

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Opposition's Populism Against Populist Power

A Comparative Study on the 2023 Presidential Elections in Turkey

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Abstract

This study examines the populist rhetoric of Turkish leaders Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu during the 2023 electoral campaign, using a mixed-method approach, in which the quantitative analysis gauges the intensity of populist language across various texts, while qualitative analysis addresses context-specific terms and nuances missed by automated methods. By integrating both methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how populism is constructed and deployed in Turkish political discourse, and how recurring rhetorical patterns emerge in the leaders' speeches which are characterized by different shades of populism.

Keywords: Populism; Turkey; Political discourse; Elections; Mixed-methodology

Introduction

The presidential elections of May 2023 in Turkey resulted in the victory of the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), led by incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, over the opposition coalition and its main candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nation's Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*). This outcome confirmed Erdoğan's leadership for another five-year term and represented a significant defeat for the opposition front. The aim of this article is not to provide an electoral or political assessment of this outcome. Rather, it builds on the consideration that Turkey will remain under the rule of the same right-wing authoritarian populist leadership that had already dominated politics until 2023. The presidential elections unfolded in a context shaped by multiple overlapping crises. The devastating earthquakes of February 2023, a severe economic downturn marked by inflation and currency depreciation, and an increasingly constrained media environment all influenced the dynamics of the campaign. Erdoğan relied on the advantages of incumbency, combining state resources, nationalist rhetoric, and promises of reconstruction to consolidate support. Conversely, the opposition sought to capitalize on discontent over governance failures, economic hardship, and democratic backsliding, presenting itself as a credible alternative through the broad-based Nation's Alliance. These factors rendered the campaign not only highly polarized but also a revealing test of how populist discourse functions under the pressures of hybrid authoritarianism. The relevance of populism in contemporary Turkish politics is well recognized in the literature, with some authors even identifying a distinctive "Turkish brand" of populism. This version of populism is marked by three main features: (i) the emphasis on the national will (*milli irade*) embodied by the leader, (ii) the delegitimization of political institutions, and (iii) a strongly Manichean view of social and political dynamics (Selçuk,

2016; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). The continuation of Erdoğan's rule suggests that Turkey will face further confrontational moments and will likely remain an important case for comparative research on populism. The 2023 elections therefore provide a valuable opportunity for a detailed examination of populist discourse. Such an analysis not only enriches our understanding of the Turkish case, but also provides data that may inform broader debates on the dynamics of populism in hybrid regimes.

This article focuses specifically on the discursive strategy of the opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The central research question is: how did the opposition present its political offer and shape its rhetoric to counter the populist style of the governing coalition and its leader Erdoğan? Previous studies have shown that the CHP relied on populist or even "inverted-populist" strategies during the 2018 presidential elections and the 2019 local elections (Boyraz, 2020; Demiralp & Balta, 2021). Extending this line of inquiry, the present work investigates whether and how the 2023 opposition campaign also adopted populist language. In doing so, the article situates itself within a growing body of scholarship (Demiralp & Balta, 2021; Uğur-Çınar & Açıkgöz, 2023) that examines whether opposition actors in Turkey resort to populism, rather than attempting to position themselves as anti-populist. The analysis shows that Kılıçdaroğlu consistently employed a populist discourse, albeit with distinct characteristics compared to Erdoğan's rhetoric, which will be highlighted in the following sections.

To pursue this inquiry, the article first formulates an operational definition of populism. The academic debate on the concept is both prolific and divided, but most contributions conceptualize populism either as a thin-centered ideology or as a discursive style/rhetoric (Piccolino & Soare, 2021). In either case, the ideational approach dominates, making ideas and their communication central to the analysis of the "supply side" of populism. Through a review of the academic literature, the first section of this article will identify the features of populism that are the most relevant to conduct the research. Being the ideational approach the prevalent one in this literature, it follows that ideas and their conveyance become crucial elements of analysis of the supply side of populism. The 2023 Turkish elections provide an exceptionally rich dataset for this purpose. Both candidates ran intense campaigns, holding up to three rallies per day and producing extensive amounts of social media content. The discursive corpus compiled for this study includes more than one hundred campaign texts –mostly rally speeches, but also propaganda materials and other addresses – almost evenly divided between Erdoğan (47) and Kılıçdaroğlu (53). The analysis employs a mixed-method design. A Dictionary-based Quantitative Text Analysis (DbQTA) is used to measure the intensity of populist language – relying on a specifically constructed dictionary of Turkish populist vocabulary that incorporates both theoretical definitions and context-specific terms – and the presence and incidence of this vocabulary in the two candidates' discourses are tested using *R*, especially its text mining packages. The results are then refined and complemented by a Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA) of a narrower set of speeches (31 by Erdoğan and 34 by Kılıçdaroğlu). Rallies were selected for the DQCA analysis because of their homogeneity as a discursive tool, their ritualized structure, and the recurrence of catchphrases and themes. For example, Kılıçdaroğlu made a far more extensive use of propaganda videos of him speaking directly to the electorate than Erdoğan did. On the other hand, due to the unbalanced space on mainstream media, the latter accounts for a larger number of speeches in prime-time news programs on television. This methodological combination ensures both breadth and depth. DbQTA provides a reliable, time- and resource-efficient means of quantifying populist rhetoric, while DQCA captures the nuances and contextual dimensions that automated methods may overlook. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in tandem allows for an assessment not only of the *quantity* of populism in the candidates' discourse, but also of its

quality – which is fundamental to understand which type of populism is adopted, which themes are the most relevant, which ideational offer is provided to “the people”.

This mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology is in itself part of the innovative contributions of this paper to the existing literature. DQCA is used not only to validate the vocabulary-based analysis, but also to integrate and refine its findings aims to address the methodological debate, positively arguing for the possibility to treat a complex and very much context-related matter as political discourse and populism without giving up either to the precision, reliability, and efficiency of quantitative methods or to the possibility of weighing and bringing in the peculiarities of the sociopolitical and linguistic contexts granted by qualitative methods.

The article aims to contribute to the literature in two other respects. First, it examines populist competition on the supply side between an entrenched populist-authoritarian leadership and the opposition, providing insights relevant to both the Turkish case and comparative studies of similar regimes. Turkey, widely recognized as a paradigmatic case of competitive authoritarianism under right-wing populist rule (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), is particularly well-suited for such an analysis. These characteristics contributed to make Turkey the object of a number of other comparisons (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Kaya et al., 2020). Second, it extends the focus of Turkish populism studies beyond Erdoğan, highlighting the existence of a distinctive form of opposition populism that warrants scholarly attention in its own right.

Populism and the ideational approach

Academic interest in populism has generated a large body of research on its conceptualization, usually converging on three main approaches: i) populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2013; Wirth et al., 2016; Mauk, 2020), ii) as a discursive style or rhetoric (Kazin, 1995; de la Torre, 2000; Panizza, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Aslanidis, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Norris, 2020a, 2020b), and iii) as a political strategy or form of mobilization (Weyland, 2001; Madrid, 2008; Acemoglu et al., 2011). A recent meta-analysis by Piccolino and Soare (2021) shows that, although definitions have grown in both precision and number, conceptualizations remain debated; yet, ideology- and discourse-based approaches are by far the most prevalent. One of the most influential definitions is provided by Cas Mudde (2004), who describes populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p. 543).¹ This builds on Freedon’s (1998, p. 751) concept of “thin-centered ideologies,” defined by a restricted morphology based on a small set of context-dependent core concepts, in contrast to “thick-centered” ideologies with dense structures and policy prescriptions. The flexibility of thin-centeredness and its chameleon-like nature (Taggart, 2004) explain its wide application across the political spectrum (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), as it can absorb diverse and even contradictory beliefs (Philip & Panizza, 2011). Mudde (2004) identifies two essential components: First, the antagonism between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elites,” and, secondly, the claim that politics must serve the “general will” of the people. Stanley (2008) similarly stresses these points while adding the sovereignty of the people; Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) highlight the centrality of culture and way of life; and Taggart (2000) underlines the

¹ Italics in original.

personalistic bond that emphasizes “the ordinariness of its constituents and the extraordinariness of their leaders” (p. 102).

The “thin-centered” nature of populism, as anticipated, implies that it prescribes neither specific policies nor stable definitions of its core elements (“the people” and “the elites”). Different populists attribute divergent meanings to these categories (Canovan, 1999, p. 3–4), which Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012, p. 151) therefore describe as “empty vessels” filled differently according to context. What makes them distinctively populist is not the content assigned to each group, but the Manichaean framing of society as a struggle between good and evil, with the moral attributes of both sides shifting across actors and settings. This analysis will show how, despite addressing the same “people”, the Turkish contenders defined both “the(ir own) people” and “the elites” in very different ways. Such flexibility, which Mudde (2004) reconciles with Freedman’s notion of “thinness,” is considered by other scholars to be evidence of incoherence that prevents populism from being classified as an ideology. Aslanidis (2015) goes as far as to reject “thin-centeredness” as overly generic and methodologically inconsistent, arguing it cannot capture “degrees of populism” as increasingly acknowledged in quantitative studies. Similarly, Norris (2020a, p. 698) denies that populism qualifies as an ideology, given its lack of core texts and coherent policy prescriptions, a view shared by Norris and Inglehart (2019), who stress that populism never makes substantive programmatic claims. On these grounds, much of the literature instead frames populism as discourse or rhetoric. Laclau (2005, p. 33) was among the first to emphasize that what defines populism is not ideological content but the logic of articulating diverse contents. Proponents of this view do not dismiss Mudde’s contribution, but argue against the “unnecessary ideological clause” (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 9), suggesting that populism is best understood as “a form of rhetoric, a persuasive language, making symbolic claims about the source of legitimate authority and where power should rightfully lie” (Norris, 2020a, p. 699). Hawkins (2009, p. 1045) similarly notes that, while ideology and discourse share overlaps, populism is better seen as “a *latent* set of ideas or a worldview that lacks significant exposition and [...] is usually low on policy specifics” (italics in original).

Despite these differences, a review of the literature shows that discourse and rhetoric are central to the study of populism across conceptual approaches. As Storz and Bernauer (2018, p. 526) note, “framing populism as an ideology, rhetoric or political communication style all has similar observational implications”. Accordingly, scholars who conceptualize populism as discourse/rhetoric naturally analyze discursive material, but even those adopting ideological or strategic definitions often ground their research in discourse, both conceptually and methodologically. Pauwels (2011, p. 100), for instance, draws on Mudde’s ideological approach yet acknowledges that “considering populism to be a thin centered ideology does not exclude the possibility that it features a specific style of communication as well” and therefore applies Dictionary-based QCA to party propaganda. Similarly, Jansen (2011, pp. 82–83) defines “populist mobilization” through popular mobilization and “populist rhetoric [...]: an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people”, underscoring the centrality of discourse in populist practice. Further examples from diverse conceptualizations but all grounded in discursive material are reported in Table 1. The Table does not aim to provide an exhaustive review of all studies on populism, but rather to highlight a representative set of contributions that have shaped the theoretical and methodological frameworks most relevant to this research. The selected scholars were included because of the applicability of their conceptualizations to the Turkish case, and their methodological contribution in the study of populist discourse. Other studies, while valuable, were excluded for reasons of scope and to maintain consistency with the analytical categories adopted in this article.

Table 1. List of scientific articles on populism that used discursive material as data for their research²

Author(s)	Conceptualization of populism and reference author	Methodology	Object of the analysis
Pauwels (2011)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material
Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Classical and computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material
Rooduijn et al. (2014)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party manifestos
Elçi (2019)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Parliamentary speeches
Vasilopoulou et al. (2013)	Ideology (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013: 389-390)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Parliamentary speeches of party leaders
Bernhard et al. (2015)	Ideology (March, 2012)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material and party leader's speeches
Armony (2005)	Ideological discourse (Armony, 2005: 5-6)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential speeches
Bonikowski and Gidron (2016)	Strategy/Style (Jansen, 2011)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential campaign speeches
Jagers and Walgrave (2007)	Communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 2-3)	Human-coded content analysis	Electoral campaign TV speeches
Hawkins (2009)	Discourse (Hawkins, 2009: 1045)	Human-coded content analysis (holistic grading)	Speeches
Espinal (2015)	Discourse (Laclau, 1977)	Quantitative dictionary-based + qualitative text analysis	TV speeches
Aslanidis (2016)	Discourse (Aslanidis, 2015)	Computer-based semantic text analysis	Party manifestos, speeches, propaganda material
Storz and Bernauer (2018)	Discourse (Aslanidis, 2018)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Party manifestos
Oliver and Rahn (2016)	Discourse (Oliver and Rahn, 2016: 190-191)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential campaign speeches

² All the tables and figures in this article are created by the author.

Despite their context-related, conceptual and methodological differences, scholars largely converge on the essential attributes of populism. Aslanidis (2015, p. 9), echoing ideological approaches, identifies in populist discourse the “supremacy of popular sovereignty [together with] the claim that corrupt elites are defrauding “the People” of their rightful political authority”. Norris (2020a, p. 699) similarly argues that it “rests on twin claims, namely that (i) the only legitimate authority flows directly from the “will of the people” [...], and by contrast (ii) the enemy of the people are the “establishment””. In the Venezuelan case, Hawkins (2009, p. 1043–1044) highlights a Manichaean vision opposing “the good [associated with the] will of the people” to “a conspiring elite that has subverted the will of the people”. In the United States, Oliver and Rahn (2016, p. 190) describe populism as “a type of political rhetoric that pits a virtuous “people” against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk”. Likewise, de la Torre (2000, p. 4), writing on Latin America, defines populism as “a rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between *el pueblo* [the people] and the oligarchy” (italics added). The evidence from these diverse perspectives confirms a shared view of populism’s essential features: (i) people-centrism, (ii) anti-elitism, and (iii) a Manichaean understanding of political and societal dynamics.

Similarly, the study of populism in the Turkish specific context has drawn on several comparative frameworks within political science which are rooted in the discussion outlined above. A key strand of this literature frames populism primarily as a “thin-centered” ideology. However, in Turkey this conceptual framework is nuanced by additional dimensions – such as discursive religious symbolism and foreign policy populism – which serve to highlight how political actors like the AKP articulate a modern, yet culturally rooted, populist narrative (Özpek & Tanrıverdi Yaşar, 2017; Bulut & Hacıoğlu, 2021; Canveren & Kaiser, 2024). Other scholars extend this core definition by focusing on populism as a dynamic discursive strategy rather than a static set of ideas. In these analyses, it emerges a layered understanding of Turkish populism that captures the fluidity of populist rhetoric in Turkey, where the populist discourse evolves in response to internal political crises, shifts in electoral behavior, and local political dynamics – a synthesis that incorporates historical tensions such as the secularist versus Islamist divide, as well as reactions to Westernization and neoliberal reforms (Yabancı & Taleski, 2017; Taşçıoğlu, 2019; Çay & Kalkamanova, 2023; Sofos, 2025). Beyond the authors initially cited, particularly the “us–them” divide in Turkish populism has been widely studied. Scholars have documented how AKP discourse constructs moralized boundaries between a homogeneous, virtuous “people” and various internal or external “others” (Eligür, 2010; Somer, 2019). Research on polarization and identity politics in Turkey further shows how these antagonistic categories have become embedded in political communication and electoral mobilization (Yabancı, 2018; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021; Yılmaz & Ektürk, 2021). In summary, Turkish populism is predominantly conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology and a distinctive communicative practice that frames politics in terms of a radical “people versus elite” divide, while simultaneously adapting to transformations in crisis management and institutional change, revealing how populism operates both as an adaptive ideology and as a strategic mode of communication in response to crises, thereby reflecting the unique political, cultural, and institutional dynamics of Turkey.

All of this considered, this article adopts an understanding of populism as a specific discursive or rhetorical form. This approach is the most consistent with the aim of comparing two electoral discourses and best fits the empirical material used here, which consists exclusively of the candidates’ own public statements rather than party propaganda or programmatic documents. As highlighted in the literature, the discursive perspective also

accommodates the context-dependent nature of populist content. On these grounds, and following the reviewed scholarship, an operational definition of populism can be formulated as a distinctive discursive style characterized by three elements:

- 1) People-centrism: the populist claim for unrestricted popular sovereignty [which] is closely connected to specific understandings and valorization of the people, meant as an horizontal and homogeneous ensemble characterized by the same interests, features, moral (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Hawkins, 2009; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Wirth et al., 2016).
- 2) Anti-elitism: the existence of a conspiring elite engaging in the misappropriation of the popular will, values, sovereignty, vertically distant from the people and diametrically opposed in terms of interests, features, moral (Jaegers & Walgrave, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Aslanidis, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Wirth et al., 2016).
- 3) Manichaeism: the moralistic and antagonistic understanding of the outside world as a struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elites) (de la Torre, 2000; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Wirth et al., 2016; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2019).

Methodology and data

As anticipated in the introduction, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies will be adopted in this study. There is a voluminous literature that applies quantitative techniques of text analysis to the study of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Hawkins, 2009; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; March, 2012; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014; Bernhard et al., 2015; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015; Aslanidis, 2015, 2016; Storz & Bernauer, 2018). What they have in common is the fact that they treat text as data in the form of words and process it through a large-scale analysis by means of a computer or/and by a large group of coders (Benoit et al., 2009). The increase in the number of scholars that resort to quantitative methods in this kind of studies is especially due to their validity in highlighting the various degrees of intensity with which populism is employed by the different actors in the different contexts analyzed: a characteristic that only recently has become recognized by the academic literature (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 5), and that is inherent in discourses but not in ideologies³. Thus, these methods have proven particularly useful in comparative studies of a single case over time or of two or multiple cases to highlight the differences in the “degrees of populism” between various political leaders, parties, actors. However, there are some shortcomings of solely conducting a purely quantitative text analysis. Beyond its high reliability, even the best designed quantitative research shows inherent limits in its capacity to reveal the multilayered, complex discursive instruments employed by populists in the public sphere (Lipinski, 2017, p. 245). Furthermore, being populism a highly context-specific phenomenon, the populist vocabularies and registers change from country to country and sometimes also from actor to actor within the same country. While the impact of these problems can be at least in part reduced by the researchers who have an in-depth knowledge of the context that allows them to take these variations in account and shape their models accordingly⁴, a series of expressions, periphrases, shades of meaning will be unavoidably missed by a solely computer-based analysis. Moreover, the exact same words may be used by the different actors with completely different meanings attached to them. As this research itself will show, a different degree of populism between the two Turkish actors will emerge from the quantitative analysis, but a closer look to their speeches will

³ As Aslanidis argues, one can build a more or less intensively populist speech, but it makes no sense to speak about ‘degrees’ of socialism, Marxism or liberalism since the normative political concepts that undergird such ideologies are of a ‘take it or leave it’ nature.

⁴ This is especially true for single-case or small-scale comparative studies, while for large-scale comparative ones it becomes utterly rare if not impossible to possess such a specific knowledge, unless a large and diverse research group is involved

complete the picture by including some wordings in it that were impossible to evaluate through the computer-based analysis. Just to make an example, the word “çete” (band, gang) can hardly find space in a dictionary of populism – and concretely, at least in the dictionary-based quantitative research that I consulted, it never does. However, a closer look to the Turkish context and to the speeches of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in particular will reveal that it is used by him to characterize a usurping élite acting against “the people”, and thus should somehow be included in the analysis. But here comes another problem: since this expression finds place only in Kılıçdaroğlu’s rhetoric, as he is the sole political leader to make use of it, it is very problematic to include it as a benchmark in a comparative analysis with (one, in this case, or more) other actors that attach to it a non-élitist and non-populist meaning (one can also talk of “gangs” in relation to issues of criminality, for example) or never make use of it.

To reduce the probability of excluding these expressions and wordings from the analysis, I integrate the quantitative method with a qualitative one, that aims at identifying those shades of meaning and expressions that couldn’t be accounted by the computer-based analysis. Moreover, it will allow to better characterize the content of the textual material, adding information related to the style and content of the populist discourses to that related to the “degree” of it. Qualitative methods are however in general less accessible, as they require a deeper knowledge not only of the country(ies)-specific political scenario and its actors, but also of its language, especially in those contexts (as it is the case for Turkey) in which it is harder to find a sufficient amount of textual material and speeches directly produced or translated in one of the internationally most spoken languages. If and once these problems are overcome, the researchers are faced with the peril of subjectivity of the qualitative analysis of the text, being it possible for them to give more weight to some expressions and/or underestimating the relevance of others: a risk that is essentially eliminated in a well-structured computer-based analysis. Furthermore, qualitative analyses are always resource- and time-intensive. To overcome these two problems, I conducted the qualitative analysis on a more restricted corpus, both in quantity and in characteristics of the selected texts. Compared to the over one hundred texts extracted from electoral and TV speeches, propaganda videos, and other campaign material processed through the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis was carried out on a less extensive textual corpus made solely of the two leader’s speeches at electoral rallies. This entails some advantages. Electoral speeches are available for both candidates in almost an equal number (while, for example, electoral videos containing speeches directed to the electorate have been mostly used by Kılıçdaroğlu, who conversely has not made an use of detailed social media posts as extensive as Erdoğan’s), and moreover they are homogeneous, in the sense that, being essentially a political ritual (Kertzer, 1988), they tend to reproduce similar discursive strategies and structures regardless of who performs them. In other words, they contain recurring politically contextualized properties such as syntaxes, meanings, speech acts, style, rhetoric, conversational interactions (van Dijk, 1998, p. 23). These characteristics help overcoming the peril of subjectivity: only the recurring contents of the discourses will be analyzed, with the idea that if they are stressed on and repeated consistently by the politicians in various contexts (the different provinces where political leaders perform their rallies), they are relevant parts of the discursive patterns of each politician. If populist content is present in these recurring patterns, it will be considered in the analysis as integral part of that politician’s rhetorical weaponry and not an incidental example of populist wording of a concept.

In terms of selection and creation of the corpus, the whole texts have been collected during a research period in Istanbul and Ankara during the months of the electoral campaign and the aftermaths of the vote (April to June 2023), and in the following weeks via online sources.

All the speeches and texts included in the corpus were retrieved from official and verifiable sources: the YouTube channels of the AKP and CHP, the official websites of both parties and party leaders, and their verified social media accounts. In addition, a part of the material was collected directly during the fieldwork. Only complete and publicly delivered speeches were included, while fragmentary statements, media interviews, or unofficial transcripts were excluded to ensure homogeneity and comparability across cases. This selective strategy responds to the need for reliability of sources and internal consistency of the corpus. The corpus consists of 102 texts containing discursive material, equally divided among Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu. The majority (65) is composed by the speeches the two candidates delivered at their electoral rallies: 31 by Erdoğan, 34 by Kılıçdaroğlu. The qualitative analysis is based only on these 65 texts for the reasons explained above. The following presentation of the additional texts will further clarify how non-homogeneous (albeit relevant to the conduction of the campaign) were the propaganda instruments used by the two candidates. The corpus for the quantitative analysis contains 37 more texts, complementing the 65 campaign rallies with other types of discursive material in which the leaders addressed “the(ir) people” directly, without intermediaries⁵. These texts were selected according to three criteria: (i) their relevance to the main agenda of the elections, (ii) their centrality in the dynamics of the campaign, and (iii) the consistency of their use by each candidate as a propaganda tool, so as to ensure both comparability and internal coherence of the dataset. In terms of sources, all materials were retrieved from official and verifiable channels: the YouTube pages and websites of AKP and CHP and their respective leaders, and their verified social media accounts (Twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube). An essential component of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s campaign were the short videos (3–7 minutes) shared via social media, 17 of which met the above criteria and were included in the corpus. Erdoğan, who did not rely on this format, addressed his digital audience mainly through social media posts – especially on Twitter/X, a platform highly popular for political debate in Turkey – 10 of which were selected. During the fieldwork, it emerged that the most commented and debated elements of Erdoğan’s digital campaign were not short videos but rather his long-form Twitter/X posts. These posts were systematically discussed by journalists, political talk shows, analysts, and other qualified commentators on social media, gaining wide circulation and shaping public discourse. By contrast, in Kılıçdaroğlu’s case it was precisely his short videos that became the most visible and debated format, as they were widely shared, commented upon, and scrutinized across traditional and digital media. This divergence illustrates the distinct communicative logics of the two candidates, and explains why the corpus includes Kılıçdaroğlu’s videos on one side and Erdoğan’s Twitter/X posts on the other, each reflecting the most relevant and impactful discursive material in their respective campaigns. Furthermore, differently from Kılıçdaroğlu, Erdoğan could use his institutional role to travel and participate to events such as inauguration of infrastructures, public ceremonies and festivals, special broadcasts, conferences for the presentation of governmental initiatives. 10 speeches⁶ held in these events that contained electoral discourses responding to the above-listed characteristics have been selected and included, considering their homogeneity as a discursive, ritualized genre (Kertzer, 1988, van Dijk, 1998), and after evaluating their compliance to the criteria of relevance to the agenda,

⁵ Interviews and participation to TV or online programs with journalists, academicians, intellectuals have thus not been included.

⁶ These are the speeches held at the special interview jointly broadcasted by Channel 7 and Ülke TV (April 26), TEKNOFEST Fair (April 29), İstanbul Security Forum (May 2-3), TV message at the nation broadcasted on TRT (May 7), Ceremony for the Appointment of 45.000 Teachers (May 8), special event at the National Library (May 11), Opening of the Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha Mosque (May 11), Youth Meeting (May 12), inauguration of the Defne State Hospital (May 21), special interview jointly broadcasted by Channel D and CNN Türk (May 26).

centrality in campaign dynamics, direct address of the people, thus ensuring internal reliability.

The quantitative analysis

The quantitative approach chosen is the Dictionary-Based Quantitative Text Analysis (DbQTA from now on), which is an increasingly popular method to analyze the populist discourse (Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015; Pauwels & Rooduijn, 2015; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Storz & Bernauer, 2018; Elçi, 2019) due to its proven effectiveness in generating reasonably valid estimates of populist positions from political texts (Pauwels, 2011, p. 103). Through this method, I aimed to measure the frequency of populist vocabulary and the weight of the three components of populism (people-centrism, anti-elitism, Manichaeism) in the discourses of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and properly visualize them for an easier first comparison. To this scope I used the software “R”, in particular the packages “tm” and “ggplot2”, to conduct the analysis. DbQTA consists in building a dictionary by allocating words to pre-defined categories, and then analyzing their frequency and distribution across the corpus through different techniques depending on the research objectives. In this study, the categories were framed as the three outlined above: (i) people-centrism, (ii) anti-elitism, and (iii) Manichaeism. Drawing on existing examples of dictionaries developed by other scholars applying this method, as well as on context-specific knowledge of Turkish politics and of this electoral campaign in particular (which I closely followed from the cities of Ankara, Mardin, Konya, Istanbul in the months preceding the vote of May 2023), I constructed a preliminary dictionary. This initial version integrated terms derived from theory and prior literature with expressions observed empirically in the campaign, and each entry was allocated to one of the three categories according to its semantic compatibility⁷. The process of dictionary construction followed three steps in order to enhance transparency and reliability. First, a list of terms was generated from the core conceptual dimensions of populism identified in the literature discussed above, serving as the theoretical baseline. Second, the list was adapted to the Turkish context by systematically screening campaign materials to identify salient and context-specific expressions that functioned as markers of populist discourse. Third, the dictionary was refined through iterative testing: ambiguous or low-frequency terms were excluded, while recurrent context-specific expressions identified in the previous step were added. Finally, the dictionary was cross-validated with the qualitative coding (as explained in detail in the dedicated section) to ensure that it captured the main populist dimensions without over- or under-representing context-bound language. Integrating the quantitative method with a qualitative one allowed me to use the latter also as a validation method: while proceeding with the qualitative analysis of the texts, I checked that the words previously measured were consistently used in a populist manner, so to avoid including false positives in the word count, and adjusted the dictionary accordingly⁸. Taken together, this procedure allowed the DbQTA to maintain both theoretical consistency and empirical sensitivity to the Turkish case. The result is shown in (Table 2). Following standard practice in the dictionary-based populism literature I analyzed, coder reliability was ensured at the

⁷ For example, words like “(national) will” and “people” have been listed under “people-centrism”; “establishment” and “oligarchy” under “anti-elitism”; “corrupt” and “honest” under “Manichaeism”.

⁸ For example, a word that is frequently included in other scholars’ dictionaries that I consulted was “country”. Reading the single text allowed me to notice that the word “country” was often used in non-populist contexts (e.g. when talking about foreign trade with other countries), while it carried a populist meaning when used in forms like “my country” “our country”. I then modified my dictionary and repeated the quantitative analysis for that word accordingly.

level of dictionary validation rather than coder multiplicity, with semantic robustness secured through the iterative refinement process described above.

Another challenge comes from linguistics. Turkish is an agglutinative language, where “words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes, and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme” (<https://glossary.sil.org/term/agglutinative-language>). These morphemes stay untouched by the cleaning functions of the “tm” package (remove punctuation, stemming, etc.). Thus, when searching for a word (e.g. “nation” – “millet”), the program will not show the results for which the word is used with different logic functions (e.g. “to the nation” – “millete”, “to our nation”, “milletimize”, etc.). I thus had to design the research pattern to include the morphemes expressing the person “me/mine” and “us/our”, the grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, dative, locative, ablative, genitive), and the combinations of both, and to conduct the word search for each of them. A further challenge is represented by the fact that the Turkish language is not included in most of “R “packages, and this emerged for instance when cleaning the text from the so-called stopwords (words that are unimportant for the meaning of the text but which frequencies can alter the results of the textual analysis, such as, for example, conjugations, prepositions, pronouns). These problems had to be taken into account and overcome both by recurring to the resources available in the CRAN (Comprehensive R Archive Network) and by creating specific lists of stopwords for the purpose.

After having addressed these problems, I processed the texts through the DbQTA, obtaining the results below.

Results of the DbQTA and discussion

The figures below (Figure 1, Table 2) show the results of the quantitative analysis of the texts. The table contains the word-scores of each of the three categories, representing the frequency⁹ with which the words belonging to each of them appear in the texts. The “populism score” (ps) is the sum of the word-scores of the three categories and represents the ratio of populist words in the discourses analyzed. The higher these scores are, the more frequent is the use of a populist vocabulary by the respective politician.

The stacked bar chart graphically summarizes these results. From its observation it emerges that Erdoğan’s electoral discourse (ps = 0,275) implied a sensibly larger use of populist vocabulary than Kılıçdaroğlu’s (ps = 0,199). Other interesting data is visible from the observation of the dimensions of each segment of the two stacks, represented in the table by the value %ps: it represents the weight of each category of populism (ws – word score) in the populist discourse (ps – populism score) of each candidate. It is immediately evident that Kılıçdaroğlu (%ps = 5%), while similar space (14% and 17% respectively) was given by both candidates to Manichean vocabulary. However, the populist discourse of Kılıçdaroğlu was characterized by a sensibly more frequent employment of an anti-elitist vocabulary (%ps = 16%) than Erdoğan’s (%ps = 5%).

⁹ Each word score represents the ratio between the sum of the words of each category and the total of the words of the discourses analysed.

Figure 1. Word scores of each category of populism for the two main presidential candidates, May 2023 elections, Turkey

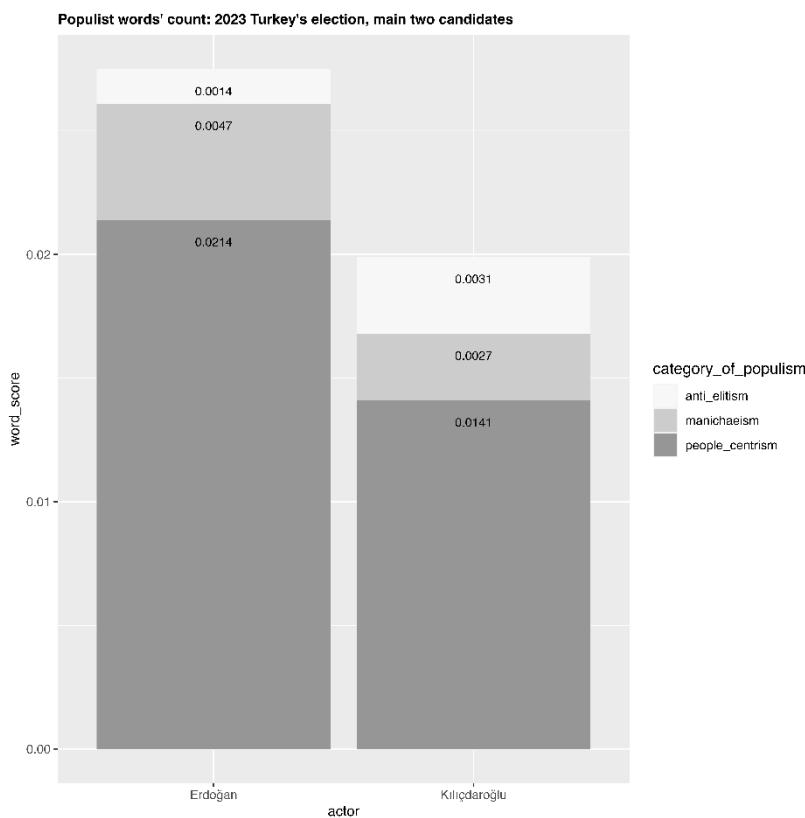


Table 2. Word scores of each category of populism for the two main presidential candidates, May 2023 elections, Turkey

	People-centrism	Anti-elitism	Manichaeism	Populist score
Erdogan	0,0214	0,0014	0,0047	0,0275
%ps _{RTE}	78%	5%	17%	
Kilicdaroglu	0,0141	0,0031	0,0027	0,0199
%ps _{KK}	71%	16%	14%	

More precise indications on the style and the content of the two discourses will be obtained from the qualitative analysis. However, the DbQTA already provides us with some insights on the differences in the way the two politicians address “the(ir) people” (Table 3). As for people-centrism, Erdogan often appeals his “(my/our) nation” (*millet*¹⁰, *milletim*), “(my/our) country” (*ülkem/ülkemiz*), while Kilicdaroglu mostly employs the expressions “(my/our) brothers and sisters” and “fellow citizens”. The opposition leader employs the Turkish word for “people” (*halk*) to a much greater extent than his rival. This is reflected in the formulas they use the most to salute their followers: “my dear people” (*sevgili halkım*) in the case of

¹⁰ The results for both the actors exclude the use of the term “millet” in the expression “Millet İttifakı” (Nations’ Alliance) from the ws count.

Kılıçdaroğlu, “my beloved/sacred nation” (*aziz milletim*) for Erdoğan. Furthermore, the appeal to the “national will” (*milli irade* or *milletin iradesi*) – one of the “classic” features of people-centric language – is much more frequent in Erdoğan’s discourse than in Kılıçdaroğlu’s. Concerning anti-elitism, as anticipated, Erdoğan uses a narrower anti-elitist vocabulary both in quantity and variety. He mostly depicts his adversaries as “imperialists” (*emperyalist*, never used by Kılıçdaroğlu) and “foreigners” (*yabancı*¹¹), or alternatively as “enemies” (*düşman*) either of the nation or the national will. Differently from his rival, Kılıçdaroğlu employs a series of substantives with a pejorative connotation like “cadre” (*kadro*) or “lobby” (*lobi*). However, most of his anti-elitist word-score is built around the use of the word “palace” (*saray*) that, as it will emerge from the qualitative analysis, is used as a metonymy to symbolize the luxury, money waste, excesses of the ruling elites that puts them distant from “the people. Finally, regarding Manichaeism, despite the similar %ps scores, there are many differences in the way the two contenders framed the Manichaean struggle between good and evil. In Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse a stronger differentiation between what is “just, right, true” (*doğru, haklı, hakiki*) and “unjust, unlawful” (*adaletsiz, haksız*) is found than in Erdoğan’s, who very rarely made reference to an “unjust” or “unlawful” order. On his side, he described his adversaries with words as “traitors, betrayal” (*hain, ihanet*: expressions never used by Kılıçdaroğlu) or “liars” (*yalancı, palavracı*).

The qualitative analysis

As largely anticipated, a qualitative analysis has been conducted to validate and/or correct the results of the computer-based text processing, and in any case to integrate them and provide further insights on the type and content of the populist discourses of the two candidates, starting from the indications already obtained through the DbQTA. More in details, the methodology adopted is the so-called Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA). This is a very suitable technique to process texts starting from existing theories, as well as to validate or extend them conceptually (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). It is called “directed” because existing theories and prior research “direct” the researcher in identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Naturally, the “existing theories” of reference are those drawn from the literature initially reviewed, and consequently the “key concepts” are i) people-centrism, ii) anti-elitism, iii) Manichaeism. Coding categories were then derived from this, from the empirical knowledge of the pre-electoral period, and from the indications provided by the DbQTA. On these bases, all the texts of the selected corpus¹² have been read and coded manually, grouping relevant sentences according to the coherence of their contents, figures, references, meanings with the theory- DbQTA- and empirical-based categories (Weber, 1990). The results of this analysis are presented below, analyzing the content of the people-centric and anti-elitist discourses of the two candidates. A specific focus on the Manichaeism will not be made since, as it consists in the portrayal of a struggle between “the good people” and “the corrupt elites” respectively, its content will emerge when analyzing the other two categories.

¹¹ These two words are often used with similar implications, as it will be shown later in the text.

¹² As already specified, the corpus analyzed through DQCA is made only of the speeches of the two candidates at their electoral rallies, to allow for a more efficient and precise comparison

Table 3. Frequency of the populist words per populist category^a

PEOPLE-CENTRISM		ANTI-ELITISM		MANICHAEISM	
Erdogan	%ps _{PPC}	Kılıçdaroğlu	%ps _{PPC}	Erdogan	%ps _{SANT}
nation	0,299	brothers/sisters	0,206	imperialist*	0,017
brothers/sisters	0,159	citizens	0,124	palace	0,012
(my/our) country	0,120	people	0,112	foreign*	0,012
citizens	0,107	nation	0,100	foreign*	0,018
(national) will	0,036	motherland	0,056	enemy	0,012
motherland	0,033	(my/our) country	0,052	tutelage	0,008
people	0,009	homeland	0,024	cadre	0,002
comrades	0,007	oppressed	0,016	palace	0,002
morals/ethics	0,005	(national) will	0,006	regime	0,003
homeland	0,004	tradition*	0,004	thief	0,001
oppressed	0,001	compatriots	0,004	bureaucrat	0,000
compatriots	0,000	morals/ethics	0,003	mafia	0,000
referendum	0,000	referendum	0,001	elite	0,000
sovereign*	0,000	comrades	0,000	lobby	0,000
tradition*	0,000	sovereign*	0,000	elite	0,000

^a The %ps scores are the ratio between the absolute frequency of each word and the total populist score of the relative politician. The symbol * indicates that the word has been searched in its substantive, adjective, adverbial forms.

Results of the DQCA and discussion

Erdoğan

Erdoğan makes frequent use of people-centric rhetoric, especially stressing the figures identified through the DbQTA. The qualitative analysis contributes to add more precise indications on the content and style of this populist rhetoric. When Erdoğan appeals to “the people” framing it as “the nation/country/motherland” he aims to stress the characteristics of unity and homogeneity which are inherent to these expressions, and to mark the distinction between them and “the others” (the elites, the enemies of the nation = the opposition). There is an expression in particular that appears, almost identical, in nearly half (15) of the speeches analyzed (31), which groups all these elements that are traceable elsewhere in the texts in a sparser manner:

Tek millet, tek bayrak, tek vatan, tek devlet. Bir olacağız, iri olacağız, diri olacağız, kardeş olacağız, hep beraber Türkiye olacağız¹³.

A single nation, a single flag, a single state. We will be one, we will be big, we will be alive, we will be brothers and sisters, all together we will be Turkey.

This expression may seem simply a highly nationalistic one. It is classifiable as populist because it is accompanied by the portrayal of a Manichean struggle between the “single nation” and its enemies that have “no nation, no flag, no ezan, no religion”¹⁴ or that want to “divide our country”¹⁵. Furthermore, as indicated by the DbQTA, Erdoğan frequently resorts to appeals to the “national will”. The content of such appeals is the most “classical” populist cliché: “they” (the opposition) are portrayed as the “enemies of democracy, the national will and the values of the nation, the enemies not only of civil politics but also of civil society”¹⁶, “us” (Erdoğan and his people) are those who:

Milletin iradesi üzerindeki anti-demokratik prangaları milletin dualarıyla beraberce kırdık¹⁷.

together, through the prayers of the nation, broke the anti-democratic shackles [they posed] on the national will.

The qualitative analysis confirms the DbQTA findings on Erdoğan’s anti-elitist discourse, showing his recurrent framing of the opposition as aligned with “foreigners” and “imperialists.” Adversaries are accused of “greeting the western imperialist powers”¹⁸, of receiving support “from Europe to America”¹⁹, and of seeking to “hand over our economy to moneylenders and our future to the imperialists”²⁰. Frequent references are made to the USA, EU, IMF, and London as symbols of external control. In contrast, Erdoğan presents himself and “the people” as the sole bulwark against these threats, pledging “not to leave our country at the mercy of these groups”²¹.

¹³ Erdoğan’s speech in Tekirdağ, 08/05/2023

¹⁴ Erdoğan’s speech in Kayseri, 06/05/2023

¹⁵ Erdoğan’s speech in Mardin, 10/05/2023

¹⁶ Erdoğan’s speech in İstanbul, 12/05/2023

¹⁷ Erdoğan’s speech in Samsun, 4/05/2023

¹⁸ Erdoğan’s speech in Batman, 10/05/2023

¹⁹ Erdoğan’s speech in Edirne, 8/05/2023

²⁰ Erdoğan’s speech in Ankara Büyük Mitingi, 30/04/2023

²¹ *Ibid.*

Such claim is repeated 22 times in the 31 texts analyzed. Here is a clear example of it.

*Bu CHP ne diyor: 'IMF'den borç alın da biraz rahatlayalım.' 'Gerek yok, biz bize yeteriz.' dedik [...] Ama bunlar Londra tefecilerinden 300 milyar dolar alacağını söylüyor. Bunlar tefeci, bunlar esrar, eroin kaçakçısı. Bunlardan size yar olmaz. Ama bununla benim halkımı kandırmaya çalışıyorlar. İşte, pazar günü bunlara dersi vermeye hazır mıyız? Bizim bunlara ihtiyacımız yok!*²²

What does this CHP say: 'Let's take a loan from the IMF and bring some relief.' We said: 'There is no need, we are enough to ourselves' [...] But they say they will take \$300 billion from London loan sharks. These are usurers, these are marijuana, heroin smugglers. These are not good for you. But they are trying to deceive my people with this. Here, are we ready to teach them a lesson on Sunday? We don't need them!

What the DbQTA could not capture are context-specific expressions that go beyond "typical" anti-elitist wording, often conveyed through figures of speech (metonymy, synecdoche) to construct a Manichaean divide: on one side, an opposition acting against the nation's good, morals, and interests; on the other, a government portrayed as the sole true representative of the people. In the 2023 campaign, Erdoğan recurrently employed this device to advance at least two narratives, the most prominent being the depiction of the opposition as allies of terrorism. Here, Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation's Alliance were framed as taking orders from abroad and betraying the public good, while the governing bloc was presented as loyal only to God and the people. Central to this narrative is the word "Kandil"—the mountain base of the PKK in Iraq—used as a shorthand for terrorism. Although such terms cannot be detected by populism dictionaries, they are pivotal to Erdoğan's rhetoric: in the 31 speeches analyzed, he invoked this "Kandil" narrative 28 times. What follows is one of the most concise and telling examples.:

*Bay bay Kemal'in akıl hocası Kandil, o Kandil ile konuşuyor, talimatı oradan alıyor. Biz talimatı, önce Allah'tan, sonra milletten alıyoruz*²³.

Bay bay Kemal's [Kılıçdaroğlu's] mentor is Kandil, he speaks with Kandil and takes instructions from there. We take instructions from God first, then from the nation.

Similarly, the acronym "LGBT" does not appear in standard populism dictionaries, yet Erdoğan repeatedly used it in the 2023 campaign to stigmatize the opposition as "LGBT" and accuse it of seeking to undermine Turkey's moral values. His coalition was portrayed as the sole bulwark against this "alien" ideology and as the genuine representative of the nation's ethical foundations. This narrative appeared 19 times across the 31 speeches analyzed, one of which is presented below as a clarifying example.

*Gazi Mustafa Kemal'in partisini marjinal örgütlerin, mezhep fanatiklerinin, LGBT savunucularının [...] yuvası haline dönüştürdü*²⁴.

LGBT'ci değiliz, biz LGBT'ye karşıyız. CHP LGBT'ci, İYİ Parti LGBT'ci, HDP LGBT'ci. O masanın etrafında olanların LGBT'ye karşı olduğunu duydunuz mu? Cumhur İttifakı olarak biz LGBT'ye karşıyız. Çünkü

²² Erdoğan's speech in Aydın, 9/05/2023

²³ Erdoğan's speech in Pursaklar (Ankara), 12/05/2023

²⁴ Erdoğan's speech in Kayseri, 6/05/2023

bizim için aile kutsaldır. [...] Biz, güçlü aile güçlü millet demektir, böyle bugünlere geldik. [...] Ne yaparlarda yapsınlar boş. Bize Allah yeter. Bize milletimizin sevgisi, desteği yeter²⁵.

They turned the party of Gazi Mustafa Kemal [...] into a cradle for marginal organizations, sectarian fanatics, LGBT advocates.

We are not LGBT, we are against LGBT. CHP is LGBT, İYİ Parti is LGBT, HDP is LGBT. Did you ever hear that the people around that table are against LGBT? As the People's Alliance, we are against LGBT. Because for us the family is sacred. [...] To us, a strong family means a strong nation, that's how we came to these days. [...] Let them do what they want. God is enough for us. The love and support of our nation is enough for us.

Kılıçdaroğlu

The qualitative analysis confirms the results of the DbQTA, showing that much of Kılıçdaroğlu's people-centric rhetoric aims to depict a direct connection between him and "the people" by means of brotherhood ("brothers/sisters") and of empathy ("my (dear) people"). For example:

[...] Onlar yandaşları, bu kardeşiniz vatandaş için çalışacak. Vatandaşına hizmet etmeyen bir siyaset, siyaset değildir. Siyaset, vatandaşına hizmet edecek. Siyaset, halka hizmet edecek²⁶.

[...] They will work for their cronies, this brother of yours will work for the citizens. If politics doesn't serve the citizen then it's not politics. Politics is about serving the citizen. Politics is about serving the people.

This emphasis on the people-centered character of politics is a clear instance of populist language, as it combines people-centrism with Manichaean and anti-elitist undertones: Kılıçdaroğlu contrasts "us" (the people) with "them" (the corrupt governing elites).

Beyond vocabulary, the DbQTA could not fully capture his recurrent strategy of stressing shared sociological and economic features. Drawing on the hardships of the economic crisis, he frequently recalled his humble origins and personal traits (sobriety, honesty, modesty) to assert that he is "one of you, one of the people"²⁷. In speeches and videos, this was reinforced by his self-presentation in modest settings (the kitchen of his home, handwritten notes on recycled paper²⁸) and by claims like "I lived like you, I lived like one of you, I always tried to be modest"²⁹ or recurrent slogans such as "Bay Bay Kemal"³⁰ stands for the people, works for the people, fights for the people"³¹. While claims of empathy with citizens are not inherently populist, they become so when framed against a corrupt elite detached from the people's reality. What Kılıçdaroğlu portrays is a Manichaean clash between the "modest" (*mütevazi*), "oppressed" (*ezilen*), "honest" (*dürüst*), "just" (*haklı*) people and the "luxury-life living" (*lüks hayat*), "lying" (*yalancı*), "dishonest" (*namussuz, sahtekâr*), "unjust" (*haksız*) governing elite. Such rhetoric is employed in most of the speeches analyzed (22 out of 34). What follows exemplifies the pattern around which it commonly revolves:

²⁵ Erdoğan's speech in Giresun, 4/05/2023

²⁶ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Erzincan, 6/05/2023

²⁷ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Denizli, 5/05/2023

²⁸ These elements, that especially scholars who study with, will not be (*bay*) and the assonant English word "bye". touched upon further in this article.

²⁹ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Sinop, 3/05/2023

³⁰ Kılıçdaroğlu often uses himself the pejorative nickname "Bay bay Kemal" that Erdogan appeals him

³¹ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Kayseri, 29/04/2023

Benim saraylarda oturma gibi öyle bir merakım yok. Ne sarayı Allah aşkına ya! Ben sizler gibi mütevazı yaşıyorum zaten. Bir evim var. Mutfağımı da hepiniz biliyorsunuz zaten ne kadar görkemli bir mutfağımın olduğunu. Bizim mutlu bir evimiz var, huzur içinde yaşıyoruz. Ne sarayı ya Allah aşkına! Millet açlıktan kıvrırken, mutfaklarda yanın olurken sarayda mı oturulur Allah aşkına! Sizler nasıl yaşıyorsanız inanın Bay Kemal de öyle yaşayacak, mütevazı yaşayacak³².

I have no such interests in living in palaces. What palace, for God's sake! I already live modestly like you. I have a house. You all already know my kitchen, how wonderful it is. We have a happy house, we live in tranquility. What palace, for God's sake! While the nation is starving, while the kitchens are burning, they live in palaces. For God's sake! Believe me, Bay Kemal will live exactly as you do, he will run a modest life.

As in Erdoğan's case, these quotations show how the three components of populism – people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichaean framing – often appear intertwined, making it harder in qualitative analysis to separate them as neatly as in the DbQTA. The strong anti-elitist rhetoric identified quantitatively is evident in Kılıçdaroğlu's recurring use of "the palace" (*saray*) to symbolize the ruling elite's luxury, waste, and detachment from ordinary citizens. Similarly, the frequent use of "foreign/foreigner" (*yabancı*), which topped the DbQTA list, accuses the government of "working for the foreigners"³³ or highlights the elites' cosmopolitan lifestyles as further proof of their alienation from "the people". This narrative, employed 19 times in the 34 speeches analyzed with the same pattern shown in the example below, is always followed by the promise that Kılıçdaroğlu will stay away from these wastes and give everything back to the people.

³² Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Muğla, 6/05/2023

³³ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Eskişehir, 25/04/2023

Amerika'nın en pahalı yeri Manhattan Adası'dır, orada 35 katlı gökdelenler yaptılar. Muhammed Ali Clay'in çiftliğini satın aldılar. İngiltere'de, Chelsea'de lüks villalarda oturuyorlar. Hollanda'da dünyanın paraları var bunlara ait. Bay Kemal bunların tamamını biliyo. Son kuruşuna kadar alacağım ve Türkiye'ye getireceğim. Esnafa vereceğim, çiftçiye vereceğim, emekliye vereceğim, ev kadınlarına vereceğim³⁴.

They had a 35-story skyscraper built in the most expensive place in America, Manhattan. They bought the farm property of Muhammad Ali Clay. They live in the luxurious villas in Chelsea, England. There is a lot of money in Holland that belongs to them. Bay Kemal knows exactly all of this. I will take [this money] back to the single penny, and bring it to Turkey. I will give it to the shop owners, to the farmers, to the pensioners, to the housewives.

As with Erdoğan, the qualitative analysis revealed terms absent from the DbQTA dictionary but central to Kılıçdaroğlu's anti-elitist rhetoric. He frequently denounces the "gang of five" (*beşli çete*)³⁵ and the "drug barons" (*uyuşturucu baronları*) as emblematic of entrenched clientelist ties with the government. While references to clientelism are not inherently populist, they become so when framed as a Manichaean clash between greedy elites and a uniform, deceived "people" whose interests Kılıçdaroğlu vows to defend. This narrative appeared consistently across all 34 of his speeches analyzed, one example of which is reported below.

Gene diyecekler 'Parayı nereden bulacaksın?' Hep o soruyu soruyorlar. E sen parayı beşli çetelere veriyorsun, ben vatandaşa vereceğim. Sen yandaşa veriyorsun, ben vatandaşa vereceğim. Kimin hakkı? Vatandaşın hakkı. Ayrıca beşli çetelerin, yurt dışına kaçırıdıkları paranın tamamını getireceğim, tamamını. Son kuruşuna kadar getireceğim ve bu millete vereceğim [...].

*Kul hakkı yemem, kul hakkı yedirmem. Herkes bilsin. Ben bunu söylüyorum da mesela onlar diyemiyorlar. 'Kul hakkı yemem' diyemiyor. 'Kul hakkı yedirmem' diyemiyor. Bunu sadece Bay Kemal söylüyor*³⁶.

They will say again, 'Where will you find the money?' They always ask that question. Eh, you give the money to the gangs of five, I will give it to the people. You give it to the cronies, I will give them to the citizens. Whose right is it? It is a right of the citizen. One thing more, I will bring back all the money that the gangs of five smuggled abroad. I will bring it back to the single penny, and give it to this nation [...].

I don't cheat anybody of their rights, and I don't allow others to do so. Let everyone know. I say this, for example they can't. They can't say "I don't cheat anybody of their rights". They can't say "I don't allow others to do so" either. Only Bay Kemal says this.

³⁴ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Kırıkkale, 7/05/2023

³⁵ With this name he refers to the owners of the holdings *Cengiz*, *Limak*, *Kalyon*, *Kolin*, and *Makyol*: five of the biggest companies in Turkey, accused by the opposition's leader of entertaining a deep-rooted clientelism relationship with the government.

³⁶ Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Düzce, 9/05/2023

Conclusions

This article aimed at analyzing the populist discourse of the two main protagonists of the Turkish 2023 presidential race. The rhetoric/discursive approach to the study of populism was adopted, based on the relevant academic literature. The quantitative analysis conducted on the selected textual corpus indicated that Erdoğan made a wider use of a populist vocabulary compared to Kılıçdaroğlu. People-centrism was the category of populism that characterized the most both candidates' discourses (%ps: 78% and 71% respectively for Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu), but Kılıçdaroğlu's one showed a higher share of anti-elitist vocabulary (5% and 16%), while words associated with Manichaeism scored similar %ps values (17% and 14%). An interpretation of these results was possible through a qualitative analysis, that validated the results of the DbQTA: those words that the DbQTA indicated as the most characteristic of each candidate's populist discourse were found by the DQCA to be consistently part of their populist phrasings. The most relevant examples are reported above. However, the qualitative analysis further integrated the evidence highlighted by the quantitative one. First, because it was possible to identify further context-related terms and expressions: words that are commonly not included in populist dictionaries (such as "LGBT" or "gang"), and thus could not be taken into account by the DbQTA, were found to be the center of recurrent populist narratives in both candidates. Second, because it highlighted the bounds between the three categories of populism in the populist discourse/rhetoric. An expression containing a people-centric claim is not necessarily populist *per se*: it becomes such when it is charged with anti-elitist and Manichaean meanings.

The qualitative method thus reveals the problematic nature of attempts to measure and quantify populism, at least in comparisons of this type. When qualitatively processing Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches, one would have a hard time saying that they were "less populist" than the ones by Erdoğan (something that could be more decisively affirmed by the quantitative data), as populist concepts were expressed recurrently and with similar patterns of repetition by both candidates. While the use of a populist rhetoric by Erdoğan is not a recent phenomenon and is widely documented by the academic literature, one of the main innovative elements of this research is that it sheds light on the use of a populist discursive strategy by the opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. From the analysis conducted, it emerges that what really differentiates the two leaders is the style and content of their populisms, rather than the adoption of a populist language, which is present in both the contenders' discourses. Adopting the conceptualization formulated by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), it can be said that the broadest difference stays in the exclusionary nature of Erdoğan's style of populism compared to the inclusionary one of Kılıçdaroğlu. Looking at the material, political, and symbolic dimensions indicated by the two authors as the benchmarks differentiating these two styles of populism, it emerges that in terms of distribution of resources (material aspect), advocation of democratic participation and political contestation (political aspect) and broadness of the boundaries with which "the people" is defined (symbolic aspect) Erdoğan's discourse presented a more marked exclusionary connotation towards specific groups/elites ("the LGBT lobby", "the terrorists of Kandil", and so on) while Kılıçdaroğlu targeted more specific and narrow groups of elites ("the palace", "the gang of five") and showed a broader, more inclusionary understanding of "the people". Other differences in content lay in the more aggressive style of Erdoğan, and in his prevalent focus on valence issues (like security, moral values, national unity), compared to the "positive campaign" (*olumlu/pozitif kampanya*) conducted by Kılıçdaroğlu with a more marked emphasis on position issues (especially on the economic and social fields). Another aspect to consider is the different political positioning of the two leaders (one in power since more than 20 years, the other leading the opposition block), that

influenced especially their anti-elitist discourses: Kılıçdaroğlu could frame his adversaries recurring to more “classical” and “universal” populist references to their dishonest, corrupted, and predatory misconduct; Erdoğan, who could not blame his adversaries for a poor and dishonest governing record³⁷, used much more context-related examples to frame them as elites acting against the people (e.g. the repeated references to “Kandil”). To sum up, these differences lead to think of two different styles, rather than quantities, of populism: people-elite dynamics were narrated by Erdoğan in a more exclusionary way, with an insistence on more abstract and values-oriented aspects (national ethics and genuine Turkish values to be defended, the “national will” – *milli irade* – to be embodied, the sense of security to be preserved). On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu presented a more inclusive version of populism in which the clash between the people and the elites was based on more concrete and material aspects: economic grievances to be addressed, misappropriated resources to be redistributed, social injustices to be vindicated. Table 4 provides a comparative overview of the key features characterizing the populist discourses of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu.

Table 4. Comparative table of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu’s styles of populism.

Feature	Erdoğan (Exclusionary populism)	Kılıçdaroğlu (Inclusionary populism)
People-centrism	Embodied in the leader, national will (<i>milli irade</i>)	Broad definition of “the people”
Anti-elitism	Against abstract enemies (LGBT lobby, Kandil terrorists)	Against specific elites (the palace, the gang of five)
Manichaean worldview	Strongly moralized, national values	Material grievances, redistributive focus
Campaign style	Aggressive, focus on security and moral values	Conciliatory and “positive campaign”, focus on social/economic issues

Despite being the sole method capable of bringing these differences to the surface, the DQCA did not refute but validated and integrated the findings of the dictionary-based analysis, that thus not only proved useful to process a larger quantity of textual data, but also contributed to direct the qualitative research(er). Especially for wider comparisons involving more countries and actors, quantitative methods remain more efficient because of the advantageous ratio between time spent/quantity of data analyzed and the good accuracy they allow for. However, with the results of this research I argue for integrated quantitative-qualitative methods to be best suited for this kind of analyses, as they allow the researcher to benefit from the advantages of both methods while producing more complete and encompassing insights and data about the phenomena analyzed.

While addressing the research questions, this paper leaves room for new answers to be explored. Even in a crowded field of studies such as that on populism, there is a wide space for new research to be carried out, inherent in the topics of this paper, that can go beyond

³⁷ Apart from references to the mismanagement of the metropolitan cities that the opposition won in 2019, that were however part of a strategy of blame-shifting in which this analysis did not find any populist rhetoric consistent with the operational definition outlined above

the conclusions already available in the rich literature on the topic. Comparative studies, in particular, present a promising avenue for further exploration. As mentioned before, Turkey serves as a paradigmatic case in the context of countries led by authoritarian populist leaders, offering a valuable opportunity for scholars to conduct comparative studies that utilize Turkey as a key reference point. The evidence that Kılıçdaroğlu employed a populist discourse in this electoral campaign raises a stimulating question on the comparability of this case with others that share similar contextual characteristics. The findings also raise the question of why Kılıçdaroğlu adopted populist rhetoric. Three main explanations can be considered: (i) strategic adaptation: a deliberate choice to compete with Erdoğan on the same populist terrain, attempting to appropriate the language of “the people” against “the elites” in order to broaden his electoral appeal, while reshaping these meanings in accordance with his conciliatory campaign style and inclusive discourse; (ii) structural constraints: the result of operating within a competitive authoritarian regime, where limited access to media, state resources, and institutional channels pressures opposition actors to employ populist discourse as one of the few available means to mobilize support and gain visibility; (iii) populist contagion (Rooduijn et al., 2012): a broader phenomenon whereby mainstream or opposition actors adopt populist discourse not only as a deliberate strategy or under structural constraints, but because populism itself has become a competitively advantageous language in contemporary politics, exerting a “contagion effect” on the wider party system. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but rather highlight the tension between agency and structural conditions in explaining opposition populism in Turkey. In fact, as various scholars explain, the contagion process may operate through strategic repositioning in response to external pressures. While empirical studies of populist contagion yield mixed findings, Figueira (2018) argues for the existence of a “perfect storm” of populism, whereas Schwörer (2021) shows that in specific issue areas such as immigration – particularly salient in the Turkish 2023 presidential campaign – mainstream parties often adapt their narratives in response to the success of far-right populist actors. This suggests that the Turkish case can serve as a valuable reference point for comparative studies, helping to illuminate how populist contagion shapes opposition strategies across different competitive authoritarian contexts. By examining whether, in other similar political regimes that characterize as illiberal democracies or competitive authoritarianisms, opposition parties that challenge the (right-wing) populist leaderships in power adopt populist strategies to compete, and/or by comparing the populist discourses of the political actors in these regimes, new research can shed light on the evolving nature of political competition in countries that experienced a consolidated process of democratic backsliding, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in the global political landscape. This is just one example among many of the potential held by this field of investigation to unearth valuable insights that can inform both academic scholarship and the political debate itself in the years to come.

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