



**“The Youth of a Nation are the trustees of posterity”**  
How younger generations can shape Turkey through  
the upcoming Turkish elections



TURKEY PROGRAMME – *Turkey elections countdown series*

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# “The Youth of a Nation are the trustees of posterity”

## How younger generations can shape Turkey through the upcoming Turkish elections

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**Note:** The phrase “The Youth of a Nation are the trustees of posterity” in the title is attributed to Benjamin Disraeli

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#### **Summary**

- Half of the 64.1 million voters will be young people born after 1997.
- Young generations are de facto secularized and want change.
- Youth support for the AKP is dwindling steadily, while its support of the continue to rise.
- Young people in Turkey are navigating hybrid new identities.

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WITH ABOUT 6 MILLION FIRST TIME VOTERS and around 50% of the 62 million voters born after 1981, the young have emerged as a crucial factor in the elections upcoming on 14 May 2023.

Youth, together with the Kurds, the undecided and women, will be a key factor in the next elections and, more broadly, in the political and social dynamics of Turkey in the years ahead.

*Approximately 6 million voters born in 1997-2000 have had the right to vote since the 2018 elections, and some 13 million members of Generation Z will have the right to vote in the 2023 elections. Given that millennials will constitute 19.7 million of the electorate in 2023, a full half of the 64.1 million voter pool will be young people.*

According to various polls conducted in view of the elections, the key trends among the younger generations are the high percentage who remain undecided and a higher proportion supporting the than the current government.

Profound disappointment with the political system and anxiety stemming from the economy and its high rates of young unemployment are two salient characteristics of Turkish youth today, along with the emergence of hybrid identities around an axis of de facto secularization and a general culture of nationalism.

According to a survey conducted by TEAM<sup>1</sup>, “generations Y and Z have a critical and weighted share of voters that can influence the upcoming elections”. According to TurkStat projections, 7.2 million new voters born in 2000–2005 will vote in the 2023 elections. Add the approximately 6 million voters born in 1997–2000 who have had the right to vote since the 2018 elections, and some 13 million members of Generation Z will have the right to vote in the 2023 elections. Given that millennials will constitute 19.7 million of the electorate in 2023, a full half of the 64.1 million voter pool will be young people.

## AKP, CHP and the youth vote

All the political parties are competing for the youth vote, but the main confrontation in this respect is between the AKP and CHP.

Until the 2015 elections, young people were more inclined to vote for the AKP, whose appeal for younger generations resided mainly in the flourishing economy, the narrative of a “New Turkey”, and the liberalization the AKP had introduced vis-a-vis the headscarf issue.

However, as Ayça Alemdaroğlu argues<sup>2</sup>:

One of the most significant obstacles to the AKP fully realizing its hegemonic objectives in Turkey is the widespread disaffection of Turkish youth with the AKP (...) Many young people, moreover, are not only less inclined to vote for the AKP in comparison to their parents, they are actively critical of its policies.

A recent major survey on Turkish youth sponsored by Konrad Adenauer Foundation<sup>3</sup> revealed the young generations to be not at all satisfied with the current government and the way Turkey is run. A total of 62.5% of the respondents responded “I am not satisfied

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.teamarastirma.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Genclerin-Siyaset-Algisi-ve-Siyasetten-Beklentileri.TEAM-2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://merip.org/2018/12/the-akps-problem-with-youth/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/16886777/Turkish+Youth+2021\\_KAS.pdf/e430a8e7-a1e1-6b55-4a74-e77c4b2a8652?version=1.3&t=1655118037331](https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/16886777/Turkish+Youth+2021_KAS.pdf/e430a8e7-a1e1-6b55-4a74-e77c4b2a8652?version=1.3&t=1655118037331)

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at all; Turkey is governed poorly”, with only 5.9% stating they were satisfied and 25.8% stating that Turkey was governed moderately well; neither well nor poorly.

According to a survey conducted by TEAM<sup>4</sup> in 2020, the AKP had suffered significant losses among young voters (up to 29 years old), while the CHP had begun to increase its appeal to this same group.

While the AKP’s share of young voters in the 2018 elections stood at 30.4%, TEAM’s 2020 survey found the party to have lost 19.2% of these young voters and gained only 10.3% new young voters.

Contrasting with this trend, the CHP was found to have lost 11.2% of the young voters who voted for it in the 2018 elections (out of a total of 17.8%), but to have gained 37.1% of the youth vote by 2020.

This trend, with the AKP losing and the CHP gaining young voters has continued, while, according to KONDA (interview of the author with KONDA), young people emerge as a key block of votes for the opposition.

According to KONDA's latest data, the youth vote favours the CHP slightly over the AKP, but when support for the other parties and the HDP/YSP is taken into account, the youth vote is clearly going to favour the opposition.

Kılıçdaroğlu also seems to be developing significant momentum among young people.

Around 25% of young people remain undecided, but this rate is expected to drop to single digits in the days ahead.

According to KONDA, the most important group within young voters are the 6 million who will be voting for the first time. These first-time voters are clearly in favour of the opposition; 35–40% of this group remain undecided, but this proportion is also expected to decrease significantly.

## Change and bewilderment among Turkish youth

The main reason behind these opposing trends and the gradual consolidation of young voters around the opposition is that “young people want change”, to quote Mehmet Ali Kulat, Chairman of the MAK Consultancy<sup>5</sup>.

According to MAK’s data, as of March 2023, 70% of young people aged 18–29 support the opposition.

According to Murat Gezici, the head of the Gezici polling firm, young voters are generally angry with the government but are not committed to a particular ideology and do not fully trust the opposition. In all, 80% of Generation Z voters aged 18–25 will not vote for the AKP<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.teamarastirma.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TEAM-Seçmen-Eğilimleri-Araştırmaları-2020.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/07/05/turkiyede-ilk-kez-oy-kullanacak-6-milyon-genc-erdoganin-kaderini-belirleyebilir>

<sup>6</sup> <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/07/05/turkiyede-ilk-kez-oy-kullanacak-6-milyon-genc-erdoganin-kaderini-belirleyebilir>

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Gezici’s data show that Generation Z voters aged 18–25 are strongly opposed to crackdowns on lifestyles, freedom of expression and the media.

*They can clearly see that the root of their problems and troubles lies with the Erdoğan government and its policies. Therefore, their main expectation from this election is change. They are ready for change, and they are so motivated that they could react very badly, with extreme outbursts, should they lose the election.*

Youth specialist Nevzat Tasci argues that<sup>7</sup>:

A significant portion of young voters, i.e. voters under the age of 30, have spent their entire lives under Erdoğan governments, while the rest of them have spent a large part of their childhood and youth under Erdoğan's governments (...) [T]hey can clearly see that the root of their problems and troubles lies with the Erdoğan government and its policies. Therefore, their main expectation from this election is change. They are ready for change, and they are so motivated that they could react very badly, with extreme outbursts, should they lose the election (...) [Y]oung opposition voters not only expect change from the election, they also expect their candidate to perform well.

A thorough survey on Turkish youth published recently by Konrad Adenauer Foundation<sup>8</sup> records that 35.6% of the respondents consider the President responsible for the problems Turkey is facing today, while 38.9% said that “the ruling party and the opposition, all politicians” should be held responsible.

However, while younger generations do want change, the Turkish youth appears confused and manifests a wide range of sometimes contradictory attitudes and perceptions which somehow drive them towards hybrid identities and more inclusive perceptions.

Every major survey conducted in recent years has revealed a powerful mistrust of political parties and institutions among the younger generations, as well as an “anti-political” dynamic, in the sense that they refrain from taking an active part in politics.

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Demet Lukuslu<sup>9</sup> argues that:

Since (the younger generations) see politics as a dirty sphere in which only vested interests have a say, it is an area they choose to shun. Also, since they consider changing certain things in the political arena to be very difficult to achieve, they refrain from entering it and fighting for that change (...) [T]his attitude may come across as apolitical, but it is a criticism of politics and in this respect a political attitude.

The results of a broad survey conducted by *Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma* and published in November 2021<sup>10</sup> record that:

The new generations do not trust political institutions and democratic processes, [and] Turkey's democratic infrastructure may not be mature enough in the future to solve the new problems that arise. If the predictions of people aged 18–30 today for the future of politics are that democratic politics will not be beneficial

<sup>7</sup> <https://daktilo1984.com/yazilar/z-kusagi-secimden-ne-bekliyor/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/16886777/Turkish+Youth+2021\\_KAS.pdf/e430a8e7-a1e1-6b55-4a74-e77c4b2a8652?version=1.3&t=1655118037331](https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/16886777/Turkish+Youth+2021_KAS.pdf/e430a8e7-a1e1-6b55-4a74-e77c4b2a8652?version=1.3&t=1655118037331)

<sup>9</sup> <https://tr.euronews.com/2021/02/04/z-kusag-turkiye-de-genc-jenerasyonun-kayg-lar-ve-beklentileri-neler>

<sup>10</sup> <https://turkiyraporu.com/arastirma/turkiyenin-geleceginde-genc-bakis-12168/>

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for them, they will have to prioritize their own future and find individual solutions (such as migration).

Indeed, according to the data presented in the *Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma* and Konrad Adenauer Foundation reports, younger generations are more likely to trust the military more than political parties than the societal average.

However, despite this “apolitical” trend and very low levels of trust in politics and institutions, the *Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma* survey finds that:

Freedom of expression and beliefs are as important to most young people as the demand for democracy. Freedom of expression and freedom of belief are concepts that can define democracy for young people in Turkey. They are also cultural instruments that play a key role in shaping lifestyles and building social relationships.

In many surveys, younger generations are much less in favour of an authoritarian leader and support representative democracy far more.

The deep changes and new identities emerging among Turkey’s youth are reflected in, for instance, the findings of the *Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma* survey, according to which the vast majority (61%) of young people who identify themselves as very religious favour participatory democracy.

Nevertheless, as Evren Balta and Hatem Ete argue<sup>11</sup>, perceptions among Turkish youth of restrictions on democracy seem to diverge from those of the older generations, since “while the younger population emphasizes stability and authority as a factor in their own well-being, the older population may emphasize stability and authority as an element in the security of the state/nation”.

In their survey, Balta and Ete record that:

Younger respondents are almost twice as likely to approve of going beyond the rules and the law to solve Turkey's problems than those over the age of 55. In this respect, we can conclude that young voters take a more problem-solving approach than older voters and consider democratic conventions to be secondary.

However, in response to the statement "The security of the state comes before the security of citizens", younger respondents took a less statist stance than older respondents. In all, 51.5% of respondents aged 55 plus agreed with the statement, compared with 33.8% of respondents aged 18–34.

## Allah, Atatürk, secularization and nationalism

One of Erdoğan’s main challenges seems to be youth defiance in the face of his project to create a “pious generation” through the proliferation of religious schools (*imam hatip*).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://ankaraenstitusu.org/turkiyede-toplum-siyaset-devlet-iliskisine-bakmak/>

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*However, despite the importance young people ascribe to religion, their perception of institutionalized Islam is not very positive, and they also tend to espouse secularized lifestyles.*

Younger generations record lower levels of religiosity, while even those who define themselves as religious tend to have a secular world view and way of life.

The survey by Konrad Adenauer Foundation records that “51% of the participants reported that religion was ‘very important’ to them. The proportion of those who said, ‘religion is important to me’ is a relatively low 21.7%. The proportion of those who declared, ‘religion is not important at all and/or not important to me’ make up 14.5% of the youth. In other words, in overall terms, although the young population appears to give importance to religion, when we look at the true significance level, it is only around half (51%) of the total responses.”

However, despite the importance young people ascribe to religion, their perception of institutionalized Islam is not very positive, and they also tend to espouse secularized lifestyles.

According to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation survey, the younger generations place little trust in clerics, with 57.7% of the respondents saying they did not trust clerics and only 19.6% saying they did.

Even more noteworthy are the responses which indicate that 92.3% of youth find pre-marital relations normal, with only 7.7% saying that “a girl should not have a pre-marital relationship with a boy, I don’t find it right”.

The trans-generational gap between young people and their parents is growing wider, and the younger generations are both actors in and recipients of these sociological and anthropological metamorphoses.

The new generations have very different expectations from the older ones: they want freedoms and different ways of life and standards of living, and do not have the psychological and symbolic ties to Erdoğan and the AKP which their parents have.

Emre Erdoğan argues that<sup>12</sup>:

The biggest difference is that they come from more educated families. A generation ago, less than 5% had a mother with a university degree, whereas among 18–24 year-olds today, this proportion is one in four and set to rise. Likewise, the majority of this age group were born and raised in urban areas. We are dealing with a more educated group than we have ever seen before (...) When all these factors come together, we get something we call cognitive mobility, which, as far as we know, leads to the formation of a more ‘open’ worldview.

And she highlights “two conflicting forces”:

Young people who are more extroverted and open to change due to cognitive mobility are forced to become introverted due to macro-level changes. These two opposing forces do not play out in the same way for all young people, with some experiencing less cognitive mobility, while others are less confronted with scarcity. This, combined with their own life experiences, supports our view that there is no one type of youth.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://daktulo1984.com/yazilar/z-kusagi-secimden-ne-bekliyor/>

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*As actors in and recipients of profound transformations, Turkey’s younger generations are expected to choose change in the upcoming elections, despite their low trust in politics and institutions.*

The general trends within Turkish youth when it comes to political/ideological identities are also moving towards secularized and nationalist identities, with Atatürkist/Kemalist and Idealist/Nationalist ideologies being espoused most of all.

According to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation survey, 20.5% of the respondents identified with the Atatürkist/Kemalist ideology and 10.9% with the Idealist/Nationalist ideology. In all, 18.8% said they have no ideology, 9.1% that they are Turkists, 7.1% Islamists, 6.8% Revolutionary-Socialists, 4.3% Centre Left-Social Democrats, and 2.3% Centre Right-Liberal.

Emre Erdoğan writes<sup>13</sup> that:

Since nationalism is on the rise across the country, we can say that it is also on the rise among young people (...) [T]he presence of Syrian refugees has become a scapegoat issue for actors who exploit it. For young people, anti-Syrian sentiment has led to the rise of nationalism (...) [T]he nationalist-conservative rapprochement and hegemony embodied in the ruling bloc, which is reproduced with all the tools at the government’s disposal,, has led to nationalism becoming the norm.

However, as Balta and Ete’s research data show<sup>14</sup>, overall, the younger generations tend to be less nationalistic than the older ones:

When nationalism averages by age are analyzed, it is observed that the higher the average age, the higher the nationalism value. Young voters between the ages of 18–24 have the lowest average nationalism (6.95), while the average nationalism of voters between the ages of 55–64 (8.38) is the highest.

## Conclusion

As actors in and recipients of profound transformations, Turkey’s younger generations are expected to choose change in the upcoming elections, despite their low trust in politics and institutions.

As Angeletopoulos and Areteos have argued<sup>15</sup>, the process of *de facto* secularization that characterizes the rest of the Turkish society has impacted still more on the younger generations, while their powerful identification with Atatürkism/Kemalism is indicative of the distance they have travelled from Erdoğan’s efforts at institutional Islamization.

Nationalism, as Emre Erdoğan has argued, is on the rise in Turkey and the younger generations will therefore follow this trend, but there is a significant dynamic among youth towards democratization and participatory democracy.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://daktilo1984.com/yazilar/z-kusagi-secimden-ne-bekliyor/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ankaraenstitusu.org/turkiyede-toplum-siyaset-devlet-iliskisine-bakmak/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://greeknewsagenda.gr/interviews/reading-greece/7012-“turkey-the-train-of-the-great-modernisation”-interview-with-george-angeletopoulos-and-evangelos-aretaios-on-hybrid-identities-and-subverting-the-clichés>



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The path Turkish youth will choose in the months and years ahead will hinge on political developments and the Turkey that emerges out of the elections. Of course, the challenge to respond to the expectations of the nation’s youth will weigh more heavily on the current opposition, if it wins the upcoming elections.