

# Blame Shifting in Autocracies Following Large-scale Disasters: Evidence from Turkey

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Large-scale disasters, particularly when handled poorly, often spark popular outrage and threaten an autocrat's hold on power. Autocrats frequently employ blame shifting strategies to redirect public anger and weather these storms. We examine whether blame shifting after a large-scale disaster helps or hurts an autocrat's popularity through a mixed-methods research design in the electoral autocracy of Turkey in April-July 2023, following the February 2023 earthquakes. An online survey experiment ( $n=3,839$ ) identifies the effects of blaming the aftermath of the earthquake on the opposition, a force majeure, private construction companies, or a government minister, while focus groups explore the mechanisms behind these effects. We find that blaming the opposition or a force majeure leads to a backlash, especially among those more able to critically evaluate information. Focus groups reveal that these backlash effects are driven by voters' dismay at electoral opportunism and the incumbent's polarizing language following a large-scale disaster.

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## 1 Introduction

Many countries have experienced large-scale disasters in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Wildfires in the US and Australia have scorched millions of hectares and ruined livelihoods, floods in Germany and Libya have destroyed homes and taken thousands of lives, and earthquakes in Morocco, Syria, and Turkey have killed tens of thousands and displaced millions. Politicians' reactions to large-scale disasters, which are occurring increasingly frequently due to anthropogenic climate change, can threaten the tenure of even the longest-standing or seemingly secure leaders. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously remarked that, “events, dear boy, events” were the greatest challenge for any statesman. This is especially true for autocrats (Flores and Smith 2013). Even China’s Xi Jinping faced protests against his regime’s zero-Covid policy, including some explicit calls for the removal of the Chinese Communist Party regime and for Xi himself to step down (Wintour 2022).

Yet, many autocrats survive large-scale disasters. Xi ultimately steered his regime through the Covid pandemic, North Korea’s Kim Jong Il survived a devastating famine in the 1990s (Wilson Center 2002), and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to take his tenure into a third decade following the earthquakes in February 2023, despite significant anger directed against his rule due to his government’s poor response (Hubbard 2023). Autocrats have an extensive survival toolkit that they can draw from to try to boost their popularity and stabilize their regime following large-scale disasters. They can unleash repression (Wood and Wright 2016), increase provision of public goods (Springborg 2011), or try to dissuade people from protesting by engaging in blame shifting, where they attempt to direct people’s anger towards a target other than the autocrat (Aytaç 2021; Weaver 1986). This last tactic is frequently used by dictators, especially following large-scale disasters, but there is little evidence of whether it works. We therefore ask: how does blame shifting following a large-scale disaster affect an autocrat’s popular approval?

We set out competing pre-registered arguments about the effects of blame shifting on autocratic leader approval following large-scale disasters. These are drawn from various subfields, but especially the public management literature on blame avoidance. We focus on (part of) Christopher Hood’s notion of ‘presentational’ blame avoidance to define blame shifting as an attempt to pass

blame to another actor or phenomenon through ‘spin, timing, stage-management and argument by offering plausible excuses’ (Hood 2007, 200).<sup>2</sup> In the context of authoritarian systems, our conceptualization entails using propaganda to manipulate public opinion and pass blame onto another actor or phenomenon to protect the autocrat’s position (Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017, 428). Blame shifting may positively affect autocratic leader approval through the mechanisms of 1) obfuscating clarity of responsibility among citizens, or 2) by generating sympathy for the autocrat through highlighting the role of supposedly obstructionist actors. Alternatively, blame shifting may have negative effects if 1) citizens perceive that the autocrat is lying, or 2) they deem the autocrat to be politicizing an issue, which should be ‘above politics,’ for instrumental purposes. We also argue that individual-level characteristics—specifically, an individual’s ability to consume alternative information and being an unaffiliated voter—reduces their likelihood of being susceptible to blame shifting.

We test these arguments in Turkey, following the earthquakes of February 2023, which left over 50,000 people dead, 3.3 million displaced, and a US\$150 million reduction in monthly labor income (Relief Web 2023).<sup>3</sup> Turkey is a typical electoral autocracy; democratic institutions officially exist, but the playing field is tilted “in the incumbent’s favour to the extent that it is no longer a democracy, typically through restricting media freedom and the space for civil society, and repressing the opposition” (Maerz et al. 2020, 912). While the proximity of the May 2023 election may narrow the broader applicability of our findings—a point we return to in the Conclusion—the regime’s strong control, but not monopoly over information flows, is typical of many electoral autocracies.<sup>4</sup> However, the ubiquity of the earthquakes meant that Erdoan could not employ commonly-used propaganda tactics intended to distract or censure the earthquakes from public discourse (Roberts 2018). Instead, Erdoan engaged in blame shifting designed to protect his public approval. This included blaming the devastation of the earthquakes on them being a natural disaster that was impossible to prepare for (a force majeure), the opposition’s control of local governance in certain regions, and private construction companies.

We employ a mixed-methods approach to explore the effects of these blame shifting strate-

gies, and one additional tactic (a hypothetical scenario of Erdoğan firing a minister), on Erdoğan’s approval. This first entails an online survey experiment fielded to 3,839 adults in April and May 2023, which primes respondents with a randomly assigned blame shifting strategy and then measures their approval of Erdoğan. We complement this with three follow-up focus groups in July 2023 of participants who were supporters of Erdoğan, the opposition, or unaffiliated voters. The experiment identifies the effects of the various types of blame shifting politics on people’s approval of Erdoğan, while the focus groups help elucidate the reasons underlying people’s responses to blame shifting politics (i.e., the causal mechanisms).

We find that blame shifting politics on average tend not only to be ineffective, but they can spark a backlash. Specifically, priming respondents with Erdoğan’s efforts to blame the earthquakes’ effects on a force majeure or the opposition led to eight and six percentage point decreases in his approval, respectively. We also find that these effects were moderated by an individual’s ability to consume alternative sources of information: Erdoğan attempting to shift blame to a force majeure or the opposition led to a greater backlash among those with a higher level of education or a higher income. Contrary to our expectation, partisanship does not modify these effects. The focus groups reveal that these backlash effects are driven by voters’ dismay at electoral opportunism and the incumbent’s use of polarizing language following a large-scale disaster. Regardless of partisan affiliation, respondents express strong revulsion against blame shifting that points to the supposedly unavoidable nature of large-scale disasters, and they disapprove of tactics that instrumentalize the earthquake for political gain, especially when politicians use polarizing language.

Our study contributes to various bodies of literature that examine blame shifting. Blame shifting interests scholars in numerous subfields, including comparative authoritarianism (Cai 2008; Chaisty, Gerry and Whitefield 2022; Li, Ni and Wang 2021; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020), the European Union (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2023; Kriegmair et al. 2022; Schlipphak and Treib 2017; Schlipphak et al. 2023; Traber, Schoonvelde and Schumacher 2020), international relations (Kim 2024; Verbeek 2024), and public management (Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017; Hansson 2024; Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014). However, de-

spite the prominence of blame shifting across these diverse subfields—an indicator of its perceived importance—evidence on the effects of blame shifting on executive approval remains minimal and, where it does exist, findings are somewhat contradictory.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, evidence on the effects of blame shifting in the wake of large-scale disasters is non-existent (Hood 2007, 200).<sup>6</sup> By filling this specific gap, our work contributes more broadly to research on blame shifting across these diverse bodies of research.

The article proceeds as follows. We first extract theoretically-motivated arguments from literature on public management and authoritarian propaganda to describe why blame shifting in autocracies following a large-scale disaster may affect a leader's approval positively or negatively. We then introduce the empirical setting of Turkey in 2023. Next, we describe our mixed-methods research design of a survey experiment supplemented by focus groups. This entails discussing participant recruitment, the intervention, the outcome variable, the pre-registered hypotheses, focus group procedures, and ethical considerations. We then present the results, before concluding by considering the findings' implications, the study's limitations, and avenues for future work.

## 2 Autocratic Leader Approval, Crises, and Blame Shifting

Despite dictators facing little or no danger of losing power at the ballot box, recent scholarship on comparative authoritarianism emphasizes the importance of popular approval for autocratic stability (Carter and Carter 2023; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). The traditional view in the contemporary study of autocracy is that a leader's standing among elites in the regime is the most important factor in determining their survival. Since World War Two, dictators have been more likely to lose power at the hands of a coup than any other method (Svolik 2012, 4-5). However, their standing among the people matters. Dictators can, and increasingly do, also fall to threats from the people (Carter and Carter 2023; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). Popular unrest can also precipitate challenges by insiders who, wary that the people may seek to overturn the regime's entire autocratic structure, remove the leader in an attempt to becalm the population (Casper and Tyson 2014). Popular approval is thus extremely important in shaping autocratic leader survival

in the short-term, but also something that many dictators consider in the long-term as they seek legitimacy to stabilize their regime (Gerschewski 2015).

At the same time, political leaders are closely attuned to crises because these can undermine their popular approval if the leader is blamed for the event itself, or for how they handle its aftermath (Cole, Healy and Werker 2012). This is especially true for autocrats because they are more susceptible than democratic leaders to the negative effects of large-scale disasters, which increase protests and reduce their tenure (Flores and Smith 2013). Disasters including earthquakes, floods, and wildfires can “threaten the political status quo, since people often make policy demands of their [autocratic] leaders in the aftermath to alleviate their suffering” (Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014, 449). Large-scale disasters can thus be thought of as critical junctures, which provide an opportunity for the political status quo to be renegotiated (Collier and Munck 2022). Autocrats are therefore often proactive in trying to protect their popular approval in the wake of large-scale disasters.

Dictators have various options available to protect their approval following a large-scale disaster. They can attempt to shift the agenda to another issue that is more favorable to them (Aytaç 2021), they can provide policy concessions (Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014, 452), or they can try to shift blame (Weaver 1986). In an autocracy, the concentration of power around the leader or in a small ruling coalition should make it harder for autocrats to credibly shift blame (Weaver 1986). However, several scholars have documented that autocrats do attempt to do this (Cai 2008; Williamson 2024), including in the wake of large-scale disasters (Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014). While it is by no means the only strategy that autocrats employ, presentational blame shifting is especially appealing to autocrats at this time. Autocrats cannot use other propaganda tactics like censorship, for instance; such a tactic would be implausible and ineffective due to the common knowledge among citizens of the disaster’s effects (Roberts 2018; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). However, despite autocrats frequently employing blame shifting after disasters, it is unclear whether such efforts are effective (Hood 2007, 200).

Still, the frequent use of post-disaster blame shifting in autocracies suggests that autocrats be-

lieve the tactic is in some way effective (Hood 2007, 200).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, autocrats in regimes including China (Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017), Egypt (Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014), and Russia (Chaisty, Gerry and Whitefield 2022) have all employed blame shifting strategies after large-scale disasters. Research on clarity of responsibility on voting behavior suggests that blame shifting may be effective by creating uncertainty among citizens, including in autocracies about who is responsible for negative circumstances (Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2013; Lewis-Beck 1997). The use of this tactic can muddy the waters to cast doubt in people's minds about whether the autocrat is responsible for how the aftermath of a large-scale disaster is handled. This can protect the autocrat's standing among the people at this critical time. Blame shifting may also provide benefits beyond just protecting an autocrat's popular approval; it may also improve it by generating sympathy among the people for the autocrat. In this way, an autocrat can imply through blame shifting that if only unfortunate circumstances or actors with nefarious intentions stopped obstructing the autocrat, then he would be able to govern more effectively on the people's behalf (Weaver 2018, 260-261).

Blame shifting used by autocrats following a large-scale disaster may therefore be effective by ensuring that an autocrat's popular approval does not decrease as much as it would have done in the absence of a blame shifting strategy, or even by helping increase it. While there is a dearth of systematic evidence on whether blame shifting strategies have this effect (Hood 2007, 200), there is some suggestive evidence that these positive effects are possible. For example, in Russia, Putin responded to the Covid pandemic in 2020 in part through a 'presentational' blame shifting strategy.<sup>8</sup> Putin blamed regional leaders for negative economic consequences of their strategies to deal with the pandemic, even replacing several regional governors (Vladimir Ilyukhin in Kamchatka, Sergey Gaplikov in Komi, and Igor Orlov in Arkhangel'sk). While Putin did not entirely escape criticism from the Russian people for the government's response to the pandemic, his blame shifting strategy was somewhat successful as greater blame was targeted at regional authorities (Chaisty, Gerry and Whitefield 2022, 368, 372-373). Beyond electoral autocracies, Schlipphak et al. (2023) show that aspiring autocrats in backsliding countries can weaken support for external sanctions by framing

them as illegitimate interference in domestic affairs, effectively shifting the blame for sanctions and their consequences.

Nevertheless, despite autocrats' frequent use of blame shifting following large-scale disasters, there are several plausible reasons why such strategies may fail to have a positive effect, or even lead to a backlash and diminish support for the autocrat. First, if an autocrat's attempts to shift blame are not perceived as credible by the people, then such attempts are unlikely to improve their attitudes towards the autocrat, and could even worsen opinions of him (Gläsel and Paula 2020).<sup>9</sup> For example, Rosenfeld (2018) shows that messaging about economic conditions in electoral autocracies becomes less credible when it diverges from citizens' direct experiences. 'Hard' propaganda, which contains crude and heavy-handed messages can worsen citizens' opinions of an autocratic regime (Huang 2018). Thus, if citizens believe an autocrat is lying about who is responsible for the aftermath of a large-scale disaster, it may diminish their approval of the autocrat. In electoral systems, outright lying is politically risky and can undermine trust in the leader (Gaber and Fisher 2022, 460). Perceived dishonesty in politics can invoke strong negative reactions, especially among the highly educated (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017). In Turkey, Erdoğan's claim that the opposition was to blame for the February 2023 earthquakes, for instance, could have been perceived as a 'common knowledge' lie since most areas affected by the earthquakes were controlled by ruling party mayors (aside from the southern province of Hatay).<sup>10</sup>

Second, an autocrat's blame shifting strategies may be especially likely to illicit a backlash when they are used following a large-scale disaster. At this time, voters expect politicians to attend to the lives and outlooks of ordinary people (Valgarðsson et al. 2021, 858). Specifically, voters expect politicians to be more 'human' (Clarke et al. 2018; Garzia 2011), 'normal,' or 'in touch' with ordinary people (Valgarðsson et al. 2021, 859). During hard times, many citizens expect unity from their politicians, rather than blaming others, where they provide empathetic and practical leadership to help people navigate the aftermath of such a traumatic event (Shogan 2009). In some cases, citizens perceive these issues as being 'above politics', especially when many have lost their livelihood, friends, and family. Employing blame shifting, thereby politicizing a large-scale

disaster for instrumental purposes rather than providing the empathetic leadership that citizens are looking for at this time, may therefore anger voters and decrease the autocrat's approval.

One example of the negative effects of blame shifting, albeit from a democratic context, is US President Trump's actions during the Covid pandemic. Trump sought to blame the pandemic on ethnic outgroups by repeatedly using phrases like 'Chinese virus' and 'Kung Flu.' Rather than protecting the president from blame or boosting his approval, Trump subsequently received greater blame for failings in his administration's response, especially among conservatives (Porumbescu et al. 2023). In autocracies, Aytaç (2021) does not find any negative effects of blame shifting by Erdoğan in Turkey for economic woes, but he does find that it is ineffective at boosting approval for Erdoğan's economic policies.

Thus, there are compelling theoretical reasons to suggest that blame shifting after a large-scale disaster affects an autocrat's approval. These effects could also be conditional on individual-level characteristics—a point we return to in the Research Design—or other systematic factors. For instance, blame shifting following a disaster could precipitate a boost or downturn in an autocrat's approval depending on the target to which the autocrat apportions blame. Blaming actors or institutions outside of the polity may be more likely to boost a leader's approval through a rally-around-the-flag effect (Schlipphak and Treib 2017; Schlipphak et al. 2023; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020; c.f. Porumbescu et al. 2023); conversely, blaming domestic actors, such as the opposition, could be divisive and thus more likely to precipitate backlash.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely, though, that any average or heterogeneous effects of blaming a particular target are contextual, depending on the (im)plausibility of how credibly the target for blame shifting can be tied to the phenomenon that precipitates the autocrat attempting to shift blame.

Overall, whether and how blame shifting politics following a large-scale disaster affect autocratic leader approval is unclear.<sup>12</sup> We therefore explore this question in the context of Turkey, which is an instructive case to study this question since it recently experienced two major earthquakes in February 2023, after which its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan employed several blame shifting strategies. Turkey also has an institutional setup typical of most electoral autocracies. In

testing our hypotheses, we focus on domestic targets for blame, since this is who was targeted by Erdoğan. Although our blame shifting treatments and the reactions they induce are specific to Turkey, our study offers broader clues to understand the impact of blame shifting politics following large-scale disasters in other autocracies, since similar tactics are also used by incumbent and aspiring autocrats elsewhere.

### **3 The Empirical Setting: Turkey**

#### **3.1 Electoral Autocratic Politics**

Turkey is a typical electoral autocracy; it regularly holds elections for the chief executive and national legislative assembly but they are neither free nor fair (Morse 2012; see also Çalışkan 2018; Apaydin et al. 2022). Erdoğan, of the Justice and Development Party (AKP; *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), has been in power since 2003, first as prime minister, and then as president since 2014. While Erdoğan and the opposition view elections as the only legitimate path to power, Erdoğan’s position is relatively comfortable due to an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the executive (Bermeo 2016). A coup attempt in 2016 briefly threatened Erdoğan’s tenure, but subsequent purges of the military and a broader crackdown on civil society strengthened his position (Esen and Gümüşcu 2017). Since 2003, Erdoğan’s tenure has been characterized by a gradual and then quickening erosion of democratic norms (Bermeo 2016, 11; Tansel 2018).

Erdoğan’s hold on power has been grounded in two pillars. First, for most of his tenure his level of approval has been positive (MetroPOLL Araştırma 2020). This initial popularity was driven by economic achievements (Pope 2011, 54-55), before largely resting on Islamism as a political ideology (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Second, Erdoğan’s grip on power has also depended on autocratic governance, including how elections are run. The media landscape is biased in Erdoğan’s favor, the judiciary is politicized, and rules governing election campaigns favor the AKP (Bermeo 2016, 10-11; Esen and Gümüşcu 2016, 1586-87).

However, the election initially scheduled for spring 2023 was set to be different. Turkey was experiencing economic problems, which had been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic (Reuters

2023). Also, after seemingly learning from previous elections, the opposition united behind a single candidate (Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP)). Elections in electoral autocracies are neither free nor fair, but incumbents can be defeated through a united opposition and innovative electoral strategies (Bunce and Wolchik 2010). Thus, heading into 2023, Erdoğan's position was genuinely uncertain.

### **3.2 The February 2023 Earthquakes and Blame Shifting Politics**

On February 6, 2023, two earthquakes that measured 7.8 and 7.5 on the Richter scale shook the Southeastern provinces of Turkey, as well as neighboring Syrian provinces. The earthquakes compounded Turkey's economic problems, and also led to 50,000 deaths and the displacement of 3.3 million people (Relief Web 2023).

The earthquakes also further challenged Erdoğan, who was already facing arguably the toughest fight of his political career, as these events provided the opportunity for the political status quo to be renegotiated (Collier and Munck 2022). In particular, growing corruption under the AKP and declining accountability in public sector management made it challenging for Erdoğan to convince voters to support his reelection bid (Cifuentes-Faura 2025; Ertas 2024). Perceptions of how Erdoğan handled the earthquakes' aftermath would be pivotal to his prospects of retaining power.<sup>13</sup> As noted, the ubiquity of the earthquakes prohibited Erdoğan from employing propaganda to distract or conceal the earthquakes from public discourse (Roberts 2018). One of Erdoğan's main strategies was therefore to blame the devastation caused by the earthquakes on other actors or circumstances. He did not have just one target for this, instead blaming numerous targets at different times for various aspects of the earthquakes' consequences.

First, Erdoğan sought to shift blame by framing the event as a force majeure. This refers to an act of nature or god that no one can be held accountable for; this is a common tactic among democratic and autocratic leaders across the world, including in Turkey (Yilmaz, Albayrak and Erturk 2022). Specifically, Erdoğan said that, “[w]hat happens, happens, this is part of fate’s plan,” and that, “[i]t’s not possible to be ready for a disaster like this” (Michaelson 2023). This is a questionable claim in Turkey, not least because Turkey lies in a seismic hazard zone. Indeed,

Erdogan's and the AKP's rise to power was in part facilitated by two massive earthquakes in Western Turkey in 1999, which killed thousands of people (Cagaptay 2011).

Second, Erdogan blamed private construction companies for so many buildings collapsing. More than 130 people were investigated in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes for alleged involvement in shoddy and illegal construction (Associated Press 2023). The plausibility of this attempt to shift blame was also dubious since footage from 2019 emerged after the earthquakes of Erdogan praising some of the housing projects that collapsed, as well as the construction amnesties, which he took credit for at the time, that allegedly permitted contractors to ignore safety codes that were specifically designed to make buildings more earthquake resistant (Kenyon 2023).

Third, Erdogan blamed the opposition for hindering the urban transformation that he claimed Turkey needed in the wake of the earthquakes. When visiting the earthquake-affected southern province of Osmaniye, Erdogan criticized Kilicdaroglu for being 'immoral and dishonest' due to the latter's criticism of how post-earthquake aid was being managed. Erdogan also defended urban transformation projects, and claimed that a prominent figure in the opposition CHP was against such measures (Gercek News 2023).

These blame shifting strategies may have been effective, despite their seeming implausibility when viewed dispassionately by academic observers, because of the AKP's heavy influence over Turkey's media environment. To test the impact of these tactics on Erdogan's approval, we combine a survey experiment with subsequent focus groups to measure the size of their effects and unpack the causal mechanisms at work.

## 4 Research Design

We examine the effects of blame shifting politics following the earthquakes in Turkey on Erdogan's approval through a mixed-methods research design. This first entails an online survey experiment, fielded in April-May 2023.<sup>14</sup> We then conducted three focus groups in July 2023 to explore the reasons underlying participants' survey responses. Thus, the experiment identifies the average and heterogeneous treatment effects of various blame shifting strategies, while the focus

groups examine the mechanisms behind these effects.

#### 4.1 Recruitment

We recruited 3,839 adults (18+) through a professional survey company, TGM Research (hereafter, TGM).<sup>15</sup> TGM conduct opt-in incentive-based Internet survey panels in more than 85 countries. They recruit participants via a combination of organic growth, affiliation websites, and paid adverts.<sup>16</sup> The sample is nationally representative in terms of age and gender, although it is over-represented among people with a higher level of education, people from the Marmara region (which contains Istanbul), and under-represented among Muslim individuals.<sup>17</sup> Appendix C provides a power analysis, which showed that this sample size would permit detection of small but substantively meaningful treatment effects; null results would therefore be informative as they would suggest that blame shifting does not have a meaningful effect on an autocrat's approval.

#### 4.2 Intervention

The intervention entailed an article about the devastation following the earthquakes. We randomized whether participants read an article that only described the devastation, or also included a actual statement from Erdoğan blaming the aftermath of the earthquakes on a force majeure, the opposition, or private construction companies.<sup>18</sup> We also included one additional treatment of Erdoğan blaming a minister for failing to adequately prepare the country for an earthquake because dictators often purge ministers when they shift blame to protect their position during a crisis (Williamson 2024). There was some noise following the earthquakes about intra-government blame shifting, but since Erdoğan had not purged anyone at the time that we fielded the survey, we presented this as a hypothetical scenario to avoid deception.

More specifically, respondents in the control group read the following article (in Turkish):  
*"The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaraş on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 42,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaraş at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earth-*

*quake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, Diyarbakir, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.*" The style of this factually accurate article was modeled on the Turkish media outlet, *Hürriyet*, a mainstream media outlet with a conservative outlook. The article's prose replicates how pro-government media in Turkey, and other autocracies, cover news expected to be unpopular. The article therefore captures the style and tone of media that participants regularly encounter. However, to avoid legal concerns, the article does not include any branding that suggests that it comes from *Hürriyet* or any other publication, and is illustrated with a generic public domain image of buildings damaged in the earthquake.<sup>19</sup>

For treatment group respondents, this article was supplemented with additional text where Erdoğan blamed another actor or circumstances for the devastation that followed the earthquakes. Using the private construction companies treatment as an example, the above article was supplemented with: "*President Erdoğan says private construction companies are to blame. President Erdoğan's government vowed to investigate anyone suspected of responsibility for the collapse of buildings. In the six days after the first earthquake, the government detained or issued arrest warrants for 130 people allegedly involved in shoddy and illegal construction.*" The treatments relating to force majeure, the opposition, and a government minister included similar statements from Erdoğan attempting to blame them (see Figure 1).<sup>20</sup>

To be clear, Erdoğan acknowledged the scale of the crisis as he reported on the number of the injured, dead, and displaced in early press conferences. In formulating the control text, we followed a similar framing and included information on the magnitude of the earthquake, the number of people affected, and the regions that were most affected. However, since these factual statements by the president were almost always juxtaposed with an attempt to blame nature/fate, the opposition, or private contractors, the treatment texts therefore combine the factual statement with blame shifting. In that sense, the treatments accurately reflect Erdoğan's behavior during the early days in the earthquakes' aftermath.<sup>21</sup>

Within each treatment group, we also randomly assigned participants to a strong or weak version of each treatment, which we call 'primed' or 'unprimed,' respectively. For respondents who

**Figure 1:** English Translations of Treatment Articles

**(a) Force Majeure treatment**

NEWS · EARTHQUAKE

**Erdoğan says a force of nature at fault for devastation following earthquakes**



The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaraş on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 50,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaraş at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earthquake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.

President Erdoğan says forces of nature are to blame. Türkiye lies in one of the world's most active earthquake zones. When visiting the quake epicenter Kahramanmaraş, President Erdoğan said, "The conditions are clear to see. It's not possible to be ready for a disaster like this. Such things have always happened. It's part of destiny's plan."

**(c) Opposition treatment**

NEWS · EARTHQUAKE

**Erdoğan says opposition at fault for devastation following earthquakes**



The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaraş on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 50,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaraş at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earthquake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.

President Erdoğan says that opposition figures are to blame. President Erdoğan emphasized that opposition figures had blocked urban transformation, saying that "Someone in Adana says they are against urban transformation. Who is this? A mayor from the CHP! [Republican People's Party]. Urban transformation is indispensable...If there is any negligence, we will hold them accountable before the law, no one should have any doubt."

*Notes:* Treatment texts were not in bold in the original treatments. The original Turkish versions of control and treatment articles are in Appendix D.

**(b) Minister treatment**

NEWS · EARTHQUAKE

**Erdoğan says minister at fault for devastation following earthquakes**



The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaraş on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 50,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaraş at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earthquake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.

President Erdoğan says the relevant minister is to blame. President Erdoğan yesterday fired Murat Kurum, the Minister of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change. President Erdoğan said that Mr. Kurum had "failed in his duties to adequately prepare the country for an earthquake, and that he had failed to protect the people."

**(d) Private companies treatment**

NEWS · EARTHQUAKE

**Erdoğan says private construction companies at fault for devastation following earthquakes**



The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaraş on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 50,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaraş at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earthquake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.

President Erdoğan says private construction companies are to blame. President Erdoğan's government vowed to investigate anyone suspected of responsibility for the collapse of buildings. In the six days after the first earthquake, the government detained or issued arrest warrants for 130 people allegedly involved in shoddy and illegal construction.

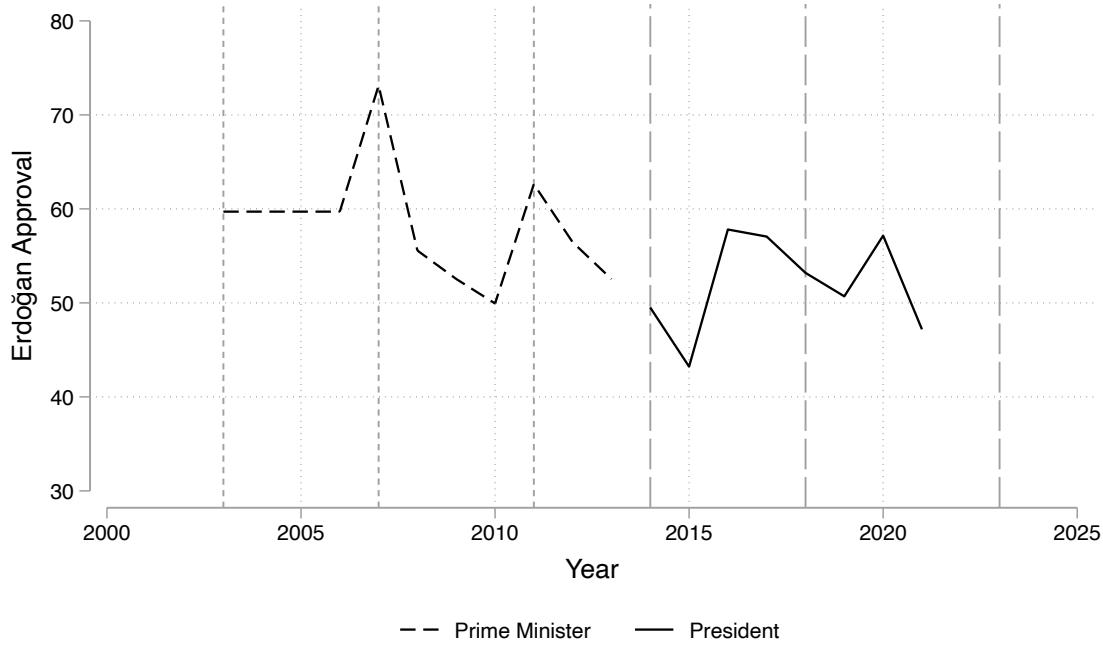
received a primed treatment, between receiving the treatment and answering the outcome question about their view of Erdoğan, they were also asked to what degree they agreed with a statement about the culpability of the actor or group who Erdoğan was blaming. For example, in the case of private construction companies, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement: “*The President has essentially taken the right measures to ensure safe construction. But greedy construction companies violated the regulations and disregarded these efforts for the love of profit and therefore are responsible for the scope of destruction.*” Asking respondents this question prior to the outcome question primed respondents to focus on the potential culpability of the actor associated with their treatment group. Respondents who received an unprimed treatment were not asked this question until they had already responded to the outcome question about their view of Erdoğan.<sup>22</sup> Respondents receiving an unprimed treatment were therefore not primed to focus on an actor’s potential culpability prior to answering the outcome question.

#### 4.3 Outcome Variable and Pre-treatment Covariates

The main outcome variable is approval of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While executive approval has been studied extensively in democracies, especially the US (Edwards III, Mitchell and Welch 1995), we know less about executive approval in autocracies (Guriev and Treisman 2020). Yet, even in more extreme autocratic contexts than Turkey, leader approval matters. It can shape policy outcomes, and even precipitate coups by regime insiders fearful that they may lose their privileged positions if the people revolt and overthrow the polity’s autocratic institutions (Johnson and Thyne 2018; Miller 2015). Improved understanding of the determinants of autocratic popular approval therefore contributes to knowledge about political and economic outcomes in autocracies.

We measure approval of Erdoğan by asking respondents how much they “approve of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s way of carrying out his duties as the president” (strongly disapprove; somewhat disapprove; neither approve nor disapprove; somewhat approve; strongly approve; or don’t know). Responses were standardized to aid interpretation of the results; this creates *Erdoğan approval*, which ranges between zero and one, where higher values correspond to higher approval of Erdoğan.<sup>23</sup> The average level of approval for control group respondents was 43 percent. Although

**Figure 2:** Approval of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2003-2021



*Note:* Erdoğan became prime minister in 2003 following a by-election, and led the AKP to victories in the Grand National Assembly in 2007 and 2011, as indicated by the short-dashed lines; he was then elected to the presidency in 2014, winning reelection in 2018 and 2023, as indicated by the long dashed lines.

our sample is not representative in terms of education, region, and religion, comparing the baseline level of approval for Erdoğan in our sample to data from the Executive Approval Project (EAP) suggests that our sample is reasonably reflective of public sentiment, at least in terms of presidential approval. Figure 2 shows that, according to EAP, Erdoğan’s approval was 48 percent in 2021 (Carlin et al. N.d.). However, this was two years before our survey, which followed several years of high inflation and the government’s delayed response to the 2023 earthquakes.

Regarding pre-treatment covariates, we control for whether a respondent is female, their age, level of education, whether they are a public sector employee, their income, and the province that they live in.<sup>24</sup> We include these covariates in our analysis to increase statistical precision (Imbens and Rubin 2015).

#### 4.4 Hypotheses

Based on the earlier theoretical discussion, we set out two competing pre-registered hypothe-

ses about the relationship between blame shifting politics and people's approval of Erdoğan.<sup>25</sup> Exposure to blame shifting treatments may increase people's approval of Erdoğan, if these tactics have their intended effects, but they may also be viewed by people for what they are—a blatant attempt to avoid culpability by Erdoğan who holds at least some responsibility—and diminish his standing:<sup>26</sup>

**H1a: Effective talk hypothesis.** Approval of Erdoğan will be higher among respondents receiving any of the blame shifting treatments than among respondents in the control group.

**H1b: Backlash hypothesis.** Approval of Erdoğan will be lower among respondents receiving any of the blame shifting treatments than among respondents in the control group.

Next, recall that there are two versions of each treatment: a primed version and an unprimed version, which were randomly assigned. In the primed version, respondents receive a treatment (e.g., that blames private construction companies for the devastation following the earthquakes), they are then asked a question that prompts them to consider the culpability of the actor involved in the treatment they received (e.g., private construction companies), before being asked for their approval of Erdoğan. In the unprimed version, the order of the questions that prompts respondents to think about culpability and assesses their approval of Erdoğan is reversed. Just as Chaudoin, Gaines and Livny (2021) show that the order of questions for mediation analysis can affect results, we expect that those receiving the primed treatment will respond more strongly to blame shifting than those receiving the unprimed treatment:

**H2: Priming hypothesis.** The effects of the blame shifting treatments on approval of Erdoğan, whether positive or negative, will be greater among respondents receiving the primed treatments than among respondents receiving the unprimed treatments.

Blame shifting politics are unlikely, however, to have the same effects among all people. First, the treatment effects should be moderated by whether respondents can critically evaluate information. Respondents who are able to do this should be less susceptible to blame shifting politics influencing their approval of Erdoğan. One indicator of this is their level of education. While

education in non-democracies can aid indoctrination for the regime's benefit (Lott 1999), there is significant evidence consistent with the idea that it leads individuals to access alternative sources of information and aids critical thinking (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014; Zaller 1992). Indeed, education has long been thought of as helping individuals develop their political sophistication (Lipset 1959). Another indicator of whether respondents can critically evaluate information is income. Income is positively associated with political participation, even while controlling for education (Testa 2018). Greater involvement in politics should make an individual more adept at 'reading between the lines' of the regime's propaganda. Hence, richer individuals should be more able to objectively analyze blame shifting messaging. We therefore expect that blame shifting politics will be less likely to positively influence approval of Erdoğan among better educated and richer individuals:

***H3: Socio-economic status (SES) hypothesis.*** Any positive effects of the blame shifting treatments on approval of Erdoğan will be higher among respondents who have a lower level of education (are poorer) than respondents who have a higher level of education (are richer).

Blame shifting politics may also have different effects on respondents' approval of Erdoğan conditional on their existing views of him. Affective polarization—the notion of animosity between opposing political parties—affects attitudes and behaviors within (and beyond) the political sphere (Iyengar et al. 2019). Attachment and opposition to political parties and actors influences how individuals interpret information, including who citizens hold responsible for policy outcomes (Healy, Kuo and Malhotra 2014; Maestas et al. 2008; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Zaller 1992). Partisanship conditions how people consume information not just in democracies, but also autocracies, including Turkey (Laebens and Öztürk 2021; see also Gläsel and Paula 2020; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

Experimental work has shown that cues from in-party leaders do not always persuade that party's supporters (Brader, Tucker and Duell 2013; Nicholson 2012). Blame shifting may have little effect on Erdoğan's dedicated supporters if they already hold very positive views of him. Alternatively, opposition supporters may have negative views of Erdoğan that are firmly entrenched

and cannot be influenced by blame shifting (Aytaç 2021, 1521). Any positive effect of blame shifting politics should therefore be especially visible among respondents who are neither strong supporters nor strong opponents of Erdoğan (Aytaç 2021, 1522; Geddes and Zaller 1989):

**H4: Politics-in-the-middle hypothesis.** Any positive effects of the blame shifting treatments on approval of Erdoğan will be higher among unaffiliated respondents than among supporters of Erdoğan or the opposition.

#### 4.5 Focus Group Procedures

To our knowledge, the study is one of the first to combine a survey experiment with focus groups to unpack causal mechanisms behind authoritarian approval. The experiment provides a robust foundation for the identification of causal patterns on a broader scale, while the focus groups help reveal the reasons behind citizens' reactions to blame shifting by assessing their experiences, beliefs, and opinions (Cyr 2017). Unlike alternative qualitative methods, such as interviews, the social nature of focus groups also allows us to observe how citizens' individual views are shaped by collective discussions, reflecting the interactive dynamics of opinion formation (Nyumba et al. 2018, 28).

The focus groups also help address a potential issue in the experimental design: pre-treatment exposure (Druckman and Leeper 2012). Basing the treatments on actual presidential statements enhances the experiment's external validity by making the treatments realistic; respondents may have heard these statements before the experiment. Pre-treatment exposure does not threaten the identification of treatment effects since pre-treated respondents should be equally distributed across experimental groups, but the experiment may capture only the marginal effects of additional exposure to blame shifting or the effect of priming respondents to consider Erdoğan's role in the disaster. Focus groups further help mitigate this concern by assessing whether the experimental effects that we observe reflect more than mere reactions to additional exposure to familiar narratives.

##### 4.5.1 Participant Selection

At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they would participate in a follow-up

focus group; about 60 responded positively. Participants were then recruited into a focus group based on their self-declared voting intention.<sup>27</sup> The three groups correspond to whether respondents said they intended to vote for the incumbent, opposition, or that they were uncertain. Basing groups on participants with similar political preferences allows us to more fully probe individuals' reasons for their responses to blame shifting since participants can more comfortably explain themselves in front of others with similar views. Dividing participants in this way also helped us avoid disagreement or conflict, given the high level of political polarization before the election. Regarding covariates, we composed each group to maximize variation on gender, age, education, income, and location. If multiple respondents within the pool of 60 respondents had similar socio-economic backgrounds, we randomly chose one participant for inclusion.<sup>28</sup> The exposure of the respondents to the survey treatments was heterogeneous: that is, participants in each group had been randomly exposed to different treatments. The sessions were designed to create an environment conducive to candid discussion, allowing us to examine respondents' thought processes.

Following the composition of each group, we emailed each participant with the details of the study. We received 8-9 confirmations from each group; attrition led to each group consisting of 5-6 participants.<sup>29</sup> The online meetings each lasted for an hour and occurred in July 2023. The sessions were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

#### **4.5.2 Focus Group Questions**

We unpack the underlying motivations and cognitive processes influencing respondents' perceptions of blame shifting through open-ended questions on the respondents' opinions of all four types of blame shifting. The questions were semi-structured, ensuring broad consistency across groups but allowing us to respond to interesting points as necessary.<sup>30</sup> Following introductory questions, the moderator reminded participants of the content of the treatments that they were exposed to, and then asked follow-up questions based on their responses. For example, in order to get more detailed information on the impact of the treatment on the construction companies, the moderator reminded participants about the president's statements where he explicitly shifted blame to construction companies for the magnitude of the destruction. Respondents were then asked about

their thoughts and feelings in response to this information. During the natural course of the conversation, the moderator reminded the participants of additional treatments and asked follow-up questions to unpack the logic behind the participants' responses.

#### **4.6 Ethics**

There are ethical risks to conducting research after large-scale disasters. Surveying or interviewing people about a disaster in its immediate aftermath contains risks, including re-traumatization. We considered these ethical questions seriously, assessing whether the project's risks could be alleviated, irrespective of any benefits, through discussions with Turkish academics, gaining ethical approval from an institutional ethics committee, and assessing the risks against the American Political Science Association's ethical principles for human subjects research (see Appendix A). Overall, we concluded that the ubiquitous presence of the earthquakes in Turkish media combined with the dispassionate nature of our treatments meant that the risk of re-traumatization was low. The focus groups were also led by a moderator using an objective and dispassionate tone, focusing on treatments that respondents had already been exposed to in the survey. Beyond these considerations, we felt that the importance of understanding the effects of blame shifting politics in the wake of large-scale disasters provided motivation to pursue the research.

### **5 Results**

We find that Erdogan's efforts to blame the aftermath of the earthquake on a force majeure or the opposition led to a backlash, reducing his approval, especially among richer and better educated individuals. The focus group findings confirm this and reveal that voters were particularly upset by perceived electoral opportunism and the President's polarizing language following the disaster.

#### **5.1 Experimental Evidence**

The average treatment effects are summarized in Table 1.<sup>31</sup> Table 1 displays results from the full sample in Model 1, and the sub-samples of when the treatment was not preceded by the blame assignment prompt questions (unprimed treatment; Model 2), and when the treatment was

preceded by these questions (primed treatment; Model 3).

**Table 1:** Summary of Average Treatment Effects on Approval for Erdogn

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Force majeure	-0.04 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)
Minister	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Opposition	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)
Private companies	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Constant	0.45*** (0.05)	0.38*** (0.06)	0.52*** (0.07)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.07	0.07
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	3,839	1,938	1,901

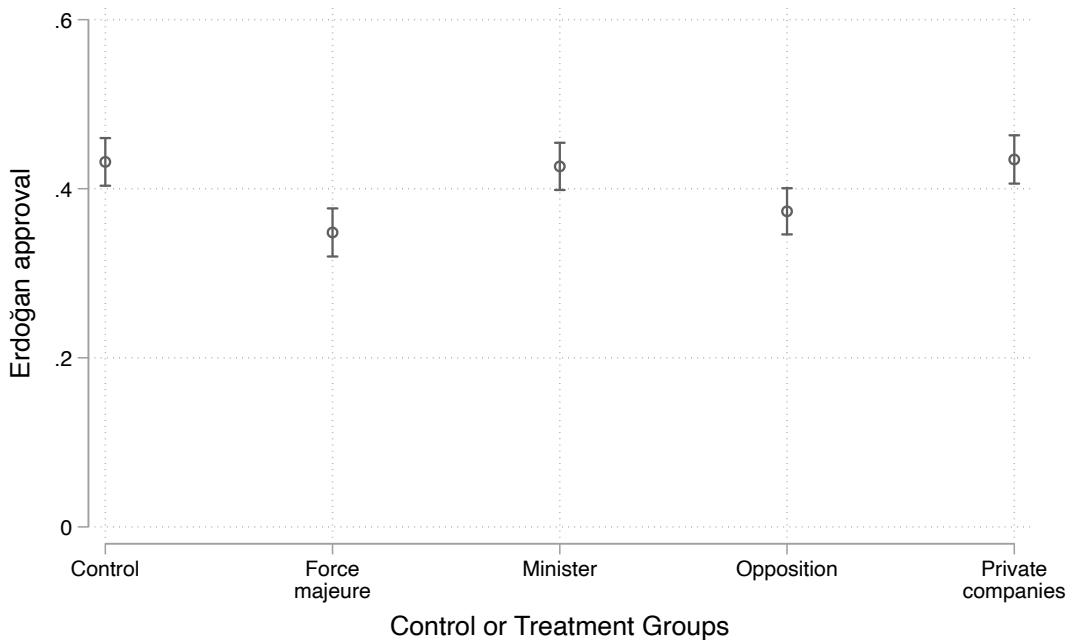
Standard errors in parentheses

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The evidence provides qualified support for the *Backlash hypothesis*, specifically for two treatments: when Erdogn blamed the earthquake on a force majeure or the opposition. We find no evidence of significant average treatment effects for the minister and private construction companies treatments.<sup>32</sup> These findings are largely based on the results from the sub-sample using the primed treatment (Model 3). No coefficients for any of the treatments reached conventional levels of statistical significance in the full sample or the sub-sample with the unprimed treatment. In terms of our hypotheses then, we find evidence to support the *Backlash hypothesis* for the force majeure and opposition treatments, but only the with primed treatment, which therefore also shows support for the *Priming hypothesis*. The predictive margins for the primed treatments, using 84% confidence intervals, the graphical equivalent to  $p < 0.05$  (Goldstein and Healy 1995, 175), are visualized in Figure 3. The force majeure treatment reduces approval of Erdogn by eight percentage points (43 to 35 percent), relative to control, while the opposition treatment reduces approval

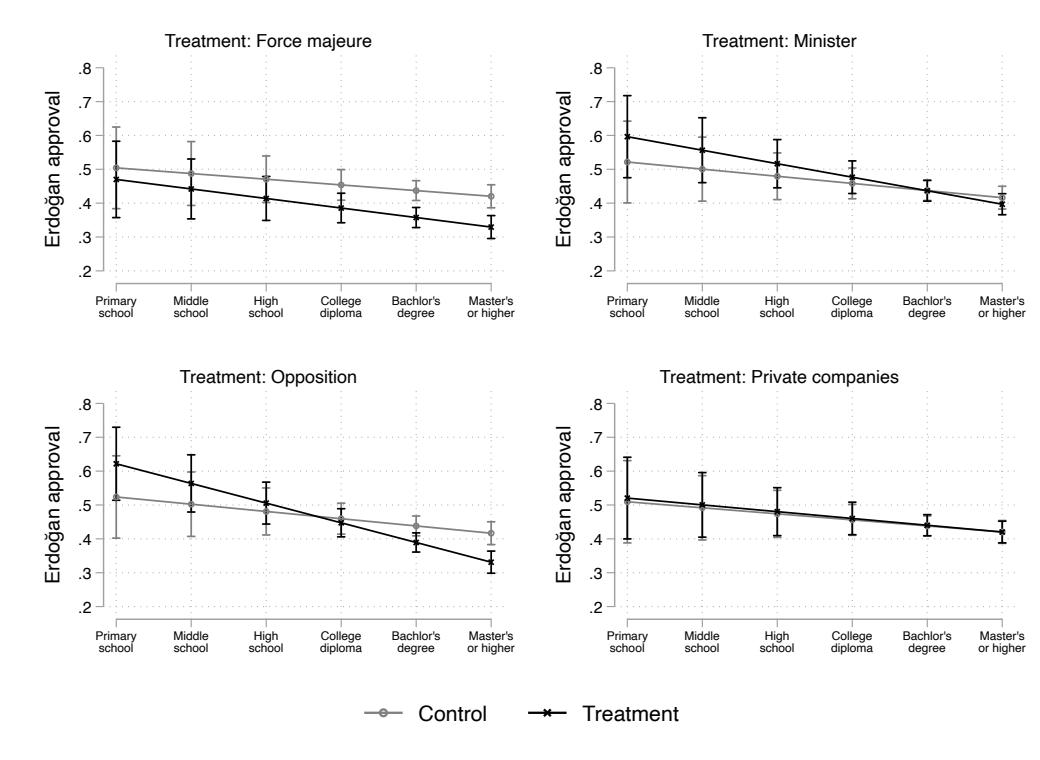
by six percentage points (43 to 37 percent).

**Figure 3:** Predictive Margins for the Primed Treatment



We next assess whether there is support for the *SES hypothesis*, which is that people more able to consume alternative sources of information are more likely to be sceptical of the government’s messaging around blame shifting. We first examine the effects of the treatments—we use the primed treatments since these were the only significant average treatment effects that we found (see Table 1)—conditional on a respondent’s level of education. The inclusion of the interaction term means that hypothesis testing is best conducted visually (Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006); the results are shown in Figure 4.<sup>33</sup> Again, we find that only the effects of the force majeure and opposition treatments are moderated by an individual’s level of education. The force majeure treatment has a greater backlash effect on approval for Erdoğan when respondents are more educated (bachelor’s degree or higher). We find a similar effect for the opposition treatment (albeit only for respondents with a master’s degree or higher). Approval of Erdoğan among participants who were

**Figure 4:** Primed Treatment Effects Conditional on Education

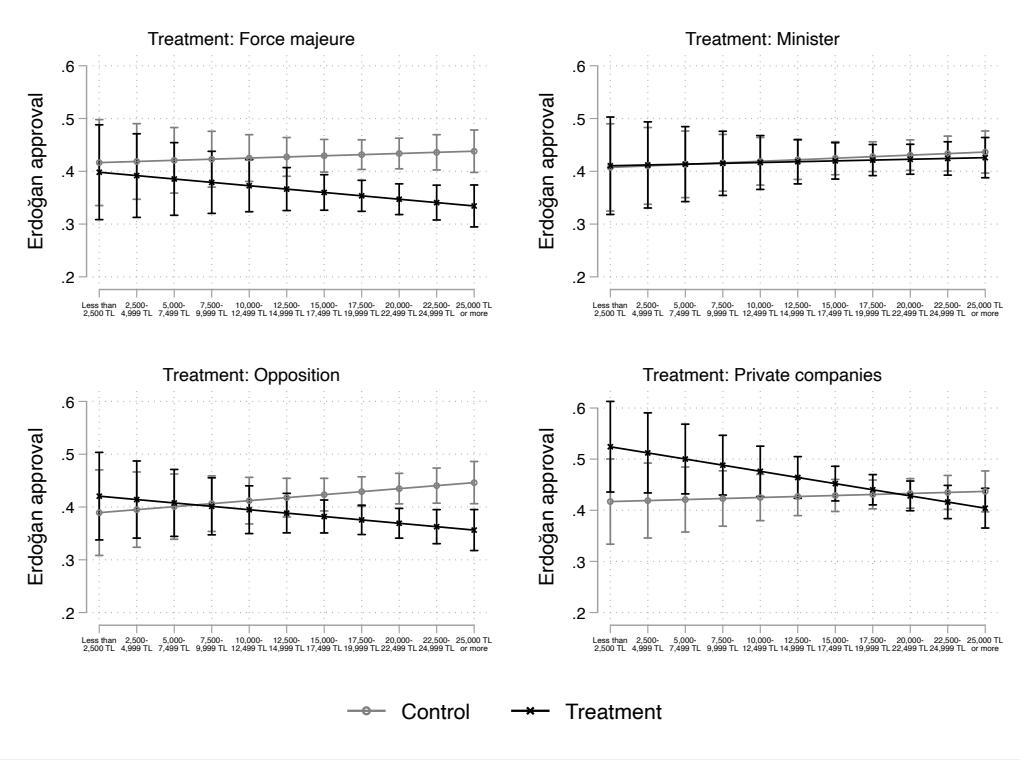


subjected to the force majeure or opposition treatments is nine percentage points lower, relative to control, if respondents had a master's degree or a higher level of education.

We find similar heterogeneous treatment effects based on variation in a respondent's level of income.<sup>34</sup> The force majeure and opposition treatments lead to an increasing backlash effect on approval for Erdoğan among richer respondents. Approval of Erdoğan among participants who were exposed to the force majeure (opposition) treatment is ten (nine) percentage points lower when participants earn at least 25,000 Turkish Lira a month (about 1,300 USD when the survey was fielded).<sup>35</sup>

Finally, we did not find comprehensive evidence to support the *politics-in-the-middle* hypothesis.<sup>36</sup> These results are summarized in Table 2.<sup>37</sup> Most of the coefficients for unaffiliated participants are positive, as expected, but the majority are not statistically significant. The one exception is the minister treatment, which has a positive effect on Erdoğan's approval for unaffiliated voters, as well as opposition supporters, suggesting that purging a minister could have helped Erdoğan

**Figure 5:** Primed Treatment Effects Conditional on Income



increase his approval among the supporters whose minds he most needed to change. This may be because this specific treatment, although involving the spin of presentational blame shifting, comes closest to agency-based blame shifting, which involves shifting responsibility (in advance) onto another individual or officeholder.

Some additional findings in Table 2 may seem surprising. First, Erdoğan's supporters respond negatively to the force majeure treatment; opposition supporters also respond negatively, but it had a larger effect on Erdoğan's supporters. There may be a backlash to blaming events on a force majeure across partisan lines, since voters appreciate politicians who take responsibility, while the larger effect among AKP supporters may be because AKP supporters have faith in Erdoğan, so therefore dislike him attributing problems to events beyond his control. Second opposition supporters do not lower their approval of Erdoğan in response to Erdoğan blaming the opposition. This could be because opposition supporters are accustomed to Erdoğan blaming the opposition, so this tactic has little effect on them.

Overall, despite high affective polarization in Turkey (Orhan 2022, 722), blame shifting does not have systematically different effects on government and opposition supporters.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that severe shocks, such as large-scale disasters, disrupt the usual consequences of affective polarization, prompting citizens to set aside their political biases when assessing post-disaster incumbent performance. Even in highly polarized societies, major disasters may weaken stable partisan support for leaders. On the other hand, as Erdoğan’s various attempts to shift blame after the earthquakes show, citizens are inundated with new information following a large-scale disaster, as politicians seek to shape narratives to their benefit. The ability therefore to critically evaluate information—which we suggest is higher for better educated and richer people—is therefore key in shaping how attempts to shift blame affect people’s views. The focus groups further address these possibilities.

**Table 2:** Summary of Treatment Effects Conditional on Partisanship

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Force majeure	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.05* (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.05* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Minister	-0.03 (0.03)	0.05* (0.02)	0.06 <sup>+</sup> (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.11* (0.05)	-0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Opposition	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.05)
Private companies	-0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)
Constant	0.68*** (0.09)	0.29*** (0.06)	0.43*** (0.07)	0.67*** (0.12)	0.22** (0.07)	0.37*** (0.10)	0.81*** (0.15)	0.24** (0.08)	0.27** (0.10)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.05
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample	Full	Full	Unprimed	Unprimed	Unaffiliated	Unaffiliated	Primed	Primed	Primed
Partisanship	Erdogan	Opposition	Unaffiliated	Erdogan	Opposition	Erdogan	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition
Observations	1585	1233	1021	805	615	518	780	618	503

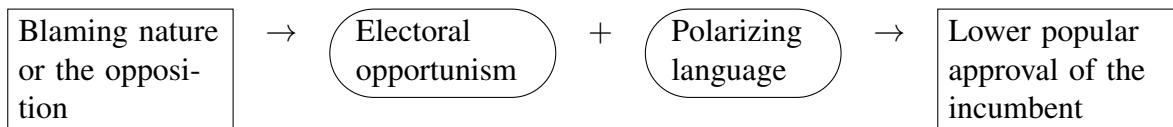
Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## 5.2 Focus Group Evidence

The focus groups reveal that, in all three groups, respondents perceived Erdoğan's blame shifting as electoral opportunism and they were 'turned off' by polarizing language during a time of crisis. Voters expected the government to hold responsible individuals or organizations accountable; instead, they were confronted by implausible efforts at shifting the blame. Figure 6 summarizes how these dynamics reduced voters' approval of the incumbent, although voting behavior did not significantly change (see Table I4).

**Figure 6:** Mechanism at Work



In all focus groups, participants were reminded of the treatment vignettes, followed by a series of questions that probed how the vignettes affected their opinion of the incumbent. Participants were less interested in discussing the treatments involving the minister and construction companies. In line with the survey findings, conversations became more detailed when the moderator reminded participants of the treatments where Erdoğan blames the opposition and a force majeure. We suspect this is because the opposition and force majeure treatments induced stronger emotional reactions, with focus group participants' similar emotive reactions then reinforcing their collective interest in discussing these treatments. Overall, three salient themes emerged to account for the backlash to the treatments involving Erdoğan blaming the opposition and a force majeure. First, all respondents, regardless of their partisan leaning, were repelled by the instrumentalization of the earthquakes for political gain. In particular, AKP supporters were disenchanted by both sides' attempts to exploit tragic deaths for political advantage. The manipulation of sensitive episodes for political gain was perceived by AKP loyalists as distasteful opportunism. While AKP supporters also criticized the opposition for doing the same, Erdoğan's inclination to blame the opposition and invoke notions of fate further alienated pro-AKP voters. In response to a follow-up question

on their opinion of the treatment where Erdoan shifts blame to the opposition, one incumbent-supporting participant said: “*There was an election ahead of us...[and they are saying:] “Here is the election coming up, let’s get votes...Here we are providing this aid, but don’t forget this, we are [the ones who are] with you.”...In other words, nothing was done for the people, nothing was done to heal our wounds, there was no unity, but only, “Let’s get a vote, let’s [do the best for our] interest.”...It was more like an [opportunistic] relationship.*”

Participants supporting the opposition were similarly disappointed with how political interests shifted attention away from a discussion over recovery and aid efforts to help ordinary individuals. In response to a follow-up question about the same treatment that blames the opposition, one pro-opposition participant said: “*To be honest, I saw that both sides were not completely focused on the earthquake...I expected both sides to be united...I saw that political interests were still at the forefront. There was an election recently...in order to get votes, so I find both sides guilty...they did not unite.*” In that sense, political leadership was perceived to be out of touch with the hardship victims were experiencing, and their inability to demonstrate human connection frustrated voters.

Trying to strategically blame political rivals also alienated those who were unaffiliated before the elections. Just like AKP followers and opposition supporters, unaffiliated voters yearned for leadership that prioritized empathy, unity, and a commitment to addressing the root causes of immediate challenges rather than engaging in blame games for short-term political advantage in the approaching elections. In response to a question about their opinion of the treatment where Erdoan shifts blame to a force majeure, one unaffiliated participant expressed disappointed with the ensuing public debate between the incumbent and the opposition, stating that “[*I*]nstead of...[forming] a great unity in the country, [*the opposition*] responded in their own way to the ridiculous things the other side did...What they should have done was to say, “Brother, today is the day of unity, we will leave politics aside, we will heal the wounds of this country as brothers and sisters.” Unfortunately, they failed to do this.” Reflecting the lack of a significant finding in the experiment for blame shifting for unaffiliated participants, this reaction may indicate that these citizens were not disengaged with political events, but they were disappointed with rhetoric from

both sides of the political aisle.

A second salient theme behind the backlash to blame shifting is the distaste of politically polarizing language by both pro-AKP and opposition media commentators and politicians, especially in the context of a large-scale disaster. When faced with the devastating impact of such calamities, participants of all partisan leanings expected political leaders to rise above partisan divides and prioritize collective well-being rather than shifting the blame on nature, the opposition, or private construction companies. Divisive rhetoric in the aftermath of disasters disappointed AKP supporters who expected the incumbent to focus on cooperative solutions when confronting the country's challenges posed by the earthquake. In response to a question regarding their opinion on the general tone of the debate in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, one incumbent supporting participant said that, "*everything is exaggerated a lot in our country. After a while an event happens and after a few days it gets completely out of hand and [manipulation occurs]...There is a constant smear campaign or excessive praise, so it is completely biased. We cannot be impartial in any way...They make such annoying comments; they constantly praise one side or denigrate another, so this is not right.*" Thus, while voters are aware that politicians and pundits distort facts by way of exaggeration, polarizing language invokes anger and disappointment. Opposition supporting participants reacted similarly to this question, with one participant saying that, "*the election process has really blinded both the government and the opposition...maybe the proximity of the election has caused so much hatred [and] polarization.*" Inflammatory language following the earthquake prompted a sense of disillusionment among those who desired a more unifying approach from their political leaders during moments of national hardship.

Third, all voters, regardless of partisan preference, expected a degree of accountability for failings in response to the earthquakes. Respondents disagreed with blaming fate for the large-scale disaster. The delayed government response and lack of accountability in the face of acute shortcomings by authorities responsible for disaster management (e.g., Kizilay-Turkish Red Crescent) left a lingering sense of frustration among the participants across all three groups. This sentiment is particularly pronounced among AKP supporters, including those directly affected by the earth-

quake, who were most sensitive to the perceived lack of punishment for officials involved. Nearly all participants in the focus group composed of incumbent supporters disagreed with Erdoğan's attempts to blame the earthquake on a force of nature. When reminded of the relevant treatment text and asked about their opinion, one incumbent supporting participant said, "*So many people lost their lives, we can't get away with calling it fate.*" This reaction was not exclusive to incumbent supporters. An opposition supporting participant echoed this aversion, saying that "*we are an earthquake country, we cannot [dismiss it] as fate.*"

These accounts further illuminate why only the force majeure and opposition treatments caused a backlash among respondents. The force majeure treatment implies a clear refusal of accepting accountability, and the opposition treatment includes the polarizing language and electoral opportunism criticized by the participants, but these traits are less pronounced in the minister and private sector treatments. While these latter treatments shift blame away from Erdoğan, they are not as politically polarizing to the extent that voters begin to question where the leader's priorities lie as a result of the framing. This is likely because the statements in the treatments concerning the minister and private construction companies can be characterized as 'special-access lies,' which are "deliberately false statements based on facts about which the speaker is thought to have special access" regarding their veracity (Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018, 4). Because the voters do not have alternative sources of information or the level of expertise to assess whether the minister or the contractors are indeed responsible, shifting the blame to these actors does not generate a similar backlash effect. In that sense, the minister and private sector treatments are more credible to respondents, as there was in fact negligence on part of both government officials and private construction companies.

## 6 Conclusion

Our study shows the limitations of autocratic presentational blame shifting, particularly when it is perceived as an attempt to absolve the incumbent in an unbelievable manner or as instrumentalizing suffering for political gain. Blame shifting may be a common tactic to deflect responsibility

and maintain political stability in authoritarian regimes (Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017; Cai 2008; Chaisty, Gerry and Whitefield 2022; Li, Ni and Wang 2021; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020; Windsor, Dowell and Graesser 2014), but in the context of a large-scale disaster it risks alienating the population, including those who support the incumbent. Blame shifting, especially when directed towards supposedly uncontrollable circumstances or political rivals, may not be as effective as autocrats seem to believe, given the frequency with which they use it. The backlash observed in the experiment and the results of the focus groups indicate that citizens, in the emotionally charged aftermath of large-scale disasters, expect leaders to take responsibility for relief efforts and to act in a unifying manner instead of engaging in politically motivated blame games.<sup>39</sup> Dictators' attempts to shift blame clash with such expectations, particularly when they are perceived to lack credibility. Under these circumstances, voters perceive such rhetoric as an indicator of dishonesty, which reduces the approval of the autocrat as voters expect non-partisan cooperation to aid recovery efforts. Within this context, resorting to political opportunism or using polarizing language makes the incumbent less credible in the citizens' eyes and decreases his approval.

The findings have important theoretical and policy implications that extend beyond Turkey. First, the results suggest that there are limits to the use of presentational blame shifting. Even though incumbents in electoral autocracies exercise great control over information channels, this does not enable them to unconditionally shape how citizens perceive the government in the context of large-scale disasters and does not guarantee support. The content and framing of messages matter. Narratives that lack plausibility and contradict citizens' expectations or experiences may trigger a backlash and erode, rather than strengthen, the leader's approval.

This insight may also help explain the advantages of agency-based approaches to blame shifting. Autocrats can successfully deflect blame by diffusing political power and responsibility (Beazer and Reuter 2019; Hood 2011; Williamson 2024). When such structures exist before a disaster, they may prove more effective in insulating autocrats from blame. Since agency-based approaches shape citizens' perceptions of political responsibility and involve actual shifts in governance, they do not rely as heavily on presentational blame shifting. As a result, they are more

credible, less likely to be seen as politicizing a crisis, and reduce the risk of backlash. However, agency-based approaches are costlier than presentational blame shifting since they need to be implemented before a disaster. Using them successfully requires long-term planning, and they are thus of limited use to autocrats who want to shift blame immediately after a large-scale disaster.

The results further speak to the broader literature on autocratic survival strategies in the wake of large-scale disasters. The limits of blame shifting, combined with the challenges to effectively censor information about ubiquitous crises (Rozenas and Stukal 2019), suggest that it is difficult for autocrats to maintain legitimacy following such events. Autocrats have to compensate for losses in one of their sources of stability by increasing others (Gerschewski 2015). The findings may therefore help to explain why autocrats often ramp up repression of the aftermath of disasters (Wood and Wright 2016).

Finally, the study has implications for international relations scholarship on blame shifting and disaster responses by international organizations. National leaders can sometimes successfully shift blame to international organizations (Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2023; Schlipphak et al. 2023). However, our findings suggest that such attempts are less likely to succeed and may even backfire after large-scale disasters. For international organizations involved in disaster relief, this implies that to avoid backlash to their work that could benefit authoritarian incumbents, they should steer clear of post-disaster blame games. If citizens respond negatively to incumbents' blame shifting, the best approach is likely to ignore these efforts and focus on relief operations.

The study is not without limitations. Conducting the study shortly before the May 2023 election may limit whether the findings apply to other (electoral) autocratic contexts. Views of an incumbent may harden before an election; indeed, vote choice tends to be ‘locked in’ one month in advance (Blais 2004). However, this possibility should, if anything, downplay substantive effects, suggesting that the findings should apply to autocratic contexts beyond the time shortly preceding a national-level election.

Nonetheless, this points to the first of several areas for further research. First, replicating the study outside of an election campaign would provide greater insights into the broader effects of

blame shifting in autocracies. Second, exploring the effectiveness of blame shifting in autocracies' presentational blame shifting strategies outside of a large-scale disaster would indicate whether the emotionally charged atmosphere of the wake of a disaster conditions the findings. Third, replicating the study in other autocracies with different institutional settings and demographics would further probe the scope conditions of the effectiveness (limitations) of presentational blame shifting. We expect that the results generalize to electoral autocracies similar to Turkey's, but additional research is required to confirm this. While our empirical focus is electoral autocracies, studying the link between blame shifting and incumbent approval in other types of autocracies would also contribute to a broader understanding of the effectiveness of survival tactics used by autocrats (Aytaç 2021; Williamson 2024). The findings regarding the SES hypothesis, for instance, indicate that backlash is more likely when citizens recognize blame shifting as implausible. This suggests that a backlash against blame shifting is less likely in autocracies where the government maintains tighter control over information and where the population is less educated and wealthy. Conversely, we expect a stronger backlash to blame shifting in less repressive autocracies and in those with more educated and wealthier populations. Relatedly, the availability of plausible blame shifting narratives is likely an important scope condition. For example, autocrats who have invested in agency-based blame shifting, and have thereby credibly delegated responsibility for disaster prevention and relief, or nascent regimes which can credibly blame poor disaster prevention on previous governments, should be more capable of shifting blame while avoiding backlash. Lastly, further exploration of the cognitive processes that underpin the backlash effect could offer additional clues about whether and how leaders recover from the negative repercussions observed in this study. In particular, the incongruity between reduced approval rates for leaders who employ blame shifting after a large-scale disaster and voting behavior begs further inquiry. This would help us understand why incumbent supporters continue to vote for an incumbent despite a lower approval rate of the ruler following major disasters in autocracies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>We refer to ‘large-scale’ rather than ‘natural’ disasters because disasters are not natural, e.g., communities choose to reside in flood plains, on fault lines, or in areas at risk of wildfires (Chmutina and Von Meding 2019).

<sup>2</sup>Hood also includes ‘diverting the public’s attention to other matters’ under ‘presentational blame avoidance,’ but we exclude this since we are (at least partially) interested in leaders’ efforts to actively shift blame onto another actor, rather than merely avoid it; like Aytaç (2021), we view diverting attention and shifting blame as distinct strategies. ‘Presentational’ blame avoidance is distinct from an ‘agency’ strategy, which allocates responsibility in advance to another institution or officeholder (Williamson 2024), or a ‘policy’ strategy, which aims to avoid blame through incremental policy changes (Hood 2007, 199-200; Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017, 428).

<sup>3</sup>Conducting research in the aftermath of a large-scale disaster raises important ethical questions. We summarize ethical considerations in the Research Design, and discuss them in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup>The effects of authoritarian propaganda relate to the accessibility of alternative information (Gläsel and Paula 2020). Thus, a more tightly controlled media environment in a totalitarian autocracy, like China under Xi Jinping, may facilitate different effects of blame shifting. This article’s conclusions therefore only apply to electoral autocracies.

<sup>5</sup>In the Turkish context, Aytaç (2021) finds minimal evidence of any effect on approval, positive or negative, of an autocrat blaming foreign powers, the world economy, or domestic institutions for economic malaise. In contrast, Schlipphak et al. (2023) find that, in the context of backsliding EU countries, would-be autocrats can mitigate the impact of EU sanctions on their legitimacy considerably by portraying EU interventions as illegitimate meddling in domestic affairs, thereby shifting the blame for such sanctions and their consequences.

<sup>6</sup>Although scholars have undertaken further research on blame shifting since 2007, there remains no evidence on presentational blame shifting following large-scale disasters.

<sup>7</sup>Hood (2007, 200) notes that, “[t]he high political centrality of presentational strategies and strategists suggests that they are widely believed to be effective and necessary for warding off blame...[although] we have limited evidence for that assumption.”

<sup>8</sup>Putin also employed an ‘agency’ strategy by assigning responsibility for localized Covid-suppression policies to regional authorities (Chaisty, Gerry and Whitefield 2022, 368).

<sup>9</sup>On the importance of credibility, Schlipphak et al. (2023) and Heinkelmann-Wild et al. (2023) show that blaming international organizations can be effective because citizens have a limited understanding of complex multilevel governance, which makes blame shifting more credible.

<sup>10</sup>A ‘common-knowledge’ lie is a false assertion about facts, which the audience can verify independently based on reliable sources (Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018, 5)

<sup>11</sup>Relatedly, as mentioned, Aytaç (2021) found no systematic evidence that blaming foreign powers or domestic

institutions increased approval for the Turkish government's economic policy.

<sup>12</sup>It is also possible that the potential positive and negative effects described above offset each other and blame shifting has no effect on average.

<sup>13</sup>Our goal in this section is not to describe how Erdoğan secured reelection relatively comfortably in May 2023. Instead, we simply document how Erdoğan sought to protect his popular approval following the earthquakes.

<sup>14</sup>As noted, the study may therefore be affected by being conducted shortly before a national-level election; we revisit this point in the Conclusion.

<sup>15</sup>Each participant received US \$1 for completing the survey, which took about 10 minutes. Payment was based on US dollars due to fluctuations in the Turkish lira. This amount, and the compensation rate for focus group participants (see below), was decided through consultation with TGM who have experience of conducting surveys and focus groups across the world, including in Turkey.

<sup>16</sup>TGM has checks to ensure that minors are not recruited; this includes asking all participants' date of birth when they register with a panel, and then comparing it to the date of birth submitted when a participant opts-in for a study.

<sup>17</sup>Appendix B contains statistics on the nationally representative nature of the sample. For robustness, we re-estimate the models with post-stratification weights for age, education, gender, province, and religion; the findings are unchanged (see Table I3 in Appendix I).

<sup>18</sup>Participants may encounter more than one of these blame shifting tactics in the real world. For instance, participants may have observed Erdoğan blaming the opposition and private construction companies. However, although simplistic, our survey design allows us to isolate the effects of these distinct blame shifting strategies. This kind of experimental design is common in political science, including in the study of autocracy (Aarslew 2024).

<sup>19</sup>Available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aerial\\_View\\_of\\_the\\_Hatay\\_Province\\_in\\_Turkey\\_\(52699004990\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aerial_View_of_the_Hatay_Province_in_Turkey_(52699004990).jpg).

<sup>20</sup>Turkish translations of the treatments are in Appendix D.

<sup>21</sup>Appendix E contains a fuller discussion on concerns regarding ecological validity for treatment design.

<sup>22</sup>The equivalent questions prompting respondents to consider the culpability of a force majeure, the opposition, and a government minister are in Appendix M.

<sup>23</sup>The variable has a mean of 0.41 and a standard deviation of 0.40, illustrating the polarization in Turkey before the 2023 election; summary statistics are in Appendix F. We also asked several questions that indirectly measure respondents' approval of Erdoğan (whether respondents plan to vote or volunteer for Erdoğan or Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, which party respondents intend to vote for in the parliamentary elections, and respondents' views of the government's earthquake response). The results section focuses on the main outcome of interest: *Erdoğan approval*; the remaining results are in Table I4.

<sup>24</sup>Appendix H shows that respondents are balanced across these factors.

<sup>25</sup>All hypotheses were pre-registered at [redacted]. The pre-analysis plan included one additional hypothesis about the expected relative strength of the treatments, which is omitted from the main text. This is discussed in Appendix G.

<sup>26</sup>For both **H1a** and **H1b**, the null hypothesis is that blame shifting has no significant effect.

<sup>27</sup>In the experiment, we had to use a pre-treatment covariate to identify people's partisanship, but since we do not face this constraint in selecting focus group participants, we use the question about who people intended to vote for in 2023.

<sup>28</sup>Table K8 shows the socio-economic background and location of each participant.

<sup>29</sup>Each participant received an Amazon voucher in Turkish lira worth £15. Again, the rate was decided through consultation with TGM and based on a foreign currency to mitigate fluctuations in the Turkish lira.

<sup>30</sup>Appendix L provides the guiding questions.

<sup>31</sup>Full results in Table I1. Following our pre-analysis plan, we control for whether respondents are female, their age, level of education, whether they are a public sector employee, their income, whether they are Islamic, and their home province in our analysis to increase statistical precision (Imbens and Rubin 2015). The results are similar with the control variables excluded (see Table I2).

<sup>32</sup>The null effects for the minister and private companies treatments could be driven by experimental manipulation failure in these groups. However, we conduct a manipulation check, where we leverage an open question, in which we asked respondents to explain their approval of Erdogan. Respondents in all treatment groups were more likely than respondents in the control group to use words associated with their specific treatment texts, indicating successful experimental manipulation for all treatments (see Appendix J).

<sup>33</sup>Full results in Table I5.

<sup>34</sup>Full results in Table I6.

<sup>35</sup>The moderating effects of education and income could reflect effects of anti-government sentiment rather than political sophistication. However, we test the moderating effect of partisanship below, and do not find that opposition supporters exhibit greater backlash, which one would expect if education and income were merely proxies for anti-government sentiment.

<sup>36</sup>For the experiment, we use a pre-treatment covariate to identify unaffiliated voters as respondents who did not report voting for Erdogan (incumbent supporters) or Muharrem Ince or Selahattin Demirtas (opposition supporters) in the 2018 presidential election.

<sup>37</sup>Full results in Table I7.

<sup>38</sup>Schlippak et al. (2023) similarly do not find that affective polarization drives how citizens respond to government effects to shift blame for the consequences of external sanctions.

<sup>39</sup>The exception was non-incumbent supporters becoming more positive about Erdogan after he blamed a minister. Although such an action would be politically motivated, blame being levied within rather than across partisan lines

may explain why a scapegoating purge would be popular among non-incumbent supporters.

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# **Supplementary Information: “Blame Shifting in Autocracies Following Large-scale Disasters: Evidence from Turkey”**

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## A Ethical Considerations

In this section, we describe how ethical considerations for the project were assessed against the American Political Science Associations' 12 ethical principles for human subjects research.

1. **"Political science researchers should respect autonomy, consider the wellbeing of participants and other people affected by their research, and be open about the ethical issues they face and the decisions they make when conducting their research."**

The aftermath of large-scale disasters are horrific occasions. People affected have often lost their homes, livelihoods, and even their friends and loved ones. They are invariably experiencing significant trauma. Conducting research around large-scale disasters is important for researchers in various fields, whether to examine how such disasters can be prevented or how their negative effects can be mitigated as much as possible. However, researchers should do everything they can to not exacerbate the trauma of anyone who has been affected by a large-scale disaster, and ideally, also consider what they can do to improve the situation (i.e., donating to an aid organization, raising awareness of the plight of those affected, and—where applicable—lending their expertise).

Conducting research with people—via a survey and focus groups—in the wake of a disaster, such as an earthquake, might come across as a nuisance when people are trying to rebuild their lives. Asking people about the specific disaster in question—in this case, asking people about the earthquakes in their relative immediate aftermath—could even re-traumatize those affected by reminding them of the recent painful experiences. Thus, there are important ethical concerns when conducting research with people about a large-scale disaster in its wake.

Overall, we made the decision to conduct research with people in Turkey after the earthquakes for two main reasons. First, in the short-term, we concluded that the risk of re-traumatizing people was low. The earthquakes happened in February 2023, and we surveyed people in April and May 2023, shortly before the presidential election, later in May 2023, before conducting focus groups in July 2023. During this time period, the earthquakes and their aftermath were ubiquitous in media coverage. Our questions did not ask people about personal experiences during the earthquake; instead, we merely asked them for their views on Erdoğan blaming various actors for the government's poor response to the earthquake. The fact that the earthquakes were a constant topic in the news and that our questions did not ask about people's personal experiences led us to conclude that the risk of re-traumatization was low.

Second, we concluded that it was worth proceeding with the research due to the importance of the topic. Understanding the determinants of an autocrat's popularity in the wake of a large-scale disaster is not an abstract topic. When disasters like an earthquake occur during an autocrat's tenure, it can spell their end of their time in office, which it arguably nearly did for Erdoğan given the *ex-ante* uncertainty ahead of the election. This was partly due to preexisting economic factors, but also because of his response to the earthquakes. If domestic or foreign actors wish to counter propaganda by an autocrat designed to keep the latter in power, it is important that the effects of that propaganda, and how they might vary across different people, are properly understood. As noted, this is not an abstract issue. A

majority of the world's population live under autocracy; understanding how autocrats boost their popular approval, potentially stabilizing their regime and extending their tenure, is hugely important. For these reasons, we concluded that the potential risks of re-traumatizing people affected by the earthquakes were minimal, and that the research was worth proceeding with.

**2. “Political science researchers have an individual responsibility to consider the ethics of their research related activities and cannot outsource ethical reflection to review boards, other institutional bodies, or regulatory agencies.”**

The project received extremely helpful feedback from an institutional review process at the University of York on three separate occasions. This process started in 2021, but further approval was sought and received in 2022 to check theoretically-motivated changes to some of the planned treatments, and then again in 2023 to gain approval for further changes to the treatments following the earthquakes in February. Although helpful, we also sought feedback on numerous occasions from peers, primarily at academic conferences, while the involvement of a Turkish PI with colleagues, friends, and family across Turkey was also crucial to our considerations of the potential ethical risks involved in the project.

A pre-analysis plan for the project was presented many times at conferences to gain feedback on the substance of the research, but also on ethical questions. We considered one issue particularly deeply, which was whether to deceive participants for the treatment about a minister being fired or to present it as a hypothetical scenario. When we presented the research, respondents were divided on this question. Some did not bring it up proactively and when pressed still had no concerns; others raised the issue proactively and expressed concerns. The first iteration of the project that was approved by an institutional ethics committee included deception, but when we redesigned the project for unrelated issues (see above) and sought institutional approval again, we proactively chose to remove the deceptive nature of the treatment, even though the institutional ethics committee did not request it. In sum, we proactively considered ethical questions relating to the project and prioritized these over potentially larger treatment effects, which likely would have resulted from a stronger treatment (which would not have involved a hypothetical scenario).

In addition to the helpful feedback that we received from the institutional review process and from academic conferences, we also benefited from having a Turkish PI on the project. The Turkish PI's involvement was essential, both for the substance of the research but also, especially after the earthquakes occurred in February 2023, for considering the potential ethical risks of fielding the survey. These are described in more detail in response to several of the other principals, but ultimately, we would not have fielded the survey if the Turkish PI had concluded that it was ethically problematic.

**3. “These principles describe the standards of conduct and reflexive openness that are expected of political science researchers. In some cases, researchers may have good reasons to deviate from these principles (for example, when the principles conflict with each other). In such cases, researchers should acknowledge and justify deviations in scholarly publications and presentations of their work.”**

In our responses to the remaining nine principles, we discuss how we have largely attempted

to adhere to the principles technically and in spirit. We also aim to transparently discuss where we risk deviating from the principles, along with our reasons for doing so.

**4. “When designing and conducting research, political scientists should be aware of power differentials between researcher and researched, and the ways in which such power differentials can affect the voluntariness of consent and the evaluation of risk and benefit.”**

We recruited participants for the survey and focus groups from a survey company, TGM Research (hereafter, TGM). TGM recruited participants via their usual procedures, which entail pre-existing panels. People join these panels voluntarily to participate in various market research projects, for which they receive compensation. People join panels via opt-in emails, referrals, mobile apps, marketing campaigns, and social media. Thus, no one was compelled to participate in our survey. The participants for our survey regularly participate in surveys so the procedures are familiar to them. They also participate in surveys online, which for ours meant they could do it anywhere they chose (e.g., on their phone, on a computer at home, etc.).

TGM implemented their usual procedures to ensure our survey did not recruit minors. TGM ask people's age and date of birth when they register with TGM as potential participants in surveys. TGM then asked their age at the outset of our study to check there were no discrepancies between the age that they declare at the registration stage versus the age they provide when registering for a survey. Additionally, when participants provided their age for our survey, if it was below 18, then the survey automatically terminated and their responses were not collected. Overall, we hoped that our efforts to exclude minors, recruiting participants from a pool who regularly volunteer to complete surveys, and requiring participants to complete the survey online at a place of their choosing minimized any risk of power differentials affecting whether consent was truly voluntary.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they wished to volunteer to participate in a follow up online focus group that would last an hour. We emphasized that expressing interest was entirely voluntary, and if participants later changed their mind and decided they did not wish to participate in the focus group, then they were under no obligation to do so. Then, once we contacted participants with details about the focus groups, we asked participants to not share any personal information, keep their cameras off, and enter a preassigned number rather than their name in the teleconferencing software when participating in the focus group. We also resolved that only the Turkish PI would participate in the focus groups to minimize the risk of there being any misunderstanding (due to translation issues) about whether participation was voluntary.

**5. “Political science researchers should generally seek informed consent from individuals who are directly engaged by the research process, especially if research involves more than minimal risk of harm or if it is plausible to expect that engaged individuals would withhold consent if consent were sought.”**

*Survey*

All the participants who completed the survey (in the control and treatment groups) provided their consent to participate. Participants completed the survey online in a place of their choosing, but before they could begin the survey they were asked to confirm that they

agreed to participate after reading an information page about the project, affirming that they understood what the survey was about and what participation would entail, and affirming that they understood that while their answers would be used in subsequent analysis their identity would remain anonymous. Participants who did not agree with *all* of these points were not able to start the survey. The procedures regarding informed consent were approved by the institutional ethics committee.

We informed participants before they started the survey that they could withdraw from the survey at any time before it started or at any point during the survey. We emphasized that if participants chose to withdraw before completing the survey, then their responses would not be collected. Participants' responses were only recorded if they clicked 'submit' at the end of the survey. After this point, removing their responses would have risked violating their anonymity (since we would have needed a significant amount of personal information to confidently identify and remove their responses from the survey software's database).

### *Focus Groups*

When participants finished the survey, they were asked if they wished to volunteer to participate in a follow up online focus group that would take about an hour. If they wished to participate in the focus group, participants were asked to voluntarily provide their email address so that they could be contacted in future to potentially participate. Participants who were randomly selected for potential involvement in a focus group (after being subset by partisan leanings), were then emailed by the Turkish PI to gauge their interests. At this point again, we emphasized to participants that their involvement was not mandatory. The point was emphasized again to participants at the start of the focus groups, and participants were also asked to agree with a series of statements in order to participate. Like the survey, these checked that participants had read an information sheet about the project, that they understood what the project entailed, and that any information they provided would not enable them to be identified in any way. As before, any participant who did not agree with *all* of these statements was not able to participate in the focus group.

## **6. "Political science researchers should carefully consider any use of deception and the ways in which deception can conflict with participant autonomy."**

The study did not entail deception. Participants in one of the treatment groups of the survey were presented with a hypothetical scenario of a minister being fired, but the hypothetical nature of the treatment was emphasized prior to the treatment being presented and at the end of the survey in a debrief. Participants were invited to complain about this or any other aspect of the survey; no complaints were received.

## **7. "Political science researchers should consider the harms associated with their research."**

We identified two main possible types of harm associated with the research project. First, a risk of re-traumatizing participants through being exposed to information about the scale of devastation caused by the earthquakes. This subject matter could have also re-traumatized the PI(s) conducting the research. We discuss this point explicitly in response to principles one, eight, and ten. To sum, we concluded that the risk of this potential harm was low due to the ubiquitous presence of the earthquakes and their effects in Turkish news, while we also

excluded emotive personal accounts of what happened to people in our treatment to avoid triggering participants.

The second area of potential harm was that participants with negative views of Erdoğan could have faced negative repercussions if their views were uncovered. Turkey is an electoral autocracy and as scholars have highlighted, individuals living in autocracies often fear revealing their true views of the autocrat lest they be shunned socially or experience negative consequences from the state such as harassment, physical violence, or imprisonment. We assessed that the risk of this harm in Turkey was low. Prior to the election, there were regular opposition rallies featuring thousands of people, where people did not experience these kinds of negative consequences from the state. The fact that there is significant opposition to Erdoğan is not unknown in Turkey. More importantly, we also took extensive steps to protect the anonymity of survey and focus group participants so that their identities would not be revealed. We discuss the measures that we took to ensure anonymity in response to principles five and nine.

**8. “Political science researchers should anticipate and protect individual participants from trauma stemming from participation in research.”**

The earthquakes in Turkey have killed tens of thousands of people and displaced several million people. They have caused human suffering on a vast scale. It is important that participating in the survey or a focus group does not re-traumatize participants. This point was discussed extensively ahead of deciding whether to proceed with the survey.

Ultimately, we decided to proceed because we thought that, on reflection, participating in the research was unlikely to re-traumatize participants. The earthquakes are a constant presence in Turkey’s news. Reading a small number of facts about the earthquakes is unlikely in this context to re-traumatize an individual. Relatedly, for this reason we chose not to include any personal stories into the texts that participants read since personalizing the events could have made the texts emotionally traumatic to read, even for individuals extremely aware with the devastation that the earthquakes have caused.

It was also possible that participating in the focus groups could have re-traumatized individuals. Discussion in focus groups is by nature more open-ended and could stray to topics or details that participants find distressing. We aimed to mitigate this through two ways. First, the focus groups were led by a Turkish PI who was mindful of this possibility and in guiding the topics for discussion aimed to avoid areas that could have upset participants. Second, participation in the focus groups was voluntary, and we emphasized to participants before they consented to participate, that the groups would entail discussion of their approval of Erdoğan in relation to the earthquakes, and that participants should not volunteer if they believed they would find this experience upsetting.

Overall, we believe that these considerations and strategies meant that the likelihood of trauma stemming from participation in the research was low. This, combined with the benefits of better understanding the effects of blame shifting politics following large-scale disasters, motivated us to pursue the project.

**9. “Political science researchers should generally keep the identities of research participants confidential; when circumstances require, researchers should adopt the higher**

**standard of ensuring anonymity.”**

We have not and will not reveal any information that could be used to personally identify an individual who participated in our research.

Regarding the survey, we did not collect individuals' names or addresses, and we only collected email addresses where participants voluntarily provided them when they expressed an interest in being contacted to participate in a follow-up focus group. We have not and will not publish any individual's email address.

When we emailed details about the focus groups to participants who volunteered to join a focus group, we advised participants to keep their cameras off for the duration of the discussion, not to enter their full name into their teleconferencing profile, and not to share information that could be used to personally identify them. When referring to focus group participants in the research paper, we do not refer to any details that could be used to personally identify individuals.

10. **“Political science researchers conducting studies on political processes should consider the broader social impacts of the research process as well as the impact on the experience of individuals directly engaged by the research. In general, political science researchers should not compromise the integrity of political processes for research purposes without the consent of individuals that are directly engaged by the research process.”**

To assess the broader social impacts of the projects, we considered both potential risks and benefits relating to sociopolitical effects as well as those that directly affect those engaged by the research. The potential benefits of the project are significant. If we can understand how blame shifting politics affect an autocrat's popular approval then civil society organizations and potentially foreign powers as well can make more informed decisions about how to counter this kind of propaganda. It is important to emphasize however, that in considering the sociopolitical and direct impacts of conducting the research, we did not weigh the benefits and risks against each other. Instead, we discussed the risks so that we could be confident that they could be mitigated, irrespective of any benefits that might arise from the project.

*Direct Risks*

The primary risk to those directly engaged by the research is that participants may be re-traumatized by being presented with information about the earthquakes and their effects. It is possible that reading about the devastation caused by the earthquakes in terms of death toll, destruction of homes, and loss of livelihood could upset participants. However, as discussed above, we considered this risk to be very low due to the ubiquitous presence of the earthquakes in Turkish media and as a topic of conversation in Turkish society. We also thought this risk would be further mitigated through the treatment design. The article(s) that participants were presented with contained only factual statements about the earthquakes (i.e., noting where the earthquakes had hit, the estimated death toll, and noting that many buildings were destroyed in multiple provinces). The factual and dispassionate nature of the treatments, as opposed to more emotive treatments that included personal accounts of the damage wrought by the earthquake, we thought would further minimize the risk of possible re-traumatization. We also warned participants before they started the survey that they would

be confronted with information about the earthquakes, and advised them not to begin the survey if they felt this would be upsetting. Based on these steps, we felt that any direct risk of re-traumatization to those directly engaged by the research was minimal.

There was also a possible direct risk of re-traumatization to those conducting the research. However, this was minimal for the survey since it was self-enumerated by participants online at a time and place of their choosing. It was also minimal for the focus groups since the Turkish PI who conducted them is accustomed to discussing challenging and potentially traumatic issues as an academic who works in this area. We therefore concluded that there was a low risk of any direct negative effect on the mental health of those conducting the research.

### *Sociopolitical Risks*

The main sociopolitical risk of the project was whether the study could impact the election in Turkey. However, we concluded that any risks relating to this point were minimal. The treatments that we exposed participants to could have influenced participants' approval of Erdogan and subsequently their voting behavior in the election. This would have compromised the integrity of the political process in Turkey. We felt though that this was unlikely. The treatments were either non-fictional—i.e., they were based on actual news reports—or in the case of the fictitious scenario (a minister being fired), it was presented as a hypothetical scenario so participants were made aware that the event had not actually occurred. Then, in case any participant missed this, we emphasized in a debrief that the account of the minister being fired was fictional. We then invited participants to comment or complain about this or any other aspect of the survey; we did not receive any complaints or negative feedback. Overall, by using non-fictional treatments based on actual news reports, and making clear that a hypothetical scenario was fictitious, we were confident that our research project would not compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

**11. “Political science researchers should be aware of relevant laws and regulations governing their research related activities.”**

We took care to follow all Turkish laws and regulations related to this research. Our main concern was a new law introduced by the Turkish government in October 2022 concerning disinformation. The law ostensibly criminalizes spreading misinformation. Using deception in our survey—where we asked participants to consider a hypothetical scenario of a minister being fired—could have fallen foul of the law. However, our Turkish PI assessed that this risk could be mitigated by presenting it as a hypothetical scenario and through the use of a careful debrief where we informed participants who were exposed to this treatment that the minister had not been fired. The survey team—TGM—who are experienced at conducting surveys in Turkey concurred with this assessment.

**12. “The responsibility to promote ethical research goes beyond the individual researcher or research team.”**

Although we sought advice from scholars and survey experts, no one beyond the authors was responsible for the design of the survey. Neither did anyone aside from the authors directly interact with survey participants. TGM recruits participants on an ongoing basis in countries across the world via a combination of organic growth, affiliation websites, and paid adverts,

but when participants completed the survey, they did so online and did not interact with any individuals from TGM. Then, TGM provided contact details of participants who voluntarily expressed interest in participating in a focus group, but our Turkish PI was the only person to speak directly with participants during the focus groups.

## B National Representativeness of Sample

	Sample		Nationally	
			Source	Year
Median age	35	33.5	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Percent female	46.97	49.90	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Percent with a degree	52.76	17.36	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Percent Islam	88.39	98.03	Pew Research	2020
Region (percent from)				
Aegean	14.32	10.35	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Black Sea	8.20	13.88	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Central Anatolia	13.36	15.66	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Eastern Anatolia	6.72	12.24	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Marmara	34.66	18.92	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Mediterranean	12.26	11.64	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021
Southeastern Anatolia	7.89	12.25	Turkish Statistical Institute	2021

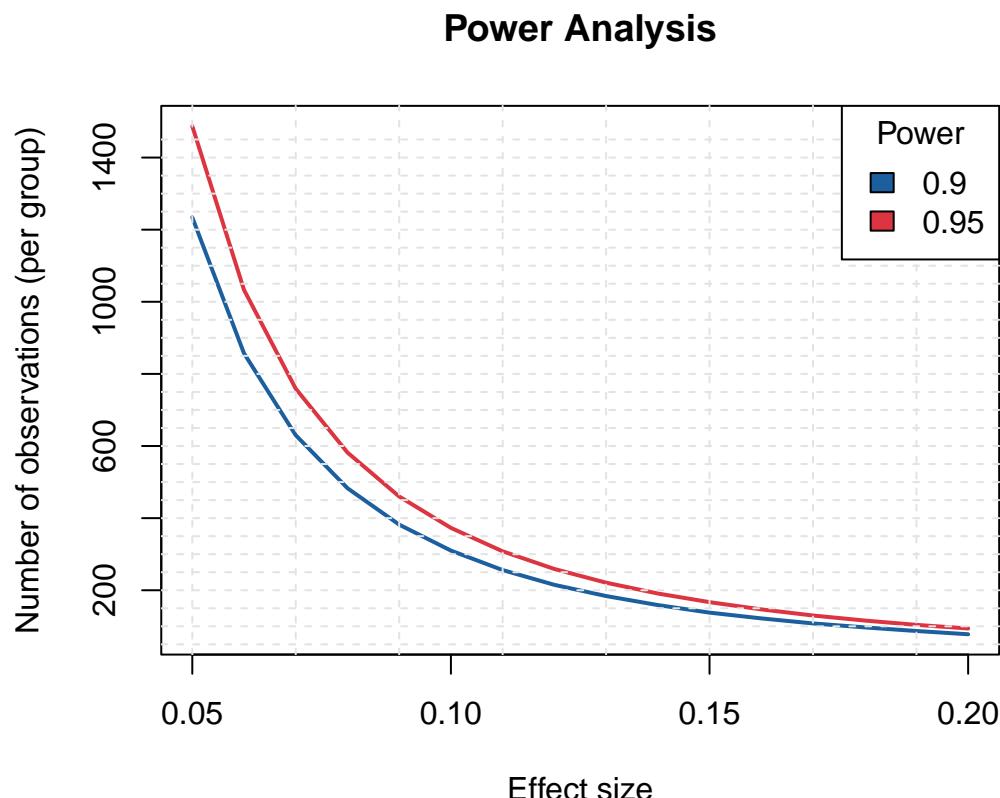
## C Power Analysis

We conducted a power analysis prior to the experiment to estimate the number of necessary participants per control or treatment group to test the hypotheses. This raises questions of (1) what would be a meaningful change in support for a dictator (Erdoğan) following the use of blame avoidance politics, and (2) what effect sizes might be reasonable to expect.

Regarding the first question, changes in support for Erdoğan that could threaten his position would certainly be substantively significant. In 2018, Erdoğan won with 52.59%; the second placed candidate received 30.64%. A swing of ten percentage points would therefore be hugely consequential for Erdoğan's ability to hold on to power.

Regarding the second question, several studies point to possible changes in autocratic support based on blame avoidance politics. Recent research finds that township officials in China can increase their approval by 20.3 to 26.5 percentage points by punishing corrupt officials (Tsai, Trinh and Liu 2022). Another working paper finds in China that an anti-corruption campaign that is perceived as effective and not targeting political rivals can increase support by 21 percentage points, while a campaign that is perceived as effective and targeting political rivals increases support by nine percentage points (Nwankwor and Dai 2023).

Based on this and the previous paragraph, an increase of ten percentage points seems both meaningful and a potentially reasonable effect size to expect. Our power analysis suggests that a total sample size of 4,500 (900 per group) will permit detection at 95% confidence of changes in support for Erdoğan of at least seven percentage points.



## D Turkish Control and Treatment Articles

**Figure D1:** Turkish Control Article

HABERLER > DEPREM

# Yıkım depremleri takip ediyor



6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'ı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13.26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalganın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kilis'i de salladı.

**Figure D2:** Turkish Treatment Articles

**(a) Force Majeure treatment**

HABERLER · DEPREM

**Erdoğan deprem sonrası meydana gelen yıkımdan doğayı sorumlu tuttu**



6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'tı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13:26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalgalanın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kili's'i de saldı.

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, depremden doğayı sorumlu tuttu. Türkiye, dünyadan en aktif deprem bölgesi üzerinde yer alıyor. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan depremin merkez üssü olan Kahramanmaraş ziyaretinde "Sartlar ortada. Böyle bir felakete hazır olmak mümkün değil. Bunun gibi olaylar hep olmuştur. Kader... " dedi.

**(c) Opposition treatment**

HABERLER · DEPREM

**Erdoğan deprem sonrası meydana gelen yıkımdan muhalifeti sorumlu tuttu**



6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'tı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13:26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalgalanın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kili's'i de saldı.

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, depremden muhalifeti sorumlu tuttu. Erdoğan muhalifet figürlerinin kentsel dönüşümü engellediğini vurgulayarak, "Adana'da biri diyor ki 'kentsel dönüşümü karşızı.' Kim bu? CHP'li bir belediye başkanı! (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi). Kentsel dönüşüm kaçınılmazdır... Herhangi bir ihmali varsa, hepsi kanun önünde hesap verecekler, kimsekin hiçbir şüphesi olmasın" dedi.

**(b) Minister treatment**

HABERLER · DEPREM

**Erdoğan deprem sonrası meydana gelen yıkımdan bakanı sorumlu tuttu**



6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'tı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13:26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalgalanın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kili's'i de saldı.

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, depremden ilgili bakanı sorumlu tuttu. Erdoğan dün Çevre, Şehircilik ve İklim Değişikliği Bakanı Murat Kurum'u görevden aldı. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Sayın Kurum'un "Ülkemiz depreme yeterli şekilde hazırlama yükümlülüğünü yerine getirmekte başarısız olduğunu ve halkı korumayı bilmeyedini" söyledi.

**(d) Private companies treatment**

HABERLER · DEPREM

**Erdoğan deprem sonrası meydana gelen yıkımdan müteahhitleri sorumlu tuttu**



6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'tı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13:26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalgalanın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kili's'i de saldı.

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan depremden özel inşaat şirketlerini sorumlu tuttu. Erdoğan hükümeti binaların çöküşünden sorumlu olan tüm şüphelerin sorutulacağına dair söz verdi. Depremi takip eden ilk altı gün içinde kaltesiz ve kaçak inşaat faaliyetinde bulunduğu iddia edilen 130 kişi hakkında gözaltı veya tutuklama kararı verildi.

## E Treatment Design: Ecological Validity

The control and treatment group texts were designed to reflect how Erdoğan communicated with Turkey's citizens in the aftermath of the earthquakes.

Blame shifting was a hallmark of Erdoğan's responses immediately after the earthquakes occurred. On the day of the earthquakes, Erdoğan released a brief statement (February 6) and then disappeared for 25 hours before releasing a longer statement on February 7. When he showed up in person, this time to visit those who were affected by the event, he blamed "fate,"<sup>1</sup> and then threatened the opposition (February 8).<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, he began to use the expression "asrin felaketi" (the disaster of the century) as the party launched an online campaign, stressing that this was a natural disaster that could not have been prevented.<sup>3</sup> During a visit to the affected areas on February 9, Erdoğan further used hostile expressions to blame the opposition.<sup>4</sup>

Erdoğan acknowledged the scale of the crisis as he reported on the number of the injured, dead, and displaced in regular press conferences. This information is included in the control text. However, these factual statements of the president were almost always juxtaposed with an opinion that either blamed nature, the opposition, or private contractors, so we designed the treatments to combine the factual statement about the devastation caused (e.g., the magnitude of the earthquake, number of people affected, cities that were hit hardest) with a statement by Erdoğan that was intended to shift blame. In that sense, the treatments were designed to accurately reflect Erdoğan's behavior during the early days following the earthquakes.

It is possible that the quotes from Erdoğan included in the treatments only reflecting the blame shifting component of this communication—with the information about the devastation caused by the earthquakes included in the reporting component of the treatment—could predispose respondents to reacting negatively to the treatments. However, if this was the case, then it is surprising that we did not observe backlash for the minister and private contractor treatments as well.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.birgun.net/haber/kader-planinin-icerisinde-varmis-420735#google\\_vignette](https://www.birgun.net/haber/kader-planinin-icerisinde-varmis-420735#google_vignette),  
<https://www.birgun.net/haber/erdogan-bu-kez-deprem-icin-soyledi-bunlar-kader-planinin-i-cerisinde-olan-seyler-420668>; <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-butun-imkanlari-seferber-ettik-42217192>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.diken.com.tr/erdogan-25-saat-sonra-bestepeden-gorundu/>, <https://www.ihac.com.tr/haber-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-depremden-etkilenen-10-ilde-3-aylik-ohal-ilan-edildi-145661>.

<sup>3</sup><https://serbestiyet.com/serbestiyet-in-english/felaketin-ortasinda-asrin-felaketi-kampanyasini-kim-yapti-118483/>.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.evrensel.net/haber/481552/erdogan-hatayda-kurtarma-calismasi-yok-diyen-re-haysietsiz-dedi>, <https://www.diken.com.tr/erdogan-depremde-eksikleri-soyleyenlere-hakaretle-karsilik-verdi/>

## F Summary Statistics

**Table F1:** Summary Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Erdoğan approval	0	1	0.41	0.40
Erdoğan vote intention	0	1	0.40	0.43
AKP vote intention	0	1	0.32	0.47
Erdoğan volunteer intention	0	1	0.25	0.36
ICT outcome	0	4	0.94	0.94
Government earthquake response	0	1	0.38	0.39
Kılıçdaroğlu vote intention	0	1	0.54	0.43
CHP vote intention	0	1	0.37	0.48
Kılıçdaroğlu volunteer intention	0	1	0.32	0.38
Female	0	1	0.48	0.50
Age	18	93	36.55	12.04
Education	1	6	4.26	1.17
Public sector employee	0	1	0.21	0.41
Income	1	11	7.36	2.88
Islam	0	1	0.91	0.29
Aegean	0	1	0.14	0.35
Black Sea	0	1	0.08	0.27
Central Anatolia	0	1	0.13	0.34
Eastern Anatolia	0	1	0.07	0.25
Marmara	0	1	0.35	0.48
Mediterranean	0	1	0.12	0.33
Southeastern Anatolia	0	1	0.08	0.27

## **G Additional Hypothesis**

The pre-analysis plan, available at [redacted], also included one additional hypothesis related to the relative strengths of the treatments. We expected that the force majeure treatment would have the strongest effect on participants' approval of Erdogan, relative to the control, compared to the relative effects of the other treatments.

In one sense, this hypothesis was supported by the evidence. The effect of the force majeure treatment was larger than the effects of the other treatments (see Figure 3). However, the logic of this hypothesis was based on finding positive effects related to blame shifting. We expected that because the force majeure treatment did not attempt to blame anyone else it would mitigate backlash effects to a greater degree than the other treatments. But the force majeure treatment led to the biggest average backlash effect. The focus group evidence showed that attributing the devastation caused by the earthquakes to fate enraged participants of all partisan affiliations because so many people lost their lives and Turkey is relatively regularly hit by earthquakes.

## H Randomization

**Table H1:** Covariate Balance Between Control and Treatment Groups

	Control	Force majeure	Minister	Opposition	Private companies	p-value
Female	0.46	0.49	0.46	0.47	0.48	0.22
Age	36.56	36.17	36.44	36.93	36.98	0.50
Education	4.22	4.24	4.28	4.22	4.38	0.74
Public sector employee	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.20	0.19	0.76
Income	7.36	7.36	7.34	7.32	7.53	0.96
Islam	0.91	0.92	0.91	0.90	0.91	0.54
Aegean	0.15	0.16	0.14	0.15	0.14	0.89
Black Sea	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.33
Central Anatolia	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.13	0.88
Eastern Anatolia	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.77
Marmara	0.35	0.34	0.36	0.35	0.39	0.86
Mediterranean	0.13	0.13	0.12	0.13	0.12	0.99
Southeastern Anatolia	0.07	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.26

## I Results

**Table I1:** Average Treatment Effects on Approval for Erdogan

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Force majeure	-0.04 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)
Minister	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Opposition	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)
Private companies	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Female	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Age	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Education	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)
Public sector employee	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)
Income	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01 <sup>+</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Islam	0.28*** (0.02)	0.29*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.03)
Aegean	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.04)
Black Sea	-0.05 <sup>+</sup> (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.05)
Central Anatolia	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.04)
Eastern Anatolia	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (.)
Marmara	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)
Mediterranean	-0.05 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)

Southeastern Anatolia	-0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)
Constant	0.45*** (0.05)	0.38*** (0.06)	0.52*** (0.07)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.07	0.07
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	3839	1938	1901

Standard errors in parentheses

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table I2:** Average Treatment Effects on Approval for Erdoğan

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Force majeure	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)
Minister	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Opposition	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)
Private companies	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Constant	0.43*** (0.01)	0.42*** (0.02)	0.43*** (0.02)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.002	0.001	0.008
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	4206	2132	2074

Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Since the sample is not representative of some factors, we conduct a robustness test where we re-estimate the main models with post-stratification weights—for age, education, gender, province, and religion—using the Census data provided in Appendix B (Solon, Haider and Wooldridge 2013, 13–17). The main findings (i.e., from the primed sample in Model 3) are largely unchanged in terms of statistical and substantive significance.

**Table I3:** Average Treatment Effects on Approval for Erdoğan with Post-Stratification Weights

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Force majeure	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)
Minister	0.02 (0.02)	0.06* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
Opposition	-0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)
Private companies	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)
Female	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Age	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)
Education	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Public sector employee	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Income	-0.01 <sup>+</sup> (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Islam	0.32*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.02)	0.29*** (0.02)
Aegean	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)
Black Sea	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)
Central Anatolia	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.04)
Eastern Anatolia	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.12* (0.05)
Marmara	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)

Mediterranean	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.10 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)
Southeastern Anatolia	-0.04 (0.04)	0.06 (0.06)	0.00 (.)
Constant	0.33*** (0.06)	0.31*** (0.09)	0.23** (0.09)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.23	0.17
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	3,838	1,937	1,901

Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

We discuss in the paper that we also examine the effect of the various blame shifting strategies on several outcomes that indirectly measure respondents' approval of Erdoğan (whether respondents plan to vote or volunteer for Erdoğan or Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the main opposition candidate in the 2023 Turkish presidential election, which party respondents intend to vote for in the parliamentary elections, and respondents' views of the government's earthquake response). The outcomes, also listed in the bottom row of the table, and the questions they are based on from the survey are as follows: Erdoğan vote intention (O2), AKP vote intention (O5), Erdoğan volunteer intention (O6), Government earthquake response (O8), Kılıçdaroğlu vote intention (O4), CHP vote intention (O5), and Kılıçdaroğlu volunteer intention (O7).

**Table I4:** Average Treatment Effects on Various Outcomes

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Force majeure	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)
Minister	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.04* (0.02)
Opposition	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)
Private companies	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)
Female	0.02 (0.01)	0.04* (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.02+ (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)
Age	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00+ (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Education	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.01+ (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Public sector employee	-0.03+ (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.02)
Income	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)

	Islam	AKP	Erdogan	Government	Kilicdaroglu	CHP	Kilicdaroglu
	vote	vote	volunteer	earthquake	vote	vote	volunteer
	intention	intention	intention	response	intention	intention	intention
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.04	0.02
Observations	3731	3129	3670	3778	3728	3129	3657

Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table I5:** Treatment Effects Conditional on Education

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Education	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03+ (0.02)	-0.02+ (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
Force majeure	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.12)									
Force majeure × Education	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)									
Minister				-0.00 (0.08)	0.07 (0.12)		-0.05 (0.11)					
Minister × Education				0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)						
Opposition						0.08 (0.08)	0.10 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)				
Opposition × Education						-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)				
Private companies									-0.04 (0.08)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.11)	
Private companies × Education									0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	
Female	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.05* (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)
Age	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00+ (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00+ (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Public sector employee	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Income	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Islam	0.28*** (0.03)	0.26*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.28*** (0.03)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.33*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.04)	0.36*** (0.03)

Aegean	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.13* (0.07)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)	-0.16* (0.07)	-0.08+ (0.04)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.13* (0.06)
Black Sea	0.05 (0.05)	0.15* (0.07)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.08 (0.05)	-0.11* (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.14+ (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	0.07 (0.05)	0.08 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Central Anatolia	0.05 (0.05)	0.09 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)	0.02 (0.03)	0.10 (0.07)	0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.12+ (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.05)	0.13+ (0.07)	-0.02 (0.06)
Eastern Anatolia	0.10+ (0.06)	0.12 (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)	0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.08)	0.10 (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)	0.21** (0.07)	-0.08 (0.09)	0.12* (0.06)	0.20* (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)
Marmara	0.02 (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.06** (0.02)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.08* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.11+ (0.06)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.06)
Mediterranean	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.07)	-0.08* (0.03)	0.03 (0.07)	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	0.09 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)
Southeastern Anatolia	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.00 (.)	0.02 (0.06)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)
Constant	0.35*** (0.08)	0.31** (0.12)	0.39*** (0.11)	0.39*** (0.07)	0.32** (0.12)	0.37*** (0.10)	0.36*** (0.08)	0.32** (0.12)	0.40*** (0.11)	0.27** (0.08)	0.30* (0.12)	0.24* (0.11)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.11
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	1507	752	755	1536	768	766	1521	762	759	1537	756	781

Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table I6:** Treatment Effects Conditional on Income

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Income	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Force majeure	0.07 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.08)	0.14 (0.09)									
Force majeure × Income	-0.01 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)									
Minister				0.05 (0.06)	0.00 (0.08)	0.00 (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)					
Minister × Income				-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)					
Opposition					0.10 <sup>+</sup> (0.06)	0.03 (0.08)	0.18 <sup>*</sup> (0.09)					
Opposition × Income					-0.02 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)					
Private companies						0.14 <sup>*</sup> (0.06)	0.11 (0.08)					
Female	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 <sup>+</sup> (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.05 <sup>*</sup> (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.07 <sup>*</sup> (0.03)
Age	-0.00 <sup>**</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>*</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>+</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>*</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>**</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>***</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>+</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>+</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 <sup>*</sup> (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Public sector employee	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Education	-0.03 <sup>**</sup> (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.03 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.03 <sup>**</sup> (0.01)	-0.03 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.03 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.03 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.04 <sup>***</sup> (0.01)	-0.04 <sup>**</sup> (0.01)	-0.04 <sup>**</sup> (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
Islam	0.27 <sup>***</sup> (0.03)	0.26 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.28 <sup>***</sup> (0.03)	0.28 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.29 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.27 <sup>***</sup> (0.03)	0.29 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.30 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.29 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.30 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.33 <sup>***</sup> (0.04)	0.36 <sup>***</sup> (0.03)

Aegean	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.12 <sup>+</sup> (0.07)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.12 <sup>+</sup> (0.06)
Black Sea	0.05 (0.05)	0.15* (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.13 <sup>*</sup> (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	0.14 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.07 (0.05)	0.08 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Central Anatolia	0.05 (0.05)	0.09 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.03)	0.10 (0.07)	0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.12 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.05)	0.13 <sup>+</sup> (0.07)	-0.01 (0.06)
Eastern Anatolia	0.11 <sup>+</sup> (0.06)	0.13 (0.08)	0.08 (0.09)	0.02 (0.04)	0.07 (0.08)	0.09 (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)	0.21** (0.07)	-0.08 (0.07)	0.13 <sup>*</sup> (0.09)	0.20 <sup>*</sup> (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)
Marmara	0.03 (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.07** (0.02)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.10** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)
Mediterranean	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	-0.09** (0.03)	0.03 (0.07)	-0.11 <sup>*</sup> (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.09 (0.07)	0.09 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.07)
Southeastern Anatolia	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.00 (.)	0.01 (0.06)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	-0.06 (.)
Constant	0.29*** (0.08)	0.30** (0.11)	0.30** (0.11)	0.37*** (0.07)	0.36** (0.11)	0.31** (0.10)	0.34*** (0.08)	0.36** (0.11)	0.33*** (0.11)	0.18 <sup>*</sup> (0.07)	0.25 <sup>*</sup> (0.11)	0.11 (0.10)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.11
Sample	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed	Full	Unprimed	Primed
Observations	1507	752	755	1536	768	768	1521	762	759	1537	756	781

Standard errors in parentheses

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table I7:** Treatment Effects Conditional on Partisanship

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Force majeure	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.05* (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.05* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Minister	-0.03 (0.03)	0.05* (0.02)	0.06 <sup>+</sup> (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.11* (0.05)	-0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Opposition	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.05)
Private companies	-0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.08 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)
Female	0.03 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)
Education	-0.01 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Public sector employee	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.05 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.06 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)
Income	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)
Islam	0.08 (0.08)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.10 (0.10)	0.05* (0.02)	0.17*** (0.04)	0.06 (0.12)	0.06* (0.02)	0.13*** (0.05)
Aegean	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.12* (0.05)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.17** (0.06)	0.04 (0.04)	0.06 (0.06)
Black Sea	0.05 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.04)	0.00 (.)	0.02 (0.07)	-0.17** (0.06)	0.00 (.)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.00 (.)

Central Anatolia	0.01 (0.04)	-0.07 <sup>+</sup> (0.04)	-0.15*** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.09 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.02 (0.06)
Eastern Anatolia	0.00 (.)	0.00 (.)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.06)	0.05 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.09 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	0.08 (0.07)	0.12 (0.08)
Marmara	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.05 (0.06)
Mediterranean	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.10 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.11 <sup>+</sup> (0.06)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	0.11 <sup>+</sup> (0.07)
Southeastern Anatolia	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.13** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.00 (.)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.00 (.)	0.03 (0.07)
Constant	0.68*** (0.09)	0.29*** (0.06)	0.43*** (0.07)	0.67*** (0.12)	0.22** (0.07)	0.37*** (0.10)	0.81*** (0.15)	0.24** (0.08)	0.27** (0.10)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.05
Sample	Full	Full	Unprimed	Unprimed	Primed	Primed	Primed	Primed	Primed
Partisanship	Erdogan	Opposition	Unaffiliated	Erdogan	Opposition	Unaffiliated	Erdogan	Opposition	Unaffiliated
Observations	1585	1233	1021	805	615	518	780	618	503

Standard errors in parentheses

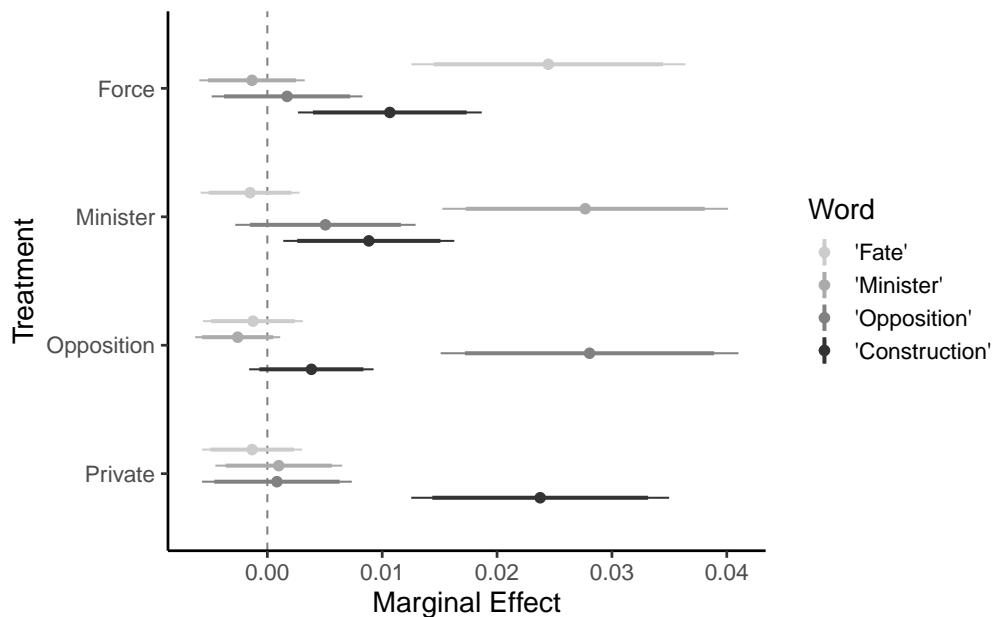
+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## J Manipulation Checks

We assess whether our experimental manipulation of the treatments was successful by examining whether our treatments affect how respondents justify why they approve or disapprove of Erdogan.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, we assess whether the treatments make it more likely that respondents justify their view of Erdogan in a way that relates to the treatment they were exposed to, by looking at whether or not they use specific words associated with the treatments. We collected these data via an open-ended text-based question that asked participants to “briefly explain why you approve or disapprove of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.” For the force majeure treatment, this word is “fate,” for the minister treatment “minister,” for the opposition treatment “opposition,” and for the private sector treatment “construction.”<sup>6</sup>

Figure J1 shows the effects of the four treatments, relative to the control group, on the likelihood that respondents used these particular words. We find that all treatments significantly increase the likelihood that respondents use the word associated with the treatment they were exposed to in their open answer. Moreover, the effects of each treatments are—while not unique—strongest for their respective unique words. We therefore conclude that experimental manipulation was successful for all of the treatments.

**Figure J1:** Experimental Manipulation Checks



*Notes:* The figure shows the effects of the four treatments on the likelihood that participants mention the words “fate,” “minister,” “opposition,” and “construction” in their open answers explaining their approval rating of Erdogan. The bars indicate 95% (thin) and 90% (bold) confidence intervals. Coefficients stem from linear probability models following the same specifications as the models in Table 3.

<sup>5</sup>This manipulation check was not pre-registered.

<sup>6</sup>To avoid bias due to ambiguous meanings or common synonyms in Turkish, we conducted this analysis on English translations of respondent’s answers.

## K Focus Group Compositions

**Table K8:** Composition of focus groups

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Unaffiliated</b>					
	F	1994	Vocational diploma	10.000 - 12.499 TL	Gaziantep
	F	1974	Secondary School	25.000 TL and above	Istanbul
	M	1984	BA equivalent	12.500 - 14.999 TL	Istanbul
	M	1977	BA equivalent	25.000 TL and above	Kocaeli
	M	1980	BA equivalent	22.500 - 24.999 TL	Mersin
	F	1975	High school	12.500 - 14.999 TL	Istanbul
	F	1998	Vocational diploma	17.500 - 19.999 TL	Izmir
	M	1988	MA equivalent or above	17.500 - 19.999 TL	Izmir
<b>Opposition</b>					
	F	1987	BA equivalent	12.500 - 14.999 TL	Izmir
	F	1991	BA equivalent	20.000 - 22.499 TL	Izmir
	M	1982	High school	12.500 - 14.999 TL	Ankara
	M	1960	BA equivalent	17.500 - 19.999 TL	Antalya
	M	1971	MA equivalent or above	20.000 - 22.499 TL	Bartin
	F	1976	BA equivalent	15.000 - 17.499 TL	Mugla
	M	1965	High school	7.500 - 9.999 TL	Istanbul
	F	1988	High school	25.000 TL and above	Izmir
<b>Incumbent</b>					
	F	1985	BA equivalent	22.500 - 24.999 TL	Izmir
	F	1993	BA equivalent	15.000 - 17.499 TL	Izmir
	M	1974	BA equivalent	25.000 TL and above	Aksaray
	M	1962	High school	10.000 - 12.499 TL	Kilis
	F	1981	High school	7.500 - 9.999 TL	Tekirdag
	M	1972	High school	17.500 - 19.999 TL	Ankara
	M	1970	BA equivalent	15.000 - 17.499 TL	Izmir
	F	1998	High school	5.000 - 7.499 TL	Izmir

## **L Focus Group Questions**

### **Introduction/Engagement Questions**

1. How many of you prefer to read while holding a printed newspaper in hand?
2. Today, thanks to the Internet, it is possible to access news from different sources. What factors do you take into account when choosing your preferred source of the news?

### **Exploration Questions**

1. When you read the news about the earthquake, how do you evaluate the newspaper report you read?
  - (a) How do you decide to trust the source and why?
  - (b) How do you evaluate the accuracy of political news?
2. After the February earthquake, President Erdoğan said that this is a natural phenomenon, it is not possible to prevent earthquakes in such cases. What do you think about this?
3. We would like to hear your thoughts on President Erdoğan's statements about those responsible for the scale of the disaster after the earthquake. How do you think the management of this process was? [Remind them of the texts on opposition, construction companies, the minister.]
  - (a) Do you think the opposition will do a better job in responding to the earthquake?
4. In your answers before the elections, you said that you were supportive of/undecided/opposed to about your opinion on President Erdoğan's style of governance. Could you explain a bit more why you were undecided on that point?
5. What do you like/do not like about President Erdoğan's management style and why?
  - (a) What are some things you dislike about his style of governance and why?

### **Exit Questions**

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## M Survey

Turkish	English
<b>D1.</b> Cinsiyetiniz nedir?	<b>D1.</b> What is your gender?
<01> Erkek <02> Kadın <03> İkili olmayan/üçüncü cinsiyet <04> Söylememeyi tercih ediyorum	<01> Male <02> Female <03> Non-binary/third gender <04> Prefer not to say
<b>D2.</b> Hangi yılda doğdunuz?	<b>D2.</b> In what year were you born?
<b>D3.</b> Eğitim seviyeniz nedir?	<b>D3.</b> What is your level of education?
< 01 > İlkokul < 02 > Ortaokul < 03 > Lise < 04 > Lisans Derecesi < 05 > Yüksekokul/profesyonel veya teknik diploma < 06 > Yüksek lisans derecesi veya üstü < 98 > Bilmiyorum	< 01 > Elementary < 02 > Preparatory/Basic < 03 > Secondary < 04 > Bachelor's degree < 05 > Mid-level diploma/professional or technical < 06 > Master's degree or above < 98 > Don't know
<b>D4.</b> Çalışıyor musunuz?	<b>D4.</b> Do you work?
< 01 > Tam zamanlı çalışıyorum (haftada 30 saat veya daha fazla) < 02 > Yarı zamanlı çalışıyorum (haftada 30 saatten az) < 03 > Emekliyim < 04 > Ev hanımıyım < 05 > Öğrenciyim < 06 > İşsizim (iş arıyorum) < 07 > Diğer < 98 > Bilmiyorum	< 01 > Full time (30 or more hours a week) < 02 > Part time (less than 30 hours a week) < 03 > Retired < 04 > A housewife < 05 > A student < 06 > Unemployed (looking for work) < 07 > Other < 98 > Don't know

**D5.** Hangi sektörde çalışıyoysunuz?

- < 01 > Kamu
- < 02 > Özel
- < 03 > Diğer
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D5.** What sector do you work in?

- < 01 > Public
- < 02 > Private
- < 03 > Other
- < 98 > Don't know

**D6.** İşinizdeki konumunuz nedir? (Eğer birden fazla işiniz varsa, asıl işinizdeki konumunuza belirtin.)

- < 01 > Bir kurumun yönetici veya yüksek dereceli devlet memuru
- < 02 > Silahlı kuvvetler mensubu veya polis
- < 03 > Hükümet çalışanı
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D6.** What is your position at your work? (If you have more than one job, answer with regard to your main job.)

- < 01 > Director of an institution or a high-ranking governmental employee
- < 02 > Working at the armed forces or the police
- < 03 > A governmental employee
- < 98 > Don't know

**D7.** Medeni durumunuz nedir?

- < 01 > Bekar
- < 02 > Evli
- < 03 > Boşanmış
- < 04 > Dul
- < 05 > Nişanlı
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D7.** What is your marital status?

- < 01 > Single
- < 02 > Married
- < 03 > Divorced
- < 04 > Widowed
- < 05 > Engaged
- < 98 > Don't know

**D8.** Dini inancınız nedir?

- < 01 > İslam
- < 02 > Hristiyan
- < 03 > Musevi
- < 04 > Diğer
- < 05 > Dini inancım yok
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D8.** What is your religion?

- < 01 > Islam
- < 02 > Christian
- < 03 > Jewish
- < 04 > Other religion
- < 05 > No religion
- < 98 > Don't know

**D9.** Her gün dua eder misiniz?

- < 01 > Her zaman
- < 02 > Çoğu zaman
- < 03 > Bazen
- < 04 > Nadiren
- < 05 > Hiçbir zaman
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D9.** Do you pray daily?

- < 01 > Always
- < 02 > Most of the time
- < 03 > Sometimes
- < 04 > Rarely
- < 05 > Never
- < 98 > Don't know

**D10.** Aylık hane geliriniz Türk Lirası olarak ne kadardır?

- < 01 > 2.500 TL'den az
- < 02 > 2.500 - 4.999 TL
- < 03 > 5.000 - 7.499 TL
- < 04 > 7.500 - 9.999 TL
- < 05 > 10.000 - 12.499 TL
- < 06 > 12.500 - 14.999 TL
- < 07 > 15.000 - 17.499 TL
- < 08 > 17.500 - 19.999 TL
- < 09 > 20.000 - 22.499 TL
- < 10 > 22.500 - 24.999 TL
- < 11 > 25.000 TL ve üzeri
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D10.** What is your monthly household income in Turkish lira?

- < 01 > Less than 2,500 TL
- < 02 > 2,500 - 4,999 TL
- < 03 > 5,000 - 7,499 TL
- < 04 > 7,500 - 9,999 TL
- < 05 > 10,000 - 12,499 TL
- < 06 > 12,500 - 14,999 TL
- < 07 > 15,000 - 17,499 TL
- < 08 > 17,500 - 19,999 TL
- < 09 > 20,000 - 22,499 TL
- < 10 > 22,500 - 24,999 TL
- < 11 > 25,000 TL or more
- < 98 > Don't know

**D11.** Hangi ilde yaşıyorsunuz?

- < 01 > Adana
- < 02 > Adıyaman
- < 03 > Afyonkarahisar
- < 04 > Ağrı
- < 05 > Amasya
- < 06 > Ankara
- < 07 > Antalya
- < 08 > Artvin
- < 09 > Aydın
- < 10 > Balıkesir
- < 11 > Bilecik
- < 12 > Bingöl
- < 13 > Bitlis

**D11.** In what province do you live?

- < 01 > Adana
- < 02 > Adıyaman
- < 03 > Afyonkarahisar
- < 04 > Ağrı
- < 05 > Amasya
- < 06 > Ankara
- < 07 > Antalya
- < 08 > Artvin
- < 09 > Aydın
- < 10 > Balıkesir
- < 11 > Bilecik
- < 12 > Bingöl
- < 13 > Bitlis

**D11.** Hangi ilde yaşıyorsunuz? (devam)

< 14 > Bolu  
< 15 > Burdur  
< 16 > Bursa  
< 17 > Çanakkale  
< 18 > Çankırı  
< 19 > Çorum  
< 20 > Denizli  
< 21 > Diyarbakır  
< 22 > Edirne  
< 23 > Elazığ  
< 24 > Erzincan  
< 25 > Erzurum  
< 26 > Eskişehir  
< 27 > Gaziantep  
< 28 > Giresun  
< 29 > Güümüşhane  
< 30 > Hakkâri  
< 31 > Hatay  
< 32 > Isparta  
< 33 > Mersin (İcel)  
< 34 > İstanbul  
< 35 > İzmir  
< 36 > Kars  
< 37 > Kastamonu  
< 38 > Kayseri  
< 39 > Kırklareli  
< 40 > Kırşehir  
< 41 > Kocaeli  
< 42 > Konya  
< 43 > Kütahya  
< 44 > Malatya  
< 45 > Manisa  
< 46 > Kahramanmaraş  
< 47 > Mardin  
< 48 > Muğla  
< 49 > Muş

**D11.** In what province do you live? (cont.)

< 14 > Bolu  
< 15 > Burdur  
< 16 > Bursa  
< 17 > Çanakkale  
< 18 > Çankırı  
< 19 > Çorum  
< 20 > Denizli  
< 21 > Diyarbakır  
< 22 > Edirne  
< 23 > Elazığ  
< 24 > Erzincan  
< 25 > Erzurum  
< 26 > Eskişehir  
< 27 > Gaziantep  
< 28 > Giresun  
< 29 > Güümüşhane  
< 30 > Hakkâri  
< 31 > Hatay  
< 32 > Isparta  
< 33 > Mersin (ex İcel)  
< 34 > İstanbul  
< 35 > İzmir  
< 36 > Kars  
< 37 > Kastamonu  
< 38 > Kayseri  
< 39 > Kırklareli  
< 40 > Kırşehir  
< 41 > Kocaeli  
< 42 > Konya  
< 43 > Kütahya  
< 44 > Malatya  
< 45 > Manisa  
< 46 > Kahramanmaraş  
< 47 > Mardin  
< 48 > Muğla  
< 49 > Muş

**D11.** Hangi ilde yaşıyorsunuz? (devam)

< 50 > Nevşehir  
< 51 > Niğde  
< 52 > Ordu  
< 53 > Rize  
< 54 > Sakarya  
< 55 > Samsun  
< 56 > Siirt  
< 57 > Sinop  
< 58 > Sivas  
< 59 > Tekirdağ  
< 60 > Tokat  
< 61 > Trabzon  
< 62 > Tunceli  
< 63 > Şanlıurfa  
< 64 > Uşak  
< 65 > Van  
< 66 > Yozgat  
< 67 > Zonguldak  
< 68 > Aksaray  
< 69 > Bayburt  
< 70 > Karaman  
< 71 > Kırıkkale  
< 72 > Batman  
< 73 > Şırnak  
< 74 > Bartın  
< 75 > Ardahan  
< 76 > İğdır  
< 77 > Yalova  
< 78 > Karabük  
< 79 > Kilis  
< 80 > Osmaniye  
< 81 > Düzce  
< 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D11.** In what province do you live? (cont.)

< 50 > Nevşehir  
< 51 > Niğde  
< 52 > Ordu  
< 53 > Rize  
< 54 > Sakarya  
< 55 > Samsun  
< 56 > Siirt  
< 57 > Sinop  
< 58 > Sivas  
< 59 > Tekirdağ  
< 60 > Tokat  
< 61 > Trabzon  
< 62 > Tunceli  
< 63 > Şanlıurfa  
< 64 > Uşak  
< 65 > Van  
< 66 > Yozgat  
< 67 > Zonguldak  
< 68 > Aksaray  
< 69 > Bayburt  
< 70 > Karaman  
< 71 > Kırıkkale  
< 72 > Batman  
< 73 > Şırnak  
< 74 > Bartın  
< 75 > Ardahan  
< 76 > İğdır  
< 77 > Yalova  
< 78 > Karabük  
< 79 > Kilis  
< 80 > Osmaniye  
< 81 > Düzce  
< 98 > Don't know

**D12.** Aşağıdaki gazetelerden hangisini en sık okursunuz?

- < 01 > Hürriyet
- < 02 > Habertürk
- < 03 > Sabah
- < 04 > Milliyet
- < 05 > Hiçbiri
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D12.** Which of these media sources do you consume most often?

- < 01 > Hürriyet
- < 02 > Habertürk
- < 03 > Sabah
- < 04 > Milliyet
- < 05 > None of them
- < 98 > Don't know

**D13.** 2018 Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçiminde kime oy verdiniz?

- < 01 > Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- < 02 > Muharrem İnce
- < 03 > Selahattin Demirtaş
- < 04 > Meral Akşener
- < 05 > Diğer
- < 06 > Hiç kimseye oy vermedim
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D13.** Who did you vote for in the 2018 Turkey presidential election?

- < 01 > Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- < 02 > Muharrem İnce
- < 03 > Selahattin Demirtaş
- < 04 > Meral Akşener
- < 05 > Someone else
- < 06 > No one
- < 98 > Don't know

**D14.** Herhangi bir siyasi partije ne kadar bağlı hissediyorsunuz?

- < 01 > Hiç bağlı değil
- < 02 > Biraz bağlı değil
- < 03 > Ne bağlı, ne bağlı değil
- < 04 > Biraz bağlı
- < 05 > Çok kuvvetli derecede bağlı
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**D14.** How attached do you feel to any political party?

- < 01 > Strongly unattached
- < 02 > Somewhat unattached
- < 03 > Neither attached nor unattached
- < 04 > Somewhat attached
- < 05 > Strongly attached
- < 98 > Don't know

**D15.** Aşağıdaki siyasi partilerden hangisine üyesiniz?

- |                                     |                   |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| < 01 > Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi   | < 01 > AKP        |
| < 02 > Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi      | < 02 > CHP        |
| < 03 > Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi   | < 03 > MHP        |
| < 04 > İYİ Parti                    | < 04 > iYi Parti  |
| < 05 > Halkların Demokratik Partisi | < 05 > HDP        |
| < 06 > Yeşil Sol Parti              | < 06 > YSP        |
| < 07 > Saadet Partisi               | < 07 > SP         |
| < 08 > Türkiye İşçi Partisi         | < 08 > TIP        |
| < 09 > Hiçbiri                      | < 09 > None       |
| < 98 > Bilmiyorum                   | < 98 > Don't know |

**D15.** Are you a member of a political party?

**P1.** Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi’nde toplam kaç milletvekili sandalyesi var? Lütfen en iyi tahmininizi belirtin.

**P1.** How many seats are there in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey? Give your best answer.

**P2.** Türkiye'nin şu an görevde olan Dışişleri Bakanı'nın adı nedir? Lütfen en iyi tahmininizi belirtin.

**P2.** What is the name of Turkey's current Foreign Minister? Give your best answer.

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Lütfen aşağıdaki haber makalesini okuyun:  
[Aşağıdaki makalenin yakın zamanda büyük tirajlı bir gazetede yayınlandığını varsayıyalım:]

[*Kontrol başlığı*]  
**Yıkım depremleri takip ediyor**

[*Tretman başlıklarları*]  
**Erdogan deprem sonrası meydana gelen yıkımdan [bakanı/doğayı/muhalefeti/müteahhitleri] sorumlu tuttu.**

6 Şubat günü saat 04:17'de Kahramanmaraş'ı sarsan 7.8 büyüklüğündeki büyük depremde 50.000'den fazla kişi hayatını kaybetti. Birden fazla büyük ve küçük artçı sarsıntıları takiben saat 13.26'da 7.5 büyüklüğünde ikinci bir deprem Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana geldi. İlk büyük depremde hasar gören pek çok bina ikinci büyük dalganın etkisiyle çöktü. Deprem aynı zamanda Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay ve Kilis'i de salladı.

*Cumhurbaşkanı Erdogan, depremden ilgili bakanı sorumlu tuttu. Erdogan dün Çevre, Şehircilik ve İklim Değişikliği Bakanı Murat Kurum'u görevden aldı. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdogan, Sayın Kurum'un "ülkeyi depreme yeterli şekilde hazırlama yükümlülüğünü yerine getirmekte başarısız olduğunu ve halkı korumayı beceremediğini" söyledi.*

Please read the following news article:  
[Suppose the following article recently appeared in a major Turkish newspaper:]

[*Control headline*]  
**Devastation follows earthquakes**

[*Treatment headlines*]  
**Erdogan says [minister/a force of nature/opposition/private construction companies] at fault for devastation following earthquakes**

The powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake that rattled the southern province of Kahramanmaras on February 6 at 4:17am claimed the lives of over 50,000 people. After multiple large and small tremors, another 7.5 magnitude earthquake occurred in Kahramanmaras at 1:26pm. Many buildings damaged in the first major earthquake collapsed by the impact of the second major earthquake. The earthquake also rocked the neighboring provinces of Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, Diyarbakir, Adana, Adiyaman, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay, and Kilis.

*President Erdogan says the relevant minister is to blame. President Erdogan yesterday fired Murat Kurum, the Minister of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change. President Erdogan said that Mr. Kurum had "failed in his duties to adequately prepare the country for an earthquake, and that he had failed to protect the people."*

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, depremden doğayı sorumlu tuttu. Türkiye, dünyanın en aktif deprem bölgesi üzerinde yer alıyor. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan depremin merkez üssü olan Kahramanmaraş ziyaretinde “Şartlar ortada. Böyle bir felakete hazır olmak mümkün değil. Bunun gibi olaylar hep olmuştur. Kader...” dedi.

President Erdoğan says forces of nature are to blame. Türkiye lies in one of the world's most active earthquake zones. When visiting the quake epicenter Kahramanmaraş, President Erdoğan said, “The conditions are clear to see. It's not possible to be ready for a disaster like this. Such things have always happened. It's part of destiny's plan.”

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, depremden muhalefeti sorumlu tuttu. Erdoğan muhalefet figürlerinin kentsel dönüşümü engellediğini vurgulayarak, “Adana'da biri diyor ki 'kentsel dönüşüme karşıyız.' Kim bu? CHP'li bir belediye başkanı! (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi). Kentsel dönüşüm kaçınılmazdır... Herhangi bir ihmali varsa, hepsi kanun önde hesap verecekler, kimseyin hiçbir şüphesi olmasın” dedi.

President Erdoğan says that opposition figures are to blame. President Erdoğan emphasized that opposition figures had blocked urban transformation, saying that “Someone in Adana says they are against urban transformation. Who is this? A mayor from the CHP! (Republican People's Party). Urban transformation is indispensable...If there is any negligence, we will hold them accountable before the law, no one should have any doubt.”

Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan depremden özel inşaat şirketlerini sorumlu tuttu. Erdoğan hükümeti binaların çöküşünden sorumlu olan tüm şüphelilerin soruşturulacağına dair söz verdi. Depremi takip eden ilk altı gün içinde kalitesiz ve kaçak inşaat faaliyetinde bulunduğu iddia edilen 130 kişi hakkında gözaltı veya tutuklama kararı verildi.

President Erdoğan says private construction companies are to blame. President Erdoğan's government vowed to investigate anyone suspected of responsibility for the collapse of buildings. In the six days after the first earthquake, the government detained or issued arrest warrants for 130 people allegedly involved in shoddy and illegal construction.

01. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın Cumhurbaşkanlığı görevini yapış tarzını ne kadar onaylıyorsunuz?

- < 01 > Hiç onaylamıyorum
- < 02 > Biraz onaylamıyorum
- < 03 > Ne onaylıyorum ne onaylamıyorum
- < 04 > Biraz onaylıyorum
- < 05 > Kuvvetle onaylıyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

01. How much do you approve of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's way of carrying out his duties as the president?

- < 01 > Strongly disapprove
- < 02 > Somewhat disapprove
- < 03 > Neither approve nor disapprove
- < 04 > Somewhat approve
- < 05 > Strongly approve
- < 98 > Don't know

**OTEXT.** Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ı neden onaylayıp onaylamadığınızı kısaca açıklayınız?

**O2.** Yaklaşan Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinde Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'a oy verme ihtimaliniz nedir?

- < 01 > Hiç ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 02 > Biraz ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 03 > Ne ihtimal veriyorum ne de vermiyorum
- < 04 > Biraz ihtimal veriyorum
- < 05 > Çok yüksek ihtimal veriyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**O3.** Önümüzdeki genel seçimlerde oy kullanma ihtimaliniz nedir?

- < 01 > Hiç ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 02 > Biraz ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 03 > Ne ihtimal veriyorum ne de vermiyorum
- < 04 > Biraz ihtimal veriyorum
- < 05 > Çok yüksek ihtimal veriyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**O4.** Yaklaşan cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinde Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu'na oy verme ihtimaliniz nedir?

- < 01 > Hiç ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 02 > Biraz ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 03 > Ne ihtimal veriyorum ne de vermiyorum
- < 04 > Biraz ihtimal veriyorum
- < 05 > Çok yüksek ihtimal veriyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**OTEXT.** Can you briefly explain why you approve or disapprove of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan?

**O2.** How likely are you to vote for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the upcoming presidential election?

- < 01 > Very unlikely
- < 02 > Somewhat unlikely
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat likely
- < 05 > Very likely
- < 98 > Don't know

**O3.** How likely are you to vote in the upcoming general election?

- < 01 > Very unlikely
- < 02 > Somewhat unlikely
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat likely
- < 05 > Very likely
- < 98 > Don't know

**O4.** How likely are you to vote for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the upcoming presidential election?

- < 01 > Very unlikely
- < 02 > Somewhat unlikely
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat likely
- < 05 > Very likely
- < 98 > Don't know

**05.** Yaklaşan parlamento seçimlerinde hangi partiye oy vereceksiniz?

- < 01 > Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi
- < 02 > Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi
- < 03 > Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi
- < 04 > İYİ Parti
- < 05 > Halkların Demokratik Partisi
- < 06 > Yeşil Sol Parti
- < 07 > Saadet Partisi
- < 08 > Türkiye İşçi Partisi
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**05.** Which party are you most likely to vote for in the upcoming parliamentary election?

- < 01 > AKP
- < 02 > CHP
- < 03 > MHP
- < 04 > iYi Parti
- < 05 > HDP
- < 06 > YSP
- < 07 > SP
- < 08 > TIP
- < 98 > Don't know

**06.** Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın seçim kampanyası için gönüllü olma ihtimaliniz nedir?

- < 01 > Hiç ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 02 > Biraz ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 03 > Ne ihtimal veriyorum ne de vermiyorum
- < 04 > Biraz ihtimal veriyorum
- < 05 > Çok yüksek ihtimal veriyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**06.** How likely are you to volunteer for the campaign of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan?

- < 01 > Very unlikely
- < 02 > Somewhat unlikely
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat likely
- < 05 > Very likely
- < 98 > Don't know

**07.** Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu'nun seçim kampanyası için gönüllü olma ihtimaliniz nedir?

- < 01 > Hiç ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 02 > Biraz ihtimal vermiyorum
- < 03 > Ne ihtimal veriyorum ne de vermiyorum
- < 04 > Biraz ihtimal veriyorum
- < 05 > Çok yüksek ihtimal veriyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**07.** How likely are you to volunteer for the campaign of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu?

- < 01 > Very unlikely
- < 02 > Somewhat unlikely
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat likely
- < 05 > Very likely
- < 98 > Don't know

**08.** Hükümeti depremler karşısındaki yaklaşımını ne kadar onaylıyorsunuz?

- < 01 > Hiç onaylamıyorum
- < 02 > Biraz onaylamıyorum
- < 03 > Ne onaylıyorum ne onaylamıyorum
- < 04 > Biraz onaylıyorum
- < 05 > Kuvvetle onaylıyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**08.** How much do you approve of the government's response to the earthquakes?

- < 01 > Strongly disapprove
- < 02 > Somewhat disapprove
- < 03 > Neither unlikely nor likely
- < 04 > Somewhat approve
- < 05 > Strongly approve
- < 98 > Don't know

**BA1.** Sizce aşağıdakilerden hangisi depremin yol açtığı yıkımın kapsam ve büyüklüğünden en çok sorumludur?

- < 01 > Cumhurbaşkanı
- < 02 > Muhalefet
- < 03 > Özel inşaat şirketleri/Müteahhitler
- < 04 > Bakan Murat Kurum
- < 05 > Hiç kimse; bu bir doğa olayıdır
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**BA2.** Aşağıdaki ifadeye ne kadar katılırsınız?

“Bu kadar şiddetli bir deprem durdurulamaz bir doğa olayıdır. Buna yeterince hazırlanmak mümkün değildir.”

- < 01 > Kesinlikle katılmıyorum
- < 02 > Biraz katılmıyorum
- < 03 > Ne katılıyorum ne katılmıyorum
- < 04 > Biraz katılıyorum
- < 05 > Kesinlikle katılıyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**BA3.** Aşağıdaki ifadeye ne kadar katılırsınız?:

“Cumhurbaşkanı aslında güvenli inşaatı sağlamak için doğru önlemleri aldı. Ama arogözü inşaat şirketleri ve müteahhitler kar etme aşkına bu düzenlemeleri dikkate almayarak ihlal ettiler. Bu yüzden yıkımın boyutundan ve kapsamından onlar sorumludurlar.”

- < 01 > Kesinlikle katılmıyorum
- < 02 > Biraz katılmıyorum
- < 03 > Ne katılıyorum ne katılmıyorum
- < 04 > Biraz katılıyorum
- < 05 > Kesinlikle katılıyorum
- < 98 > Bilmiyorum

**BA1.** Who of the following do you think is most responsible for the scope and magnitude of destruction caused by the earthquake?

- < 01 > The president
- < 02 > The opposition
- < 03 > Private construction companies
- < 04 > Minister Murat Kurum
- < 05 > No one; it is a force of nature
- < 98 > Don't know

**BA2.** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“An earthquake of such a great magnitude is an unstoppable force of nature. It is impossible to adequately prepare for it.”

- < 01 > Strongly disagree
- < 02 > Somewhat disagree
- < 03 > Neither agree nor disagree
- < 04 > Somewhat agree
- < 05 > Strongly agree
- < 98 > Don't know

**BA3.** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“The President has essentially taken the right measures to ensure safe construction. But greedy construction companies violated the regulations and disregarded these efforts for the love of profit and therefore are responsible for the scope of destruction.”

- < 01 > Strongly disagree
- < 02 > Somewhat disagree
- < 03 > Neither agree nor disagree
- < 04 > Somewhat agree
- < 05 > Strongly agree
- < 98 > Don't know

**BA4.** Aşağıdaki ifadeye ne kadar katılırsınız?:

“Cumhurbaşkanı aslında Türkiye’yi depremlere hazırlamak ve güvenli inşaati sağlamak için doğru önlemleri aldı. Ancak sorumlu bakanlık Cumhurbaşkanı’nın kararlarını uygulamada başarısız oldu. Bu yüzden yıkımın boyutundan ve kapsamından ilgili bakanlık sorumludur.”

< 01 > Kesinlikle katılmıyorum

< 02 > Biraz katılmıyorum

< 03 > Ne katılıyorum ne katılmıyorum

< 04 > Biraz katılıyorum

< 05 > Kesinlikle katılıyorum

< 98 > Bilmiyorum

**BA4.** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“The President has essentially taken the right measures to ensure safe construction and prepare Turkey for earthquakes, but the responsible ministry has failed to implement President’s agenda is therefore responsible for the scope of destruction.”

< 01 > Strongly disagree

< 02 > Somewhat disagree

< 03 > Neither agree nor disagree

< 04 > Somewhat agree

< 05 > Strongly agree

< 98 > Don’t know

**BA5.** Aşağıdaki ifadeye ne kadar katılırsınız?:

“Cumhurbaşkanı aslında Türkiye’yi depremlere hazırlamak ve güvenli inşaati sağlamak için doğru önlemleri aldı. Ancak muhalefet partileri Cumhurbaşkanı’nın kararlarını uygulama sürecinde zorluk çıkardı. Bu yüzden yıkımın boyutundan ve kapsamından muhalefet sorumludur.”

< 01 > Kesinlikle katılmıyorum

< 02 > Biraz katılmıyorum

< 03 > Ne katılıyorum ne katılmıyorum

< 04 > Biraz katılıyorum

< 05 > Kesinlikle katılıyorum

< 98 > Bilmiyorum

**BA5.** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“The President has essentially taken the right measures to ensure safe construction and prepare Turkey for earthquakes, but the opposition has undermined the president’s agenda and is therefore responsible for the scope of destruction.”

< 01 > Strongly disagree

< 02 > Somewhat disagree

< 03 > Neither agree nor disagree

< 04 > Somewhat agree

< 05 > Strongly agree

< 98 > Don’t know

## **References for the appendix**

- Nwankwor, Chiedo and Yaoyao Dai. 2023. “Anti-corruption Campaigns and Popular Support for Incumbent Government: A Survey Experiment in Nigeria.” *Working paper* .
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