

Barriers to Reviving Democratic and Participatory Political Culture in Turkey: A Case Study of the Undergraduate Students of the Selcuk University

Shakib Zarbighalehhamami, Reşat Açıkgoz

Selcuk University, Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

For several decades, Turkey has been striving to transition toward a modern social culture. Governments that have come to power in recent decades have reinforced their governance by leveraging fundamental values. However, the current political landscape, dominated by the conservative right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP), has increasingly deviated from democratic principles. This study aims to examine the barriers to revitalizing a participatory and democratic political culture in Turkey from the perspective of undergraduate students at Selçuk University. Using Grounded Theory analysis and drawing on Almond and Verba's theoretical framework on political culture, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 17 undergraduate students. The findings indicate that authoritarianism and government unaccountability in the political and social spheres, along with the state's weak performance in implementing democracy and ensuring equitable resource distribution, have led to a decline in public trust and political participation. If this governance approach continues, it will further disillusion the public with political reforms and weaken political support for the government. According to the participants, the government's failure to uphold democratic commitments plays a significant role in the decline of public trust and political engagement, which is particularly reflected in voter turnout rates.

Keywords: Participatory political culture, democracy, Turkey, Selçuk University, Grounded Theory.

INTRODUCTION

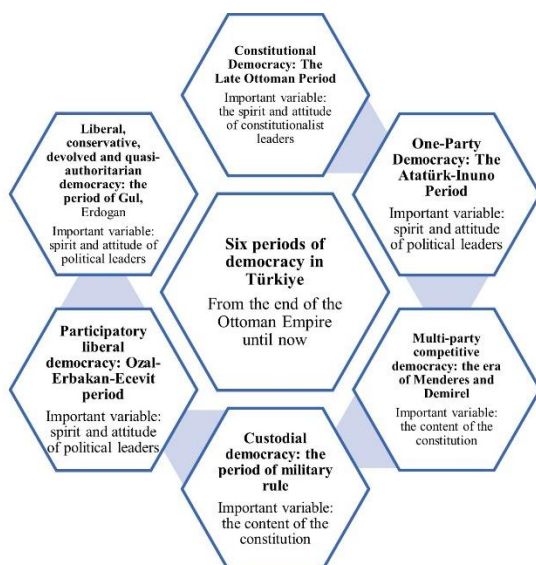
Democracy and the establishment of civil society are among the most significant achievements of humanity throughout history. Human experience, both historically and rationally, has demonstrated the priority and superiority of democratic structures over other forms of power. Consequently, attention to the issue of democracy, examining its characteristics and components, as well as its obstacles, limitations, and advantages, has been one of the fundamental axes of study for intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists in various scientific fields, especially sociology, and particularly political sociology (Rehbargazi, et. al, 2016: 2). The main subject of political sociology is the exploration of the power relations between the government and social forces; forces that sometimes resist governance, sometimes infiltrate it and sometimes remain passive (Rone & Arwinpoor, 2023: 204).

The transition to democracy, or even the initiation of the democratization process, is influenced by many factors, which researchers have pointed to base on their theoretical inclinations: modernization, economic situation, external pressure, the integration of trust networks in public policy, trust in governmental institutions, and so on, have been introduced as effective factors in the transition. Political culture, generally understood as the nexus between politics and culture, and more specifically, the impact of cultural beliefs and values on the construction of societal culture, influences politics. The study of the continuity of politics and culture, and the effect of culture on politics, is an ancient matter dating back to Plato and Aristotle. The subject of "the virtues of citizens" in the discussions of Montesquieu and Aristotle was precisely aimed at exploring the effects of culture on politics, a theme later continued by Tocqueville in American society. Gabriel Almond defines political culture as "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics within a system." According to Almond, every political system embodies a specific pattern of orientation toward political actions (Ahmadi & Namaki, 2012).

Citizen participation in political matters and governance is of paramount importance in establishing a robust

system. It requires that people engage actively in their destiny and that of their society with complete freedom and rational deliberation. This active involvement enables them to influence decision-making processes aimed at achieving national objectives and shaping public policies and the management of the country's affairs. It is evident that the process of participation and democratization of the governance system is accompanied by the redistribution of power structures. Consequently, individuals and organizations that have so far held a significant share of the political and administrative system's power often resist losing their influence. On the other hand, those who gain power and position in the process of transformation and democratization of the political and administrative system welcome change and support it (Hasanifar & Zarbi, 2023:55-56).

Since the end of World War I and the official collapse of the Ottoman Empire, one of the main issues for the government and society of Turkey has been the recognition of the type of governance and the formation of a political system that can be responsive to the evolving internal needs of Turkey while also adapting to the requirements of the contemporary world. Although initially, the adoption of the title of "Republic" by the nationalist and secularist Turks under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha heralded the formation of a democratic system, the unchanging role of the military in safeguarding Turkey's territorial integrity and its political demands, as well as the power of the Islamic movement in a country perceived as the last stronghold of Islamic caliphate, created ambiguity as to whether the Republic of Turkey, with the dominance of secular and nationalist views, could truly represent a message of Western-style democratic system. The historical experience of the Republic of Turkey from 1923 until today has practically shown that this country is several steps ahead in terms of democratic indicators compared to its surrounding countries, sudden changes in governments, and untimely military interventions in the formation of the government. However, under this process, the challenges of Islamic parties, minorities, and groups against the exclusive secular flow have proven that democracy has not been able to fully and acceptably show itself in Turkey with the result of establishing stability based on popular legitimacy. According to the theoretical definition provided by various theorists, especially Adam Przeworski, the consolidation of democracy means a situation in which democracy becomes the sole rule of the game, and no one can conceive of actions outside democratic institutions. Turkey still has a long way to go to reach this stage, but the formation and institutionalization of some structural prerequisites for democracy have ensured that the democracy train is always in motion (Sadeghian & Ebadi, 2021:68). Based on this, over the past two or three centuries, various and diverse democratic attitudes have emerged, such as constitutionalism in the last two centuries of the Ottoman Empire (1800-1923), the single-party quasi-authoritarianism of the Kemalist period under Ismet Inonu (1923-1946), the multi-party competition during the Adnan Menderes - Suleyman Demirel era (1946-1970), military rule (1970-1980), liberal-participatory under Turgut Ozal- Necmettin Erbakan - Bulent Ecevit (1980-2002), liberal-conservative (2002-2007), delegative democracy (2008-2012), and quasi-authoritarianism (2013-2021) under the ruling party of Justice and Development. Each of these periods has contributed to the preservation and strengthening of the democratization process. The following diagram illustrates the six stages of the democratization process in Turkey between 1800-2024, along with its most important variables (Movasseghi & Norozinezhad, 2016).



Picture 1: The six periods of the democratization process in Turkey

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the underlying factors that have prevented the achievement of democracy in Turkey. Naturally, the attainment of democracy follows a path of a democratic political culture emphasizing constructive and widespread political participation. This research seeks to study and examine the obstacles that have played a role in Turkey's failure to transition to democracy from the perspective of undergraduate students at the Faculty of Literature and Economics at Selcuk University.

LITERATURE

Theoretical literature divides democratization theories into two main categories based on their emphasis on the timeframe and prevailing conditions: 1. Macro-structural theories focus on long-term developments and structural factors such as economic development, the emergence of a strong civil society, the rise of democratic political culture, urbanization, education, and communications; 2. Actor-oriented theories concentrate on short-term factors such as political protests, ideologies and political parties, historical periodizations, the deliberate role of social and political actors, social, political, and class struggles (Bashirieh, 2008: 24-25).

Regarding the relationship between democratic political culture and the realization of democracy, Lipset and Huntington emphasize that the acceptance of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the rights of opposition parties, the rule of law, human rights, and the acceptance of religious freedoms by the people and elites are prerequisites for achieving democracy (Lipset, 1994; Huntington, 1993: 25-29).

As for Lipset's theory of democratic political culture (1994), it can be observed that in countries such as Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina, which have experienced government assassinations and human rights violations over the years, their political culture suddenly transformed into a democratic culture. Additionally, the active role of the Catholic Church in opposing authoritarianism, the existence of democratic values in the core texts of Islam, and successful models of democratic political systems in some Islamic countries such as Malaysia, have challenged the direction of authoritarian Catholicism and Islam. Indeed, interpretations influenced by the underdeveloped social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of the environment have promoted particular interpretations of Islamic texts as the main teachings of religion, creating a somewhat unrealistic image of the democratic potential inherent in religious texts in the minds of non-Muslim scholars. In Turkey, many religious teachings and approaches have remained distant from modern and tribal interpretations and have consistently been one of the reasons for the failure of democratization efforts (Saeed & Mahdavi, 2013: 8).

The first prerequisite for establishing a desirable democratic system is the existence of a culture of dialogue, wherein individuals within a society are willing to subject their opinions and votes to scrutiny and judgment by others. Political expression is highlighted as one of the indicators of political participation (Hersij, et. al, 2013: 7). Other indicators, such as political effectiveness and inclination toward political activities, are also utilized to study political participation, which has been the focus of this research.

The transition process to democracy consists of three main separate stages: A. Collapse of non-democratic regimes; B. Formation of democratic regimes; C. Consolidation and establishment of democracy. However, the collapse of non-democratic regimes does not necessarily lead to the formation of democratic regimes and the transition to democracy. Rather, depending on various factors, active forces, intellectual trends, and dominant discourses, the emergence of democracy is just one possible consequence of regime collapse (Bashirieh, 2008: 54).

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, in their book "Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty," argue that democracy is consolidated when elites have no strong motivation to overthrow it. This process depends on multiple factors such as the strength of civil society, the structure of political institutions, the nature of political and economic crises, the level of economic inequality, the structure of the economy, and the shape and extent of globalization. According to them, distinguishing between the distinctly different paths that political institutions traverse over time will be useful in understanding the reality of why some countries are democratic while others are dictatorships. So far, only some of these paths have led to democracy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012: 12).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union following the Cold War in the 1990s, a period of expanding regimes

known as hybrid democracies emerged. These forms of democracy became prevalent in various regions, including African countries such as Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, and Zambia; Eurasian countries like Albania, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan; Asian countries including Malaysia, Taiwan, Egypt, and the Philippines; and Latin American nations such as Mexico, Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. Over certain periods, these hybrid regimes became the dominant form of governance. Later, theorists and political analysts categorized hybrid democracies into different types, such as pseudo-democracy, virtual democracy, electoral democracy, false democracy, illiberal democracy, exclusive democracy, delegative democracy, tutelary democracy, semi-authoritarianism, flexible authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, and competitive authoritarianism. However, despite their differences, all these regimes share three key characteristics:

1. They represent incomplete or insufficient forms of democratization.
2. They have failed in democratic transitions and have not achieved democratic consolidation.
3. They exist in a gray zone, meaning they combine democratic rules with authoritarian governance.

Ergun Özbudun, a prominent expert on Turkish politics, discusses this concept in his book *Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Challenges of Democratic Consolidation*. He argues that there is a gray zone between full democracy and democratic consolidation, analyzing Turkey's democracy within this framework. His definition of the gray zone aligns with the characteristics of hybrid democracies, particularly delegative democracies. Similarly, Christian Göbel, in his article on semi-authoritarianism, classifies semi-authoritarian regimes within this gray zone, emphasizing that they are neither fully democratic nor entirely authoritarian (Sadeghian & Rahber, 2019: 243).

According to Göbel, the number of countries in this gray zone has undoubtedly increased since the 1990s. He describes semi-authoritarian regimes—such as pseudo-democracy and delegative democracy—as a large category of systems that do not fully fit into either the democratic or non-democratic classifications. Similarly, Tricarolo suggests defining hybrid regimes as a distinct type of governance that combines free and fair elections with authoritarian elements. Furthermore, Wolfgang Merkel introduced a strict concept of consolidated democracy to distinguish and classify different governance methods. He identified five key indicators: elections, public participation, effective power, horizontal accountability, and civil liberties. Based on these indicators, he identified 34 deficiencies in defective democracies. Under consolidated democracy, he categorized exclusive democracy, tutelary democracy, delegative democracy, and illiberal democracy as subtypes, all of which essentially fall under the broader category of hybrid democracies. Another scholar, Marina Ottaway, argues that this intermediate state (gray zone) is most commonly found in hybrid political systems, including semi-authoritarian regimes and delegative democracies. These complex systems exhibit a mixture of nominal liberal freedoms, superficial democratic institutions, and limited respect for civil and political liberties. However, their fundamental nature remains illiberal and even authoritarian. Additionally, Ottaway emphasizes that this ambiguous and dual nature is deliberate. Semi-authoritarian regimes display hybrid or even multi-layered political characteristics. While they allow a limited space for genuine political competition, this restriction reduces governmental accountability. At the same time, these regimes tolerate political space just enough to permit the formation of political parties and civil society organizations, the operation of independent media to some extent, and the discussion of certain political issues. The conceptualization of hybrid regimes is primarily based on Robert Dahl's two democratic principles:

1. Political competition
2. Public participation

In practice, hybrid regimes tend to grant many political rights necessary for competition but simultaneously systematically exclude certain social groups, restrict political participation, and weaken institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, and other oversight bodies—allowing the ruling elites to maintain control over daily politics (Sadeghian & Rahber, 2019: 244).

The Governance Approach of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

There is a strong correlation between governance methods and the democratization process. If governance is more democratic, transparent, participatory, and consensus-driven, then democratization is more effective and

successful. However, if governance remains non-transparent and hybrid (mixed in nature), democratization remains incomplete and may even regress toward authoritarianism.

Turkey's democratization process has been hindered by these governance shortcomings. Despite over a century of modernization and democratization efforts, Turkey continues to face multiple challenges at a crossroads. According to Jung, Turkey resembles a complex factory where the interaction of multiple variables produces unforeseen new variables, which in turn reshape the original variables (Ghahremanpour, 2013: 82-3).

The hybrid and multi-layered identity of the AKP—which incorporates Islamism, conservatism, democratic modernism, nationalism, and liberalism—has made the party's trajectory unpredictable. This complexity explains why Ergun Özbudun argues that, while the AKP's third term in government cannot be fully labeled authoritarian, its governance model increasingly exhibits authoritarian tendencies. Despite claims made by Turkey's political leaders over the past two decades—especially since 2007—the country's governance model has not followed a liberal-conservative democratic path but has instead evolved into a hybrid system characterized by delegative and semi-authoritarian rule. Unlike its early years in power (2002–2007), when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) operated within the framework of liberal-conservative democracy, the party gradually adopted a hybrid and semi-authoritarian approach in its second (2007–2012), third (2012–2018), and fourth (2018–present) terms. This transformation has significantly obstructed Turkey's democratization process, which, after two decades of AKP rule, now faces numerous challenges. Among the structural and political factors contributing to this decline are:

1. A dual and hybrid political structure, balancing democratic and authoritarian elements
2. A rigid and oligarchic party system, concentrated around a strong authoritarian leadership
3. A weak and fragmented opposition bloc, lacking cohesion and effectiveness
4. The influential role of religious institutions and Sufi orders, which act as intermediaries and, at times, interfere in politics
5. Frequent revisions and manipulations of the constitution, undermining democratic stability
6. The erosion of judicial independence, weakening checks and balances
7. A contradictory and unstable international environment, shaped by:
 - a. The European Union's inconsistent stance on applying the Copenhagen criteria and Turkey's accession process
 - b. Regional crises, particularly the Arab Spring uprisings, which have further complicated Turkey's political landscape

As a result, Turkey's democratic trajectory remains uncertain, trapped in a hybrid system that blends limited democratic elements with increasing authoritarian control (Sadeghian & Rahber, 2019: 245).

Prior Research

The research background highlights various factors influencing the political culture in Turkey and its impact on the functioning of the democratic political system. Erden (2023) emphasizes that the prevailing political culture poses significant challenges to democracy in Turkey. Sadeghian and Abadi (2021) point out that the democratization process in Turkey has always been influenced by socio-economic modernization, the role of the state in modernization, relative power structures of social classes and interest groups, democratic government capacity, the legacy of the authoritarian regime before the transition, the country's position in the global system and dependence, the role of the country in the global system of governments, structural foundations of political parties, content and structure of the constitution, leaders' attitudes and outlooks, and the nature of political movements. Kubicek (2021) raises a broad discussion about the lessons learned from the years of power of the Justice and Development Party and how researchers may reconsider some of their assumptions about Turkey, as

well as the broader literature on democratization. Sadeghian (2019) emphasizes that the democratization and consolidation of democracy in Turkey over the past century have faced various obstacles, such as military interventions, ineffective and passive opposition, non-democratic government performance and support for religious and political ideologies, ethnic and religious divides, authoritarian government leaders, weak and sometimes biased political party performances, contradictory international pressures and ideological considerations of the European Union and the United States, zeitgeist, empowerment of extremist political systems and support for dictatorship in the international system, and the effects of regional developments, all of which have contributed to the weakening and failure of the democratization and consolidation process of democracy. Lovell (2015) also points to the internal challenges in Turkey, attributing the instability of Turkish democracy to its lack of cohesion, stemming from the broad political competition, level of participation, and political and civil liberties. Going further, authors such as Aydin Dozgu and Kiman (2014) argue that the inability of external environments, including Europe and the United States, to meet Turkey's legitimate needs for cooperation in joining the international community of democracies has led to negative feedback and internally destabilizing consequences. In an attempt to explain the democratic instability in Turkey, Noor J. Martin (2010), in a chapter of the book "New Faces of Security in the Middle East," introduces the heterogeneous interaction among secularist forces, Islamists, and Alevis as the root of these events in Turkey.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to study qualitatively and deeply the obstacles to the transition to a democratic and participatory culture in Turkey from a foundational theory perspective. By foundational theory, we mean a theory directly derived from systematically collected and analyzed data during the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and final theory are closely intertwined. Qualitative researcher do not start their work with a preconceived theory but rather begin in the realm of reality and allow the theory to emerge from the data they gather. The qualitative researcher initiates their work with a research question or something similar. The theory in their work is developed during the process of data collection. This mostly inductive approach implies that the theory is constructed from or rooted in the data.

Grounded theory is one of the qualitative research strategies widely utilized across various fields of social sciences. This approach is employed for studying, elucidating, and developing theories about social processes based on the perspectives of individuals who have experienced social issues or phenomena under study. It is particularly useful when limited information is available about the phenomenon under study (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Birks & Mills, 2012).

In this method, concepts are collected based on data, identified, and extracted, and then extensively compared and analyzed with other concepts. Based on this, similar elements are grouped, and the most abstract group forms a category. Subsequently, concepts and categories are continuously compared with new data until theoretical saturation is reached, and the concepts align with the data (Frost et al., 2010). Traditional qualitative procedures, including data collection, decomposition, analysis, coding, and data note-taking, are all derived from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017). Indeed, the grounded theory researcher seeks to create a theory in the examination and study of individuals engaged in similar processes or interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 2011).

Since no prior research had been conducted on this topic in Turkey, the researchers first decided to adopt a reliable and open-ended research approach to conduct an in-depth study of the barriers to democratic transition and participatory political culture in the country. While they had access to participants for survey distribution or a quantitative study, a detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives and insights on the subject was deemed more crucial. This approach aimed to pave the way for more specialized future research. Therefore, Grounded Theory was chosen as the most suitable methodology, allowing for a systematic and exploratory examination of the research question.

The method employed to identify individuals in this research involved purposive and judgmental sampling. After establishing the necessary framework for conducting interviews and identifying the desired individuals, the data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 questions, typically lasting between 60 to 100 minutes, conducted between January and May 2024. In this study, theoretical saturation was considered as the endpoint for the sample size and data collection. The sample of this research reached theoretical

saturation after interviewing 17 individuals. Considering the theoretical sampling method, the researchers exercised utmost care and sensitivity in selecting the first few interviewees. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that these individuals had a reasonable level of political and general knowledge relevant to the main research topic. With preliminary inquiry and research, an attempt was made to interview people who have significant knowledge of the country's political conditions to start sampling. Then, according to the answers received from them and their analysis, we tried to continue the process of sampling and selecting people based on their field of study, gender, income, political attitude, and other considered factors. After analyzing these interviews and understanding the concepts that could be extracted, the next participants were chosen accordingly. During the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews, the researchers noticed the accumulation and completion of information from various participants, until it became apparent that from the 19th interview onwards, no substantial new information was being added to the previous findings, and the information was being repeated consistently.

In this study, due to the sensitivity of the social context under investigation and the aim to obtain deep and genuine insights from qualitative research, and to discover a conceptual model of this process based on the participants' perspectives, the grounded theory methodology was used. For selecting participants, theoretical and maximum diversity sampling methods (gender, academic discipline, political orientation) were utilized. Accordingly, students with diverse genders, academic backgrounds, and political orientations were chosen, providing rich and abundant information to create a conceptual model for researchers.

In this research method, through an iterative process, concepts were gradually extracted from codes, categories were identified, and a conceptual model was developed from categories. Thus, for data analysis, based on the Strauss and Corbin analysis method, three stages of coding were conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

In the coding phase, the researchers used MAXQDA 2024 software to categorize the data. Based on the textual and audio data provided by the software, the extracted codes were classified into three stages: initial, secondary, and main categories. Then, using the "retrieved segments" tool in the software, the accuracy of the coding and the categorization of the concepts, according to the definition provided for each, was reviewed and finalized. In this process, the coded concepts were categorized into five groups: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences, and were prepared for textual analysis with the help of participant quotations.

Finally, after categorizing the key concepts in the software, and in accordance with the Grounded Theory research methodology, the categories were classified into five levels to facilitate the interpretation and description of the core category of this study. As shown in Figure 2, a concise and structured summary of the extracted categories is presented.

During the open coding stage of this research, the interview texts were read multiple times, and more than 145 concepts were extracted from meaningful sentences. Concepts were synthesized into 30 sub-categories and 13 main and more abstract categories in the axial coding. Finally, a final core category of "Obstacles to Return to Participatory and Democratic Political Culture" was extracted, which comprehensively encapsulates all main categories and provides a narrative analysis of the data.

After analyzing the data, follow-up contacts were made with some participants to present the interview text and analysis for verification to ensure reliability. Additionally, the researcher referred back to the methodological assumptions, the main research questions, and the data throughout the data collection and analysis stages, comparing the construction of categories and paradigmatic models with raw data to ensure the validity of the research findings.

In this study, interviews were conducted with 17 individuals, all of whom were Turkish nationals and born and raised in the country. Among these, 8 participants were female and 9 were male. Additionally, 10 participants were undergraduate students from the Faculty of Literature, and 7 were students from the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, with 11 of them in their fourth year, 6 in their third year, and one in their second year of study. Regarding monthly income based on Turkish Lira, 4 participants had no income, 8 had incomes

up to 2500 Turkish Lira per month, 4 had incomes ranging from 2500 to 5000 Turkish Lira, and one had an income of 8000 Turkish Lira per month, mostly in the form of scholarships or student stipends. Furthermore, among these participants, 5 students held nationalist and patriotic views, 2 were communist, 2 were secular, 3 had moderate views, 4 were conservative, and one had a Pan-Turkism perspective. In this study, triangulation, respondent validation, and analytical comparisons were employed as strategies to enhance trustworthiness and credibility based on the grounded theory approach by Strauss and Corbin. For validation purposes, triangulation involved the use of coder triangulation, involving researchers and social experts, ensuring agreement among different coders and researchers regarding the research findings. Suggestions and feedback from experts after the presentation of research findings were all directed towards affirming the research findings. In the respondent validation approach, after data analysis, follow-up contacts were made with some of the participants, and the interview transcripts and analyses were presented to them for verification to ensure accurate and comprehensive summaries of the discussions and to highlight participants' emphasized opinions and points in the data analysis.

Table 02: characteristics of the participants

Table 2: Characteristics of the participants

<i>Code</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Academic Year</i>	<i>Income</i>	<i>Political Attitude</i>	<i>Place Of Birth</i>	<i>Nationality</i>
1	24	F	Sociology	4	8000	Communist	Konya	Turk
2	23	F	Sociology	4	2000	Moderate	Konya	Turk
3	22	F	Sociology	4	4000	Moderate	Konya	Kurt
4	22	F	Sociology	4	2000	Moderate	Konya	Turk
5	23	M	Political Science	4	2000	Zfer Party	Kocaeli	Turk
6	21	M	History	3	-	Political Islam	Kahramanmarash	Turk
7	22	M	History	4	2000	Nationalist	Sanliurfa	Turk
8	21	F	Political Science	3	1900	Conservative Right	Yozgat	Turk
9	25	M	Political Science	4	4000	Nationalist	Eğ erli	Turk
10	24	M	Political Science	4	-	Nationalist	Adana	Turk
11	24	M	History	4	2500	Conservative Right	Eskishehir	Turk
12	22	M	History	3	5000	Pan Turk	Konya	Turk
13	20	F	International Communication	2	-	Nationalist	Denizli	Turk
14	23	M	Philosophy	3	2000	Secular Left	Sparta	Turk
15	22	F	Arabic Literature	4	2000	Communist	Mardin	Mihlemler
16	23	F	Business Management	3	5000	Secular Left	Van	Turk
17	24	M	International Communication	4	-	Nationalist	Azerbaijan	Turk

Source: Information obtained from the demographic table in the semi-structured interview

FINDINGS

In this research, the central and core concept that consistently emerges from the data and to which all other main concepts are related is "Obstacles to Return to Participatory and Democratic Political Culture". The central phenomenon of this study, as expressed by undergraduate students of the Faculty of Literature and Economics at Selçuk University in Konya, articulates the obstacles to democratizing Turkey's political culture. Moreover, since the central phenomenon consists of main concepts "The passivity of the parliament, ministers and political parties in the policies of the last twenty years", " Authoritarianism and lack of meritocracy in religion-oriented and ethno-oriented society", " Economic and social inequalities in the government and society", "Transition to a democratic political system" and " Deepening the gap between the government and the nation" it is named " Obstacles to Return to Participatory and Democratic Political Culture".

Contextual Conditions: The passivity of the parliament, ministers, and political parties in the policies of the last twenty years

When discussing democracy, paying attention to the pillars of democracy is crucial. Political institutions such as parliament, political parties, councils, and so on are among the most important institutions that can serve as intermediaries between the people and government officials. Moreover, these institutions can effectively contribute to moderating the government's performance.

One of the key arguments used to label the Turkish government as undemocratic is the complete passivity of political institutions. The authoritarian nature of the government has led these political institutions to be sidelined from the policymaking process. Particularly over the past twenty years, the political landscape in Turkey has been moving towards monopolism, with the ruling party's power increasing day by day. This situation has led Turkish citizens, especially the younger generation, to perceive a weakening of democracy in the country.

Participants in this study unanimously agreed that institutions such as parliament and political parties do not play a significant role in the country's political scene, and members of parliament and even ministers do not have clearly defined roles. Almost all primary and secondary themes obtained regarding this issue emphasized the passivity of political institutions and their actors.

Participant number 14 stated:

"When I look at the political parties, they have no authority to make decisions in the government. They just play alone. Their presence or absence doesn't matter."

Participant number 8 said:

"I don't exactly remember which party she was from, but a parliament member, even a female member, held two dolls in her hand and said: Today, there was a budget debate in the parliament. Her speech was very sarcastic. During the budget speech, parliament members asked if you've come to watch a show to solve economic problems. The budget debate is underway in the parliament, but instead of the budget, they talk about completely different things."

Causal Conditions: Authoritarianism and lack of meritocracy in religion-oriented and ethno-oriented society

The interpretation of authoritarianism and sometimes dictatorship by the ruling government in Turkey often revolves around the single-party dominance in Turkey's political arena. Participants in this study pointed to authoritarian governance and the government's efforts to consolidate its power in various fields. There is almost a consensus among them that the ruling party - the Justice and Development Party (AKP) - in Turkey exerts all efforts to increase its power through various means such as appointing party loyalists to various governmental positions and managing parliamentary and municipal elections. This has led to the neglect of meritocracy in the selection of individuals for governmental and political positions. On the other hand, Turkish society, due to its religious and national principles, cannot completely withdraw its support from the ruling party because this party represents the religious and national values of the society and has acceptable ideological principles, although it faces numerous criticisms in practice. This section aims to further explain this prevailing trend in Turkey's political and social landscape with the help of participants' opinions. The sub-concepts of this section include "Economic problems as a factor in the change of political culture; Authoritarian and charismatic political culture; Religion as the main component of Turkey's political culture; Lack of meritocracy in government; Poor government performance in the economic sector; Government's political incapacity in managing regional challenges."

Inefficiency of individual-oriented and authoritarian government in managing economic and political problems

The Turkish government's encounter with various challenges in recent years has led to public judgment of the government. The government's performance in fulfilling its duties has not been pleasing to the people, and its

disregard for popular demands in this regard has led the people to view the government as an authoritarian regime.

Participant number 4 says:

"Political power makes political decisions based on its doctrine. A simple example of this is Sweden joining NATO, which the Turkish government approved. The most prominent example is Syria. For example, I know that Syrians will cause many political, economic, and military crises in the future, and our government cannot manage it. It is clear that if there were 80 million Turks, 80 million people would not disappear, but the possibility of gaining political power decreases, and the government must understand this."

Participant number 7 also believes that:

"I see the government's performance in social issues as good. But the government's efforts have never been enough, especially regarding economic issues, especially the earthquake. People were trapped under the rubble. Now, you gather around and do a maneuver in Kahramanmaraş for the earthquake?! The soldiers came to the field on the third day. Soldiers cannot be sent to the scene of the incident on the third day. Security is very important in such matters. This problem is related to the country's survival."

The institutionalization of religious and racial political culture in Turkey

A significant portion of Turkey's current social and political challenges can be attributed to the institutionalization of a political culture that is largely influenced by religious and national values. Despite this, the entrenched political culture among Turks, alongside the multi-layered culture of Turkish society, has led to the recognition of conflict and contradiction as another characteristic of it.

In this regard, participant number 8 says:

"Turks love conflict. They are people who are very prone to conflict. Therefore, they are not sociable. On the other hand, in the past 20 years, some political ideas have been based on certain cliché identities; for example, conservatism is doing a religious job based on the suitability of our political thought. It actually means giving priority to religion; whereas conservatism in no Western country is based on religion. Identity is based on national identity. This is exactly where the breakdown occurs."

Participant number 14 also believes that:

"While a certain segment of our people accept the desert culture of the Arabs, which we call Wahhabism, under the guise of faith, another part of us is attracted to Western culture under the guise of civilization. The right-left factionalism and civilized-fanatic dichotomy have always existed. Although both sides are fanatical, there is a serious cultural decline and a problem beyond cultural alienation. We are fighting against our own culture."

Lack of meritocracy in the current authoritarian political system

The continuity of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) governance under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey has evolved into a naturalized phenomenon. Transitioning away from the ideals of democracy and even secularism in conjunction with numerous economic challenges has led democracy to become more of a dream in this country. On the other hand, the deepening of inter-party and inter-ideological challenges in Turkey has resulted in various interpretations of the nature of the country's political system. Undoubtedly, under such circumstances, party interests dictate that government officials in various positions are selected based on their greater loyalty to the ruling party. This has led to the neglect of meritocracy in the country, with the competence of many government officials being constantly questioned.

Participant 5 argues:

"We have a flawed democracy in Turkey. Currently, 51% of voters disregard the thoughts and opinions of the remaining 49%. For the winner, it doesn't matter what happens to others. In Turkey's political system, it's a

democracy of majority, not a unified democracy. Honestly, democracy cannot function properly in such an ignorant society. We see undeserving individuals reaching positions of power without the consent of the majority of people. This is one of the several drawbacks of such a governmental system."

Participant 6 states:

"I am one of those who prefer the parliamentary system. I am one of those who want competent ministers. I believe their faces should change in Turkey's political system. In a modern political system, people should determine the political structures and bring in men who will respond to the people's needs. However, in Turkey, we don't see that happening, and undeserving individuals occupy the most important governmental positions to ordinary governmental positions."

Intervening Conditions: Economic and social inequalities in the government and society

The current trend in Turkey's political and governmental system has led to the emergence of issues such as disregard for democratic principles and meritocracy, resulting in problems of monopolization and unequal distribution of economic and social privileges. One of the main points of contention among the participants of this research has been the unfair and unequal performance of the government in economic, social, and civil affairs. Indeed, their criticism stems from the existing societal discrimination, which is exacerbated by the government's governance style, as explained in the previous section. Additionally, various intellectual biases and cultural and traditional challenges in Turkey have somewhat contributed to the intensification of these discriminations. While the transition to democracy seems to be a collective demand, some traditional ideologies prevalent in this society are perceived as obstacles to democracy implementation. For instance, the lack of consensus on the participation of women in political positions is considered one of the social obstacles to transitioning to a democratic society. The subtopics of this section, including "Unfair government performance in the distribution of economic resources; inappropriate and authoritarian political system; government failure in education, post-earthquake crisis management, and job security provision; emphasis on the necessity of government structural reform; monopolization of resources and privileges by government officials; lack of need for women's participation due to their perceived mismatch with the political environment; political positions requiring male politicians," aim to further elaborate on this issue based on the participants' opinions.

A gender perspective on the presence of women in political and government positions

Despite the initial assumption of the researchers regarding the attitudes of Turkish students toward women's presence in political and governmental positions, a considerable number of male participants in this study believed that there was no need for women to be present in the political scene. Conversely, female participants also spoke about the necessity of women's presence in politics.

Participant number 10 says:

"I don't think women are suitable for governmental positions. Because I think they are emotional beings. Sometimes I think they cannot act logically with their emotions. I think a woman cannot sustain herself in the battlefield of politics with her feminine nature and act correctly."

Participant number 15 states:

"We see that women are recently participating in politics. One of the biggest advantages of that is that women are given many rights; they can now do many jobs and are not ostracized by society. When we suppress a particular gender, we need it again in various situations."

Participant number 7 believes that:

"Women's presence in political positions cannot solve a problem. The political scene has turned into a masculine scene, and women cannot compete with men in such situations, and in my opinion, this could be due to the nature of women, which is more suitable for tasks that require more delicacy."

Unfair performance of the government in the distribution of resources and economic privileges

The monopolistic tendencies of government officials, resulting from administrative and governmental corruption, are among the most significant axes of public protest against the government. The injustice that has caused suffering for the people of Turkey, especially the demanding youth, stems from the accumulation of power in the core of authority and its associated circles.

Participant number 12 says:

"You shouldn't give too much money to politicians. You shouldn't pay 300.000 Lira monthly to the parliament's office. If you want to run the country, I think you can even do it with a minimum wage. Don't give a Porsche to the parliament member, don't give them luxury cars, don't provide them with security so they learn not to fear their people, go out in public, and get to know the people. What can they do without that? This problem currently lies with the presidency. He doesn't see us, and I can't explain myself to him."

Participant number 10 adds:

"When gasoline and diesel have very high prices, what will farmers do? And if you can increase the price of bread, why do you increase the price of books? How many billions were lost in the earthquake? I say 78 billion Lira (2.4 billion Dollar) was collected. So where did this 78 billion lira go? The government should have been transparent, publishing it through the official newspaper."

Interaction strategies: Transition to a democratic political system

As we have repeatedly emphasized the necessity of a transition or return to a democratic and participatory political culture in Turkey, this section will elaborate on more specialized aspects of this issue. The path that the Turkish government has taken in recent years has convinced everyone more than ever that this governance is moving away from democratic principles. Events that have occurred during elections, constitutional amendments, domestic and international incidents, etc., indicate the government's inclination towards dictatorship and totalitarianism. The participants of this research, who have well understood such warnings, believe that Turkey urgently needs democracy along with structural reforms in politics, economy, and social values. The subtopics of this section, with the help of the following more specific subtopics, aim to explain this issue: "Emphasis on supporting the independent activities of parties and social movements; distrust of parties due to opportunism and lack of representation of popular demands; support for labor and student movements; dissatisfaction and negative sentiment towards the political system; negative sentiment towards the government due to the authoritarianism and self-centeredness of the president; negative sentiment towards the government due to its poor performance in various areas; democracy as the most essential need of Turkish society; obligation to implement democracy in Turkey."

Supporting the independent activities of parties and social movements

Despite the political party diversity in the Turkish political arena and the grassroots and large-scale social movements that have emerged, at least in the past twenty years, the participants in this study almost completely denied the independence of political parties and emphasized the independent activities of social movements. Although a gender perspective on social movements, particularly women's movements, was evident, and some did not grasp the goals and policies of feminist movements, overall, social movements were listed as free and independent of the fundamental needs of Turkish society.

Participant number 16 says:

"I am fully in favor of social movements, especially student and labor movements. I am currently collecting signatures from students to address an issue with the university administration, and I think this is a completely civil and legal way to bring the problem to the attention of the university management. Although some disagree with me, I respond that if we enjoy freedom of speech at the university, then we have the right to protest, and no one will blame us for it."

Participant number 7 says:

"As a citizen of the Turkish Republic, I believe I should be able to convey my protest voice to the government, and I consider this a completely natural and public right so that anyone can share their problems with the government. In my opinion, social movements, taking into account certain considerations, are the best way to convey the message or protest of citizens to the government."

Dissatisfaction with the performance of the political system

The dissatisfaction of this segment of Turkish society with the government and its performance was clearly evident throughout the interviews. Aside from the political views of each student, few sentences or phrases were heard in support of the government. Their constant criticisms, both detailed and broad, of the government's performance in various areas were heard, and it did not seem so unpredictable.

Participant number 1 says:

"I think authoritarianism is very troublesome. Since I believe that the presidential system strengthens dictatorship, I cannot look at it very positively. The performance of such a system is not satisfactory."

Participant number 9 says:

"There is an absolute power in Turkey. Can we talk about equality and justice where there is power? They appoint their relatives wherever they want, and this is completely infuriating. That's why there is no democracy."

Agreement on the necessity of implementing democracy in Turkey

Aligned with the primary objective of this article is the necessity of transitioning to a democratic society in Turkey. Essentially, the younger generation, whose political and social experiences have largely been shaped within the single-party governance framework of Turkey over the past twenty years, can aptly comprehend the benefits of establishing a democratic society. The academic and specialized knowledge, alongside the social awareness of the participants in this research, has empowered them to recognize the imperative nature of implementing democracy in Turkey while critically assessing the pitfalls of governance in the country.

Participant 5 asserts:

"Democracy is essential and rational. It provides an environment where all segments of society can voice their opinions. For instance, in autocratic and tribal systems, leadership is inherited, and people have no right to complain, but in democracy, people can transform the government and have their demands heard. By transformation, I mean voting. The power of the people in democracy is significant."

Participant 8 expresses:

"Democracy is a very good subject. Since you allow me to speak about facts, I must say that humanity cannot survive without a fair governmental, educational, and healthcare system. I believe democracy must exist. Today, if I want and succeed, I can become president or a member of parliament. Democracy provides this for you. There are many problems in implementing democracy in Turkey, but democracy, as I mentioned, is commendable and necessary."

Participant 16 contends:

"Democracy can be the savior of a society. It may not be exactly what some people want, but it allows for collective decision-making on many things so that society can live in greater peace and prosperity. Democracy even exists in the circle of friends. When deciding where to go in a friendly gathering, you will go where the majority agrees. Therefore, democracy can always be a solution."

Results: Deepening the gap between the government and the nation

As mentioned, democracy is a universal demand and dream in Turkey. Although there are sometimes oppositions to democracy, the experience of democracy in Turkey and alignment with the global development trend necessitates the revival of democratic political culture in this country. However, the prevailing trend in the political sphere of Turkey does not promise the implementation of democracy in this country. Inequality, corruption, authoritarianism, single-party rule, lack of accountability, and many other factors mentioned in this research have prevented the implementation of democracy in this country. This issue has not only led to a decrease in political participation and trust of the people in the government and political institutions of the country but also increased disappointment and clear political passivity among the people. In other words, the gap between the government and the nation in the context of such a dissatisfying situation is deepening day by day. This section, with the help of the following subtopics and the oversight of the participants, aims to further explain the above-mentioned issues: "Noticeable decline in political trust of the people, loss of people's trust in the government in the past twenty years; experience of participation in elections; non-participation in subsequent elections; dissatisfaction and negative sentiment towards the political system; negative sentiment towards the government due to the authoritarianism and self-centeredness of the president; neglect and disillusionment with the government; poor performance of the government in various areas as a factor in political passivity towards the government."

Reluctance to participate in elections

Although participating in elections has always been considered a civic duty disillusionment with the prospect of change through the emergence of new individuals and an uncertain future has led to a decrease in the willingness to participate in elections.

Participant number 8 says:

"I don't intend to participate in elections again. I don't believe that much change will happen anymore. Democracy is usually a theater for me. What I mean is that the outcome is certain, and there is no need for elections."

Participant number 3 says:

"I only participated in the 2023 presidential elections and didn't vote in the second round. I don't intend to participate in local elections either. In the 2023 elections, I prioritized my ideologies, ideas, and interests, and voted for the candidate I had in mind, who didn't win."

Significant decrease in political trust

If we consider political trust and participation as inherently linked, then it's natural that the growth and decline of both are interconnected in any society. As mentioned, one of the most significant reasons for the reluctance to participate in elections for the participants in this study is the lack of belief and hope in the efficacy of the individuals who are supposed to take office. This lost trust itself is the result of the government's inefficiency and its inability to fulfill its duties.

Participant number 2 says:

"Especially in the earthquake incident, our trust was shaken, and we were left alone. I witnessed many incidents where nobody came to help us. That's why I see that trust has greatly diminished. For example, if I fall by the roadside today and get injured, nobody does anything. If I call the police, they won't come. In my opinion, everyone experiences mistrust at some point."

Participant number 4 says:

"I thought the government's performance was good initially, and I could say that it deviated from its initial line. Instead of trying to gather everyone and represent everyone, it turned into someone who only appeals to specific

segments of society to gather votes. He surrendered to his line, and this caused his performance to be criticized by those who said he didn't represent me. This issue completely eroded trust in the government."

Disappointment with the pillars of the country's political system

With a cursory glance at the narrative trajectory of the issues and opinions expressed by contributors thus far, it is easy to speak of the entrenched nature of political apathy within the two aforementioned faculties. Just as the phenomenon of culture undergoes a process of internalization and institutionalization within individual and societal life, a series of events over the past twenty years, coupled with unmet expectations and lingering disappointments among the populace, has reinforced the passive aspect of the political culture, particularly among the youth. Although cultural divides persist, and the dichotomy between participatory and apathetic political culture in Turkish society is evident, this research largely highlights the consolidation of apathetic political culture within this society.

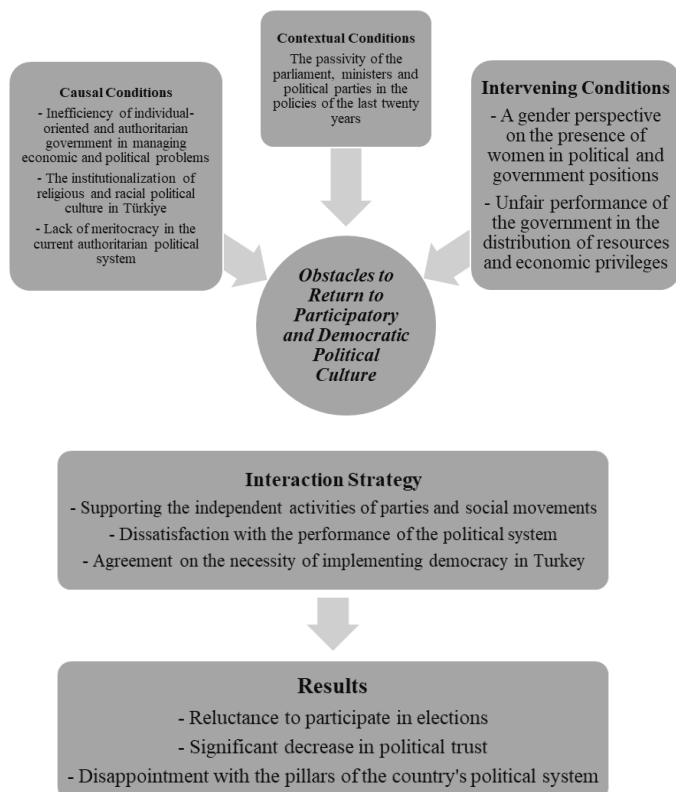
Participant 1 contends:

"With the transition to a presidential system, I question the presence of parliamentarians. Why are they there? Why do they receive such high salaries? The Justice and Development Party currently controls a significant number of parliamentary seats due to their vote share. This implies that, as the government claims, things are progressing. Opposition parties or other factions there have little influence on decisions and laws. When we witness apathy at that level of government, I can never evaluate my presence in political affairs as influential."

Participant 9 states:

"Parliament has no meaningful function because the government does not allow it. The Justice and Development Party often alters votes in their favor by having a majority of seats in parliament. This signifies the monopolistic and party-centric nature of the country's political system, which has alienated others. Such apathy naturally permeates within the populace and even fosters a negative perception of the government."

Research paradigm approach



Picture 2: The paradigmatic model with the core category of obstacles to a participatory and democratic political culture

Source: Extracted from interviews

DISCUSSION

The acceptance of democracy in any society inherently requires harmony among all its elements and dimensions. The process of individualization and institutionalization of a democratic and participatory culture will undoubtedly take time. It is a fact that democracy remains a lost ring of governance in many countries characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. Even in such societies, achieving consensus between the government and the people is not an easy task. Turkey, as one of the countries striving for a transition to a modern social culture for years, has not achieved a relatively good balance in employing religious and national values. In this country, significant efforts have been made to implement democracy, and good democratic experiences have been recorded. However, the shifts in governments and political parties, regional fluctuations, and internal challenges have led to a tumultuous democratic process in this country. Consequently, some of these challenges have empowered the governments. Governments that have ruled this country in recent decades have strengthened their governance authority by utilizing these fundamental social values. Currently, the political environment in Turkey, dominated by the right-wing conservative Justice and Development Party (AK Parti), has drifted far from democratic values. This research aims to study the obstacles to participatory and democratic political culture in Turkey from the perspective of undergraduate students at the Faculty of Literature and Economics and Administrative Sciences at Selçuk University in Konya, Turkey. Researchers in this study, conducted using the grounded theory analysis method and drawing on the theoretical concepts of political culture by Almond and Verba, concluded that authoritarianism and lack of accountability in politics and society, coupled with the government's poor and unfair performance in distributing resources and economic privileges, have transformed the necessity of implementing democracy into the primary demand of the people, according to the participants in this study. The continuation of this governance approach in Turkey has not only disillusioned people from political reforms but also led to a decrease in political participation and trust.

The findings of this research align with observations made by other scholars. As Erden (2023) highlighted political culture as the primary challenge to democratic transition in Turkey, this study also emphasizes that addressing the elements of passive political culture in the society under investigation requires multi-dimensional reforms within both the societal and governmental structures. Such reforms are deemed the most essential strategy for paving the way toward democracy.

Similarly, Sadeghian (2019) pointed out that the undemocratic actions of the government and its support for extreme ethnic and religious ideologies have effectively disregarded equality among ethnic groups as a democratic value. This reality is explicitly explained in the causal conditions section of this study, demonstrating that Turkey's governmental structure, influenced by specific ethnic and religious values, has resulted in unacceptable performance. Lovell (2015) also identified internal challenges as obstacles to democracy in Turkey, which this research further underscores. The unresolved political tensions within the government and society serve as a major barrier to democratization.

Martin (2010) highlighted the lack of interaction between secular and Islamist groups in Turkey, a finding that aligns closely with the contextual and causal conditions discussed in this study. The absence of constructive engagement and the discord among power groups constitute a significant issue that fosters the government's undemocratic practices.

However, the unique contributions and innovative findings of this research lie in the insights gathered from participants. These insights explain the passivity of political institutions, the gendered perspective on women's presence in power, the low levels of political participation and trust, dissatisfaction with the political system, and the emphasis on the independent activities of social movements. These aspects are elaborated in detail within the text of the article.

CONCLUSION

The main concern of this research was to identify the structural and mental obstacles in Turkey that prevent the political system from democratizing. Drawing upon the constructivist theories of Lipset and Huntington, which

suggest that the path to democratization passes through the gateway of a democratic and participatory political culture, the aim of this study was designed based on exploring the obstacles that hinder the democratization of the political culture in Turkey. It becomes apparent that a crucial point continually emphasized by the participants and reflected in both the sub and main concepts is the strong desire of students for constructive and effective engagement with political institutions. Although the inclination of participants in this study towards participating in elections has decreased, and their political trust has been compromised, it does not mean that they do not feel the need for constructive and influential participation in their political destiny. Furthermore, holding fair elections, the activity of political parties and institutions, and their free competition during elections are seen as a public demand.

Considering Huntington's action-oriented approach, which focuses on analyzing the factors preventing the transition to democracy, attention is also given to the structure to a considerable extent. This allows for a solid foundation of Turkey's non-democratic political system in the past twenty years to be analyzed in terms of authoritarianism, administrative corruption, lack of independence of political parties and associations, lack of rule of law, opaque elections, and similar factors. These factors contribute to the absence of a dynamic environment for political expansion and development within the framework of democracy, leading to a lack of transition to a democratic and participatory political culture in the country.

Successful democratization in Turkey is contingent upon the existence of developed social-economic structures, along with the presence of civil society, positive roles of external and international factors, and an appropriate democratic pattern among political elites. Without each of these elements, democratization will not occur.

The results of this study show that the political culture in Turkey has a very fragile structure. An important reason for this is that the political culture, which fluctuates according to conjunctural conditions, does not have a strong ground. This is due to the developments in Turkey's domestic politics as well as regional and global events. The new young generation, affected by both, is skeptical about the establishment of a democratic political culture in the country.

The results of this study are based on the views of students from the faculties of Literature and Economics at a university in Konya, which is located in the interior of Turkey and is seen as a conservative city by outsiders. This constitutes the main limitation of the study. To better understand the political culture in Turkey and to reveal the political tendencies and attitudes of young people studying at universities more clearly, it is necessary to conduct qualitative and quantitative research on students studying at universities in other cities in Turkey. In this way, the obstacles to the revitalization of a democratic and participatory political culture can be revealed more comprehensively, and more coherent projections about the future of political culture in the country can be developed.

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