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► **To cite this version:**

Omer Faruk Metin, Pedro Ramaciotti Morales. Tweeting Apart: Democratic Backsliding, New Party Cleavage and Changing Media Ownership in Turkey. Party Politics, 2022, 10.1177/13540688221135019 . hal-03668042v1

HAL Id: hal-03668042

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03668042v1>

Submitted on 14 May 2022 (v1), last revised 16 Jan 2023 (v3)

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Tweeting Apart: Democratic Backsliding, New Party Cleavage and Changing Media Ownership in Turkey

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Keywords: *democratic backsliding, Turkey, media, party cleavage, authoritarianism*

After the transition from its parliamentary democracy to a presidential system of government via a referendum held in April 2017, Turkey's path towards a new phase of deepening illiberalism weakens democratic institutions (Selcuk 2016; Sozen 2020), fosters polarization (Laebens 2021), drives existential insecurity (Akkoyunlu 2016) and offers very limited institutional checks and balances (Esen 2018). Not only does the new presidential system lower democratic well-being by transferring power away from the Turkish parliament to the president, but it also reshapes the country's longstanding party cleavages. The replacement of the parliamentary democratic system with an executive presidential order transformed old party structures and political alignments.

The first part of our article investigates to what extent following party officials in social media explains this new party cleavage in Turkey. We demonstrate that the main traditional social cleavage between religious conservatism and secularism seems to become less and less deterministic while evaluating the relative proximity between political parties. Democratic backsliding, personalization of state apparatus, and monopolization of executive power at the president's hands render authoritarianism the most salient split across major political parties of Turkey. Persistent social cleavages in party alignments taper off as the transition to a heavily centralized presidential system at the expense of institutional independence as well as necessary checks and balances took precedence over alternative agendas in the alignments of parties. To better understand political party distances in multidimensional space, we use the dynamic strategy that estimates party positions by tracing Twitter users who follow at least three members of parliament from Turkish Parliament. With the help of correspondence analysis (CA), we assign political scores in two-dimensional axes to both members of parliament (MPs) from different political parties and their followers (see Figure 1). Identifying political groups in multidimensional coordinates helps us provide empirical evidence to compare the pattern of following different political parties in social media with survey data.

The second part of the article deals with to what extent traditional media outlets owned by Turkey's large conglomerates serve authoritarianism. Uninterrupted circulation of information by credible sources is key to sustainable democracy. In pursuance of healthy public discussion, media organizations are expected to serve this task. In competitive authoritarian regimes, however, the media becomes one of the four main arenas of contestation "through which opposition forces may periodically challenge, weaken, and [...] even defeat autocratic incumbents" (Levitsky 2002). To preserve tight control over the media and to maintain strong support for the president and the system, Turkey's old media, mainly TV channels and news-

papers, are effectively used in the emergence of new democracy-authoritarianism cleavage. We investigate (1) how polarized the audience of state-owned versus foreign media is (see Figure 3), (2) how intensely media sources operated under large multi-industry business groups shared by pro-Erdogan supporters, and (3) whether tactics of buying media outlets by conglomerates change media consumption patterns. We aim to present wide-scale empirical evidence about the polarization of news consumption in the context of Turkey's political party ecosystem.

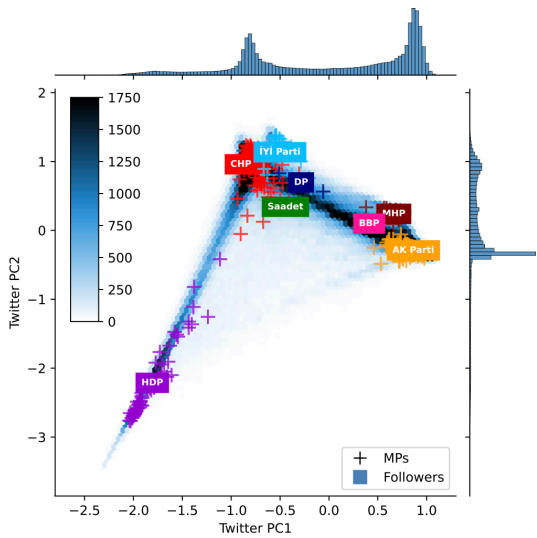


Figure 1. Each cross sign (+) on the plot represents the spatial position of one member of parliament on Twitter. The darkness of each grid stands for the number of Twitter followers for the specific location. Political party names are located at the mean score of party MPs.

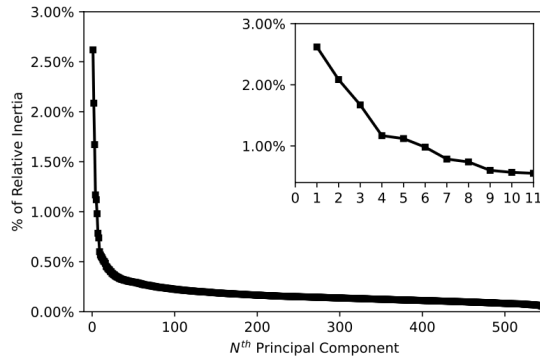


Figure 2. The scree plot displaying a graphical representation of the relationship between the percentages of relative inertia (y-axis) and PC bands (x-axis).

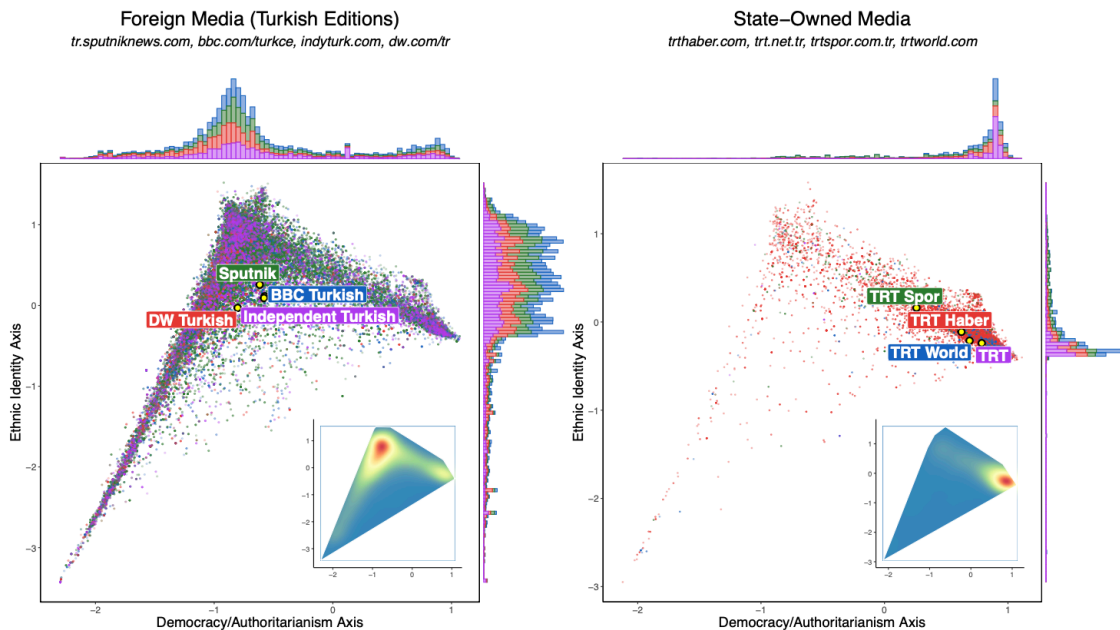


Figure 3. The difference in news consumption between foreign media versus state-owned media: Big yellow dots are the average PC1 and PC2 scores of foreign and state-owned media. Each small dot represents the mean score of Twitter users sharing a particular URL link from given media organizations. The media groups were separated by different colors. We selected four news organizations (TV, newspaper, or news agency) cited most frequently in our sample data under each category. Polygonal heat maps at the bottom left show the density of dots.

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