

Institutional Gridlock and Democratic
Backsliding: explaining popular support for
aspiring autocrats

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Question

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Quick Answer: The popular demand for checks and balances is governed by the tension between gridlock and abuse of power. An aspiring autocrat can exploit this tension to convince voters to dismantle checks and balances.

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- ▶ The most popular way to undermine democracy is not military coup anymore!



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- ▶ Countries turn from liberal democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010).

The Puzzle

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- ▶ Relative to non-democracies, democracies provide more welfare (Przeworski et al. 2000; Sen 2000), more redistribution (Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2005), stronger property rights (Ansell and Samuels), and civil and political rights (Almond and Verba 1965; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

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- ▶ **Why then do people support aspiring autocrats even though they value living in a democratic country?**

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- ▶ I argue that aspiring autocrats exploit a critical tension found in every democratic institution: institutional gridlock vs abuse of power.
- ▶ The number of veto players in any political system determines the balance between the two (McCubbins 2001; Tsebelis 2002).
 - ▶ When many veto players exist → harder to change the status-quo. Why? (the consent of all veto players required)

Gridlock!



- ▶ When only one veto player exists → the status-quo can easily change. However, ever since Montesquieu (2003 [1750]), we know that this might not be a good idea!

- ▶ Reducing the number of veto players can bring about a more effective government (Howell and Moe 2016).
- ▶ Studies already focus on the implications of the different number of veto players on fiscal policy (Alesina and Drazen, 1991; Velasco 1997), economic reforms (MacIntyre 2001, Forteza and Pereyra 2019), and adjustments (Spolaore 2004).

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- ▶ This is surprising given the ample empirical evidence between economic crises and regime changes (Gasiorowski 1995; Geddes 1999; Przeworski and Limongi 1997)
- ▶ Knowing that some people cannot tolerate gridlock, aspiring autocrats use an anti-gridlock strategy.
- ▶ It is simply presenting checks and balances as obstacles to getting things done.

Separation of powers an obstacle, says Erdoğan

KONYA - Hürriyet Daily News



Prime Minister Erdoğan's criticism of Turkey's separation of powers are seen as a clear reference to his party's offer to create a powerful presidential post. Daily News Photo/Selahattin Sönmez

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has described the separation of powers as the government's main obstacle, saying it was preventing them from introducing "further services."

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- ▶ Those exposed to such a strategy will be more likely to delegate power to the aspiring autocrat.
- ▶ People also care about the abuse of power. So where do they stand in this tension?
- ▶ They are heterogeneous in terms of their preferences regarding the tradeoff between policy responsiveness and protection against abuse of power.
- ▶ Less likely to tolerate gridlock: those who feel represented by the executive and those who need policy responsiveness.
- ▶ In real life, people will mostly hear about the anti-gridlock strategy.

- ▶ The anti-gridlock strategy also helps the aspiring autocrat to look “less authoritarian”. Why?

The majoritarian conception of democracy rests on the principle that the will of the majority should be sovereign (Coppedge et al. 2011).

People are pro-democratic because: redistribution and stronger property rights (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Boix 2003).

The majority of people have an instrumental understanding of democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Evidence

Therefore, it is not surprising that some people might perceive the dismantling of checks and balances as pro-democratic.

- ▶ Anti-gridlock strategy is perceived as a pro-democratic attempt to restore “the will of the nation”, even though it is “undemocratic” in liberal democratic terms.
- ▶ This makes democratic backsliding more sinister form of authoritarianism (Nalepa et al. 2019)!

These discussions yield two testable hypotheses:

H1: Aspiring authoritarian rulers are less likely to be punished electorally when they use an anti-gridlock strategy.

H2: People perceive the anti-gridlock strategy as a pro-democratic attempt.

Survey experiment

- ▶ I test the implications of theory using original survey data from Turkey collected in October 2018.
 - ▶ Turkey was once seen as a model of democracy for the Middle East.
 - ▶ Now, it is a textbook example of a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen and Gumuscu 2016).
- ▶ The survey was administered in Istanbul.
- ▶ The primary sampling unit was neighborhood, the smallest administrative unit within provinces.
- ▶ 515 adults.

Survey experiment

- ▶ A candidate choice experiment.
- ▶ Voters are presented with two candidates with two different attributes.
 - ▶ 1st: Candidate's position regarding the second veto player, which is the judiciary (judiciary position). Three levels: authoritarian, neutral, and democratic levels.
 - ▶ 2nd: Social Policy Position. Five levels.
- ▶ Respondents saw a candidate pair with randomly drawn levels for these two attributes and asked to choose one of them and to rate how democratic they think each candidate is. They saw five pairs in total.
- ▶ Two versions. In one version ($T = 1$), respondents see democratic and authoritarian judiciary positions with their abuse of power and gridlock justifications, respectively.

Survey Experiment

Table: All possible levels of a hypothetical candidate (judiciary position). Each candidate gets one randomly drawn value. Respondents assigned to $T = 1$ saw the anti-gridlock and the abuse of power strategies as well (written in bold).

	Characteristics of Hypothetical Candidates
	She proposes to make it harder for the judiciary to check the government in order to speed up the provision of public services.
Judiciary Position	She proposes to make it easier for the judiciary to check the government in order to decrease corruption.
	She proposes a law that will decrease the workload density of the judges.

Survey Experiment

Table: All possible levels of a hypothetical candidate (social policy position). Each candidate gets one randomly drawn value.

Characteristics of Hypothetical Candidates	
	She plans to expand the social security coverage of private hospitals to make these hospitals available for more people.
	She plans to provide attending physicians in all major areas in public hospitals.
Social Policy Position	She plans to provide one free meal to all students in public elementary schools.
	She plans to provide at least one science lab in all public elementary schools.
	She did not make any proposals about this policy.

Survey Experiment

Table: A candidate profile example from the Treatment Group

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Judiciary Position	She proposes to make it easier for the judiciary to check the government in order to decrease corruption.	She proposes to make it harder for the judiciary to check the government in order to speed up the provision of public services.
Social Policy	She plans to provide attending physicians in all major areas in public hospitals.	She plans to provide at least one science lab in all public elementary schools.

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_1 D_{ijk} + \beta_2 A_{ijk} + \beta_3 SocPos_{ijk} + \theta T + \gamma_1 D_{ijk} T + \gamma_2 A_{ijk} T + \gamma_3 SocPos_{ijk} T + \epsilon_{ijk}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{ijk} is one of the two outcome variables (selection and democracy rating) for individual i in profile j ($j = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5\}$) for candidate k ($k = \{A, B\}$), and D_{ijk} and A_{ijk} are categorical variables for democratic and authoritarian characteristics respectively.

$SocPos_{ijk}$ is 1 if the candidate has a social policy position.

These characteristics are interacted with a dummy variable, T , that takes the value 1 if the version is $T = 1$ ("treatment group").

Our main parameters of interests are γ_1 and γ_2 , which show the effects of the anti-gridlock and abuse of power strategies, respectively.

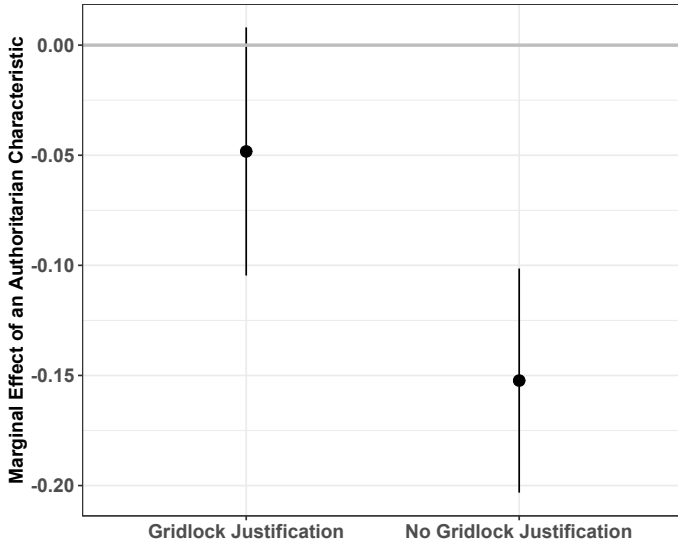
Results

Table: The effect of candidate characteristics on candidate selection

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Selection (1)	Democracy Rating (2)
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.152*** (0.026)	-1.048*** (0.149)
Democratic Characteristic	0.157*** (0.027)	0.602*** (0.130)
Social Policy	0.308*** (0.023)	1.053*** (0.142)
Version (Treatment=1)	0.004 (0.036)	0.100 (0.269)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.104*** (0.039)	0.465** (0.221)
Democratic Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.080** (0.038)	0.304 (0.203)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.077** (0.033)	-0.418** (0.210)
Constant	0.243*** (0.024)	5.095*** (0.175)
Observations	4,578	4,701
R ²	0.109	0.070
Adjusted R ²	0.108	0.069

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure: The marginal effects of an authoritarian characteristic across two versions



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Table: The effect of candidate characteristics on candidate selection within different sub-samples

<i>Dependent variable: Selection</i>					
	Erdoğan Voters	Non-Erdoğan Voters	Left-Extreme	Moderate	Right-Extreme
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.170*** (0.035)	-0.139*** (0.047)	-0.120* (0.072)	-0.188*** (0.050)	-0.134*** (0.034)
Democratic Characteristic	0.095** (0.039)	0.237*** (0.041)	0.224*** (0.065)	0.142*** (0.044)	0.148*** (0.042)
Social Policy	0.283*** (0.032)	0.358*** (0.038)	0.363*** (0.056)	0.334*** (0.038)	0.258*** (0.037)
Version (T=1)	-0.015 (0.053)	0.062 (0.054)	0.113 (0.074)	0.002 (0.070)	-0.061 (0.053)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(T=1)	0.121** (0.054)	0.099 (0.064)	0.077 (0.095)	0.067 (0.073)	0.118** (0.053)
Democratic Characteristic*(T=1)	0.030 (0.059)	0.109** (0.055)	0.189** (0.082)	0.079 (0.063)	0.043 (0.060)
Social Policy*(T=1)	-0.046 (0.049)	-0.143*** (0.053)	-0.214*** (0.073)	-0.083 (0.057)	0.015 (0.053)
Constant	0.296*** (0.033)	0.163*** (0.039)	0.145*** (0.053)	0.251*** (0.049)	0.281*** (0.035)
Observations	2,120	1,808	878	1,468	1,942
R ²	0.079	0.162	0.176	0.131	0.088
Adjusted R ²	0.076	0.158	0.170	0.127	0.085

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Results

- ▶ Anti-gridlock strategy is more likely to affect below-median income earners. [Table](#)
- ▶ Similar main results when we use 5-point likert scale as the outcome variable instead of selection. [Table](#)

Conclusion

- ▶ Liberalism and democracy must be distinguished from one another, although they historically accompany each other (Schmitt 1988).
- ▶ I focused on the motivations for supporting an aspiring autocrat who wants to dismantle checks and balances, key institutions for liberal democracy.
- ▶ Anti-gridlock strategy helps aspiring autocrats to undermine checks and balances.

THANK YOU!

Evidence from World Values Survey

Table: The relationship between the number of checks and country-year average beliefs about democracy [Go Back](#)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Indecisive Democracy		Important Democracy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
The Number of Checks	0.051** (0.020)	0.042** (0.020)	-0.026*** (0.009)	-0.021** (0.008)
Polity2 Score	-0.002 (0.005)	0.006 (0.006)	0.003 (0.003)	0.005* (0.003)
Log GDP Per Capita	-0.014 (0.020)	-0.023 (0.021)	0.036*** (0.012)	0.037*** (0.012)
Decade Fixed Effect	Yes	No	Yes	No
Year Fixed Effect	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	73	73	105	105
R ²	0.191	0.287	0.238	0.401
Adjusted R ²	0.144	0.159	0.208	0.315
Residual Std. Error	0.185 (df = 68)	0.183 (df = 61)	0.151 (df = 100)	0.140 (df = 91)
F Statistic	4.024*** (df = 4; 68)	2.234** (df = 11; 61)	7.813*** (df = 4; 100)	4.678*** (df = 13; 91)

Note:

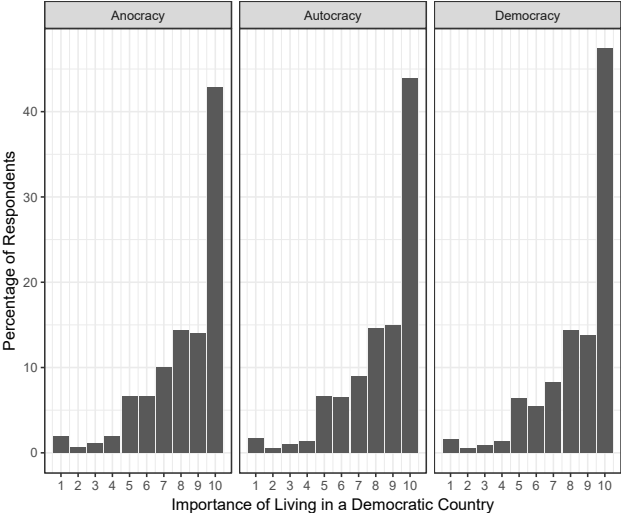
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The dependent variable ("Indecisive Democracy") for the first two columns is the country-year averages of the respondents' answers to the following question: *Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling*. The options are: 1= Agree Strongly, 2= Agree, 3= Disagree, 4=Disagree Strongly. It is rescaled to 0-1 for plotting purposes (see main text). The dependent variable ("Important Democracy") for the models in Column 3 and 4 is the country-year averages of the respondents' answers to the following question: *How important for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?* The options scale from 1 (Not at all Important) to 10 (Absolutely Important). It is also rescaled to 0-1 for plotting.

Evidence from World Values Survey

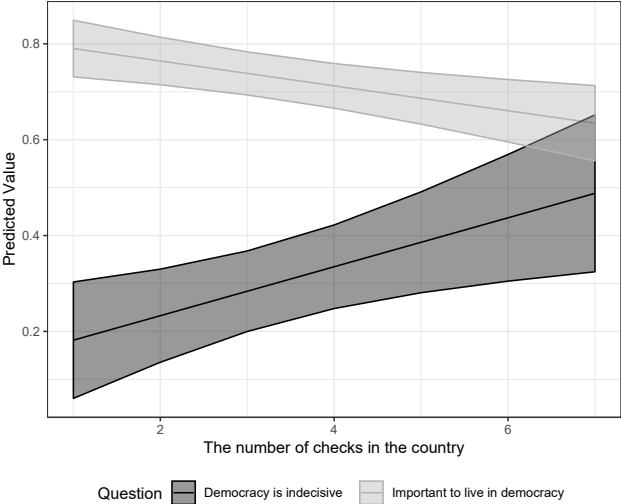
Figure: The relationship between beliefs about democracy and regime type

[Go Back](#)



Evidence from World Values Survey

Figure: Predicted Values of beliefs about democracy and its effectiveness in decision making. Both answers are rescaled to 0-1 for plotting.



Descriptive Statistics and Figures from the Experiment

Table: Descriptive Statistics of Some Important Covariates

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Age	514	37.940	13.441	18.000	26.000	48.000	73.000
Female	515	0.489	0.500	0	0	1	1
Life Satisfaction	515	4.788	3.338	0	1	8	10
Importance of Democracy for the Respondents	511	8.528	2.219	0.000	8.000	10.000	10.000
Respondents' Democracy Ratings of Turkey	506	4.136	3.221	0.000	1.000	7.000	10.000
The share of AKP voters	448	0.480	0.500	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
The share of Erdoğan voters	441	0.542	0.499	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Ideology	482	6.021	3.317	0.000	3.000	9.000	10.000
Health	515	3.984	0.886	1	4	5	5
Private Health Ins.	504	1.893	0.310	1.000	2.000	2.000	2.000
Education	515	4.581	1.370	1	3	5	8
Kurdish	515	0.142	0.349	0	0	0	1
Income	442	8.204	3.106	1.000	6.000	10.000	16.000
Religiosity	452	3.677	2.356	0.000	1.000	6.000	7.000
Full-Time Workers	515	0.530	0.500	0	0	1	1
Household Size	495	4.083	1.465	1.000	3.000	5.000	9.000

Descriptive Statistics and Figures from the Experiment

Table: Balance Table across Two Samples [Go Back](#)

	Variables	Treatment Group	Control Group	p-value
1	Age	37.45	38.43	0.41
2	Female	0.47	0.51	0.27
3	Life Satisfaction	4.60	4.97	0.21
4	Importance of Democracy for the Respondents	8.57	8.48	0.66
5	Respondents' Democracy Ratings of Turkey	3.88	4.40	0.06
6	The share of AKP voters	0.45	0.51	0.19
7	The share of Erdoğan voters	0.50	0.58	0.08
8	Ideology	5.72	6.33	0.04
9	Health	4.03	3.94	0.23
10	Private Health Ins	1.88	1.91	0.26
11	Education	4.55	4.61	0.57
12	Kurdish	0.16	0.13	0.39
13	Income	8.32	8.08	0.41
14	Religiosity	3.53	3.84	0.17
15	Full-Time Workers	0.57	0.49	0.05
16	Household Size	4.11	4.05	0.65

Figure: A Profile Example for the Candidate Choice Experiment

	Aday A	Aday B
Sosyal	Daha fazla insanın özel hastaneleri kullanabilmesi için sosyal güvenlik kapsamına özel hastaneleri de almak istemektedir	Devlet ilkokullarında okuyan tüm öğrencilere bir öğün ücretsiz yemek sağlamayı planlamaktadır
Yasa Önerisi	Mahkemelerin iş yükünü azaltacak bir yasa önermektedir	Kamu hizmetlerini hızlandırmak için yargının hükümeti daha az denetleyeceği bir yasa önermektedir

Figure: Effects of judicial position and social policy on candidate selection in each round (Treatment Group)

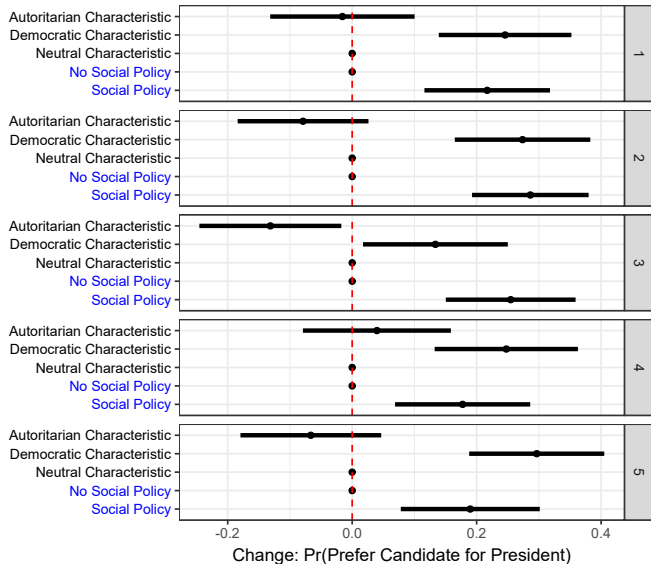
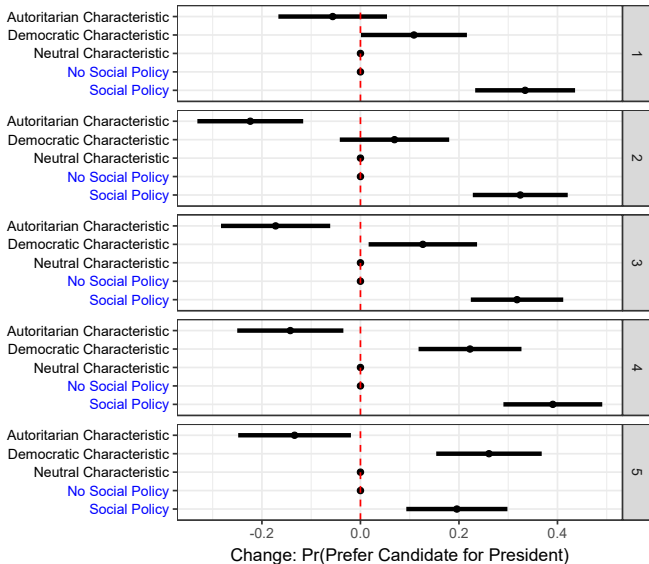


Figure: Effects of judicial position and social policy on candidate selection in each round (Control Group)



Possible Biases

- ▶ Pre-treatment bias (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Slothuus 2016)
- ▶ Urban Sample bias

Table: The effect of candidate characteristics on candidate selection among Justice and Development Party (AKP) voters and other voters

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Selection	
	AKP Voters	Non-AKP Voters
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.169*** (0.038)	-0.137*** (0.043)
Democratic Characteristic	0.076* (0.043)	0.221*** (0.037)
Social Policy	0.282*** (0.033)	0.342*** (0.037)
Version (Treatment=1)	-0.009 (0.055)	0.048 (0.052)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.117** (0.056)	0.094 (0.059)
Democratic Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.039 (0.062)	0.110** (0.052)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.052 (0.051)	-0.134*** (0.050)
Constant	0.301*** (0.035)	0.186*** (0.038)
Observations	1,908	2,082
R ²	0.073	0.149
Adjusted R ²	0.069	0.146
Residual Std. Error	0.482 (df = 1900)	0.462 (df = 2074)
F Statistic	21.281*** (df = 7; 1900)	51.871*** (df = 7; 2074)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table: The effects of candidate characteristics on selection- Binomial Logit

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Selection
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.670*** (0.116)
Democratic Characteristic	0.696*** (0.122)
Social Policy	1.424*** (0.123)
Version (Treatment=1)	0.085 (0.180)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.463*** (0.169)
Democratic Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.323* (0.173)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.388** (0.170)
Constant	-1.204*** (0.127)
Observations	4,578
Log Likelihood	-2,910.291
Akaike Inf. Crit.	5,836.582

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table: The effects of candidate characteristics on candidate support (5-point likert scale) [Go Back](#)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Support
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.493*** (0.073)
Democratic Characteristic	0.316*** (0.064)
Social Policy	0.636*** (0.070)
Version (Treatment=1)	-0.015 (0.122)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.203* (0.108)
Democratic Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.220** (0.095)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.149 (0.099)
Constant	2.926*** (0.079)
Observations	4,733
R ²	0.093
Adjusted R ²	0.092
Residual Std. Error	1.265 (df = 4725)
F Statistic	69.152*** (df = 7; 4725)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table: The effect of candidate characteristics on candidate selection and its democracy rating (with controls)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Selection (1)	Democrat (2)
Authoritarian Characteristic	-0.157*** (0.029)	-1.051*** (0.167)
Democratic Characteristic	0.159*** (0.030)	0.641*** (0.141)
Social Policy	0.311*** (0.025)	1.139*** (0.154)
Version (Treatment=1)	0.012 (0.039)	0.265 (0.293)
Ideology	0.001 (0.001)	0.032 (0.026)
Erdogan Voters	0.002 (0.007)	0.274 (0.184)
Full Time Workers	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.433*** (0.143)
Authoritarian Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.103** (0.042)	0.463* (0.244)
Democratic Characteristic*(Treatment=1)	0.085** (0.042)	0.340 (0.221)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.088** (0.037)	-0.546** (0.230)
Constant	0.243*** (0.028)	4.897*** (0.240)
Observations	3,790	3,908
R ²	0.113	0.087
Adjusted R ²	0.110	0.084
Residual Std. Error	0.472 (df = 3779)	2.656 (df = 3897)
F Statistic	48.037*** (df = 10; 3779)	37.031*** (df = 10; 3897)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table: The effects of candidate characteristics on candidate support among above and below-median income earners [Go Back](#)

	<i>Dependent variable: Selection</i>	
	Above-Median	Below-Median
Authoritarian Candidate	-0.126*** (0.035)	-0.204*** (0.041)
Democratic Candidate	0.165*** (0.038)	0.144*** (0.046)
Social Policy	0.324*** (0.033)	0.280*** (0.035)
Version (Treatment=1)	0.057 (0.046)	-0.079 (0.065)
Authoritarian Candidate*(Treatment=1)	0.024 (0.052)	0.194*** (0.065)
Democratic Candidate*(Treatment=1)	0.076 (0.053)	0.092 (0.069)
Social Policy*(Treatment=1)	-0.112** (0.047)	-0.023 (0.051)
Constant	0.224*** (0.031)	0.289*** (0.041)
Observations	2,264	1,648
R ²	0.118	0.107
Adjusted R ²	0.115	0.104
Residual Std. Error	0.470 (df = 2256)	0.474 (df = 1640)
F Statistic	42.994*** (df = 7; 2256)	28.167*** (df = 7; 1640)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01