



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW MEDIA AGE: CANDIDATES USE OF TWITTER (X) IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

*YENİ MEDYA ÇAĞINDA SİYASAL İLETİŞİM: 2023 CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI
SEÇİMLERİNDE ADAYLARIN TWITTER (X) KULLANIMI*

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Abstract

The new media era marks a period that profoundly affects political communication with the rapid development of digital technologies. This study aims to examine the political communication strategies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on the Twitter (X) platform between 30 April 2023 and 14 May 2023 during the first round of Presidential elections held on 14 May 2023. The study was carried out with the content analysis technique, one of the qualitative research methods, in terms of data collection and analysis. The data was obtained by retrospectively scanning the candidates' Twitter (X) addresses. In order to examine the candidates' posts on the Twitter (X) platform in terms of message content and statistical distribution, a coding table was prepared in Microsoft Excel and the data in the coding table was transferred to the SPSS-24 data analysis program. Then, frequency tables and graphs were created to give the numbers and percentages for each variable as descriptive statistics of the data obtained from the categories. The results show that Erdoğan prefers to reach large masses and emphasize leadership, while Kılıçdaroğlu prefers to focus within the party. While Erdoğan's communication is more formal and populist, Kılıçdaroğlu adopts a critical approach. While Erdogan's posts emphasize rallies and current debates, Kılıçdaroğlu encourages solidarity within the party and criticizes rival candidates. Although Erdoğan's number of followers and interactions are high, Kılıçdaroğlu's number of interactions is higher.

Keywords: Political Communication, Twitter, Presidential Election, Content Analysis.

Öz

Yeni medya çağı, dijital teknolojilerin hızla gelişmesiyle birlikte siyasi iletişimi derinden etkileyen bir dönemi işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışma Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ve Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu'nun 14 Mayıs 2023 tarihinde yapılan Cumhurbaşkanlığı birinci tur seçimleri döneminde 30 Nisan 2023 ile 14 Mayıs 2023 tarihleri arasında Twitter (X) platformunda gerçekleştirdikleri siyasi iletişim stratejilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma veri toplama ve analizi açısından nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden içerik analizi tekniği ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler adayların Twitter (X) adreslerinden geriye dönük tarama yapılarak elde edilmiştir. Adayların Twitter (X) platformunda gerçekleştirdikleri paylaşımlar mesaj içeriği ve istatistiksel dağılım açısından incelenmek amacıyla Microsoft Excel ortamında kodlama cetveli hazırlanmış ve kodlama cetvelinde yer alan veriler SPSS-24 veri analiz programına aktarılmıştır. Daha sonra kategorilerden elde edilen verilerin tanımlayıcı istatistikleri olarak her bir değişkene ilişkin sayı ve yüzdeleri verecek şekilde frekans tabloları ve grafikler oluşturulmuştur. Sonuçlar, Erdoğan'ın geniş kitlelere ulaşmayı ve liderlik vurgusu yapmayı, Kılıçdaroğlu'nun ise parti içi odaklanmayı tercih ettiğini göstermektedir. Erdoğan'ın iletişimi daha resmi ve popülistken, Kılıçdaroğlu eleştirel bir yaklaşım benimsemektedir. Erdoğan'ın paylaşımlarında mitinglere ve güncel tartışmalara vurgu yapılırken, Kılıçdaroğlu parti içi dayanışmayı teşvik etmekte ve rakip adayları eleştirmektedir. Erdoğan'ın takipçi sayısı ve etkileşimi yüksek olsa da Kılıçdaroğlu'nun etkileşim sayısı daha fazladır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyasal İletişim, Twitter, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimi, İçerik Analizi.



INTRODUCTION

While digital equipment permeates every sphere of life in the globalized world, technological transformation is also shifting personal and institutional communications to the digital level. In this context, the phenomenon of new media, which encompasses not only the mentioned digital devices but also the current stages of communication, effectively comes to the forefront. It integrates with various fields such as health, education, finance, and the economy, becoming seamlessly intertwined with new media (Yüksel, 2022, p. 68). Social media stands out as the most prominent and effective among these new media tools. Social media, which is the focal point for the younger generation, is increasingly gaining attention across all age groups as its areas expand. Therefore, nowadays, social media is widely utilized in every sphere as it encompasses various personal and community needs, including communication, information acquisition, entertainment, and socialization of individuals. Social media has also become attractive in the political sphere due to its easy accessibility and appeal to a broad audience (Daşlı, 2019, p. 243). The development of communication technologies has impacted not only the political sphere but also every level of individual and societal life. The emergence and development of new communication tools have prompted political actors to assess the evolving communication environment. Political actors conduct their political communication activities on the expansive communication platforms offered by digital technologies, primarily through social media applications, striving to maximize the benefits derived from this environment (Yaşar, 2022, p. 15).

Political parties, by their nature, strive to communicate with and persuade the masses because a political party is established to come to power and endeavors to achieve this goal (Kışlalı, 2016, p. 261). These efforts are aimed at gaining the support and persuasion of current and future voters (Herman and Chomsky, 2006, p. 60). Mass support is considered a fundamental element of a democratic society. In this context, communication activities with voters form a crucial foundation for political communication research (Lilleker, 2013, p. 12). Since the 1990s, when the internet began to gain popularity, the connection between the political communication and internet has consistently been a subtopic in various analyses. Lutz and others (2014), who systematically examine the relationship between the internet and democracy, generally mention the existence of three approaches: optimistic, pessimistic, and realistic. Authors in the optimistic category argue that the internet encourages the political participation of a large part of the population and strengthens democracy. They attribute this approach to the studies of Rheingold (1994, p. 11) and Turkle (1997, p. 13). Some pessimistic thinkers who criticize the internet from various perspectives believe that it replaces the time allocated for political participation (Putnam, 2000, p. 10), while others argue that internet participation may not be equal, leading to a digital divide and even deepening all forms of inequality (Norris, 2001, p. 52). According to realistic researchers like Bimber (2001, p. 53), the internet is shaped by its users, and someone who is not participatory offline will also not be online. Since the 2000s, as social media has become widely prevalent, the discourse surrounding the correlation between the internet and democracy predominantly revolves around the intersection of social networks and political communication (Daşlı, 2019; Lutz et al., 2014; Yaşar, 2022). Highlighting the positive aspects of the internet's development and the opportunities presented by social media in politics, Devran (2003) notes that political parties strive to strengthen their communication with voters by creating pages for themselves and utilizing various possibilities offered by social media. As the opportunities offered by the use of the internet and social media in every aspect of politics become increasingly attractive and their appeal grows day by day, reaching hundreds or even thousands of people with a single message to communicate with voters has become a unique space for politicians where time and space are not limited (Daşlı, 2019, p. 243). As can be seen, the advent of internet technologies introduced social networks into our lives, enabling significant transformations in the field of political communication. The advantages of social media, such as interaction, content creation, and low cost compared to traditional media, contribute significantly to political communication. Therefore, in today's election campaigns, all politicians strive to use social media very effectively (Kocaağa and Lokmanoğlu, 2024, p. 87). In this context, studies conducted in Turkey have analyzed the role of social media platforms in election processes and their impact on political communication. A 2014 study by Kılıç examines the important role of social media in political communication. According to the study, social media not only serves as a bridge between politicians and voters, but has also become a platform that affects voters' political party preferences and attitudes. Therefore, it is stated that the impact of social media on voters should not be underestimated (Kılıç, 2014, p. 179-180). Bayraktutan et al. (2014, p. 59)

conducted a study to examine how social media environments are used by candidates and party supporters during election periods. The study analyzed the accounts of party supporters and party leaders on Twitter during the 2011 General Elections in Turkey. Within the scope of this analysis, a content analysis was conducted on the Twitter accounts of candidates and party supporters and the tweets on these accounts. The study revealed important findings in order to understand the role of social media environments in electoral communication and to evaluate how these environments are used by political actors. The results of the study highlight the AKP's prominent visibility on social media and suggest that this is in line with its level of representation in the Parliament. Furthermore, parties with successful social media strategies generally invested in new media technologies and directed their youth branches to these platforms. The findings also revealed that platforms that enable two-way communication, such as Twitter, are often used as one-way bulletin boards and interaction remains low. Parties such as the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and the Democracy and Freedom Bloc (EDÖB) adopted Twitter as an alternative communication platform for those who could not gain visibility in mainstream media and followed a different communication strategy (Bayraktutan et al., 2014, p. 88-89). The study conducted by Akyol (2015, p. 98) aims to examine the use of Facebook by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu during the 2014 Turkish presidential elections. This study analyzed the content shared by the candidates on their official Facebook pages in terms of information content, interactivity level and audio/visual elements. The research provides an important resource to understand how Facebook was used during the election campaign and to evaluate the candidates' digital communication strategies. Akyol's study analyzed the messages, posts and interaction levels of candidates on their Facebook pages in detail. These analyses reveal candidates' methods of reaching and interacting with voters and identify innovative practices in digital communication. Güz et al. (2019, p. 1461) aimed to examine the use of social networking platforms such as Twitter by political parties and candidates for propaganda purposes prior to the Turkish Presidential and Parliamentary elections held on June 24, 2018. From the date when the Supreme Electoral Council officially announced the presidential candidates until the election day, the posts on the official Twitter accounts of the candidates and political parties were analyzed. The results of the study reveal the structural characteristics of political parties' and candidates' use of social networks and the relationships between these characteristics and their post-election political success. It provides important findings on how propaganda is shaped in the digital age and what role it plays in political communication. The study by Barlas (2021, p. 269) aims to examine how developments in today's communication and information technologies have led to a transformation in political communication and propaganda methods. The focus of the study is to determine the effects of social media use on political attitudes and behaviors. In this context, the Twitter usage of İYİ Party candidate Meral Akşener and Justice and Development Party candidate Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was analyzed in the run-up to the Turkish presidential elections on June 24, 2018. In the study, the functions, types and content of the tweets shared by the candidates on Twitter were subjected to a quantitative analysis. Akşener and Erdoğan's digital communication strategies and performances were evaluated comparatively through graphical data. This analysis provides an important example for understanding the effects of social media on political communication and election campaigns.

In Turkey, the most recent example of this situation occurred during the 2023 Presidential elections. Based on the assumption that social media has become an integral part of political campaigns, in line with the aforementioned, this study focuses on the messages conveyed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the candidate of the People's Alliance, and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance, on Twitter (X) during the first round of the Presidential elections held on May 14, 2023. The research aims to investigate the answer of the question how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu utilized Twitter (X) in terms of political communication during the first round of the Presidential elections on May 14, 2023. Based on this main objective, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

How do Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter (X) usage practices differ statistically?

- How is the distribution in terms of Type of Sharing?
- How is the number of likes distributed?
- How is the number of comments distributed?
- How is the number of views distributed?

- How is the number of shares distributed?
- How is the total number of Interactions distributed?
- How is the Interaction Rate distributed?

How do Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter (X) usage practices differ in terms of message content?

- How do they differ in terms of the type of political communication?
- How do they differ in terms of the subject of political communication?
- How is it distributed in terms of the target audience addressed?

Examining the Twitter (X) usage of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, this study has the potential to offer valuable insights into several crucial areas such as political communication, voter behaviors, communication strategies, and democratic processes. Research of this nature can contribute to democratic processes and public discourse. The results of the study are expected to provide important insights into political communication strategies, the impact of social media on political processes, and the communication styles of leaders. Additionally, evaluating the influence of leaders' social media use during election periods on democratic processes is crucial for providing guidance for future election campaigns. The study's findings may prove instrumental in understanding and shaping the role of social media in political landscapes, ultimately enriching democratic dialogues and decision-making processes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Political Communication Concept

Throughout history, the relationship between rulers and the ruled has been central to societies, forming the foundation of politics. Therefore, politics has always been a topic of enduring significance in the history of humanity. The conceptual definition of politics has been made in various ways over time. Nowadays, politics is frequently considered in conjunction with communication studies. Efforts to merge politics with communication have contributed to the development and emergence of the concept of political communication.

According to Aziz (2014), political communication is a communication activity in which politicians try different communication types and techniques in order to adopt their ideological goals and policies to certain circles, masses or countries and sometimes to turn them into action (Aziz, 2014, p. 3). Political communication is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses studies from various disciplines, contributing significantly to both the fields of communication and politics. According to Mutlu (1994), political communication is an interdisciplinary field of study that addresses the connections between political processes and communication processes, consisting of research content (Mutlu, 1994, p. 199). When it is evaluated from a broad perspective, the concept of political communication not only encompasses the race for power but also the entirety of politics. While it is not merely perceived as convincing voters to cast their votes, its definition is quite comprehensive. All activities in election campaigns are considered part of political communication (Aktaş, 2004, p. 12). Since communication is a field that encompasses the entire society therefore it holds great importance in politics. Politics cannot be separated from the concept of communication because it aims to reach large masses of people. The political institution requires the support of the public for legitimacy, and to gain this legitimacy, it must engage in communication with the public. The need for communication for the success of politics necessitates the professional execution of efforts, contributing to the development of political communication as a discipline.

Political communication is the communication work done by political actors to persuade the target audience. The origins of this concept date back to Ancient Greek and Roman times. Throughout history, leaders have utilized political communication to promote themselves in national and international arenas and to get ahead of their rivals (Lilleker, 2013, p. 15). In Ancient Greece, due to the small population, leaders would gather people in squares such as the agora, communicate with them face-to-face and try to convince them to act in line with their beliefs.

Political communication emerges at the point where politics and communication studies converge. In this field, it is often associated with the concepts of sovereignty, governance, and ruling. Political communication is utilized to persuade the target audience and is crucial for achieving the desired outcome. In the persuasion process, the individuals involved in politics implement the use of the established ideological language together with their surroundings. After determining the ideological language, various communication methods are employed to reach the target audience (Kılıçaslan, 2008, p. 9). The primary goal in political communication is to maintain the existing power and attract supporters to one's side. Therefore, the execution of communication, including the discourse, techniques, and methods to be used, must be carefully planned. In this context, political communication is often defined as a service that contributes to the formation of public opinion.

New Media as a Political Communication Tool

Developments in technology have led to innovations in communication tools, impacting individual and social life in various ways, and directly influencing the political sphere. Political actors have made radical changes in the way they do politics by prioritizing the development process of digitalization and new communication tools. In parallel with these developments, politicians utilizing the opportunities of digitization have increasingly started to use social media applications in political communication studies. According to Yavaşgel (2004), the political environment has undergone a transformation with the emergence and widespread adoption of new technologies. While the political organization of empires or countries in the past was shaped according to the transportation conditions of those countries, in this era, political activities are determined by new communication conditions (Yavaşgel, 2004, p. 311-312).

Politicians can increase their visibility and learn about positive or negative thoughts regarding themselves by reaching a large number of voters through social media platforms. Thanks to social media, politicians can connect with millions of people. While social media enhances political participation, it also contributes to the development process of democracy (Çağlar and Köklü, 2017, p. 152). The profile of politicians who choose traditional methods by going to the squares and reaching their voters through city and village tours, organizing rallies, is undergoing changes every day. Social media has led to differences in political communication methods. Instead of reaching the new voters by going to the squares, political actors now attempt to reach them through social media. This way, political actors can reach a number that cannot be reached with traditional media through new media tools.

Digitization has rapidly established itself in the field of communication, as in many other areas, leading to diversification of communication. Diversity is most evident in new media tools that make the most of the opportunities provided by the internet. New media communication has primarily focused on text and later incorporated visual and auditory elements into its environment. Individuals attempt to meet their desires, such as self-presentation, expression, approval, and expanding their social circles, with the opportunities offered by the new media environment. Innovations resulting from developments have led to a change in the perspective of communication. In recent times, the political institution has taken into account these developments and communicates its political messages to voters through social media to influence them. According to Karlı (2015), many people have shown more interest in this environment with the developments on social media. Various analysts express that new media provides a democratic space. In this era, many political actors communicate with their voters through social media accounts on the internet (Karlı, 2015, p. 37).

As communication forms in political communication were changed, politicians mostly convey their ideas and thoughts on current issues through social media. Politicians are moving away from traditional media methods and by using social media to communicate with supporters, rivals, and the public (Bostancı, 2014, p. 88). Political communication messages presented by parties can reach the voters not only through traditional media but also through the parties' institutional new media accounts. Thanks to the features of new media such as accessibility, permanence, access, and usage, the voter base can access these messages anytime and watch videos. This advantageous situation has increased the impact of the messages that parties want to convey to their target audiences.

Delivering messages to the voter base has become simpler through the internet and social networks. Political parties can quickly convey their messages to young voters through new communication technologies. Individuals on social networks express many thoughts about political events. People on social media express their opinions by commenting or debating, and can even find supporters who endorse their views (Fidan, 2016, p. 116-117). Political actors can engage in discussions on different political topics with young people. Young voters who follow the news on social networks express their opinions on a topic in these environments. Political actors who use these networks can engage in exchange of views with young people through new communication technologies in election campaigns. As a result, politicians who are more present on social networks can become recognized figures among young voters.

The first politician to use social media in election campaigns worldwide, former President of the United States, Barack Obama, has set an example for subsequent political actors. Managing his campaign through social media, Obama pursued an extensive strategy on this platform. During the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, Obama's campaign included a mailing list of 13 million voters, numerous Twitter (X) and Facebook posts, creatively designed websites, 3 million online donors, and his dominance on social media contributed to his success. Throughout the campaign, he raised an average of 50 million dollars in donations. Thanks to social networks, Obama conveyed his political messages to 30% of the American population (Avcı, 2014, p. 193). Obama's campaign received significant attention from young people. His social media strategy was supported by 66% of the population under 30 years old in the United States.

For many small parties unable to make their voices heard through traditional media channels, therefore social media presents an opportunity for them. The affordability of social media, its minimal constraints, its capacity for interaction, and its ability to facilitate more intimate and equal conditions for political communication with voters are decisive factors in its preference. In this context, social media is increasingly gaining importance in the design of political campaigns.

Digital Propaganda and Use Cases

Technological advances have also revolutionized the field of communication, providing rule-makers with new opportunities to make themselves and their ideas heard and adopted by the public. These developments paved the way for the emergence of mass media and brought with it the potential to dominate societies or individuals, to dominate certain views and to spread their own ideas by providing psychological superiority. Changes in mass media have transformed propaganda into an art and a contest. While traditional methods used to be preferred in the past, today, more accessible and uncontrolled environments such as the internet and social media have accelerated access to information and paved the way for more widespread use of propaganda. This has led to the development of propaganda tools and techniques (Karakuş, 2021, p. 464). It has led to the development of digital propaganda. Digital propaganda refers to the realization of propaganda activities through digital platforms. Among these platforms, social networks and the internet are particularly prominent. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are very attractive environments for digital propaganda due to their mass, speed and interactivity.

Today, individuals are mostly active on social networks and carry out many political, cultural and social interactions through these platforms. This significantly increases the impact and potential of digital propaganda (Güz et al., 2019, p. 1467). Digital propaganda is the application of new techniques on digital platforms in addition to traditional propaganda techniques. This type of propaganda refers to the use of new communication technologies to interact with people or run a campaign through the internet, computers and mobile devices, as well as human users, aiming to consciously manipulate the public during crises or elections (Neyazi, 2020, p. 1).

Today, propaganda activities have become unthinkable without mass media. Because today's propaganda activities have become activities that reach all over the world, can affect billions of people and can be effective in a city, a country, and sometimes even a whole continent in a short time. In this process, especially mass communication tools such as the internet have enabled the impact and scope of

propaganda to expand as never before (Çakı, 2018, p. 33). Digital propaganda has become more effective in the world with the spread of new communication technologies. Politicians use these platforms for propaganda by taking advantage of the power of social media to set the agenda and shape public opinion. One of the first names that comes to mind in the field of digital propaganda is Barack Obama, former President of the United States of America. After Obama's election victory, propaganda activities on digital platforms gained great importance and attracted wide attention (Güz et al., 2019, p. 1467). Obama's success in the 2008 election campaign is a striking example of how powerful a tool digital media can be in political campaigns. In his 2008 election campaign, Barack Obama managed to outmaneuver his opponents by skillfully using the internet and digital media. He deployed ten times more staff than his opponents on digital platforms, reaching five times more followers on Facebook and four times more followers on YouTube. This success was instrumental in shaping Obama's post-election management strategies. For example, the change.gov website, where more than 5,000 people shared their views on health reforms and received more than 2 million visitors in the month of its launch, enabled citizens to share their views and suggestions on the administration. Health teams encouraged many people by reaching them by e-mail and announced that public opinion would be solicited for 5 days before making decisions on non-urgent issues (Doğu et al., 2014, p. 43-44).

The success of Obama and his team in their election campaigns was based on knowing and analyzing their voters correctly. The data obtained as a result of surveys and extensive interviews not only reached the voters, but also identified the characteristics of the target audience using various algorithms and determined the right strategies for digital campaigns by creating the necessary database. Based on this data, messages with specific content were created and delivered for target groups categorized according to their characteristics. This approach is recognized as an important strategy that demonstrates the success of Obama's digital campaign team (Saydan Sanver, 2013, p. 30-31). It is known that new media-based propaganda activities were also carried out for Hillary Clinton in the past US presidential elections. Today, many political actors and parties intensively use social media platforms - especially Facebook and Twitter - for their propaganda activities. This so-called “*network propaganda*”, propaganda through social media, should be considered as an important issue in terms of its structure and effects, as it allows for interaction and rapidly becomes massive. An important feature of network propaganda is the repetition of claims and statements, which increases the recognition and recall of messages (Faris et al., 2017, p. 123).

When we look at the issue in the context of Turkey, we see that since 2004, when political parties opened online accounts and carried out small-scale activities, the work in this field gained momentum with the 2011 General Elections. In this case, we can say that the 2008 US presidential elections proved to the world the power of social media in political communication. Two years before the 2011 elections, in 2009, it was observed that the parties, party leaders and candidates who were to run in the elections intensively opened social media accounts. It is stated that the two parties that came to power and the main opposition party after the elections had more than 500 accounts on Facebook alone in those years. It was also observed that all parties participating in the elections during this period actively used social media tools (Toprak et al., 2009, p. 2004-206).

Three years after the 2011 General Elections, Turkey held its first presidential election in its political history and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first elected President of the Republic of Turkey, leaving his rivals Ekmeleddin Mehmet İhsanoğlu and Selahattin Demirtaş behind. During this election process, all candidates used social media tools effectively. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made efforts to reach out to voters through the websites named “*nationadami.com*” and “*erdogangonullusu.com*”, and highlighted the website named “*seninleyizerdogan.com*” as the website where he established the most effective connection with voters. One can log in to this website as a member or guest, share photos taken at rallies and meetings and tag themselves. In addition, all social media tools were actively used to strengthen the bond between voters and the leader (Taydaş, 2018, p. 172). After the Gezi Events in 2013, the AK Party paid more attention to social media tools and managed to become the political party that could organize the fastest on social media by reading social media in the most successful way. In the June 24, 2018 presidential election, candidates continued their propaganda activities on social media. In this election,

one of the candidates, Meral Akşener, conducted her 2018 presidential election campaign on popular social media platforms such as Twitter.

Using Twitter (X) in Political Communication Studies

Twitter (X) stands out as one of the significant political communication tools of today, owing to its easy accessibility for individuals and lower costs. Twitter (X) is utilized for political communication to gain public support and influence society. Political actors on Twitter (X) can personalize the campaign determined by their parties and create their communication plans (Meriç, 2015, p. 41). It is the most preferred social media platform for political purposes. Compared to other social media applications, Twitter (X) is a social network where individuals, political parties, candidates, and leaders share more politically oriented messages. Political actors and citizens express their political preferences on Twitter (X). It is an environment where politicians conduct campaign activities to change voters' preferences in their favor.

Twitter (X) was launched by Jack Dorsey in 2006. Since June 25, 2011, Twitter (X) has been available in the Turkish language, providing its users with a platform for communication. Political actors not only use Twitter (X) to persuade voters but also leverage this social network for political marketing. A concrete example of this is the sharing of political advertisements and brochures by parties and candidates on their social media accounts during the election period. Since Twitter (X) allows instant access from mobile devices, politicians can quickly share their political posts through this platform.

Twitter (X), a microblogging platform that allows the sending and reading of short messages, called tweets, with a maximum length of 280 characters, has gained prominence in political communication. Established in 2006, Twitter (X) has attracted over 321 million active users for more than a decade. According to official reports, over 500 million tweets are generated on Twitter (X). Strengthening the connection between users and their followers, Twitter (X) enables individuals to make their voices heard with every tweet. Widely used by politicians both in our country and abroad, Twitter (X) stands out as a modern tool in political communication (Irak, 2022, p. 209-210).

In the 21st century, Twitter (X) has provided a conducive environment for journalism practices, agenda-setting, and agenda-building activities in the political communication process, which has the potential to completely change the course of politics. Due to its decisive impact on political, social, and economic environments, Twitter (X) is more functional compared to other social media tools (Hülür and Yaşın, 2019, p. 9). Being a fast and interactive channel, Twitter (X) allows reaching more people in terms of numbers with a single tweet than gathering crowds at rally venues. Tweets can be referenced in television or newspapers to create news and shape the agenda. Due to these features, Twitter (X) has become a popular application in political communication studies.

Users on Twitter (X) can share videos, images, and short texts, as well as post links. In addition to these, they can follow and view the content shared by their followers on the social network. Twitter (X) has revolutionized communication by enabling instant messaging to reach millions of people. Currently, Twitter (X) takes the lead among social media networks where we can follow and share developments both in Turkey and worldwide (Özkaşıkçı, 2012, p. 66). Twitter (X) is not just a place for individuals to communicate with each other; it also provides access to information in various fields such as sports, arts, and entertainment. Although sometimes leading to the spread of false news due to the speed of communication, Twitter (X) is a preferred social network for individuals to access news, especially during major social events and natural disasters, instead of traditional media.

METHOD

This study aims to examine the political communication strategies employed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on the Twitter (X) platform between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023. The research utilizes qualitative research methods, specifically the content analysis technique, for data collection and analysis. The primary objective of the content analysis process is to identify relationships and concepts that can explain the collected data. The descriptive analysis phase interprets and summarizes the data, while the content analysis process delves deeper into the analysis. Consequently,

themes and concepts that may have gone unnoticed during the descriptive approach can be discovered (Selçuk et al., 2014 , p. 433).

At this point, it can be stated that content analysis is a research approach that enables the systematic and reliable analysis of qualitative data collected during a study, allowing the researcher to make generalizations about the categories of interest (Ata & Çakır, 2023, p. 348). The data to be subjected to content analysis were obtained by retrospectively scanning the candidates' Twitter (X) accounts. The Twitter (X) platform serves as an interactive environment where political parties convey their messages to various segments of society, including voters, as well as national and international actors. In this context, this study focuses on the candidates' use of Twitter (X) (Yaşar, 2022, p. 15).

All the statistics included in this analysis have been compiled from publicly available data shared by X. Only posts shared by the accounts have been evaluated, and messages sent to the page by users have not been included in the study. For the analysis of the posts made by the candidates on the Twitter (X) platform between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, a coding sheet was prepared in Microsoft Excel to examine message content and statistical distribution. The coding sheet consists of two sections. The first section examines the message content characteristics in the posts.

The first section includes the type of political communication, the subject of political communication, and the target audience. The second section of the coding sheet examines the statistical distribution characteristics of the candidates' posts. The second section includes the type of post, the number of likes, the number of comments, the number of views, the number of shares, the total interaction count, and the interaction rate.

The political communication type category was used to identify the types of content shared. In this category, messages were categorized under certain headings such as text-based tweets, tweets with images or photos, and tweets with video content. The category of political communication topic was used to determine which topics the messages addressed. In this category, messages were classified under specific headings such as election promises, party program, economic policies, foreign policy, and social issues. The target audience category was used to determine which audiences or groups the messages were aimed at. For example, young voters, women, workers, civil servants, etc. were categorized as specific demographic groups or voter segments. The category of number of likes indicates the number of times candidates' posts were liked, while the category of number of comments refers to the total number of comments on candidates' posts. On the other hand, the number of views refers to the number of times posts containing videos were viewed. The number of shares category shows the number of times candidates' posts were re-shared by other users. The total number of interactions refers to the sum of different types of interactions, such as the number of likes, comments, views and shares. Finally, engagement rate is the total number of interactions divided by the number of impressions (usually per 1000 impressions). These categories are used to measure candidates' engagement with social media.

The posts were evaluated by using the content analysis method with the coding sheet. During content analysis, the data from the coding sheet were transferred to the SPSS-24 data analysis program. Afterwards, frequency tables and graphs were created to provide numbers and percentages for each variable as descriptive statistics of the data obtained from the categories. The resulting tables were compared and evaluated against the information in the conceptual framework.

RESULTS

Statistical Distribution of Twitter (X) Usage Practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

The research initially focuses on the Twitter (X) profile appearances and the statistical distribution of usage practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Figure 1 shows the Twitter (X) profile appearances of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.



Figure 1. Profile views of candidates. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (A) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (B).

In Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter (X) profile appearance, there is an image where he is posing in front of an image of Atatürk and the Turkish flag. From a political communication perspective, this image emphasizes Kılıçdaroğlu's commitment to Turkish national values and Atatürk's principles and revolutions. These visuals aim to establish an emotional and symbolic connection with Kılıçdaroğlu's supporters by highlighting his political identity and ideology (Figure 1A).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Twitter profile appearance, on the other hand, focuses on symbols of leadership and power. In Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's profile picture, there is an official photo where he wears sunglasses and has the insignia of the air force command on his attire. From a political communication perspective, this picture makes a reference to Erdoğan's role as the commander-in-chief, emphasizing his leadership qualities. The presence of the Presidential seal with the inscription "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan" in his profile indicates that he is the President of the Republic of Turkey. These visual and written elements in his profile aim to support Erdoğan's messages of leadership and determination, highlighting his strong leadership characteristics (Figure 2B).

The Twitter profiles of both leaders aim to reflect their political communication strategies and establish a connection with their supporters to convey political messages. While Kılıçdaroğlu's profile image focuses more on nationalism and Kemalism, Erdoğan's profile is centered around leadership and power. These differences reflect the communication strategies that both leaders employ to emphasize their political identities and priorities through the communication tools they use. The general profile information for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter (X) accounts is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. General Profile Information of Candidates

Candidate	Address	Account Beginning Year	Number of Followers	Number of accounts followed	Total Tweets
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	@RTErdogan	2009	21.3 million	120	12.585
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	@kilicdaroglu	2010	10.6 million	4	6.698

Table 1 includes the general Twitter (X) profile information for two prominent political figures in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The table provides details such as the starting year of the accounts, the number of followers, the number of accounts they follow, and the total number of tweets.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opened his Twitter account in 2009 and has 21.3 million followers. He follows 120 accounts and has tweeted a total of 12,585 times. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, opened

his Twitter account in 2010 and has 10.6 million followers. However, he only follows 4 accounts and has tweeted a total of 6,698 times. When looking at these data, it can be observed that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has more followers and has tweeted more compared to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. However, it is noteworthy that the number of accounts Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu follows is quite low. These data indicate that both political figures have a significant presence on Twitter and are attempting to reach audiences through social media.

As part of the first sub-problem of the study, secondly, the statistical distribution of the overall Twitter (X) usage practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, is examined. In this context, the daily distribution of the posts made by both candidates between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, is presented in Figure 2.

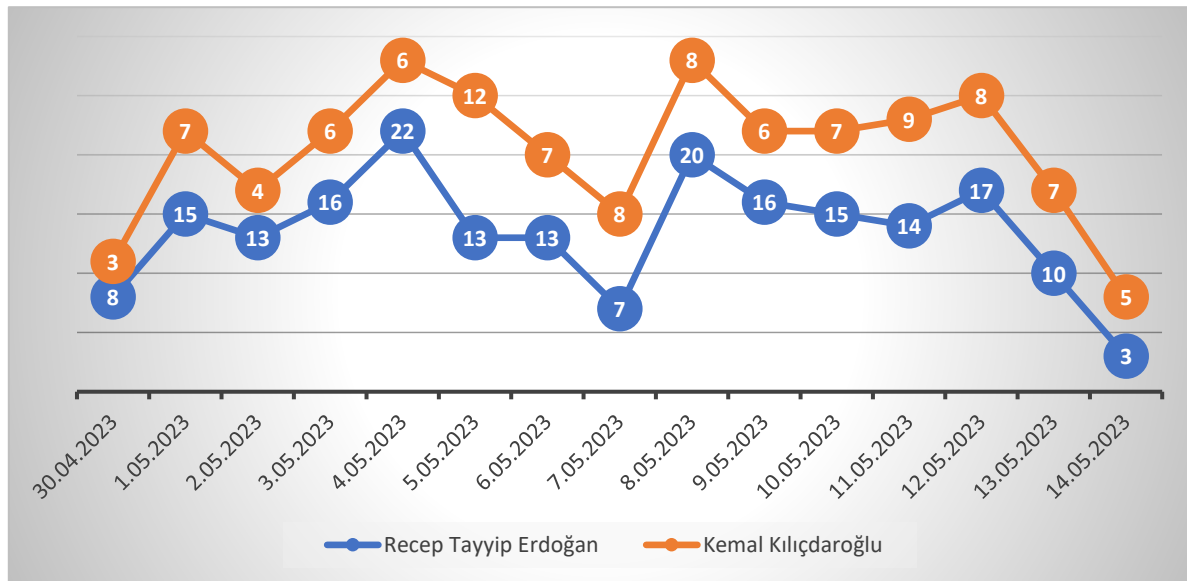


Figure 2. Daily Distribution of Candidates' Posts between April 30, 2023 and May 14, 2023

Figure 2 shows the daily distribution of the posts made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on Twitter between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023. It can be seen from the figure that the number of posts by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is generally higher compared to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. However, on some days, number of posts made by Kılıçdaroğlu exceeds the number of posts made by Erdoğan. On May 4, 2023, Erdoğan made 22 posts, which is the highest daily post count during this period. This indicates that Erdoğan was more active on that day compared to other days. May 5 and May 12, 2023, are busy days for both politicians. On May 5, Kılıçdaroğlu made 12 posts, while Erdoğan made 13 posts. Similarly, on May 12, Kılıçdaroğlu made 8 posts, and Erdoğan made 17 posts. This graph provides important information to understand the political communication strategies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Overall, the number of posts by both politicians varies over time. This can be associated with changes in the political agenda, events, or changes in communication strategies targeting specific audiences. Indeed, the higher number of tweets shared by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan both daily and overall is due to his travels to different cities, meetings with different audiences (women, youth, drivers, provincial leaders, etc.), and sharing a high number of messages related to the events during those dates. In Figure 3, an example Twitter (X) post from the meeting held by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ordu is shown.



Figure 1. Tweet Shared by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan About the Rally Held in Ordu

Despite the difference in daily posts between the two candidates, both candidates seem to use social media platforms like Twitter directly as a tool to communicate with their target audience. This can be considered an effective strategy to convey their political messages to their target audiences and engage with them. The visual elements used by the candidates in the posts made during the first round of the presidential election process between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Visual Elements Used by Candidates in Their Posts

Visual elements	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu
Text	17	20
Photographs	77	4
Link	66	51
Video	42	28

When examining the distribution of visual elements used by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in their posts between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, it is observed that visual elements are used more by Erdoğan. On the other hand, the use of photos is significantly more prevalent in the posts shared by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Photos can be an effective tool for shaping the image of political figures, establishing emotional connections, and conveying messages to the target audience. The intensity of Erdoğan's use of photos may indicate a strategy to emphasize his personal image and leadership qualities. In Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's posts, text and links are used more frequently. Texts play an important role in directly expressing political messages and conveying clear messages to the target audience. Links can be used to provide additional information, cite sources, or access supporting content. Kılıçdaroğlu's text and link-focused strategy may indicate an attempt to strengthen his political platform with supporting information. Both candidates use video content, but Erdoğan's use of video is slightly more extensive. Video content is an effective tool for dynamically conveying messages, creating emotional interaction, and explaining complex issues. The increasing use of video by the candidates may reflect the importance and impact of digital media and social platforms.

The distribution of the Like, Comment, View, Share, and Total Interaction numbers of the posts made by the candidates during the first round of the Presidential election process between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, is presented in table 3.

Table 1. Distribution of Likes, Comments, Views, Shares, Total Interactions of Candidates

Candidates	Likes	Comments	Views	Shares	Total Interactions
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	8.876.459	492.951	1.562.290,365	209.7781	11.467.191
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	14.051.100	529.750	1.562,290,00	1.750.224	163.310,74

In Table 3, the interactions such as likes, comments, views, and shares of the posts made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, are examined, and the social media interactions of both candidates are compared. The total interaction count received by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is higher than the total interaction count received by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This indicates that the social media accounts of Kılıçdaroğlu receive more interactions and he is more actively engaged with his followers. The post with the highest interaction for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is the one shared on May 14, 2023 (Figure 4).



Figure 2. The Most Interacted Post of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's post on May 14, 2023, featuring the expression "We are in the lead," has been viewed 113,849,383 times. This post has received 1,249,030 likes and became Kılıçdaroğlu's most interacted post with a 20% interaction rate.

Although Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has a higher overall interaction count, the view count of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is higher compared to the view count of Kılıçdaroğlu. This indicates that the contents of Erdoğan reaches a broader audience and is viewed more. Both candidates' like and comment counts appear to be similar. However, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's post count is higher than Erdoğan's, indicating that Kılıçdaroğlu's content is shared more and, therefore, reaches a larger audience. In conclusion, both candidates use their social media accounts as a significant tool for political communication, however there are specific differences in the types and quantities of interactions. These differences may reflect variations in the social media strategies and dynamics of their follower bases.

Distribution of Message Content in the Twitter (X) Usage Practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

Within the scope of the second sub-problem of the study, the differentiation in the Twitter (X) usage practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in terms of message content is examined. In this context, firstly, the posts of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu were considered in terms of political communication type (Figure 5).

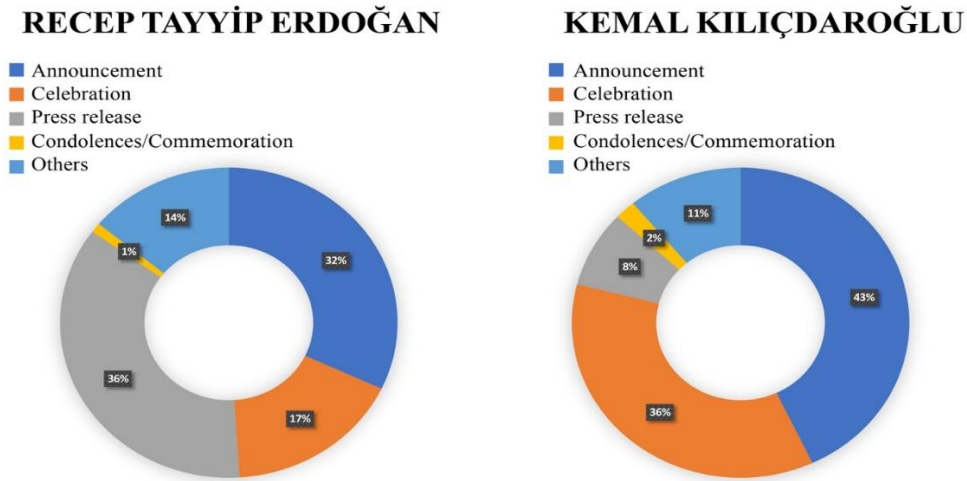


Figure 3. Distribution of the Posts made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Terms of Political Communication Type

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter (X) messages according to different types of political communication. Accordingly, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan categorizes his posts into four different types of political communication during the first round of the Presidential elections between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023: Announcement, press release, celebration, and condolences/commemoration. Additionally, messages specified under the "other" category are also present. The highest category is press releases, constituting 36% of Erdoğan's messages. This indicates the use of Twitter for official policy announcements and taking an official position on specific issues. In Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's posts during the first round of the Presidential elections between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, the announcement category ranks second and 32% of the posts fall into this category. These posts primarily consist of announcements before and after meeting and announcements related to election promises. This reflects Erdoğan's frequent use of Twitter to announce policy decisions, events, or other official matters. This also reflects the government's efforts to communicate important steps in the policy development and implementation processes to the public. Celebration and condolences/commemoration categories have lower numbers, but they are still important. These categories reflect Erdoğan's strategies to showcase leadership qualities and establish an emotional connection with citizens. In particular, condolences/commemoration messages reflect the government's efforts to show sensitivity to sad events experienced by citizens. The "other" category includes unspecified or more specifically defined communication types. These communications generally cover special or exceptional situations and may include the leader's personal or official messages. In conclusion, the figures in Figure 5 show the diversity and balanced approach in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political communication strategy. This strategy supports various objectives such as making policy announcements, taking official positions, showing sensitivity to societal events, and establishing an emotional connection with citizens.

When examining how often Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu uses different types of political communication, it is observed, focusing on the category with the highest number, that Kılıçdaroğlu predominantly shares announcement messages. Announcement category consists 43% of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's messages. This indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu frequently uses his Twitter account to inform the public about policy decisions, events, or other important issues. It also reflects Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy of using Twitter as an effective tool to introduce and support party policies and activities. The second-highest category is celebration messages, constituting 36% of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's messages. This shows that Kılıçdaroğlu uses Twitter to celebrate opportunities such as national holidays, special days, or achievements. Such messages can be used to motivate party members and supporters and emphasize social unity and solidarity. The press release category has a lower number but is still important. The press release category constitutes 8% of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's messages. This category indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu uses Twitter less frequently to make official policy announcements and take an official position on specific issues.

Figure 5, when evaluated together, reveals that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan generally follows a more active communication strategy on Twitter (X). Erdoğan sends a high number of messages in the announcement and press statement categories, reflecting his focus on announcing official policy decisions and informing the public. Although there is a certain activity in the celebration and condolences/commemoration categories, the number of messages in these categories is lower compared to other categories. This indicates that Erdoğan's communication strategy is more focused on official policies and government activities. On the other hand, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's communication strategy exhibits a different profile. While Kılıçdaroğlu actively communicates in the announcement, celebration, and "other" categories, he has published fewer messages in the press statement and condolences/commemoration categories. This may indicate that Kılıçdaroğlu tends to celebrate special days more and show emotional reactions to specific events. In this case, the differences in the political communication strategies of both leaders reflect their different political and personal priorities. While Erdoğan focuses on official policies and government activities, Kılıçdaroğlu tends to show more emotional reactions to societal events. These strategic differences reflect the political identities and communication styles of the leaders and can have different effects on public opinion.

On the other hand, the distribution of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's posts according to political communication is shown in Figure 6.

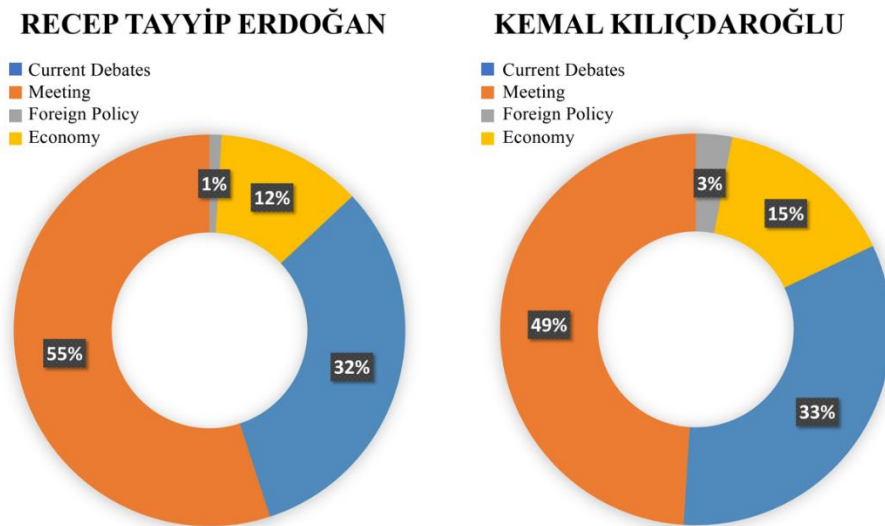


Figure 4. Distribution of the Posts by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Terms of Political Communication Subject

When examining the distribution of posts by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in terms of political communication, it stands out that "meeting" is a headline with a 55% share in Erdoğan's posts. This percentage is quite high, indicating that Erdoğan heavily emphasizes rallies on Twitter and uses this platform to encourage participation in meeting announcements and events. In Erdoğan's posts, there is a 32% share in the "Current Debates" category. This indicates that Erdoğan communicates relatively high on Twitter about current topics. There is a 12% share in the "Economy" category of Erdoğan's posts. This rate shows that Erdoğan attracts a certain level of attention to economic issues on Twitter, but less emphasis compared to other topics. Finally, in the "Foreign Policy" category, there is only a 1% share. This rate indicates that Erdoğan emphasizes foreign policy issues less on Twitter and is less active in this regard. Looking at Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, 49% of Kılıçdaroğlu's posts on Twitter fall into the "Meeting" category. This rate shows that Kılıçdaroğlu attaches great importance to meetings and effectively uses his Twitter account to announce meetings and encourage participation. There is a 33% share in the "Current Debates" category. This indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu actively communicates on Twitter about current topics and debates. It can be seen that there is a 3% share in the "Foreign Policy" category. This rate indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu emphasizes foreign policy issues less on Twitter and is less active in this area. Finally, there is a 15% share in the "Economy" category. This rate shows

that Kılıçdaroğlu also attaches importance to economic issues and regularly communicates on these issues through his Twitter account. Overall, Erdogan's high percentages in current debates and meetings reflect an intense political communication strategy. This shows that Erdogan is making efforts to respond quickly to current issues and introduce his political agenda to the public. Meetings play an important role as part of Erdogan's strategy to reach the masses directly and increase their support. Lower percentages in foreign policy and economy categories indicate that Erdogan emphasizes these issues less. This situation may suggest that his political communication strategy focuses more on domestic political issues and populist discourse. Kılıçdaroğlu's percentages in current debates and meetings are lower. This may indicate that Kılıçdaroğlu follows a more limited political communication strategy and is less active in these areas. However, the relatively higher message rates in the foreign policy and economy categories indicate that Kılıçdaroğlu is trying to draw attention to these issues and convey political positions to the public. In this case, it can be said that both leaders have different focal points in their political communication strategies and shape their communication strategies according to their own political agendas and target audiences.

Finally, the distribution of posts by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu according to the target audience is shown in Figure 7.

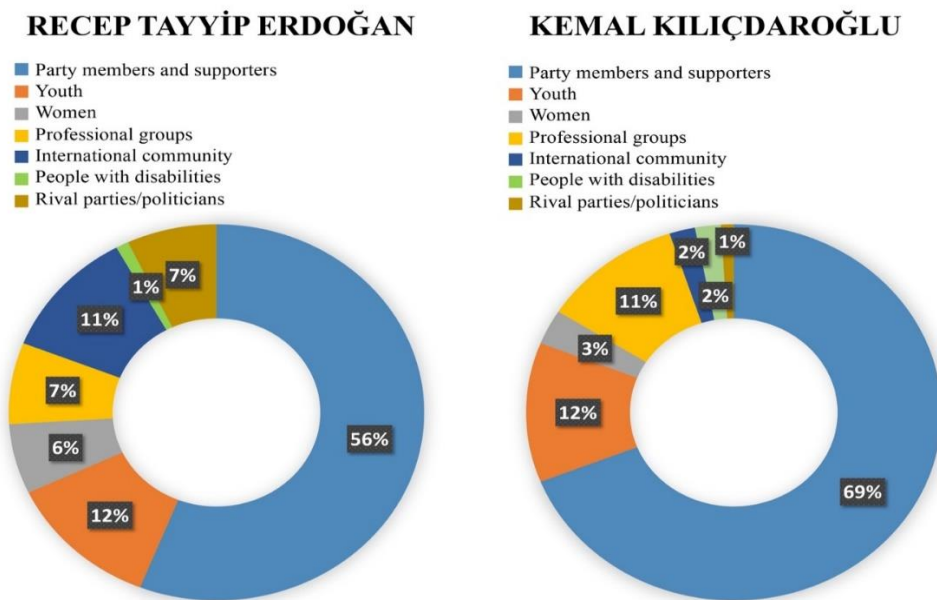


Figure 5. Distribution of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Posts by Target Audience

When examining the distribution of the Twitter messages of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in terms of target audience, it is observed that the majority of the posts made from Erdogan's Twitter account are directed towards party members and supporters (56%). This indicates that Erdogan focuses on issues related to his own party and places importance on informing and motivating his party's base. In addition, messages directed towards youth (12%) and women (6%) are proportionally lower. This suggests that Erdogan's communication strategy does not have a specific emphasis on these demographic groups or that he focuses less on these segments. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that messages directed towards the international community (11%) and professional groups (7%) also hold a significant place. This indicates that Erdogan also prioritizes communication on international relations and the demands and expectations of different professional groups. The percentages allocated for people with disabilities (1%) and rival parties/politicians (7%) are quite low. This suggests that Erdogan plays a more limited role in communication with these groups and places less importance on communication with these segments compared to other groups.

When examining the distribution of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter messages in terms of different target audiences, it is observed that the majority of the posts made from Kılıçdaroğlu's Twitter account are

directed towards his party's CHP (Republican People's Party) members and supporters (69%). This indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu uses the Twitter platform effectively to promote unity and solidarity within his party, strengthen the party's base, and improve intra-party communication. In addition, messages directed towards youth (12%) and professional groups (11%) also hold a significant place. This suggests that Kılıçdaroğlu pays attention to attracting the attention of young people and different professional groups and communicates with them. On the other hand, the percentages allocated for women, the international community, and people with disabilities are lower (3%, 2%, and 2%, respectively). This indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu places less emphasis on communication with these segments or needs to focus more on communication strategies in these areas. Finally, the percentage allocated for rival parties and politicians is quite low (1%), reflecting that Kılıçdaroğlu is less active in direct communication with his competitors and places less importance on this issue. Overall, it can be seen that both leaders have different emphases in their political communication strategies. While Erdoğan aims to reach a wider audience, Kılıçdaroğlu adopts a more focused approach.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media platforms play a particularly important role in political communication and propaganda. Platforms such as Twitter are seen as an effective communication and propaganda tool for political actors. The features offered by these platforms are effective in shaping political communication strategies. The dialogic communication features of Twitter allow political actors to interact directly with their supporters and receive feedback. Platforms such as Twitter also offer the opportunity to reach a wide audience and have rapidly gained popularity, which has played a role in political actors' and parties' preference for these platforms. The most recent example of this in Turkey was the 2023 presidential elections.

This study aims to examine the political communication strategies employed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on the Twitter (X) platform during the period of the first round of the presidential elections held on May 14, 2023, from April 30 to May 14, 2023. The research, by analyzing the general Twitter (X) profile information of the candidates, reveals that Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan aim to reflect their political communication strategies and establish an emotional and symbolic connection with their supporters. This finding is consistent with the general characteristics of political communication through social media. As stated by Bağcan et al. (2016, p. 1076), political communication through social media aims to provide a more personal and emotional interaction with voters and to make a favorable impression of candidates on voters and gain their support. Therefore, social media platforms are considered an important tool in political communication because candidates can directly reach voters and influence their emotional side.

In terms of the candidates' profile views, the results show that the emphases in the social media profiles of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reflect different political strategies. Kılıçdaroğlu's focus on the values of nationalism and Kemalism in his profile view emphasizes his commitment to Turkish national identity and his strong attachment to the ideals of the Republic. These emphases define his political identity and ideology and convey a clear message to his supporters. On the other hand, the profile image of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasizes symbols of leadership and power. This aims to create an image of a strong leader by emphasizing his leadership qualities and determination. These highlights in his profile show that Erdoğan pursues a strategy focusing on his leadership and management capacity and aims to present himself as a leader to his voters. This shows that candidates' social media messages and campaigns generally aim to portray a profile that coincides with the ideology they represent. This result is also supported by previous research. According to the findings of Gökmen and Parim's (2022, p. 138) study, leaders' posts contain the propaganda of their parties and reflect their efforts to reconstruct national identity within an ideological framework. While Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu emphasizes Atatürk, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan makes posts that emphasize nationalist sentiments. Similarly, Göksu (2019, p. 1071) states that there is an intensification of nationalist discourse in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's posts, especially after 2014. According to Karlı and Değirmecioglu (2012, p. 152), social media platforms are an important tool for political party representatives in terms of strengthening the perception of leadership and creating a positive image. Therefore, the emphasis on Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan's social media profiles can be considered as the product of a conscious strategy to strengthen

the political identities of these leaders. Both leaders' profile strategies aim to leave certain impressions on voters and emphasize their leadership styles.

When examining the start years of the candidates' accounts, the number of followers, the number of accounts they follow, and the total tweet counts, it is observed that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has more followers and a higher tweet count compared to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Erdoğan opened his Twitter account in 2009 and reached 21.3 million followers, while Kılıçdaroğlu, who opened his account in 2010, has 10.6 million followers. While Erdoğan follows 120 people, Kılıçdaroğlu follows only 4 individuals. It is evident that both leaders are active on Twitter and are attempting to reach the masses. Erdoğan's larger follower base and higher tweet count indicate a more effective presence on Twitter. The significantly lower number of people Kılıçdaroğlu follows stands out as a notable difference. These data indicate that both political figures are leveraging the power of social media to strengthen their political communication strategies. A study examining the tweets made by the candidates who advanced to the second round of the Presidential election on Twitter during the second-round process also shows that Erdoğan is a more active presence on Twitter (Tüylüoğlu, 2023). The analysis of tweets made by the candidates who advanced to the second round of the Presidential election on Twitter during the second-round process showing Erdoğan's more effective presence can be interpreted as consistent with the previously mentioned data. This situation may arise from Erdoğan not only having a wider follower base and higher interaction levels on Twitter but also from having tweeted more frequently.

The second aspect of the first sub-problem of the research involves the statistical distribution of the Twitter usage practices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023. Overall, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's number of tweets is higher than that of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. However, on some days, Kılıçdaroğlu's number of tweets exceeds Erdoğan's. For instance, on May 4, 2023, Erdoğan made 22 tweets, which is the highest daily tweet count during this period, indicating that Erdoğan is more active on certain days. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's higher daily and overall tweet count can be attributed to his extensive tweeting about rallies held in various cities, meetings with different audiences, and high-level messages related to events. This phenomenon may be evaluated as a reflection of changes in political communication strategies or adjustments based on events in the political agenda or targeted audience modifications. Bayraktutan et al. (2019) also found that leaders' use of social media is generally limited to announcement posts.

When analyzing the use of visual elements in the posts made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between April 30, 2023, and May 14, 2023, it is evident that both candidates effectively utilized social media platforms such as Twitter to communicate directly with their target audiences. During this period, both candidates were observed to employ various strategies to convey their political messages to their target audiences and engage with them. It was determined that visual elements were more frequently used in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's posts, with a notable emphasis on the use of photographs. The density of photo usage is particularly striking. Photos are employed as an effective tool to shape the political figures' image, establish an emotional connection, and convey messages to the target audience. This could indicate Erdoğan's strategy of emphasizing his personal image and leadership qualities. Previous research findings also indicate a preference for content that combines visual and auditory elements by political actors (Güdekli, 2016; Kocaağa and Lokmanoğlu, 2024; Yaşar, 2022). On the other hand, a study examining the posts made by the candidates who advanced to the second round of the Presidential election on Twitter during the second-round process also demonstrated that candidates predominantly used visual elements (Akyol, 2015, p. 108-110). The significant use of visual elements in the posts made during the second-round process of the Presidential election may indicate a specific preference and emphasis in the communication strategies of the candidates. The intensive use of visual elements could be a conscious choice to convey the candidates' messages more effectively and present them to the audience in a more attractive and impactful manner.

Within the scope of the first sub-problem of the study, the social media interactions of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu during the first round of the Presidential election, from April 30, 2023, to May 14, 2023, were examined and compared, by focusing on interaction types such as likes, comments, views, and shares. As a consequent of this evaluation, it was determined that the total number

of interactions received by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was higher than that of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This finding indicates that Kılıçdaroğlu's social media accounts received more interactions, showcasing a more active engagement with followers. A similar finding emerged in the 2014 elections. In the 2014 Turkish presidential elections, a study to determine how social media was used by candidates in the political campaign process found that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received less interaction than his rival (Akyol, 2015, p. 110).

Within the scope of the second sub-problem of the study, the communication strategies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on Twitter were examined in terms of political communication types. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's communication strategy focuses particularly on the categories of announcements and press releases. These categories reflect the intention to announce official policy decisions, explain government activities, and inform the public. Additionally, there is a certain level of activity in the celebration and condolences / commemoration categories, but the message numbers in these categories are lower compared to others. Erdoğan's communication strategy is seen to be centered around official policies and government activities. In a study that supports this conclusion, the use of Tweeter by candidates during the 2011 General Elections was analyzed and it was found that the majority of the posts were announcements (Bayraktutan et al., 2014, p. 76). In another study, the ratio of Erdoğan's press releases in his tweets during the second round was found to be 3% (Kocaağa and Lokmanoğlu, 2024). The higher prevalence of press releases in Erdoğan's tweets during the first round could have been used as an emphasis in the initial stages of the election process when candidates tend to focus on making comprehensive policy statements and announcing election promises. However, in the second round, candidates may shift their focus towards content that voters can emotionally connect with on a more personal level. In fact, Tüylüoğlu (2023) found that 12% of Erdoğan's tweets during the second round were messages that mobilized voters. On the other hand, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's communication strategy exhibits a different profile. While Kılıçdaroğlu actively communicates in the categories of "announcement," "celebration," and "other," he has published fewer messages in the categories of press releases and condolences/commemoration. This suggests that Kılıçdaroğlu tends to focus more on celebrating special days, expressing emotional reactions to specific events, and introducing and supporting party policies. In a study examining the tweets of candidates who advanced to the second round of the Presidential election, Kılıçdaroğlu's tweets in the categories of press releases and announcements are prominent (Kocaağa and Lokmanoğlu, 2024).

The second sub-problem of the study focused on analyzing the communication strategies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on Twitter in terms of political communication and target audience. Distinct emphases were identified in the political communication strategies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on Twitter. Erdoğan's communication strategy involves reaching a wider audience and focusing on populist rhetoric, while Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy adopts a more focused approach. Erdoğan's emphasis on rallies and current debates in his posts indicates a greater focus on domestic political issues and populist rhetoric. On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu's communication strategy involves promoting unity and solidarity by focusing on his party members and supporters and giving more importance to young people and professional groups. Analyzing Erdoğan's target audience distribution, there is a tendency to focus on party members and supporters, but he appears to be less active in communicating with young people and women. In contrast, Kılıçdaroğlu's tendency to focus on CHP members and supporters is more pronounced, and he places greater importance on communicating with young people and professional groups. Additionally, Kılıçdaroğlu makes more critical posts regarding rival candidates. In a study examining the tweets of candidates who advanced to the second round of the Presidential election, Kılıçdaroğlu's posts about rival candidates were found to be more prominent in the second round. Based on the above data, the following recommendations can be made to policymakers and future researchers:

- Recognize the significant role of social media platforms in political communication and utilize these platforms effectively.
- Develop a comprehensive social media strategy that includes different political communication types tailored to different target audiences.

- Use textual content effectively alongside visual and auditory elements.
- Increase interaction with followers on social media platforms and be open to their feedback. Take necessary steps to combat disinformation and propaganda on social media platforms.
- Conduct comparative studies analyzing the social media usage of different political parties and leaders.

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