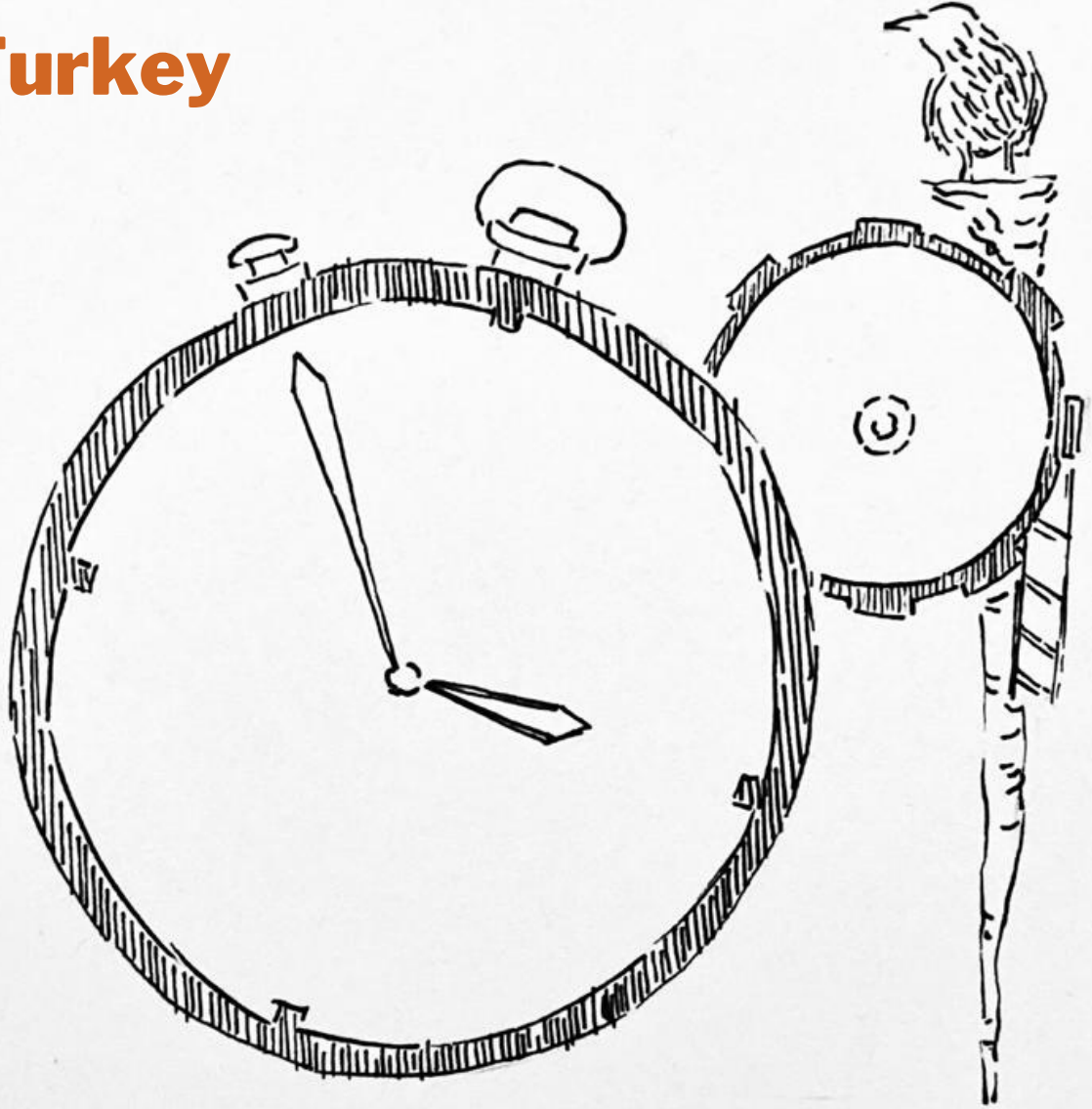


Poll strategy of the young voters who will vote for the first time in Turkey



Umur Yedikardeş & Hakan Yücel

Is government the solution or the opposition the hope?

Voting Strategies of Young Voters Who Will Cast Their First Vote and Their Expectations from Institutional Politics in Turkey

This text is the English summary of the "Voting Strategies of Young Voters Who Will Cast Their First Vote and Their Expectations from Institutional Politics in Turkey" Turkish report.

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Cover Drawing: Tuğçe Tezer

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Poll strategy of the young voters who will vote for the first time in Turkey

It is estimated that 4.5 to 5 million young people will be eligible to vote for the first time in the general elections to be held in 2023. According to surveys conducted by different research companies, an average of 20 to 30 per cent of these young people are undecided and considering not voting. The fact that the rate of undecided and non-voting youth is high enough to have an impact on the election results is evidence of the increasing distance between the youth and the institutionalized political sphere. As we approach the elections, which are seen as an important turning point for democratization, the fact that young voters who have the right to vote for the first time are determined not to go to the polls and are undecided is a situation that needs to be considered.

Our own and other researchers' studies on youth show that young people are one of the social groups most affected by economic, political and social problems and that they are not represented in principle by any party despite their desire to be recognized as subjects in institutional politics. The high average age of the parliament and the low number of deputies between the ages of 18 and 29 are also a proof of this. Institutional politics and political parties do not represent and recognize young people. Especially young people with different classes and social identities are not seen and are excluded from politics. However, if a democratic, pluralist and libertarian country is desired and if policies are formulated for this purpose, the youth, especially those who are invisible and ignored, should be listened to, and different solutions should be sought with young people according to their different class and social identities. Young people should not be considered as a homogenous social group.

The aim of the study is to reveal the view of young people in Istanbul, who have the right to vote for the first time and who are ignored and not seen by institutional politics in terms of class and identity, in the field of institutional politics and its actors within the framework of their voting strategies and their expectations from institutional politics through discussions with young people. The report aims to identify young people's voting strategies, their relationship with institutional politics, their views on the qualifications of presidential candidates and their views on Turkey's problems, before the elections, which are an important turning point for democratization.

The qualitative method was used in the study and focus group discussions were held in this context. Focus groups were selected by considering the representation of different social, class, spatial and cultural identities and gender balance. In the study, 18 focus group discussions were held, and a total of 100 people were reached. With this method, it was aimed to measure the perception of different social groups.

In the selection of participants for the focus groups; the social, class and cultural identities with which they identify themselves and their representations of these identities were taken into consideration. In the study, Kent95 [1] data was utilized to determine the spatial points. In the study, focus group discussions were held with Abdal, Alevi, Balkan immigrant, Armenian, feminist, worker, urban poor, urban affluent, courier, Chaldean, Kurdish, Levantine, LGBTI+, conservative, street musician, Roman and Greek youth. Urban affluent is a concept introduced by the researchers in this study and is used as the opposite of urban poor. The study only covers dissident youth living in Istanbul who have the right to vote for the first time.

In today's Turkey, the relationship between youth and politics has become more complex and contradictory. Youth and institutional politics are becoming increasingly differentiated from each other and the distance between them is widening day by day. Moreover, in Turkey, young people are separated as "our" / "not our" youth in the field of politics, and general institutional politics is unable to communicate with young people and respond to the increasing demands of youth. In our field research, when we asked what kind of politics Turkey's young people want, it became clear from the answers we received that they want a very different politics and country from the existing one. On the one hand, this situation can be seen positively as a "demand for a radical change" and a sign of awareness, but on the other hand, it is also a sign that the world of the young and the world of the old have diverged excessively.

Young people have been harshly criticizing the institutional politics' view of youth and the actors and rules of the political sphere for a long time. This distance between institutional politics and youth keeps young people away from politics, if not from doing politics, then from doing politics in an organized form in parliamentary parties. In general, young people find institutional politics old, male, hierarchical and authoritarian. When we look at the structural problems of Turkish politics and the large-scale studies conducted on this subject, we can say that the criticisms directed by young people towards institutional politics are also reflected in this research. This is a sign of the continuity and even the acceleration of the crisis.

The report consists of three main sections: "Pre-Election Youth States: Between Anxiety, Fatigue and Invisibility", "The Journey to the First Vote in the Election Process: Strategies, Expectations and Demands" and finally "Post-Election Doubtful Hopes: Problems, Government and Regime". In the first section titled "Pre-Election Youth States: Between Anxiety, Fatigue and Invisibility", we found that young people see themselves in deep contradictions both individually and as a generational group, and that they think, they are ageing prematurely under the pressure of the problems they face, whether they are labourers or from middle-class backgrounds. Young people also stated that cultural services should be provided, including the right to entertainment, and that they now want to live their youth, work for appropriate periods of time like their Western peers, and have the right to spend time for themselves. Young people emphasized that not only they are unable to live their youth due to the economic crisis, but they also experience class, identity, generational and - especially in the case of feminist women and LGBTI+s - gender-based exclusion from the past and feel a strong pressure on them. All young people agreed that the current ruling and opposition bloc parties fail to include young people and social problems. Young people expressed that they feel hopeless and unhappy, and have concerns about the future. It is seen that the reasons why young people feel hopeless, unhappy and anxious are economic problems, worries about the future and being deprived of the right to entertainment.

In addition, it is observed that LGBTI+ youth feel fear before the elections. Young voters think that they are afraid of the possibility of institutionalized politics and especially the government targeting them and that they will not easily find support from both the opposition and the society in such a possible situation. Kurdish youth also fear and worry that the state and the government may implement pre-election war policies. This section also discusses social and political concerns. Conservative and especially conservative female youth expressed discomfort that male politicians in institutional politics often talk about them without being asked. Young workers also seem unconcerned, believing that their lives will not change after the elections, regardless of the outcome. Some young people also expressed concerns about the election results. According to young people, the opposition's failure to provide them with a road map is one of the most important problems.

Most of the young voters also stated in this section that they do not trust opposition parties and alliances. According to them, the parties in the Millet Alliance have structural differences and they are likely to have ideological problems due to the pasts of the party leaders. In particular, Kurdish youth expressed their discomfort with Meral Akşener and Ahmet Davutoğlu's policies towards Kurds in the past, and criticized the absence of the HDP in the Table of Six.

On the other hand, while some young people say that the parties are similar to each other, they criticize the absence of parties they consider to be left-wing in the formation. Very few young people expressed that they found the Millet Alliance positive.

According to young people, institutional political parties have a structure close to youth participation. Young people defined the field of institutional politics as old, male, Turkish and rich. Noting that political parties discriminate against young people based on class, identity and generation, young people stated that they stay away from parties in this sense and that they find politics and parties "dirty". Some young people stated that they distinguish between politics and institutional politics and that young people are already involved in politics in many fields. Especially the opposition's failure to stand by the youth during social events such as the Boğaziçi Resistance was also frequently criticized.

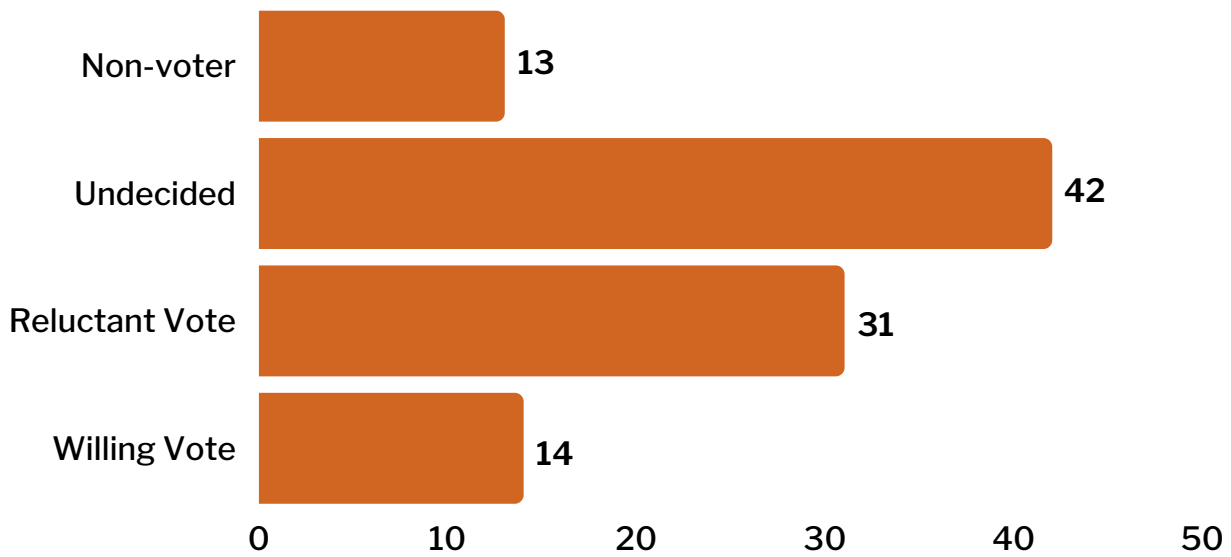
In the section titled "Election Process: The Journey to the First Vote: Strategies, Expectations and Demands", young people shared their voting strategies for the 2023 elections, their expectations about the Presidential and parliamentary candidates, the possible propaganda language and methods in the upcoming election process, and their views on the promises to be made to young people in the election. In these discussions, young people described the qualifications of the Presidential and parliamentary candidates, also they expressed that their threshold of expectation is very low. The fact that such a discourse is widespread when the candidates have not yet been announced should be seen as a sign of low expectations from the political arena.

Young people listed the qualities that they absolutely do not want in a Presidential candidate, which may cause them to give up their vote, rather than the qualities they want for their decision to vote/not vote. Young people mainly stated that they want a Presidential candidate who would not openly engage in hate speech against young people, women and diversity and who would not harm social peace. We think it is important that a significant number of young people say that the characteristics of politicians should change, that the poor, the youth and the women should also have political representatives and that they want to see them in parliament. Young people think that they are not represented in politics and that political actors are not open to dialogue with them. Young people also stated that they find the position of parliamentarian to be classist and that the public should be involved in the process of selecting candidates for parliamentary seats. It is also emphasized that not knowing whether the parliamentarians have a history of violence against women or discriminatory discourse raises questions for them.

The institutional political sphere is making promises to young people as the elections approach. Young people, on the other hand, think that institutional politics does not know them and considers young people as a homogenous group and therefore does not make promises that will touch their lives. Especially the opposition's promises of car and excise tax reductions for young people were frequently criticized by young people. On the other hand, young people stated that they are against a racist and sexist political language that fosters hate speech. According to the youth, the "insulting" and "inflammatory" political language used by political actors towards each other does not influence them and even drives them away from the ballot box. Young people demand a concrete, realistic propaganda that targets different social and class identities.

The discussions in the section titled "Doubtful Hopes After the Elections: Problems, Government and Regime" shows that young people have low expectations and high concerns about the post-election period as well as the election process, and yet they still have a certain level of hope. Young people consider it urgent to take measures to prevent the economic crisis and alleviate poverty after the elections. In addition to this, "the problem of violence" is one of the most urgent issues to be addressed after the elections. According to some young people, violence against women and students comes before economic problems. Establishing policies to ensure gender equality is also emphasized in this context. Furthermore, young people complain about marginalization and discrimination, and they want them to end.

Young people are opposed to the presidential system in principle, but they are divided on whether they want a transition to a parliamentary system immediately or after an interim period. They also want a more democratic, polyphonic and participatory politics, but are concerned that a multi-part coalition government would be fragile and would quickly fall apart. Almost all young people are united in this concern. This widespread concern reflects the fact that the parties in the opposition alliance have not been able to convince the youth that they will be able to act together if they win the elections. The opposition is unable to reassure young people in this regard.



Graphic: Voting preferences of young people who are eligible to vote for the first time (%)

This graphic was prepared by the researchers who conducted the publication

The table above, which reflects the voting motivations of the 100 participants of the focus groups, contains many contradictions when considered together with the content of the discussions in the focus groups. On the one hand, young people concretely show that they are aware of the importance of institutional politics with their criticisms, expectations and demands, on the other hand, they are divided in terms of their voting motivations.

The proportion of undecided young people and the ones who clearly state that they will not vote represents %55, more than half, of all young people. This situation is, in fact, parallel with the results of some previous comprehensive quantitative surveys. Bekir Ağırdir, the head of KONDA Research Company, made the following statement in August addressing this problem. "In 2023, there will be more than 62 million voters. Of these, 20 million will be voters under the age of 30 and 6.5 million (more than 10% of the total electorate) will be voters between the ages of 17-22. Based on the findings of surveys conducted since the last elections, a large portion of 17-18-year-olds, half of 18-24-year-olds and one-third of 25-30-year-olds say they are either undecided or will not vote. Or, if we look at today's undecided voters who say they are undecided and will not vote, half of this undecided cluster consists of young people."

Therefore, the problem of the density of young voters who cannot vote and who declare that they are undecided about voting is an important issue that should always be on the agenda, as shown by many studies. Although a significant portion of undecided voters tends to vote as the elections approach and go to the ballot box in the elections, this problem should be given importance.

While it is important that such a large proportion of young people declare that they will not vote/are undecided in the election in which they will cast their first vote - and some of them stated in the interviews that they were looking forward to the elections for their first vote - it is also important that a high proportion of young people declare that they will vote "reluctantly". Interviewees who stated that they would go to the polls involuntarily, in other words, that they would vote "reluctantly", constitute approximately 1/3 (31%) of the total number of interviewees. In our opinion, this is a problem of both quantitative and qualitative importance. First of all, we are facing a quantitative problem. In 2023, the proportion of young people who go to the polls could fall significantly if concerns are not resolved and some of those who say they are "undecided" or will vote "reluctantly" do not go to the polls. However, perhaps even more important than this is the qualitative aspect; the low level of trust in politics even in the first voting election is a socio-political problem, a sign of alienation from institutionalized politics. As a result, about 3/4 of all the young interviewees are in the middle (neither definite voters nor definite non-voters) and they constitute a group at risk of turning into non-voters, at least partially. Therefore, we believe that the risk of a significant portion of young people who will cast their first vote turning into a group that has completely lost confidence in politics should be taken seriously by political actors.

Only 14% of the young interviewees stated that they would definitely vote. In other words, the overwhelming majority of young people constitute a group with low voter motivation with different nuances. As explained in detail in the report, according to young people, the political sphere is dominated by old rich men who are ineffective in addressing impoverishment, violence and anxiety about the future, insensitive to the problems of young people, and lacking in youth representation. Although young people in Turkey went to the polls at a relatively high rate in previous elections compared to many other countries around the world, it is not certain that this will be the case in this election, as it is difficult to say that anxieties and hopelessness have turned into hope yet.

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