

Measuring Populist Discourse of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: A Quantitative Content Analysis

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Abstract

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long been considered a populist leader. This study attempts to investigate the evolution of Erdoğan's populist discourse by examining his political campaign speeches throughout all years of his rule. Using computer-based quantitative content analysis, we analyze the dimensions of populism in Erdoğan's speeches over time. Our data includes 42 election campaign speeches held between 2004 and 2018. We demonstrate how three dimensions of populism (people-centrism, anti-elitism, moralistic imagination of politics) manifest in Erdoğan's speeches and how Erdoğan's degree of populism varies from one election campaign to another. People-centrist approach constitutes the largest share of his discourse in comparison to other dimensions throughout all campaign speeches. Erdoğan's anti-elitist rhetoric was insignificant during the initial period of his incumbency. However, it increased considerably in the 2014 and 2018 election campaigns. We connect these empirical trends to the particular events in Turkish politics. Thus, this study contributes to the field by providing an empirical approach to Erdoğan's speeches.

Keywords

Content analysis; election campaigns; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; Turkish politics; Turkish populism

Introduction

Due to the rise of populist parties and leaders in the last decade, studies of populism expanded and gained popularity. Today, a wide range of politicians on the right (i.e., Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Victor Orban, and Marine Le Pen) and on the left (i.e., Bernie Sanders and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela) are characterized as populists. However, many scholars argue that they do not illustrate precisely the same characteristics of populism (e.g., Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Pappas 2016).

In this study, our purpose is to answer two research questions. The first question inquires how three dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, and moralistic imagination of politics) manifest in Erdoğan's speeches throughout the political campaigns

from 2004 to 2018. Although people-centrism is the main feature of populism, other features such as anti-elitism and moralistic imagination of politics are also extensively used by the Turkish leader. Therefore, the investigation into this question should reveal the distribution of three dimensions of populism in his speeches over the years of his rule. The second question looks at which political campaigns demonstrate the most populist rhetoric of Erdoğan.

To answer this question, we utilize a computer-based content analysis which means that a pre-defined dictionary serves as a measure of populism. A dictionary is a thesaurus, a canonical concept associated with a list of equivalent synonyms. But it has turned into a fixed expression. It is considered that the dictionary allows being exclusive to single out key features by selecting the terms linked to each key feature. So, in the empirical part of our study, we use computer-based content analysis of the election campaign speeches of Erdoğan between 2004 and 2018.¹ The advantage of automated text analysis methods is the capacity to analyze large quantities of text. We analyze texts in the original language to capture Erdoğan's unique rhetorical style.

For the dictionary-based automated text analysis, we used the R software package from the *quanteda* family developed by Ken Benoit. We adopted Ezgi Elçi's dictionary (2019), revising several keywords and using the Keyword-in-Context analysis to clarify the conceptual framework of the three dimensions of populism. In addition, Turkish is an agglutinating language, and one word can have many meanings in a specific context. Hence, we further refined and adjusted the dictionary in the course of the analysis.

In the first section, we elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of populism. The second section provides an in-depth discussion of the roots of Turkish populism. After the detailed description of our methods and data, we discuss our findings. The final section summarizes and presents our key findings.

Populism: Conceptualization and its Ambiguities

No consensus on what constitutes populism exists and hence the phenomenon does not have a formal definition. Scholars examine populism as a communication style (i.e., Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a movement (i.e., Di Tella 1965), a thin-centered ideology (i.e., Mudde

¹ Corpus of speeches can be provided upon request as it consists of hundreds of pages of textual data. We accessed Erdoğan's speeches at the official website of the National Library *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Millet Kütüphanesi* (The Nation's Library). This time frame of analysis was chosen for two reasons: Erdoğan came to power in 2003 and 2004 marked his first political campaign speech. Our last date is 2018 because it is the last date when Erdoğan gave a speech during political campaigns.

2004), discourse (i.e., Laclau 1977), and a political strategy to maintain power (i.e., Betz 2002). Such a broad variability in the approaches towards populism can be explained by the fact that it falls short of being a self-sufficient ideology, yet contains elements of different ideologies and ideological concepts and is largely context-dependent.

The term “populism” originated in Latin America and its interpretation has spread across the world (Barr 2018, 44) with an emphasis on the links between charismatic leadership and power. As Mudde and Kaltwasser point out, the popular agency approach considers it to be “a positive force for the mobilization of the (common) people and for the development of a communitarian model of democracy”(2017, 3). In other words, populism brings freedom through radical democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 3-4). Further, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 19-20) argue that such an approach disregards the demand side of populism and offer an alternative definition that captures two essential characteristics of populism, “appeal to people” and “denunciation of elites.” Accordingly, populism is “as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde 2004, 543). Mudde describes populism as a thin-centered ideology because it lacks the coherency of other ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, or capitalism. He also argues that populists have a Manichean worldview. That is to say, there are mere “friends and foes” (2004, 544). To date, Mudde’s “minimal definition” (Pauwels, 2011) is one of the most popular definitions in the field of populist studies.

Other attempts to define populism include Jan-Werner Müller who conceptualized populism as “people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior” (2017, 20). He interprets populism as a “moralistic imagination of politics.” Further, he adds another core element: “anti-pluralism” based on moral claims. Along similar lines, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) offer three core characteristics of populism: reference to people, anti-elitism, and populism as a “monolithic group” that excludes foes of the nation (2007, 3). Based on the three-fold definition, they distinguish thin and thick populism, concluding that “thin populism” is a “political communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (2007, 3).

The diverse conceptual approaches to populism that we discuss above agree on two core points: anti-elitism and people-centrism. However, these two core points alone are not enough to put the label “populist” on a politician. Other ideologies (i.e., socialism) also use people-centrism and anti-elitism in their discourse, and thus we need to narrow down our definition (Elçi, 2019). In the interpretation of Mudde (2004) and Jagers and Walgrave (2007),

we come across “exclusion” as an additional core point. However, Elçi (2019) mentions many populist parties and leaders who display inclusive features (e.g. SYRIZA and Podemos). Thus, exclusion alone cannot be a third core point. Müller and Kaltwasser’s argument (2017) emphasized that anti-pluralism strengthened with a moralistic discourse is a crucial factor to differentiate populists. So, in addition to anti-elitism and people centrism, we add a third core point: the moralistic imagination of politics.

Literature on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Populism

Although Recep Tayyip Erdoğan engaged in politics since the 1990s, his impact on Turkey has been rather limited until he came to power with the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002.

Populist elements emerged at the very dawn of Erdoğan’s political career. After the 1997 military memorandum, known as the February 28 process, Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) lost its power and Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan had to resign. In the power vacuum, Erdoğan began to act as RP’s leader, participating in the party events beyond Istanbul (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001, 84). In December 1997, during a visit to Siirt, a city in southeastern Turkey, he addressed the situation with political Islam as follows:

There is no freedom of expression in Turkey... our reference is Islam. They can never digest us. Even Western people have freedom of belief. Why can it not be respected in Turkey? Minarets are our bayonets, domes are our helmets, and mosques are our barracks. Nobody will be able to silence the call to prayer. We will surely end racial discrimination in Turkey. Because RP do not agree with other parties ... they tried every possible way to prevent RP from coming to power. But no power could prevent this.
(As cited in Hurriyet 2021)

The political establishment was not pleased with such a speech. In the aftermath, Erdoğan was banned from politics for five years and spent four months in prison (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001, 85-86). Allegedly, these experiences strengthened his belief that politics in Turkey should belong to the people rather than Kemalist elites.

In the 2000s, Erdoğan gained considerable visibility and impact as a politician. In this early period of his political career, he was under heavy scrutiny by the Turkish political establishment² because of his Islamist background³ (Türk 2018, 150-51). To consolidate power and avoid clashes with his political opponents, he attempted to establish stable

² Composed of the military, business circles, judiciary, and top brass of Turkish bureaucracy.

³ For detailed analysis over Erdoğan’s Islamist background see Ruşen Çakır and Fehm Çalmuk’s *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - Bir Dönüşüm Öyküsü* (2001).

relations inside and outside the country. Therefore, the first term of his government (2002-2007) is characterized by an insignificant degree of populism by many researchers (e.g., Türk 2018; Aytaç and Elçi 2019). However, the tendency towards populism is already noticeable. For example, in 2003, in an interview with Deborah Sontag, Erdoğan claimed that “there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks” and “your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks” (Sontag 2003). In such a populist dichotomy, “Black Turks” are associated with Anatolian groups who are Sunni Muslims, whereas “White Turks” represent secular followers of Kemalist principles (Yılmaz 2021, 4).

Some studies examine the populist tendencies of Erdoğan’s party, AKP (Sawae 2020; Dincsaahin 2012; Elçi 2019; Aytaç and Elçi 2019). For example, Aytaç and Elçi’s (2019) survey reveals that nearly 70% of Turkish voters agree that “referendums are the ultimate measure of the will of the people,” while 67% support the statement that “the power of the few special interests prevents our country from making progress.” The survey also demonstrates that supporters of AKP are more likely to have populist attitudes than supporters of other parties. Thus, we can argue that Erdoğan’s populism is focused on satisfying Turkish voters.

Empirical studies of populism in Turkey are few but insightful (e.g., Öney 2018; Aytaç and Elçi 2019; Elçi 2019). For example, Ezgi Elçi (2019) conducted a quantitative content analysis of parliamentary speeches of Turkish political leaders. His findings reveal that Erdoğan scores more populist than other leaders while Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of CHP, is the least populist leader. It also described how Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) exploits Manichean discourse, whereas the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) stands as an anti-elitist party. Overall, Elçi argues that Turkish democracy is damaged by continuous populism exploited by not only Erdoğan but also other political leaders.

In sum, Erdoğan’s populism is well-covered in academic studies, yet little work has thoroughly examined its particular dimensions (people-centrism, anti-elitism, and moralistic imagination of politics), as well as its evolution. This study focuses on this gap. We explore how the three dimensions of populism are distributed in Erdoğan’s public speeches during his six election campaigns between 2004 and 2018. In addition, we unveil the dynamics of Erdoğan’s populist rhetoric, identifying campaign speeches that exhibit the most intense populist discourse. As a result, we explain Erdoğan’s evolution as a populist leader.

Methodology and Data

Many populism studies lack a structured approach to measuring populism. However, many researchers (e.g., Jagers and Walgraves 2007; Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels 2011; Pauwels 2011; Elçi 2019) conducted content analysis for the measurement of populist actors and parties. As such studies show, computer-based content analysis is a rigorous and adaptive research technique that allows the analysis of large volumes of textual data quickly and efficiently (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011, 1272-73).

Units of measurement in the computer-based content analysis are words. The most crucial procedure in computer-based content analysis is dictionary development. For instance, in regards to classical content analysis, Pauwels (2011) argued that while formulating the codebook researchers can be highly subjective. Similarly, Rose et al (2015) claim that manual dictionary development is prone to biases in choosing some specific words and taking no notice of others. Taking these concerns over verification and validity, we avoid developing a new dictionary. We rely on Elçi's dictionary that not only combines several dictionaries of forefront researchers such as Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), Pauwels (2011), and Espinal (2015), but also adds new words to grasp the particularities of Turkish populism.

The main goal of our quantitative content analysis using R is to count the frequency of terms in our dictionary in each dimension over all of Erdoğan's speeches that we analyze. The automated dictionary-based approach is a reliable method because it avoids human decision-making as part of the text analysis. The quality of computer-based content analysis is defined by the validity of the dictionary and contextual sensitivity. To forestall the problem that the same word can change meaning within different contexts, we use Keyword-in-Context analysis. Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) propose to use a combination of classical and computer-based content analysis by making conscious decisions on selected words when there is a reference to the people and negativity towards the elites (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011, 1280). We checked the face validity of terms in the dictionary by doing the Keyword-in-Context analysis for all terms to ensure that they reveal the analyzed dimension of populism. Words marked with an asterisk in Table 1 required specific attention. For example, we removed the term "compromise" used by Elçi from our dictionary because Keyword-in-Context verification revealed that this word has a non-populist meaning.

For computer-based content analysis, agglutinating languages such as Turkish, Hungarian, Finnish, and Estonian are particularly challenging because words may contain different morphemes. For instance, the Turkish word *insan-lar-dan* (from the people) contains a stem (*insan*) and a two-word element (*lar-dan*). The word *lar* identifies plurality,

whereas *dan* stands for “from.” Such and similar suffixes that can introduce a bias of false-positive words were removed from the list of populist words.⁴ In sum, data cleaning included removing false-positive words and stopwords.

Populism in our study is operationalized by using three dimensions of populism. Accordingly, our dictionary consists of three categories: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and moralistic imagination of politics (see Table 1).

Table 1: Dictionary for the Quantitative Content Analysis

Anti-elitism		People-centrism		Moralistic Imagination of Politics	
<i>Turkish</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Turkish</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Turkish</i>	<i>English</i>
Darbe	Coup*	Egemenli*	Sovereignty*	Tehdit*	Threat*
Egemenler*	Hegemons*	Ezilen*	Obsessed*	Tezgaah*	Set up*
Elit*	Elite*	Halk*	People*	Hain*	Traitor*
Oligar*	Oligarch*	Irade*	Will*	Ihanet*	Betray*
Seçkin*	Notable*	Millet*	People*	Kirli*	Dirty*
Lobi	Lobby*	Referandum*	Referendum*	Odak*	Power*
Vesayet*	Tutelage*	Sandık*/sandığ*	Ballot box*	Yalan*	Lie*
Yolsuzlu*	Corrupt*	Kardeş*	Brother/sister*		

Source: The list of words is adopted from Elçi 2019, p.16

Election campaigns display an intense polarization due to political leaders’ aims to achieve political success (Doğanay et al 2016, 117), hence campaign speeches present a fruitful source for a study of populism. In the Turkish political context, the intensity of such polarization significantly increased after Erdoğan came to power. Particularly, during the 2007 election campaign and thereafter, his rage toward several groups among other military and judiciary elites, interest rate lobby, foreign powers, and Gülen Movement began to unfold (Türk 2018). Erdoğan used election campaigns as platforms to mobilize people and practice populist rhetoric in public speeches. Due to the high amount of election campaign speeches made by Erdoğan, we sampled only the speeches that Erdoğan gave in the largest

⁴ False positive words as in Elçi’s study: *halkalı**, *halkapınar**, *halkbank**, *milletler**, *milletli**, *milletvekil*. Due to it was unnoticed by Elçi, we have added another irrelevant words: *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi* (Grand National Assembly of Turkey), *Birleşmiş Milletler* (United Nations), *Millet Bahçesi* (The National Garden), *millet kuraathane* (the nation’s coffee), *darbesavar* (the anti-coup), *halkbank*, *halk ekmek fabrikası* (the nations’ bread factory), *dostluk halkası* (the friendship ring), *halka* (ring), *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People’s Party), *halkoylaması* (referendum), *hava kirliliği* (air pollution), *kirli hava* (dirty air), *odaklı* (oriented), *odaklanmak- odaklamak* (focus).

cities of Turkey's seven regions: Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Antalya, Samsun, Van, and Diyarbakır. However, in cases when Erdoğan skipped one of those cities, we sample the second-largest city or the third-largest city.⁵ We collected a total of 42 election campaign speeches. Data consist of speeches in general elections (2007, 2011, and 2018) and local elections (2004, 2009, and 2014).⁶ The lack of data on the 2015 general elections is the main limitation of the study. As Erdoğan became president in 2014, he selected Ahmet Davutoğlu to succeed him. While taking the leadership of AKP, Davutoğlu organized election campaigns in 2015. Thus, Erdoğan did not hold election speeches that year.⁷

Findings and Discussion

Firstly, we attempt to determine what dimensions of populist rhetoric are more prominent in Erdoğan's discourse. Our study reveals that people-centrist ideas constitute the overwhelming majority of his rhetoric, from 96.6% in 2004 to at least 86.5% in 2014. As such, the people become the main dimension of his populism, and references to people constitute the largest part of his populist rhetoric.⁸

Figure 1 demonstrates that anti-elitism and moralistic political imagination were at their lowest during Erdoğan's early incumbency while the share of people-centrism was at its highest. The reason behind this trend, perhaps, lies in Erdoğan being cautious not to provoke the Kemalist establishment with anti-elitist and moralistic imagination of politics. From 2007 onward, we see that the share of people-centrism slightly decreases, while anti-elitism and a moralistic political imagination worldview rises. Indeed, we cannot understand this phenomenon without taking into account the context of the 2007 presidential election process. AKP received great support from international allies and the Turkish masses (Cay 2019). Despite the tensions between conservative AKP and the Kemalist elites that had begun a few months before the election, Erdoğan's insistence on AKP's presidential candidate exacerbated the conflict. The Kemalist elites were able to prevent the election of Abdullah Gül, an AKP candidate, even though Erdoğan pushed forward with the early elections and challenged the Kemalist elites by juxtaposing their elitist rhetoric with a heavy

⁵ For example, in 2007 we selected Ağrı instead of Van. Whereas in 2009, Bursa, Elazığ, and Konya were selected instead of Istanbul Van and Ankara, respectively.

⁶ We could not start the date from 2002 because Erdoğan was subject to the political ban until 2003. Thus, he could not hold political campaign speeches in the 2002 general elections.

⁷ Highly disputed constitutional amendments held in 2017 once again put Erdoğan in charge of AKP.

⁸ It is worth noting that people-centric terms, such as *millet* (nation) and *kardeşlerim* (my brothers and sisters), are in the top 50 of most frequently used terms in Erdoğan's speeches.

populist one. Erdoğan's criticism of the Kemalist establishment continued (Dinçşahin 2012). Hence, the share of anti-elitism and moralistic imagination of politics in his speeches increased.

Figure 1 also shows that the share of moralistic imagination of politics hits the peak in 2014. An increase in Erdoğan's heavier moralistic populist discourse lies in two core events. The first event is the Gezi Park protests of 2013 which began after a development project was authorized. The project was aimed at building an artillery barrack and a small shopping mall in place of Gezi Park trees. When Erdoğan insisted on setting up the project, protesters occupied main squares across the country. As news about clashes between protesters and police forces emerged in the international media, Erdoğan got alarmed. His concerns were justified. Multiple recent examples of political crises in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen were still fresh in memory. With the development of social media networks and digital communication tools, transaction costs of organizing a protest or coordinating a social movement dropped significantly. Many events of the so-called Arab Spring were a part of an ad hoc stream. Importantly, the Gezi Park protest movement united people of multiple backgrounds: left-wing liberals, women wearing headscarves, nationalists, football fans, and Kurds. To discredit the protesters, Erdoğan addressed the role of the "interest rate lobby,"⁹ social media, "internal traitors," and foreign powers in organizing and promoting protests.

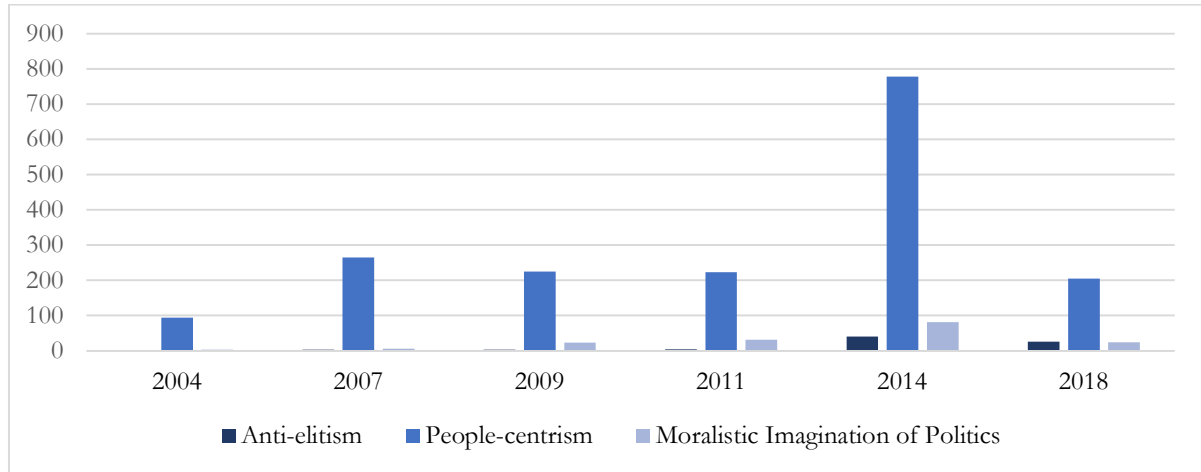
The second event is the conflict between Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement in December 2013. As anti-corruption investigations began on December 17, 2013, the police detained several key political figures, including Erdoğan's son and top-brass bureaucrats. As the conflict escalated, Erdoğan launched large-scale purges, blaming the judiciary and police forces for being influenced by the Gülen Movement. He initiated corruption scandals and blamed foreign powers and the Gülen Movement for plotting against the government (Türk 2018, 156-57). Later, he began to call his new political opponents *hain* (traitors) and labeled them as *kirli* (dirty). In the aftermath of these events, the significant increase in the moralistic imagination of politics in Erdoğan's 2014 speeches is therefore not surprising.

Anti-elitism strongly manifests itself again in the 2018 political campaigns amid the failed coup. An unprecedented attempt to overthrow Erdoğan's regime on July 15, 2016, took hundreds of lives and changed the political atmosphere in Turkey. The government declared a state of emergency. Shortly after, Erdoğan cracked down on his political

⁹ The term "interest rate lobby" includes investors, economists, and journalists who mention raising base interest rates as a macroeconomic tool. In Erdoğan's interpretation, interest rates should be low to curb inflation. His theory goes against classical macroeconomics theory which uses high interest rates as a tool to slow down inflation.

opponents (Türk 2018, 157-58). To re-consolidate his power, Erdoğan held democracy watch rallies and boosted his appeal to the people based on the narrative of “the people” standing up against “foreign elites” who seek to hurt the country. Looking at significant political events, we notice a stronger use of populist elements in Erdoğan’s speech: referring to his people, creating enemies, and excluding some groups while favoring others.

Figure 1. Three Dimensions of Erdoğan’s Populism



Source: Authors

In Figure 2, we show the total frequency of populist words through campaign speeches. Erdoğan held the most populist speeches in 2007 and 2014. The upsurge from 2004 to 2007 can be explained by the growing tensions before and after the 2007 presidential election process. Agreeing with the opposition over a consensus candidate, the Turkish military implied that intervention is possible if an Islamist candidate attempts to run for the presidency. For example, Yaşar Büyükanıt, the former 25th of general staff, highlighted the following in April 2007:

The president to be elected is also the commander-in-chief of the Turkish Armed Forces. In this respect, it is closely related to the TSK. We believe that both our president and our commander-in-chief are loyal to the basic values of the republic, the ideal of the secular, democratic and social state of law expressed in our constitution, but to the unitary structure of the state, but not in words but in substance, and that a president will be elected there in a way that reflects this in his actions. (Hürriyet 2007)

Furthermore, a night before the Grand National Assembly of Turkey elections on 27 April 2007, the Turkish Armed Forces released the so-called “e-memorandum”, stating that

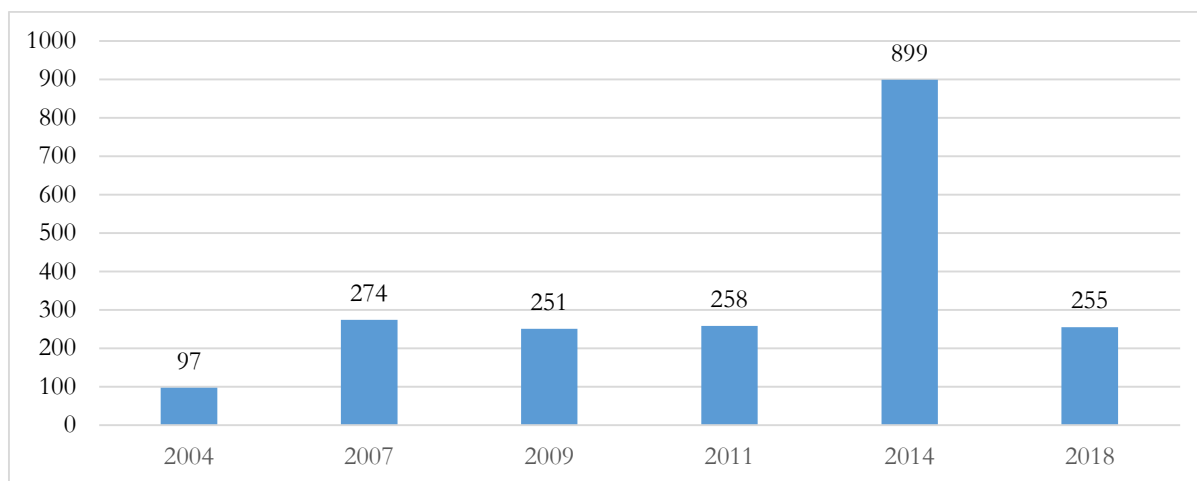
It is observed that some circles who have been carrying out endless efforts to disturb fundamental values of the Republic of Turkey, especially secularism, have escalated their

efforts recently... Those activities include requests for redefinition of fundamental values and attempts to organise alternative celebrations instead of our national festivals symbolizing unity and solidarity of our nation. Those who carry out the mentioned activities which have turned into an open challenge against the state, do not refrain from exploiting holy religious feelings of our people, and they try to hide their real aims under the guise of religion [...] Turkish Armed Forces are concerned about the recent situation. It should not be forgotten that the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in those arguments, and absolute defenders of secularism. Also, the Turkish Armed Forces are definitely against these arguments and negative comments. They will display their attitude and action openly and clearly whenever it is necessary. (BBC NEWS 2007)

Consequently, the Turkish military aimed to use the secularism debate to re-design Turkish politics. Erdoğan was nevertheless determined not to be as defensive as previous governments. In response to the “e-memorandum,” he emphasized the significance of the people’s will and decided to hold a snap election in July 2007. During the campaign, he claimed that elites do not want the people to have power, emphasizing the dichotomy of “elites vs. the people” (Dinçşahin 2012, 10). As a result, in 2007 his populist discourse escalated and the frequency of populist key terms increased in comparison to 2004.

In addition, Figure 2 demonstrates that Erdoğan’s total number of populist words surged in 2014. The long-running Gezi Park protests of 2013 and the unexpected clash with the Gülen Movement before the 2014 local election forced Erdoğan to construct new “enemies.” The 2014 presidential election marked the beginning of the most populist era in Erdoğan’s rule.

Figure 2. Dynamics of Populism in Erdoğan’s Election Campaign Speeches



Source: Authors

Conclusion

Erdoğan has long been considered the populist colossus of Turkey. We traced his populist discourse in the election campaigns from 2004 to 2018, examining 42 public speeches. Using computer-based content analysis, we measured three dimensions of Erdoğan's populism over time. The people-centrist approach has always constituted the largest share of his discourse in comparison to other dimensions. The frequency of the people-centrist approach has been the highest throughout all the years studied and spiked fourfold in 2014. In addition, the results show that initially Erdoğan's anti-elitist speeches were insignificant, but their intensity increased considerably in the 2014 and 2018 election campaigns. Concerning the dimension of moralistic imagination of politics, we do not see a clear pattern. This dimension fluctuated and did not show a consistent pattern.

Our study analyzed the dynamics of the overall populism throughout Erdoğan's political campaigns. We conclude that Erdoğan intensified the populist rhetoric, responding to significant political events, such as the 2007 presidential election crisis, the 2013 Gezi Protests, and the 2016 coup attempt. In other words, he relied on populism in times of political challenges. To defy the Gülen Movement and the Gezi Protesters, Erdoğan constructed imaginary enemies including thugs, interest rate lobby, financial lobby, and foreign collaborators. Therefore, the analysis of Erdoğan's political speeches allows us to assume that, in case of similar situations in the future, Erdoğan is likely to use a heavy populist rhetoric in speeches to address 'brothers and sisters' and denunciate elites.

To date, the researchers who have examined Erdoğan's populism failed to provide empirical evidence for their key claims. Intending to close this gap, our study connected Erdoğan's fluctuating populism with the most important political events throughout his incumbency.

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