportunities for opposition parties.

The failed coup attempt of July 2016 and its aftermath have allowed Erdoğan to dominate state institutions and shrink the political space for the opposition. Erdoğan’s defiant response to the coup attempt and ability to mobilize thousands of people to face the putschists on the streets have elevated his popularity to “mythic

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.diken.com.tr/Erdoğan-soykirim-kararında-buyuk-resmi-gordu-ust-akil-almanyaya-talimat-vermis/>

<sup>19</sup><https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2014/10/turkey-Erdoğan-middle-east-master-mind.html>

<sup>20</sup><http://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/ekonomi/520582.aspx>

proportions among significant portions of Turkey’s population” (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016, p. 520). Esen and Gümüüşcü (2017) note that, as a result of the state of emergency, Erdoğan has come to rule over a de facto presidential system, with a heavy reliance on executive decrees that are exempt from legal scrutiny. These executive decrees have led to the removal or suspension of tens of thousands from the state bureaucracy, judiciary, and the military, which in turn crippled the already traumatized institutions of the Turkish state. Erdoğan’s newly acquired confidence, mass popularity, and the institutional prerogatives bestowed upon by the state of emergency in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt opened up a wide political space for him to push further his populist agenda.

## 5 The Appeal of Populism in the Population

What is the appeal of populism in the Turkish electorate? In this section we analyze the prevalence and correlates of populist attitudes among Turkish voters by drawing on data from a nationally representative survey ( $N = 1954$ ) fielded in spring 2017.<sup>21</sup> Our dependent variable is an index of populist attitudes constructed by participants’ responses to a set of statements, which reflects the main theoretical dimensions of populism, as suggested by the relevant literature (Barr 2009; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). These dimensions are (1) a Manichean outlook of politics as a moral struggle, (2) centrality of “people’s will,” (3) anti-elitism or antiestablishment feelings, and (4) a disdain for institutions of horizontal accountability.

To measure acceptance of populist attitudes, we presented respondents with two statements related to each of these four dimensions (a total of eight statements, see Table 1) that are frequently employed in empirical studies of populism (Akkerman et al. 2014; Hawkins et al. 2012; Castanho Silva et al. 2017). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a five-point scale, with options ranging from “I do not agree at all” (coded 1) to “I agree completely” (coded 5). As agreement with the statements indicates acceptance of populist attitudes, we created an additive index that sums up the answers given to eight statements. We then transformed the resulting index to a 0–100 scale so that higher values indicate more populist attitudes.

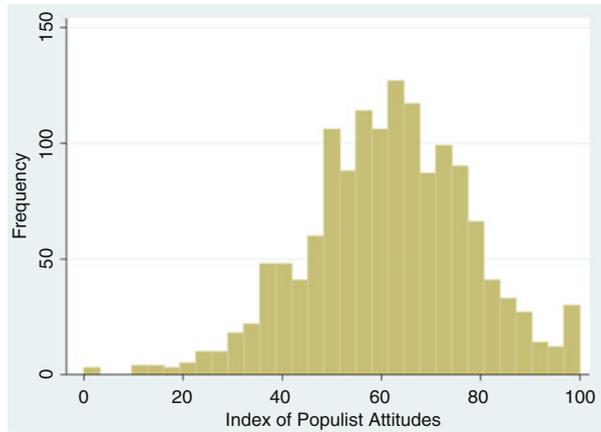
The resulting distribution of the index of populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate is presented in Fig. 1. It can be seen that the distribution is nearly normal with a mean of 61 (out of 100), and a small group of respondents have extremely high values. In Fig. 2, this aggregate index is broken down to its four component dimensions, where a respondent can score between 2 (populist statements are

<sup>21</sup>The survey is part of a larger project conducted by S. Erdem Aytaç, Ali Çarkoğlu, and Sedef Turper from Koç University. The interviews were conducted by Frekans Research ([www.frekans.com.tr](http://www.frekans.com.tr)) between February 17 and April 2 of 2017. The Open Society Foundation-Turkey and Koç University provided funding for the study.

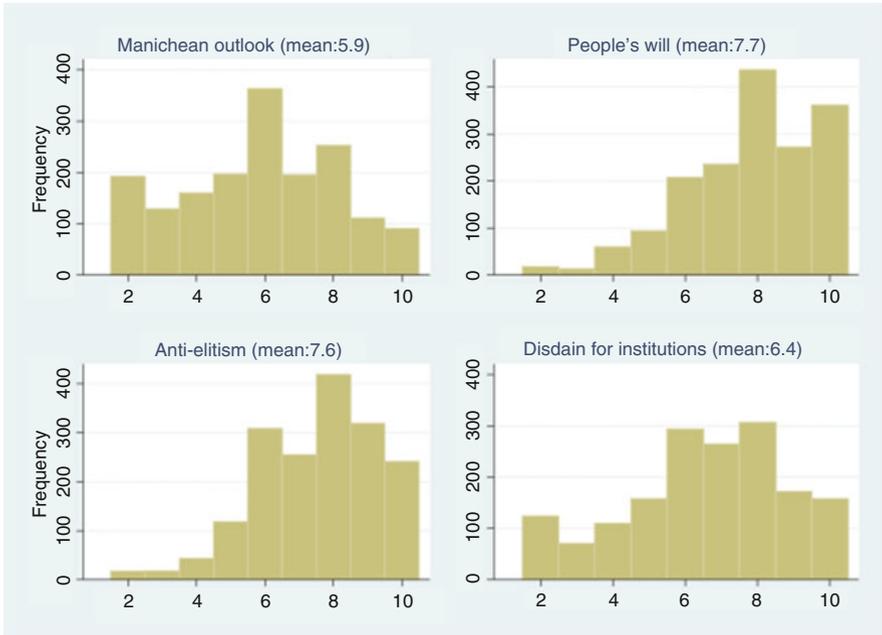
**Table 1** Statements used to measure populist attitudes

<i>Manichean outlook</i>
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil
What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles
<i>People’s will</i>
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions
Referendums are the ultimate measure of the will of the people
<i>Anti-elitism</i>
Most politicians do not care about the people
The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress
<i>Disdain for horizontal accountability</i>
Political leaders do not need to be checked by institutions since people make their decision in the elections
Having a strong leader in government is good for Turkey even if the leader bends the rules to get things done

**Fig. 1** The distribution of the index of populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate



rejected completely) and 10 (populist statements are accepted completely) for each dimension. In the Turkish case, the dimensions of people’s will and anti-elitism are particularly strong with average scores of 7.7 and 7.6, respectively. For example, about 70% of the respondents agree with the statement that “referendums are the ultimate measure of the will of the people,” and about 67% agree that “the power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress.” There is also a relatively large portion of the electorate that displays a high level of disdain for institutions of horizontal accountability. About half of respondents (47%) agree that “political leaders do not need to be checked by institutions since people make their decision in the elections.” A Manichean outlook of politics is not as strongly pronounced among Turkish voters as other dimensions of populism—for instance, only about a third (34%) of respondents consider compromise in politics as “selling out on one’s principles.”



**Fig. 2** The distribution of the four dimensions of populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate

A multivariate analysis of the individual-level correlates of populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate reveals that partisans of the incumbent AKP are significantly more likely to have populist attitudes than partisans of other major parties and nonpartisans, even after taking account of the effects of several demographic and socioeconomic factors (Table 2). Moreover, people who are relatively more satisfied with their lives, the way democracy works, and their economic circumstances are actually *more* likely to hold populist attitudes. Populist attitudes are generally thought to be “grounded in a deep discontent, not only with politics but also with societal life in general” (Spruyt et al. 2016, p. 342)—but the opposite seems to be true in Turkey. This is likely due to the fact that the long-time incumbent AKP is a party with a populist agenda, and partisanship strongly shapes both populist attitudes and the evaluations that we considered. Specifically, individuals who are content with the populist party in power (including its partisans) are more likely to have more optimistic outlook in general *and* more populist views. This is confirmed in our survey as well—partisans of the incumbent AKP express significantly more satisfaction with their lives, democracy, and economy than partisans of other parties (Fig. 3).

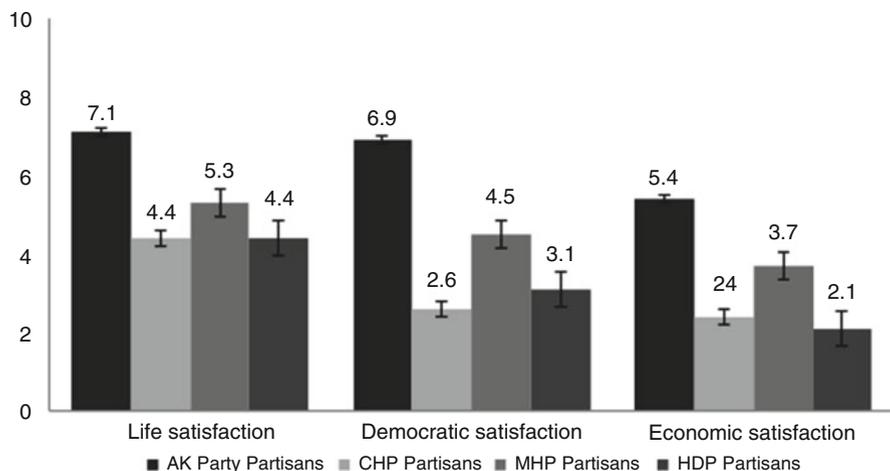
Our analysis depicts a picture where populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate are significantly and positively related to being a partisan of the incumbent AKP. Therefore the driver of mass populist attitudes in Turkey seems to be the fact that a party with a populist agenda has long been in power, and supporters of this party

**Table 2** Correlates of populist attitudes in the Turkish electorate

Dep. variable: Index of populist attitudes	Coefficient	SE
Female	-0.300	(1.040)
Age	-0.005	(0.038)
Education	0.639	(0.536)
(Log) Income	0.113	(0.445)
Life satisfaction	0.763**	(0.233)
Democratic satisfaction	0.603*	(0.256)
Economic satisfaction	1.249***	(0.248)
Treated fairly in society	-0.474	(0.656)
Trust in parliament	0.010	(0.260)
Trust in parties	-0.294	(0.258)
Pro-EU	-0.335	(1.044)
AKP partisan	4.316***	(1.265)
CHP partisan	1.960	(1.653)
MHP partisan	-2.196	(2.356)
HDP partisan	3.193	(3.364)
Constant	46.99***	(4.634)
Observations	1121	

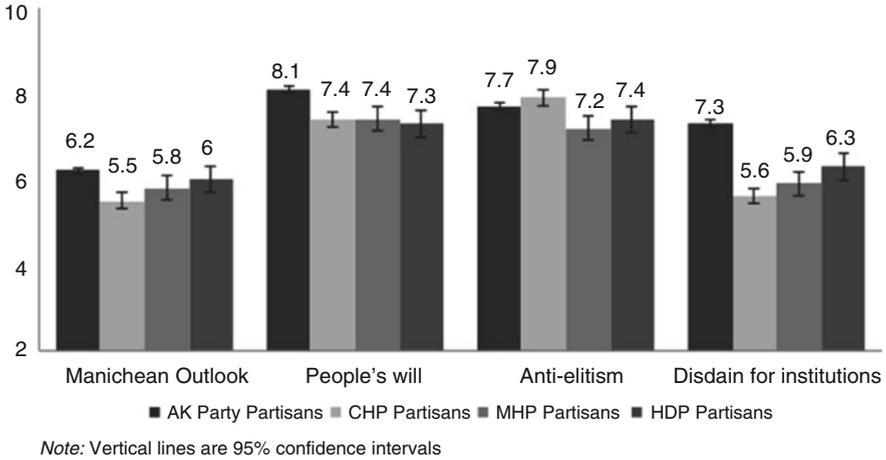
OLS regression with standard errors in parentheses. Post-stratification weights based on gender, age, education level, and region are applied

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



Note: Vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals

**Fig. 3** Partisanship and satisfaction with life, democracy, and economy (on a 0–10 scale where higher values indicate more satisfaction)



**Fig. 4** Partisanship and support for dimensions of populism (on a 2–10 scale where higher values indicate more support for the dimension)

have internalized the core premises of populism. When we explore which dimensions of populism are more prevalent among the partisans of the AKP, we see that AKP partisans score considerably higher than other partisans on the dimensions of centrality of people’s will and disdain for institutions of horizontal accountability (Fig. 4). They also tend to display higher levels of Manichean outlook of politics, but the differences with other party supporters are not that large. These results are in line with Erdoğan’s populist discourse that extols people’s will and casts institutions of horizontal accountability as impediments to the exercise of people’s will by the elected government.

## 6 Conclusion

The center-periphery cleavage emphasized by Mardin (1973) proves to be a useful framework for understanding populism in Turkey. The sway of secular-republican elites on politics through non-elected institutions has given politicians of the periphery incentives to engage in populism. As such, an antagonistic narrative of Turkish politics as a struggle between the elites of the center and the conservative majority of the Turkish population has been the bread and butter of peripheral parties in electoral competition. The competition between the current incumbent AKP and main opposition CHP can be seen as the latest incarnation of this historical, politicized cleavage, where the AKP and Erdoğan have cast themselves as the true representatives of “the people.”

With the momentum of the success of the economic and democratic reforms during its first term, aided by the favorable global economic conditions and the prospect of EU membership, the AKP weathered the challenges posed by the elites

of the center thanks to its popularity in the ballot box. Furthermore, by the end of its second term in 2011, the AKP subdued the military-judiciary elite and ended the era of tutelary democracy in Turkey (Somer 2017), though Erdoğan still continues to employ populist appeals, albeit with a slightly different narrative than before as we described. Our survey, designed to investigate the “demand” side of populism, reveals that, in a political context where a populist party has been in power for 16 years, the constituency of this party seems to have embraced principles of populism, even though they do not feel marginalized in the current political system.

In a broader comparative context, our results suggest that the dynamics of mass support for populism could be quite different in a case of populism in power than in cases of populism in opposition, which has been the overwhelming focus of the relevant literature so far, for understandable reasons. The Turkish case illustrates that populism does not necessarily need to be “grounded in a deep discontent” (Spruyt et al. 2016, p. 342)—those with positive views of the political system and the economy could also possess strongly populist attitudes, given that their preferred party is in power and it engages in politics on a populist platform. This finding highlights the crucial role of elite discourse in the prevalence and strength of populism. As long as political elites continue to opt for heavily populist platforms in politics, we might expect populist attitudes to prevail in a society, even if the resentments that might have fuelled the populist party have lost their salience.

With respect to the Turkish case, what followed the era of tutelary democracy has not been a more pluralistic and liberal democracy as some hoped, however (Öniş 2015; Özbudun 2014). Instead, the AKP has become increasingly Islamist and authoritarian, and the Turkish political system has been experiencing a period of deteriorating horizontal and vertical accountability (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Somer 2017). Given the presence of a large constituency that seems to have internalized populist values and an excessive concentration of power in the executive, we can expect populism to continue to be the dominant pattern of rule in Turkey for the foreseeable future.

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