

# Mitigating the Political Cost of Financial Crisis with Blame Avoidance Discourse: The Case of Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

How do centralized governments mitigate the political cost of severe financial crises? The economic voting scholarship has established that the clarity of responsibility, i.e., government accountability for economic conditions to the mass public, is a necessity for electoral reward or punishment for economic performance. On the one hand, political centralization, which reduces the number of veto players, may increase the visibility of the role of the executive in policy success or failure. On the other hand, it allows an uncontested blame avoidance discourse, especially when accompanied with democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the recent backlash against globalization has enabled blame shifting to international actors in many countries. Against this theoretical framework, we comparatively analyze the responsibility attribution discourses for the 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 financial crises in the statements of incumbent presidents, ministers, and parliament members of Turkey. We find that while blame avoidance discursive strategies have been attempted in all three cases, the responsibility attribution for the 1994 and 2001 crises mostly targeted the executive. In contrast, for the ongoing crisis, the responsibility discourse is dominated with blaming international political economy factors, creating ambiguity, and targeting domestic non-governmental actors.

**Keywords:** blame politics, economic voting, backlash against globalization, responsibility attribution, democratic backsliding

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## Introduction

Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power in 2002, only a year after its establishment as a right-wing party promising to fix the Turkish economy that faced a severe financial crisis at the time. The 2001 economic crisis brought the demise of –what turned out to be the last– coalition government of Turkey. Under AKP rule over the course of two decades, Turkey has had a major transformation in various areas, including its economy, political system, media, among other strategic areas. The country has been going

through a major currency crisis since 2018, coupled with hyperinflation and rising unemployment. The dire conditions and the upcoming general elections of 2023 cause the incumbent to search for strategies to mitigate potential electoral punishment for poor economic performance. This paper analyzes the political discursive strategies around the financial crisis that are utilized by the incumbent, and how this compares to the past crises of 1994 and 2001.

Revealing the discursive strategies around the currency crisis is significant for several reasons. First, the crisis impacts the electorates' purchasing power and quality of life to a great extent. Keeping the campaign debate away from the economy and masking the severity of the crisis with ideologically loaded issues, which were frequently used strategies in the early 2010s, are increasingly more challenging (Çarkoğlu 2012: 519). Intuitively, extant research finds that times of financial crises mark an escalation of economic voting (Kosmidis 2018; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013; Parker-Stephen 2013; Vidal 2018). Second, the past financial crises in Turkey led to serious political punishment. Following the 2001 crisis, all of the coalition partners failed to get a seat in the parliament. Similarly, none of the incumbent parties maintained their leading position following the 1994 crisis. Therefore, Turkey's recent history points out that economic catastrophes create a significant electoral punishment (Çarkoğlu 1997). Third, countries with large, dominant, single-party governments tend to have a higher clarity of responsibility, and thus, higher economic voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). After a two-decade long government tenure and transition to a presidential system with fewer checks and balances, the link between economic conditions and government performance could be expected to be stronger in Turkish public opinion. Thus, mitigation of the political cost of the crisis is particularly challenging.

To reveal government strategies to avoid political cost from economic crises, we offer a comparative framework that analyzes the responsibility attribution discourses for the 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 financial crises. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of newspaper archives, government leaders' speeches, and announcements of domestic economic institutions in the three crisis periods, complemented by a quantitative text analysis of the statements of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey between 2018 and 2022, we find an overwhelming number of references to various international agents and developments with regards to the ongoing currency crisis. Interestingly, while blame avoidance discursive strategies were attempted in the 1994 and 2001 cases, we find that the responsibility attribution for these crises strictly targeted the executive. We explain this contrast with two significant transformations: authoritarian consolidation at the domestic level and the backlash against globalization at the international level. In 1994 and 2001, political fragmentation and adherence to neoliberal economic ideas kept the blame centered on the executive and eliminated blame shifting to international financial institutions or developments. In contrast, political centralization and the contemporary backlash against globalization enabled the current government to effectively utilize the blame avoidance discourse by targeting international factors, making excuses, offering alternative explanations, and creating ambiguity.

We organize our article in the following manner. We begin with a discussion of the literature on economic voting, clarity of responsibility, and blame shifting discourses. We then explain our methods and data. After then, we comparatively analyze the political centraliza-

tion/fragmentation, international factors, and discursive strategies during the 1994, 2001, and ongoing economic crises. Finally, we discuss our findings and their implications for the economic voting literature and the political economy of Turkey.

## Theoretical Framework

Economic voting refers to the theory that voters reward incumbent governments when the economy performs well and punish them when macroeconomic conditions worsen (Lewis-Beck 1990). One of the most established conditions for economic voting to occur is the presence of “clarity of responsibility” (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). The voters need to discern who is responsible for policy choices to be able to assign blame to incumbent governments for economic downturns (Duch and Stevenson 2008). To see the role of clarity of responsibility in economic voting, some studies focused on the domestic institutional configuration and analyzed whether the number of veto players impacted economic voting. For instance, with a study on 13 European nations, Anderson finds that economic voting is stronger when the ruling party is large and dominant and there are fewer alternative parties (Anderson 2000). Similarly, by analyzing electoral data from 1950-2017, Akarca argues that Turkish “voters hold coalition governments less responsible for their economic performance than single-party governments” (Akarca 2019: 523). More recently, Kim shows that higher central bank independence undermines the clarity of responsibility and economic voting (Kim 2022: 19).

Beyond domestic constraints, the clarity of responsibility is also affected by economic integration into international markets. Economic globalization levels of a country, measured with both trade and capital flows, weaken the economic vote (Hellwig 2001). This conclusion, however, leaves open an important question: Does globalization reduce economic voting because of the shrinking policy room for governments that comes with exposure to trade and capital flows? Or rather, is it because voters’ perceptions of growing constraints are manipulated and exaggerated by politicians? Hellwig suggests that strategic politicians can shirk from responsibility (i.e., avoiding or shifting blame) by pointing to external stressors stemming from economic openness, international financial organizations, and global fluctuations as scapegoats, even when poor economic conditions can be traced back to their poor economic Management (Hellwig 2007: 481-483).

Blame avoidance by politicians is not a new phenomenon (Hood 2002). Many cases of policy failures are followed by attempts to influence how voters assign responsibility (Hinterleitner 2017). The blame avoidance behavior includes agency strategies like shifting the blame to other actors, presentational strategies like providing excuses and alternative explanations, and policy strategies of institutional delegation that leads to limited formal responsibility (Hood 2011). While earlier scholarship focused on blame avoidance for welfare retrenchment policies and policy failures in response to natural disasters, the 2008 global financial crisis followed by the European sovereign debt crisis led to studies that analyze blame avoidance patterns around financial crisis (Von Scheve, Zink and Ismer 2016). With the help of blame avoidance discourse, right wing populist parties in some European countries managed to cultivate the resentment over the Eurozone crisis and strengthened their electoral support, while new

EU-skeptic parties emerged or gained support. The existing scholarship on Southern European politics finds that the backlash against globalization and blaming international actors for the crisis and austerity policies significantly correlates with voting behavior.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the supply of blame avoidance strategies can undermine the clarity of responsibility and ultimately affect economic voting.

## Economic Voting and Clarity of Responsibility in Turkey

Turkish economic voting scholarship reveals the significant role of short-term evaluations of economic performance on voting behavior, even when controlled for ideological and sociodemographic factors.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship also identifies a major trend: a growing influence of partisan bias or motivated reasoning in economic evaluations of the governing party, i.e., the AKP. Through comparative analyses of five national election surveys in years of most recent general and local elections, Aytaç (2002: 328-329) finds that “AKP partisans’ economic evaluations are consistently and significantly higher than those of other voters. Moreover, the difference in evaluations seems to be widening over time as well.” Similarly, with a survey analysis on the Turkish economic voting patterns, Yağcı and Oyvat (2020) reveal a “sociotropic overestimation,” which refers to the perception “that the national economy has done better than their own household” amongst the audience of pro-government media.

In contrast to the plethora of insightful research on economic voting in Turkey, the concept of clarity of responsibility as a condition for economic voting remains understudied in the Turkish context.<sup>3</sup> The lack of research is noteworthy because Turkey offers a case that has experienced major transformations with regards to both domestic institutional configuration and attitudes towards international organizations and globalization. The changes in the political economy of domestic institutions, such as the democratic backsliding dating back to 2008, the transition to the presidential system in 2017, and undermined independence of the Central Bank, have all reduced the number of veto players (Apaydin and Çoban 2022). On the one hand, these changes, along with a two-decade government tenure of a large, dominant, single party, would indicate an increase in clarity of responsibility. As mentioned above, absence of institutional delegation eliminates potential policy level strategies for blame avoidance and claim for limited responsibility. On the other hand, authoritarian consolidation also means larger control over media, repressed freedom of speech, and undermined opposition. Thus, concentration of power implies a convenience for the supply of the blame avoidance discourse, with agency and presentational strategies, as it is less likely for these discourses to

- 1 For Spain, see Fernández-Albertos, José, Alexander Kuo, and Laia Balcells. 2013. Economic Crisis, Globalization, and Partisan Bias: Evidence from Spain. *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 4: 804-816; for Italy see Bellucci, Paolo. 2014. The Political Consequences of Blame Attribution for the Economic Crisis in the 2013 Italian National Election. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24, 2: 243-263; for Greece see Ladi, Stella, and Vasiliki Tsagkroni. 2019. Analysing Crisis Parliamentary Discourse in Greece: Whom Should We Blame?. *SSRN Scholarly Paper*, Rochester, NY.
- 2 See Aytaç 2022; Başlevant and Kirmanoğlu 2016; Çarkoğlu 2017; Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu 2022; Yağcı and Oyvat 2018.
- 3 An exception is Akarca, Ali, and Aysit Tansel. 2006. Economic Performance and Political Outcomes: An Analysis of the Turkish Parliamentary and Local Election Results Between 1950 and 2004. *Public Choice* 129, 1: 77.

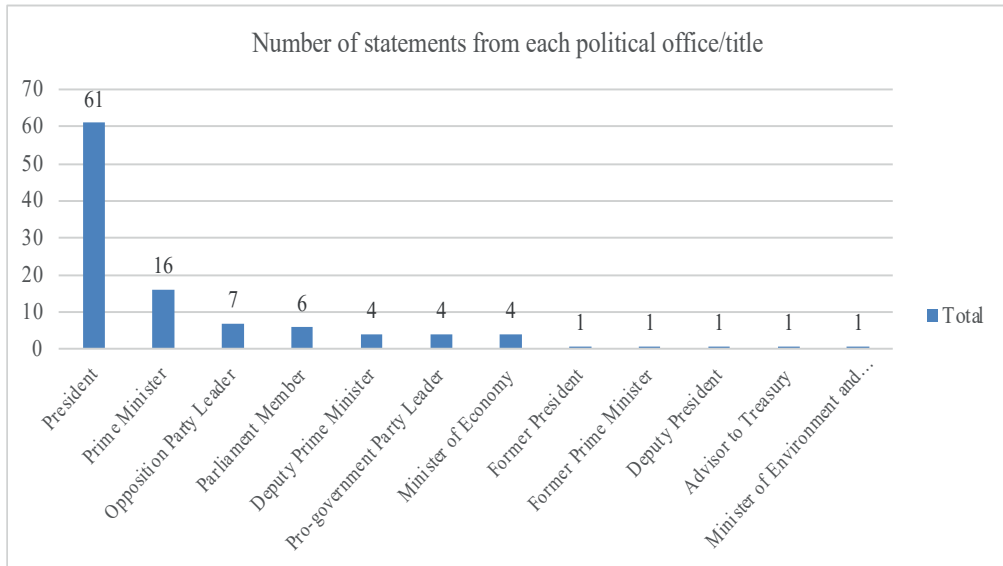


Figure 1 shows that the most frequently used words are ‘yeni’ (new), ‘millet’ (nation), ‘ekonomi’ (economy), ‘mücadele’ (fight/battle/struggle), ‘güçlü’ (strong), and ‘büyük’ (big) which indicate an emphasis on a struggle for a big, strong national economy. Furthermore, words that relate to external factors stand out, such as ‘küresel’ (global), ‘uluslararası’ (international), ‘Avrupa’ (Europe), and ‘dünyada’ (in the world). Despite selecting majority of our keywords directly related to the crisis, such as crisis, inflation, debt, devaluation, unemployment, and price increase, we do not detect any of them appearing as frequently used words. This null finding implies that since 2018, the office of presidency’s discourse did not acknowledge the economic crisis, but rather focused on depicting a struggle for a big national economy with new characteristics and the role of external factors.

### Qualitative Data and Critical Discourse Analysis

We collected statements of incumbent presidents, ministers, and parliament members on the causes of crises, responsibility attribution for crises, government disputes on economic governance and crises responses, and blame for poor economic conditions.<sup>6</sup> Our political discourse dataset has a total of 107 incumbent politician statements on one of the themes above. The majority of the discourse data are about the 2018-2022 crisis (with 66 news items), 17 are about the 2001 crisis, and 18 are about the 1994 crisis. We have six statements from the 2008-2018 period to clarify the gradual shift in political discourse. Figure 2 shows that most statements are from the incumbent presidents, prime ministers, and opposition party leaders for three crisis periods.

**Figure 2.** The Distribution of Political Actors in the Discourse Dataset

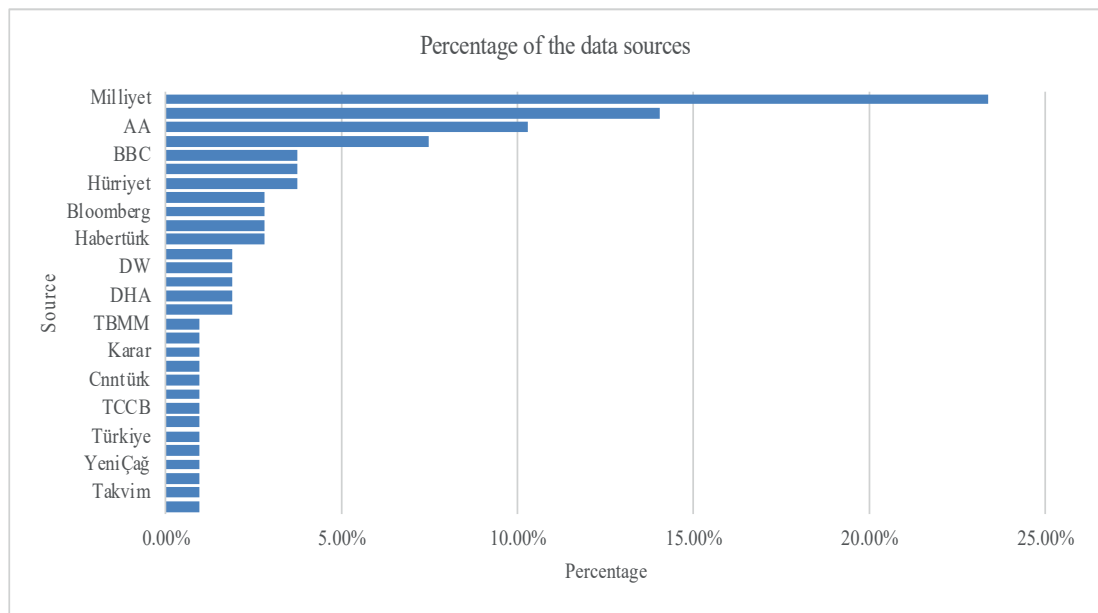


<sup>6</sup> All of the statements are from elected politicians in the offices of presidency, ministries, and the parliament, except for one. We included a statement from 1994 treasury advisor, Osman Unsal, who served in the bureaucracy, but played a significant role in the 1994 crisis as the incumbent prime minister called him ‘half of my brain.’ See <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/ekonomi/ufukta-osman-sendromu-5383710>.

While Figure 2 is a cumulative analysis of all three crisis periods, the political offices are not proportionately distributed across the three crisis periods. For instance, the statements from the offices of prime minister and vice prime minister are entirely from the 1994 and 2001 cases, as these offices are abolished at the beginning of the 2018-2022 crisis with a constitutional referendum. We discuss the role of political centralization in shaping the relevant actors and discourses around the crisis in the analysis section.

As data sources, we relied heavily on domestic newspaper archives for the discourses on the 1994 and 2001 crises. Figure 3 demonstrates the data source distribution of political discourse around 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 crises.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 3.** Political Discourse Data Source Distribution<sup>8</sup>



We conducted a CDA of political statements on the cases of 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 crises to understand the responsibility attribution patterns for poor economic conditions. CDA not only allows us to analyze the discourse data, but also exposes the ideological perspectives or strategies “that appear normal or neutral on the surface, but which may in fact ... seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends” (Machin and Mayr 2012: 5). Because of its power to reveal underlying purposes, the CDA has been widely adopted in analyzing right-wing populist discourse (Sengul 2019). To ensure inter-coder reliability, four researchers coded the quotes to reveal major blame patterns on their own. We, then discussed the statements that were coded differently, and collaboratively decided on their final theme.

<sup>7</sup> Because this research analyzes the direct quotations from politicians’ statements, and not the commentaries about the quotes, we do not illustrate political affiliations or ideological orientations of the media sources. See Yağcı and Oyvat 2020.

<sup>8</sup> DW refers to Deutsche Welle media company. TBMM refers to the official website of the parliament and TCCB refers to the official website of the presidency.

## A Comparative Framework for Economic Crises in Turkey: Critical Discourse Analysis

The most severe three financial crises in recent Turkish history, namely 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 crises, enable a within country comparative case study on the political discourse around responsibility attribution. To examine main factors, we first lay out the domestic institutional framework as it can impact the political discourse around the crisis in two ways. On the one hand, more veto players can undermine clarity of responsibility and weaken the link between the state of the economy and the political authorities. As one type of blame avoidance strategy, institutional delegation allows creative allocation of formal responsibility among different offices and individuals, which then serves to limit liability (Hood 2011). On the other hand, fragmentation and vocal opposition mean disputes, responses, and a variety of targets in crisis responsibility discourse. Second, we discuss contributing international factors for each period of crisis and see if these factors provided an opportunity for incumbent politicians to shift the blame in their discourse about the crisis. We identify the hegemonic economic governance ideas of the period and how they impact the domestic discourse as well. Table 1 presents the most relevant characteristics of the three crisis periods to this research. Due to the similarities and continuities between the 1994 and the 2001 crises, we discuss their findings together.

**Table 1.** A comparative Framework for the 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 Crises

Crisis Year	Inflation (Peak)	Debt/GDP	Political Fragmentation	Political System	Central Bank Independence	IMF SBA	Primary Political Discourse
1994 Currency Crisis	105.21%	35	Coalition (2 parties)	Parliamentary	No Independence	July 8, 1994	Blaming the government; Disagreements in economic policy making
2001 Currency Crisis	54.40 %	79	Coalition (3 parties)	Parliamentary	Independence	Dec 22, 1999; Dec 21, 2000; Feb 4, 2002	Blaming the government; Disagreements in economic policy making
2018-2022 Currency Crisis	175.55%	60.4	Single Party	Super Presidential <sup>9</sup>	Only De Jure Independence	No IMF program	Blame shifting; Ambiguity

Sources: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/>, <https://enagrup.org/>, <https://www.imf.org>.

<sup>9</sup> See page 12 for the definition of “super presidential system.”



## Political Fragmentation, International Factors, and Discursive Strategies during the 1994 and the 2001 Crises

The political institutional configuration during the 1994 and the 2001 crises were widely dissimilar to the 2018-2022 crisis. The former can be distinguished by its fragmented party system with consecutive coalition governments under a parliamentary regime in which the prime minister led the government, where the president was a non-partisan, symbolic head of the state (Angın 2016; Şaşmaz, Yagci and Ziblatt 2022). Out of nine governments formed between 1991 and 2001, seven were coalition governments that included parties on opposite ends of political spectrum. With regards to the Central Bank, while its formal independence is granted in the 2001, during the 1994 crisis, its governor resigned over disputes on foreign exchange reserve liquidation, signaling an alternative voice over monetary policy making.

**Table 2.** Political Discourse Themes around the 1994 and 2001 Crises

Political Discourse Themes	# of Statement
Blaming the government	23
Blaming the speculators	3
Blaming interest lobbies	2
Blaming past governments	2
Ambiguity	2
Blaming the increase in shopping during holidays	1
'It is a global problem'	1
Praising economic independence/sacrifice	1
Blaming the IMF	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>

We observe that in both crisis periods, the governments' responsibility for poor economic performance was the most common discourse either in the form of different politicians blaming one another, or in the form of liability admission. For instance, during the 1994 crisis, Çiller stated that she had been the prime minister for only eight months, thus she should not be held responsible for the crisis (Milliyet 1994a). However, Demirel, the president at the time, confronted her: "One cannot explain the current economic situation with the mistakes of the previous governments. If you attribute the entire responsibility to the past governments, then, people will ask you, why haven't you taken any precautions to fix those mistakes?" (Milliyet 1994b). Thus, when prime ministers attempted to shirk responsibility for the crisis, there were various actors to respond and contest the blame avoidance discourse. The separation of powers between the two offices allowed the opposite case to happen during the 2001 crisis as well. The 2001 crisis had deep, structural causes such as increasing government debt, chronic inflation, and rising interest rates for a decade (Öniş 2006). Nevertheless, after a heated debate in the National Security Council (NSC) of February 19, 2001, the Prime Minister, Ecevit, asked the President, Sezer, to publicly apologize for triggering the 2001 crisis (Hürriyet n.d.).

These discourses demonstrate that the fragmented political system with diverse political actors undermined the effectiveness of the blame avoidance by simply confronting this rhetoric. Consequently, the executive branch remained at the center of the blame for poor economic performance in both 1994 and 2001 crises. This discourse was powerful enough to push some governing politicians to take responsibility for the crisis. For instance, Deputy Prime Minister Bahçeli said: "... we realize that the political responsibility for the economic crisis belongs to our government in the first degree." In addition, the discourse on government liability led to many calls for resignation, and early elections from opposition party leaders.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the political setting with diverse actors and separation of powers between offices of the president and prime minister played an important role in keeping the responsibility attribution focused on the government for the crisis.

While the central blame targets were the domestic political elite, there were many international factors contributing to the 1994 and the 2001 crises. Since Turkey liberalized capital flows in 1992, it became subject to swings in the international financial market (Lukauskas and Minushkin 2000; Söylemez 2021). While the early 1990s were characterized by a surge in capital flows to emerging economies, the flows came to a bust in 1994, causing financial crises in both Turkey and Mexico (Akyüz and Boratav 2003). Later in the decade, financial crises continued to spread to many other developing countries, with most notably the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 1998 Russian crisis. Both had a negative impact on the Turkish economy, especially with Russia being a major trading partner. Surprisingly, we do not observe any specific references to these crises from the coalition partners.

Furthermore, the IMF played a key role in both the 1994 and the 2001 crises in contrast to the current financial crisis in Turkey. Turkey used to be one of the most recidivist borrowers of the IMF, with nineteen stand-by agreements (SBA) from her first loan in 1961 to the last in 2005. The chronic borrowing, along with the high inflation rates and effects of the European currency crisis of 1992 on Turkish economy, increased the leverage of the IMF and the EU in economic management. The neoliberal economic governance policy prescriptions, including excessive privatization, were implemented in Turkey while borrowing from the IMF (Öniş and Kutlay 2021). Besides, the 2001 crisis erupted under the watch of the Fund, while the SBA program of 1999 was in place and Turkey was receiving praises for the program's successful implementation. Many scholars criticized the IMF programs' contribution to the 2001 crisis, with its strict neoliberal conditionalities.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to many policymakers, civil society groups, and academics who heavily criticized the IMF's role in the Turkish economy's neoliberal transformation, we detected only a few cases where the coalition partners blamed the Fund for the 1994 and 2001 crises. While Ecevit agreed that the IMF had some responsibility for the 2001 crisis,<sup>12</sup> interviews with politi-

10 During the 1994 crisis, the opposition party leader Mesut Yılmaz blamed Çiller and said: "If a prime minister in a Western country did what she did ... People would chase her with sticks!" (Milliyet, 06.11.1994). During the 2001 crisis, it was Çiller's turn to be an opposition leader, and she blamed the government as well, "The government is constantly creating crisis after crisis. An immediate election is absolutely necessary" (Cumhuriyet, 02.27.2001).

11 See Yeldan 2006; Akyüz and Boratav 2003; Cizre and Yeldan 2005.

12 In a meeting with Ankara representative journalists, Prime Minister Ecevit generally agreed with the criticism that the IMF was also responsible for the crisis, and made the following assessment: "The criticisms directed at the IMF

cians and bureaucrats prove a good accordance with the Fund during negotiations for the arrangements. When asked whether the IMF was to be blamed for the 1999-2001 crisis, Hikmet Uluğbay, the Minister of State for Economic Affairs, stated that:

Today, everyone is critical about the IMF. We should indeed question whether it is the IMF or us at fault. The IMF does not come and say: “I am jobless, let’s create a stabilization program.” If your insincerity has been revealed throughout the 20 programs you have run with an organization, and you are experiencing serious problems again, you cannot claim the IMF is imposing. The IMF is not imposing; rather you are pretending to be putting into practice some measures, without going through the trouble to assimilate and explain those stabilization programs to the society sincerely and internally (quoted Aydoğdu and Yönezer 2007: 113).

While one could expect left-wing parties to be more cynical of the IMF’s motives, Uluğbay of Democratic Left Party emphasized the domestic political elites’ mistakes.

Despite the prevalence of international factors contributing to both 1994 and 2001 crises, and even a natural disaster contributing to the latter one, the governing politicians did not place a strong emphasis on these factors.<sup>13</sup> In our discourse database, there is only one reference to poor economic conditions in the rest of the developing world, which came from President Sezer: “The global economic conditions demonstrate that developing countries should approach economic problems more seriously and with new methods” (Milliyet 2001). Evidently, this reference to global economic conditions is far from blame shifting. Therefore, from the perspective of the coalition partners, the causes of the crisis varied, but international actors weren’t blamed. In contrast, the response to the 2001 crisis was to bring along a former member of the World Bank senior staff, Kemal Derviş, who designed the ‘Transition to Strong Economy Program,’ supported by an SBA as well as World Bank loans (Angın 2016: 99).

In mid-2002, while this program was on the right track, the coalition government went into a crisis and lost its parliamentary majority, resulting in early elections. The AKP won the November 2002 general elections with 34.3% of the votes; the Republican People’s Party (CHPs) became the only other party represented in the parliament, with 19.4% of the votes. The fact that the three coalition partners did not gain a single seat in the parliament can be understood as a major political punishment for the poor economic performance. The election results support our finding that the responsibility discourse was centered on the executive. Political fragmentation allowed for confrontational responses to blame avoidance strategies. Furthermore, the global dominance of neoliberal economic ideas in the 1990s prevented blame

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are generally correct. Mr. Derviş said, ‘We may not agree on everything with the IMF.’ Even in the USA, there are criticisms that the methods and functioning of the IMF are behind the times. (quoted in Fikret Bila, “IMF’ nin Her İsteği Kabul Edilemez!”, *Milliyet*, 3 August 2001, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/fikret-bila/imfnin-her-istegi-kabul-edilemez-5288532> (Accessed 20 July 2022)).

13 One of the largest earthquakes in Turkish history, the Marmara earthquake, which killed more than 15,000 people and left damages reaching 9-10 billion US dollars, occurred on August 17, 1999. The earthquake damaged the economy severely; inflation and interest rates increased, and it became very difficult for the Treasury to borrow. See Akyüz and Boratav 2003.

shifting to external agents by prescribing further integration into the global economy, reinforcing the expert authority of the IMF, and targeting governments for large expenditures (Nelson 2017; Öniş 2006). As a result, blame avoidance strategies failed to undermine the clarity of responsibility for the Turkish electorate.

## Political Centralization, International Factors, and Discursive Strategies during the 2018-2022 Crisis

The current political institutional setting in Turkey presents a sharp contrast to that of the previous crises. Through a gradual shift dating back to 2007, Turkey's political regime underwent a major transformation from a parliamentarian to a "super presidential regime" with excessive concentration of power. The transformation abolished the prime minister's office and enabled presidents to be popularly elected and affiliated with political parties. This transition led to an immense concentration of power, beyond the levels of a conventional, democratic presidential system. The term "super presidential" signifies critical differences between the contemporary political system in Turkey and democratic versions of the presidential system. While the latter have federal and decentralized structures, strong checks and balances mechanisms, and bicameral parliaments to represent the autonomous administrative units; Turkey has kept its centralized and unitary structure, granted the presidency substantial control over supreme court appointments, and limited the parliament's power to approve or veto the proposals on annual budget (Şaşmaz, Yağcı and Ziblatt 2022). Furthermore, the changes in institutional setting are accompanied by authoritarian consolidation with increasingly frequent use of presidential decrees, government appropriation of key media groups, and repression of critical voices. Furthermore, the independence of monetary institutions is undermined as they are instrumentalized to selectively benefit and solidify loyal supporters (Apaydin and Çoban 2022). While the Central Bank still has *de jure* independence with the 2001 law in place, the dismissal of the former Central Bank Governor in 2019, allegedly because he did not follow President Erdoğan's instructions and defended high interest rates, marked the virtual end of central bank independence in Turkey (Öniş and Kutlay 2021). Thus, with authoritarian centralization, the number of political actors and veto players were significantly reduced.

The centralization reflects on our data as 49 out of 66 statements during the 2018-2022 crisis are from the president. The disputes and responses both between the offices of prime minister and the president, and amongst the coalition party leaders are absent due to this centralization. Consequently, amongst 66 responsibility attribution statements for the ongoing crisis, only four blamed the government, all of which are from the opposition party leaders and members. The very limited number of statements that target the executive for the ongoing crisis is also indicative of strict media control and repressed freedom of speech.

Similar to 1994 and 2001 crises, there are various international factors contributing to the ongoing crisis. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, the global liquidity and capital flows to developing countries remained limited. Furthermore, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in inflation rates across the world, most concerning with higher energy and food prices. However, the scope of the crisis in Turkey is not

comparable: while the average inflation rate of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries increased from 4.2 to 10.2 from July 2021 to July 2022, it jumped from 19.0 to 79.6 in Turkey's official numbers.<sup>14</sup>

Despite its severity, we also observe the denial of the presence of an economic crisis in the political discourse. In January 2022, several weeks after the value of the Turkish lira halved against the US dollar in a matter of days, President Erdoğan made the following statement: “While the world is shaken by an economic crisis that started with the pandemic, Turkey has accelerated its march towards its goals” (TCBB 2022). The denial discourse, which is also apparent in our quantitative text analysis, might be leading to sociotropic overestimation.

**Table 3.** Political Discourse Themes around the 2018-2022 Crisis

Political Discourse Themes	# of Statement
Blaming the rise in inflation rates across the globe	9
“It is worse elsewhere”	7
Blaming domestic retailers	7
Praising economic independence / sacrifice	7
Denial of a crisis	5
Blaming interest lobbies	4
Blaming the credit rating agencies	4
Blaming the Russian invasion of Ukraine	4
Ambiguity	4
Blaming the government	4
Blaming the pandemic	4
Blaming the US	3
Blaming Gezi Park Protests	2
Blaming terrorist organizations	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>

The remaining discourse data, with 57 out of 66 quotes, acknowledge the ongoing crisis, but attributes responsibility to various domestic and international factors (See Table 3).

### ***Blame Shifting and Domestic Factors***

For the inflation crisis, the government members frequently blame domestic retailers for stockpiling items to sell at higher prices in the future. For instance, about rapidly rising sunflower and olive oil prices, President Erdoğan said: “They’ve made up an oil issue lately. We do not have a scarcity problem with sunflower and olive oil. The opposition is running a campaign to present our country as if it is in trouble. These people are stockpilers, they store sunflower oil, olive oil and shamelessly raise the prices” (Sabah 2022). He, then, threatened retailers with heavy monetary punishments for causing outrageous increases in food prices (Yeni Şafak

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/consumer-prices-oecd-updated-6-september-2022.htm>.

2022). These statements create an illusion that the dramatic increase in inflation rates has nothing to do with poor economic governance.

Beside retailers, the incumbent government members attribute responsibility to other domestic factors for the ongoing crisis. As Table 3 shows, interest lobbies, Gezi Park protests of 2013, and terrorist organizations have all been used for the blame shifting discourse. For instance, the pro-government party leader Devlet Bahçeli, who once expressed liability for the 2001 crisis, blamed the following actors for currency devaluation:<sup>15</sup>

The increase in the foreign exchange rates since September 21 (2021) has negatively affected the welfare of our citizens. What they couldn't achieve with terrorism, coup attempt, external pressure and blackmail, they tried to achieve with economic fight...and currency weapons. The interest lobby stepped in. Profiteer groups took action. Global loan sharks plagued our economic peace. The economic operations aiming to block Turkey's progress intensified day by day" (Cumhuriyet 2021).

### ***Blame Shifting and International Factors***

The greater share of blame shifting targets the international factors, including the rise in inflation rates across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic, international credit rating agencies like Moody's, Fitch, and S&P, the US government, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While some of these factors, like the rise in inflation rates across the globe and the pandemic, have exposed already existing vulnerabilities in the economy, the populist discourse either exaggerates the role of these factors or scapegoat international actors.<sup>16</sup> For instance, when Turkey's credit rating scores declined in 2018, President Erdoğan accused the credit rating agencies of setting traps for the Turkish economy:

What is behind this step taken by credit rating agencies? They are trying to intimidate Turkey by spreading economic terror here... This is plainly an 'Economic war'. ... Is Turkey facing a financial crisis like the Asian countries 20 years ago? No. Is Turkey facing a mortgage crisis like it was in America and England 10 years ago? No. Did Turkey go through an official bankruptcy as Greece announced 6-7 years ago? No. Despite this, credit institutions are downgrading us again. Why? I said it, it is an economic war. The purpose of this malicious operation is ... to bring down Turkey and the Turkish nation to its knees (DHA 2018).

This framing of economic problems and policy preferences as a matter of national security is also one of the most recurrently used presentational strategies. In these discourses, there are references to Turkish history, civilization, martyrs of past wars, and a high praise of the nation for bearing with the negative consequences of this economic independence model.

15 The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and its chairman Bahçeli were in opposition of the AKP rule between 2002 and 2015. After poor electoral performance of MHP in 2015, the party got closer to AKP and formed alliances with the AKP in 2018 general and 2019 local elections.

16 Many scholars point out the structural fragilities in Turkey's post-2001 speculation-led growth as the main cause of the 2018-2022 crisis (See Öniş and Kutlay 2020).

The emphasis on a glorious struggle for a new, strong Turkish economy supports the findings of our quantitative text analysis.

In addition, we find discourses that overstate the rise in global commodity prices and its role in the Turkish currency crisis. There are many references to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the inflation rate in Turkey. While the pandemic and the war in Ukraine are associated with the global rise of inflation rates, the Turkish political discourse usually follows with a sentiment of ‘comparatively speaking, we are doing fine’ or ‘the situation is worse elsewhere’. In this context, Erdoğan said “Look at the US, the inflation rates are a disaster. Look at Europe, same situation. You cannot even find the food items on grocery store shelves. Thank God, Turkey does not have such a problem” (Halk TV 2022).

Overall, in the 2018-2022 discourse data, we find the blame avoidance strategies to constitute the dominant theme around crisis responsibility. Contrary to both 1994 and 2001 cases, the blame avoidance discourse is not effectively confronted by other political offices or the opposition.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the responsibility attribution discourse for the 1994, 2001, and 2018-2022 economic crises in Turkey. Despite the presence of negative international political economy factors for all three crisis periods, we find blame shifting to international actors to be unique to the incumbent government in the 2018-2022 crisis. While many Turkish politicians attempted to circumvent blame in 1994 and 2001, the target remained on the executive due to political fragmentation. For the ongoing economic crisis, we argue that political centralization and authoritarian consolidation, with government appropriation of the press and lack of freedom of speech, enabled a one-sided discourse to be dominant with regards to the crisis. This supply of discourse is not challenged effectively by other political actors, mainly due to the two-decade long single party government and the super presidential regime that dismantled potential sources of counter discourses. Consequently, discourses that link the crisis to poor economic governance remain marginal.

Furthermore, with the backlash against globalization, political discourse that is skeptical of international institutions gained prevalence in many countries. As mentioned previously, the resentment over neoliberal globalization is cultivated by right-wing populist parties in many countries ranging from the advanced economies of the US and the UK to Southern European countries, to Global South countries such as Brazil and India (Milner 2021). The dominant anti-globalization discourse around the world enabled the incumbents to shift the blame to international factors.

The uncontested use of blame avoidance discourse and an undermined clarity of responsibility can have major implications for economic voting. Future research should explore how these strategies affect voters: Do voters change their perception of responsible actors for the crisis because of these discourses? Does the presence of uncontested blame avoidance discourse effectively mitigate the political cost of financial crisis? There are some indicators for the effectiveness of these discursive strategies. Major polls, such as Turkey Trends 2021,

Sonar surveys conducted in May 2022 and Turkey's Pulse October 2022 studied the voting tendencies for the general elections and they show 35.9, 32.5, and 36.3 percent support for the party, respectively.<sup>17</sup> While they both indicate a decline in electoral support for the incumbent, which implies a political backlash to the ongoing crisis, the party remains at the top at all three survey results. Furthermore, these support rates are not too different from the AKP's first general elections victory rates at 34.3% in 2002. Our findings might help explain this relative stability in the support rates according to these polls. Ultimately, the results of the upcoming election will reveal if electoral accountability for the crisis is significantly undermined.

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17 See <https://www.khas.edu.tr/sites/khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/turkiye-egilimleri-web-basin.pdf>, <https://sonararastirma.com.tr/mayis-2022>, and <https://www.metropoll.com.tr/arastirmalar/turkiyenin-nabzi>. (Accessed 27 July 2022).



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