

E-Government Tools, Authoritarian Propaganda and Regime Support Experimental Evidence from Turkey

Semuhi Sinanoglu

Armin von Schiller



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Dr Semuhi Sinanoglu is a Researcher in the department “Transformation of Political (Dis-)order” at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) in Bonn.

Email: semuhi.sinanoglu@idos-research.de

Dr Armin von Schiller is a Senior Researcher and Project Lead in the department “Transformation of Political (Dis-)order” at IDOS.

Email: armin.schiller@idos-research.de

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Abstract

How do e-government tools that enable direct online communication with the executive affect citizens' support for autocracy? On the one hand, such centralised digital government tools may sway public opinion in favour of strongman rule at the expense of autocratic institutions; on the other hand, such participation and responsiveness may unintentionally unveil a wide range of issues in the country, undermining trust in the regime. We examine an electronic platform in Turkey, CIMER, that allows citizens to submit petitions and complaints, send messages to the president, and propose policies and programmes. We conducted a well-powered online survey experiment with a nationally representative sample ($N \approx 4,600$) that estimates the effects of different types of regime propaganda around this e-portal on attitudinal and quasi-behavioural outcomes. The results suggest that propaganda through CIMER improves diffuse support for the regime and generates behavioural compliance, even among opposition voters. However, these positive effects accrue to regime institutions rather than to Erdoğan personally as the executive's personalistic leader. On certain dimensions, the propaganda backfires among the regime's core support groups, eroding their perceptions of Erdoğan's popularity as a leader. These results have major implications for the expected downstream effects of these types of digital tools on regime stability and legitimacy, and they add to the growing warnings about holding overly optimistic views concerning the effects of digitalisation on democracy.

Keywords: authoritarian responsiveness, normative support, legitimacy, satisfaction with regime, trust, efficacy, propaganda, digitalisation, public administration

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Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party / Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi
CI	confidence interval
CIMER	Presidential Communication Center / <i>Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Merkezi</i>
DoC	Directorate of Communications
TL	Turkish lira

1 Introduction

How do digital government tools that enable direct online communication with the executive affect citizens' support for the regime? Substantial investments are being made in e-government all over the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the effects of different types of digital tools on various outcomes, including social and political attitudes (Larreguy & Raffler, 2025; Lorenz-Spreen, Oswald, Lewandowsky, & Hertwig, 2022; Van Bavel, Robertson, Del Rosario, Rasmussen, & Rathje, 2024). Surprisingly, however, we still know relatively little about the implications of e-government tools on normative regime support (Ziaja, Geray, Sebudubudu, & von Schiller, 2025). Interestingly, both international donors and autocratic governments are pushing this agenda. What are common to the narratives of both types of actors are the potential gains in efficiency and effectiveness by using these kinds of digital tools, but these actors are also making very abstract appeals focused on participation and inclusion (Schnell, 2020). One can at least assume that the goals of both actors differ, even if they are not outright contradictory.

International donors generally aim at “shaping the digital transformation in terms of good governance and democratic principles” (German Development Ministry, s.a.) as well as “achieve an inclusive digital future”. International development cooperation unsurprisingly allocates significant resources towards improving state/bureaucratic capacity and responsiveness to citizens' preferences through policies and programming on participatory mechanisms (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). However, the very mechanisms that are meant to foster democratisation, transparency and responsiveness may be counter-productive for the purposes of regime outcomes and be exploited for authoritarian propaganda.

Autocratic governments, for their part, have shown few reservations about adopting and expanding such e-government tools. Studies show that rates of adoption have been similar between democracies and autocracies (Maerz, 2016). Autocracies do not seem to fear these tools and use them for their own purposes, which has led to the idea of digital authoritarianism (Dragu & Lupu, 2021). A proliferation of idealised “liberation technologies” has not yet materialised, and autocracies have remained successfully resistant to the diffusion of tools originating in democratic countries they disliked and have instead become increasingly engaged in the exchange of tools and technologies within networks of autocratic states (Cho & Rethemeyer, 2023).

Autocratic leaders do indeed have several incentives to support e-government tools. For one, popular digital tools offer autocrats access to the personal information of citizens and public employees for the purposes of monitoring and repression (Maerz, 2025). More importantly, these tools also serve as a promising mechanism to foster loyalty and legitimacy among citizens as well as to nurture diffuse support for autocratic rule by offering a direct connection with the executive. In other words, such administrative tools may be deployed not just to convey the regime's effectiveness with social delivery, but also to boost support among core voter groups that would be difficult for international democracy promoters to dislodge (Sinanoglu, 2025).

To analyse the effects of such digital governance tools as a normative support-enhancing mechanism for authoritarianism, we conducted a well-powered online survey experiment ($N \approx 4600$) in Turkey. The country is an electoral autocracy with a considerable degree of state capacity, has made many efforts in the digitalisation sphere, and has also increased the centralisation of power and personalism. We analysed the effectiveness of regime propaganda related to the Presidential Communication Center, CIMER (Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Merkezi) – an electronic portal that allows citizens to submit petitions/complaints, leave messages for the president, and suggest policies and programmes. Specifically, we probed three distinct types of regime propaganda messaging: the use of digital tools for social service delivery, citizen participation in sending emotional messages to the president and letters of gratitude for recent development projects – signalling citizens' support for the regime's developmentalist narratives

(Öztürk, 2023). We then measured respondents' normative support for the autocratic regime in a disaggregated way with a variety of attitudinal outcomes, including: support for power centralisation, leader evaluations, trust in authoritarian institutions, support for civil liberty restrictions, as well as a quasi-behavioural outcome of financial investments/donations in regime institutions.

We show that such e-government tools serve as more than just channels for social service delivery. They also function as effective propaganda instruments for disseminating narratives that cement broad public support for authoritarian rule and foster behavioural compliance with the institutions of the regime. Our results indicate that regime propaganda about and disseminated through CIMER as a platform significantly increases trust in authoritarian institutions, not just among regime supporters but also regime opponents as well. Moreover, such propaganda may have behavioural implications that make both government supporters and opposition voters more likely to financially support different government bodies through donations. In other words, contrary to expectations, exposure to CIMER's propaganda messaging generated behavioural compliance among regime supporters and opposition voters alike. This finding is striking, given the protracted financial crisis in Turkey and the prevalent oppositional views concerning poor resource management by the government.

However, propaganda messaging around CIMER backfires in terms of the perceived popularity of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a leader. The findings show that among his voter base, although propaganda through this portal generally boosts trust in authoritarian institutions, paradoxically it diminishes the public's perception of him as a popular leader among his constituents. To put it differently, this propaganda increases diffuse support for authoritarian institutions among the regime's core supporters, but not individual loyalties to the charismatic and popular leader. In fact, among conservatives and Islamists, the propaganda disseminated through CIMER with an emotional, leader-centred appeal backfired and decreased the average support level for strongman rule. One notable exception to this pattern is Turkish nationalists, who crosscut pro-government/opposition partisan cleavages as an ideological group. They registered the strongest authoritarian response, with propaganda significantly improving their support for strongman rule.

Our contributions are threefold. First, the experimental findings offer insights into the potential downstream effects of the digitalisation of public institutions on regime stability and legitimacy under autocracies, given the hope of international donors (and other national and international pro-democracy stakeholders) that e-government will foster democracy (Buckley, Marquardt, Reuter, & Tertychnaya, 2024; Wei, Yao, & Zhang, 2023). In particular, the findings speak to the literature, which focuses on the linkages between the digitalisation of public institutions and diffuse and instrumental forms of support for authoritarianism (see Auerbach & Petrova, 2022; Claassen & Magalhaes, 2022). Second, we present surprising results about how the incumbent regime can generate behavioural compliance among regime opponents through these e-portals and their propaganda, adding to the literature on behavioural outcomes of autocratic propaganda (Carter & Carter, 2021; Huang, 2015; Young, 2019). Finally, we provide evidence for how propaganda may backfire among the regime's constituents for the leader himself, unpacking the scope conditions on the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024).

This discussion paper is organised as follows. First, we discuss the trade-offs with authoritarian responsiveness from the regime's point of view, and the effects of digitalisation on regime legitimacy, followed by an explanation of the Turkish context. Then we describe the empirical setup and discuss the main findings as well as their general implications.

2 Trade-offs with authoritarian responsiveness

Constructing a convincing legitimacy narrative is essential for the stability of any type of regime (Tannenberg, Bernhard, Gerschewski, Lührmann, & Soest, 2021). Well-established research on democracies has explored this issue extensively. By contrast, the literature is far less developed with respect to autocracies, despite having received renewed attention recently in parallel to the ongoing wave of autocratisation (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Legitimation strategies are equally central to the stability of authoritarian regimes (Gerschewski, 2018). Similar to democracies, strategies vary by the type of autocracy (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). Electoral authoritarian regimes are identified as relying more strongly on procedural legitimacy than their autocratic peers. Holding elections regularly is instrumental with regard to how regimes legitimise their existence, as it creates certain dynamics and incentives among actors in the public sphere, regardless of the fairness of those elections.

What is interesting is that there has been a “deliberative turn” in autocratic governance in the last three decades. In addition to ruling with fear, today’s dictators mimic democracy by holding elections and allowing some degree of opposition while keeping a close eye on their popularity (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). It might be that autocratic regimes have become more responsive due to the top-down pressure to acquire more information about grievances to contain social unrest, or due to the bottom-up pressure by citizens in addition to electoral considerations (see Alkon & Wang, 2018; Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Heurlin, 2016; Malesky, Todd, & Tran, 2023; Miller, 2015; Truex, 2016). They thus devise different types of participatory instruments such as online forums and consultation tools (Chen, Pan, & Xu, 2016; Kornreich, 2019).

The hope of autocratic leaders is clear: Offering participation and indicating responsiveness may increase the durability of the regime. Autocratic institutions in which citizens may participate might help co-opt potential opposition by facilitating policy concessions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007), improving social service delivery and boosting regime legitimacy (Cassani, 2017). For instance, Jap (2024) demonstrates that ethnic minorities who have positive interactions with street-level bureaucrats tend to develop a stronger sense of attachment to the state. By addressing public concerns such as corruption, autocrats may also garner political legitimacy and popularity (Carothers, 2022; Kang & Zhu, 2021; Sinanoglu, 2024; Tsai, Trinh, & Liu, 2022). There is a broader literature that examines how satisfaction with the regime – or the lack of it – may impact instrumental support for the regime based on performance, or normative support for the regime as an ideal type of government in democracies or autocracies (see Auerbach & Petrova, 2022; Chen, 2017; Claassen, 2020; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Colombo, Dinesen, & Sønderskov, 2024; Huhe & Tang, 2017; Papp Navarro, Russo, & Nagy, 2024; Park, 2017).

However, there are risks associated with this strategy. In theory, autocrats want to keep the degree of participation within their control and be selective and targeted with their responsiveness (Breuer, 2011; Meng, Pan, & Yang, 2017; Su & Meng, 2016). But biasing the channels and controlling the public debates they trigger and lead to is not always easy. The extant scholarship highlights in particular two major trade-offs that autocrats face in offering these channels: *expectational* and *informational*.

The first trade-off refers to the fact that the additional information that the regime secures due to citizens’ use of digital tools may come at the cost of raising expectations among citizens about the regime itself. Even though limited participation may boost support among some social groups in the short run, in the long run these consultation mechanisms may raise expectations that might not be met (Truex, 2017, p. 353). Such institutional failures may be leaked to media and be framed as “empty promises” by the activists to extract concessions from the regime (Distelhorst, 2017). In addition, improved responsiveness through participation with institutions may modify and lower citizens’ expectations concerning repression and render them more likely to participate via other means, such as by staging protests (Zheng & Meng, 2021).

The second trade-off is connected to the public nature of these digital tools through which new information would become available, not just to the regime but to other citizens as well. Observing other citizens' complaints may alert people to the existing problems and failures of governance, and diminish their approval of the government (Wei et al., 2023). Based on the scale of these problems, people may also modify their beliefs about the popularity of the regime, and if it is perceived as low, that may change their level of support for the government as well (Buckley et al., 2024).

Furthermore, in terms of legitimation strategies, there is also an affective dimension potentially nurtured by these mechanisms. Citizen participation does not just rely upon a simple quid pro quo relationship with the regime, and performance is only one mechanism among others. Autocrats earn non-instrumental/normative/diffuse support for their regime – support that may not be fully attributed to preference falsification (Frye, Gehlbach, Marquardt, & Reuter, 2023). They do so by presenting themselves as “tough, efficient, and popularly accountable strongmen” (Matovski, 2021, p. 4). When voters embrace the regime's norms and principles, such normative support, in turn, buys the regime reserve goodwill for when the government fails to deliver (Neundorf et al., 2024, p. 4). That is why the consultative/participatory mechanisms they design are more than devices of social delivery to ensure that citizens acquiesce; they also serve as an affective connection with the leader/regime (Greene & Robertson, 2022; Shirikov, 2024). For example, televised engagements such as Hugo Chavez's *Alo Presidente* and *Talk with Vladimir Putin* do more than address grievances. These consultative/participatory mechanisms get voters invested in the regime, reinforcing their positive perceptions of the leader and the system.

Overall, the reasons why autocrats might be willing to open up this mechanism are clear, although risks exist for the regime. From a donor's perspective – aiming at democracy promotion – the logic is similar. The empirical question to be tested is which effects prevail. On the one hand, this propaganda messaging may come across as unconvincing “cheap talk” or cheesy/phony fairy tales to the opposition. However, this administrative tool may also serve as a vindication of, and affirmation for, the core support group. We suggest that public administration tools are more than devices of social delivery that aim to improve perceptions of the government's performance. They are also political technologies to consolidate core voter support groups, oversell the regime's popularity and increase trust in the leader – and authoritarian governance as a whole – by evoking certain ideas and emotions. In that sense, our research contributes to the scholarship on the relationship between satisfaction with the government's performance, instrumental support for the regime and normative support (see Auerbach & Petrova, 2022; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022). In the next section, we trace these factors in the Turkish context.

3 *Responsive a la turca*

The regime of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has forcefully taken over the mainstream media in the last decade (Arat & Pamuk, 2019, p. 129). Pro-government outlets largely dominate the media landscape – including digital platforms – which is populated by a sizeable number of pro-regime trolls and bots. A growing body of scholarship explores the effectiveness of this propaganda apparatus (Aytaç, 2021; Öztürk, 2023; Sinanoglu & Donnelly, 2024b) – the government has deployed it to consolidate its voter base and improve normative support for the regime, which remains inelastic to economic downturns and political crises (Neundorf, Öztürk, Northmore-Ball, Tertychnaya, & Gerschewski, 2024). It did so by deepening polarisation and fuelling religious and nationalist sentiments (Sinanoglu & Donnelly, 2024a; Somer, 2022).

One exemplary online participatory mechanism is the Turkish Presidency's Communication Center, more commonly known by its acronym, CIMER. Under the aegis of the Presidency's Directorate of Communications (DoC), which is the regime's main propaganda apparatus, the system allows citizens to submit petitions and keep track of their status as they are processed and transferred to the relevant public institutions. Citizens often use the system to report petty corruption, demand information, and request social assistance and delivery. According to official statistics, in 2022, more than six million petitions were submitted by around 3.8 million people, and roughly half of them were from first-time users (The Presidency's Directorate of Communications, 2023b). Last year, the number of petitions increased to more than 7.5 million (see Yildizalp, 2024), an indication that the system has been getting more popular over time.

The regime invests a lot in propaganda for broadcasting CIMER. First, CIMER has been packaged as an effective system that is popular among the public. For example, very recently, a huge scandal (see Fraser & Badendicek, 2024) in the health care sector hit the news, whereby a large group of medical practitioners were indicted and charged with malpractice due to the deaths of newborns. DoC claims that this investigation started with a citizens' petition to CIMER, which allegedly "takes all petitions seriously" (see Beyaz, 2024). The government was able to take credit for the initial crackdown. Relatedly, on pro-government media outlets (see Yildizalp & Tosun, 2024), the government showcases different stories of how people's problems have been addressed in multiple cities and on a variety of issues as a result of their petitions to CIMER.

But the system is more than just a petition dashboard to get things done. The system has also called upon people to develop ideas for the "new Turkish century" – the government's vision to become one of the top 10 economies in the world, as highly unrealistic as that may be. The system has included action buttons labelled "take part in government" to ask for visionary inputs. The choice of the term "new Turkish century" and making reference to a "vision" are not by chance. The government used 2023 – the centenary of the Republic of Turkey's founding – as a reference point, using the slogan "Turkey is ready, Target: 2023" to portray the government's development efforts as being grandiose and patriotic. The experimental evidence suggests that such a "national developmentalist", visionary narrative appealed to the public, despite objectively deteriorated economic conditions (Öztürk, 2023).

DoC also markets CIMER as an individual-level connection between the government and the people. Examples being circulated on news outlets and social media abound: A couple was not able to secure their family elders' blessings to get married (see Ozdemir, 2024). Following their petition to CIMER, government representatives intervened and convinced the families to allow the marriage, and also to help the couple to get settled. A young person who wanted to learn her exact birth hour for horoscopes (see Sarica, 2024) was answered on CIMER – a petition DoC presented as proof that young people also actively engage with CIMER.

People are also encouraged to "thank" the government for successful policies and programmes and send personalised messages to the president. That is why DoC (2023) presents CIMER as "the bridge of hearts". In routine reports, the directorate showcases different emotional petitions/messages from ordinary citizens in which they express their gratitude for how the president has dealt with major crises such as natural disasters. In other messages, people express their love for him, explain how they saw him in their dreams, how they are longing to meet him in person one day and invite him into their houses, or they send "heartwarming" messages from children who call the president "grandpa". These messages highlight the personal connection that citizens have with the president himself.

Most importantly, the messages from CIMER are conveyed in an identity-confirming way for the regime's core support group. For instance, following the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum back to a mosque – a controversial dream of Islamists in Turkey for decades – the DoC released emotional messages submitted to CIMER to thank the president, praying that he would

be blessed with heaven (Beyaz, 2020). In order to cater to their support group's beliefs and expectations, acknowledging their concerns and satisfying their demands (see Esberg, 2020; Shirikov, 2024), the regime employs CIMER-originated messages to reinforce the regime's affective connection with its core support group, which is religious, conservative and nationalist. This affirmative messaging may lead supporters to become more emotionally invested in the regime due to feelings of pride and hope (Greene & Robertson, 2022). Our main objective is to examine the effectiveness of this propaganda messaging for amplifying instrumental and diffuse support. Next, we describe the empirical setup for the experimental interventions.

4 Empirical setting

We hired a reputable research survey company based in Turkey to conduct a well-powered online survey ($N \approx 4,600$) in Turkey from 19 December 2024 to 20 January 2025. The firm conducted the survey using quota samples from 26 NUTS-2 regions, with respondents balanced on gender, age and education; no personally identifiable information was collected. The respondents were all Turkish citizens and older than 18. Participants were compensated through the company that provided access to the panel.

The survey starts with a demographics module that comprises questions on age, gender, city of residence, level of education, religiosity, income and political ideology. Following the pre-screening questions, we asked an attention check question. We measured party identification with two questions: If there was an election this Sunday, which party would they vote for, and which party they feel closest to, regardless of whether they vote or not.

Through Qualtrics, we implemented several data quality controls to identify potential bot responses and fraudulent completions with different protocols, including but not limited to: removing repeated responses from the same IP address, responses with failed geo-location controls, failed pre-treatment attention checks, suspicious use of AI, and inconsistent and non-serious response patterns.

Pre-treatment, there is a battery of questions that measures degree of institutional trust (in public administration and the presidential office, specifically), followed by a battery of questions that measures efficacy, and their previous (or friends'/families') experiences with CIMER (to prevent social desirability bias). We included a module on responsiveness and satisfaction, including a question that measures the government's perceived responsiveness to citizens' preferences, and a classic battery of questions that measures people's evaluation of the government's performance. We added a thermometer question of how a respondent feels towards different political parties' supporters on a scale from 0 to 100 to measure pre-treatment polarisation. Furthermore, we included several other questions pre-treatment, including whether they or their close kin ever experienced a natural disaster before, their risk assessment regarding other countries, their contact with Syrian refugees in their daily lives, and a question on concerns over globalisation and dependence on foreign markets.

We designed a between-subject vignette-based experiment. We used block randomisation, whereby participants were stratified based on their party identification (whether they are supporters of the incumbent electoral alliance, or the opposition) and then randomly assigned to treatment conditions. The reason behind this choice of randomisation is that the democracy-authoritarianism cleavage is the new defining feature of party politics in Turkey following the 2017 constitutional referendum (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020) – that is why the effect of propaganda would be conditional on the respondent's support for the incumbent.

It is not technically feasible to organise a field experiment to measure the determinants of CIMER's responsiveness. The CIMER system requests national ID information to submit petitions. Furthermore, there would be practical and ethical issues with a field experiment that incentivises respondents to interact with the system, given the authoritarian nature of the regime. Instead, we analyse the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda about (and through) CIMER as a participatory framework to drive normative support for the regime.

The experimental design has four arms. First, the control group receives a general information message about CIMER: "an electronic system allowing Turkish citizens to contact the Presidential Office to submit petitions, complaints, and request information". As for the treatment arms, in addition to the general description, we created three composite petitions/notes based on real CIMER messages as posted by the DoC. We concealed the city, date, and other potential time and location identifiers. The DoC had already anonymised the messages and did not reveal the petitioners' identities. It also classified these messages based on content, such as service delivery, support for the government's national development vision and emotional messages to the president. Figure 1 shows an empty template for CIMER messages.

Figure 1: Message template from CIMER

CIMER CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI İLETİŞİM MERKEZİ

Başvuru Sayısı : *****
Başvuru Tarihi : *****

BAŞVURAN BİLGİLERİ

Ad *****
Soyad *****
T.C. Kimlik No *****
Cep Telefonu *****
E-posta *****
İlçe / İl *****
Adres *****

BAŞVURU METNİ

Source: The Presidency's Directorate of Communications (2023a)

For each treatment, we juxtaposed three similar messages in length and writing style to reinforce it. Within each treatment arm, we randomised the order of the messages. We kept the language structure as is, including typos and grammar errors in Turkish, to preserve the propaganda content and "genuineness", as broadcast by the regime. There was a timer that did not allow respondents to skip the question for a fixed time.

- **CIMER performance/ social delivery treatment:** This treatment collects delivery-oriented messages that showcase how CIMER intervened to solve a problem while others failed to, or how citizens express their gratitude to CIMER for “getting things done”. The DoC presents the complaints first, followed by how the issue was resolved. We chose a story related to public safety, the health care industry and a general thank you message, respectively.

Message I (Public safety): For the past one and a half years, there have been incidents of looting and plundering in the area where my house is located. There are many abandoned buildings, where drug use and sale take place. As a neighbourhood, we collected signatures and wrote a petition to the municipality 4.5 months ago through the district governor, but we have not received any results. Children and women are especially affected. CIMER’s response: The number of Narcotics patrol teams has been increased, and those found involved in criminal activities have been referred to judicial authorities.

Message II (Health care): There is no PET/CT device in the oncology department of the hospital. There is a crowd waiting in line for X-rays, which has become a chaotic scene. According to staff, the devices have been broken for two weeks. CIMER’s response: Following complaints from citizens, submitted via CIMER, about delays in treatment due to malfunctions of the devices, necessary materials have been supplied, and the devices have been made ready for use.

Message III (General thanks): We thank the CIMER staff. Responding to requests on three different issues in as short a time as one day, paying attention, and showing care truly makes one feel like a citizen, an individual living in this country. In the past, we used to be intimidated into not submitting petitions, our petitions would get lost, or we couldn’t find anyone to address them. Thank goodness we have a state institution like yours to knock on its door and share our concerns.

- **Emotional messages to the leader:** This intervention presents emotional and supportive messages from pro-government voters or children that are addressed to Erdoğan himself, praising his leadership qualities, praying for him and longing to see him in person. The treatment includes affirmative messages for core voter groups through clear socio-cultural references appealing to the conservative/religious support base.

Message I: “Tall man”, I always see us together talking in my dreams. We are with you as always. In your services to Islam and protecting *dawaa* for the fight against evil, may God help and protect you. The responsibility of “ummah” is on your shoulders. From *Sultan Alpaslan* to my ancestor Osmangazi, from Mehmet the Conqueror to Caliph Yavuz Sultan Selim, Abdulhamit, and to our current Presidency, the Turkish youth will never forget your fight and services. You are in my prayers.

Message II: Dear Grandpa Tayyip, I’m seven years old. Because the way to reach you is through here, I wanted to celebrate your Father’s Day. I would want you to come. I saw your house and wanted to come, but my parents told me you would be busy. Would you show me around one day?

Message III: We are deeply grateful to you for the reopening of Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque. Restoring our mosque to its rightful status has honoured us greatly. It is not only about transforming it back into a mosque but also fulfilling the will of our ancestor Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. Thus, the burden that had weighed on our country for 86 years has been lifted. You have restored Hagia Sophia, the symbol of independence for both the Turkish people and the Islamic world, to us. May God’s mercy be upon you in both worlds. With God’s permission, we will also liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque under your leadership.

- **Developmentalist/visionary/service-oriented leader:** This intervention presents message in line with the national developmentalist narrative of the regime (Öztürk, 2023). Erdoğan has been presented as a visionary leader who accomplished national independence in the defence industry, invested in health care and founded large-scale infrastructure projects.

Message I (Transport and infrastructure): Last week, we travelled from Edirne to Bursa with my family. On our way, we used the Northern Marmara Highway, the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, the Osman Gazi Bridge, and the Istanbul-Izmir highway. On our return, we came back via the 1915 Çanakkale Bridge. We can never be grateful enough to you for bringing these monumental works to our country. Once again, I felt proud of my country and the investments made under your leadership.

Message II (Defence): Mr President, thanks to you, our army produces ATAK T-129 without needing American Cobra helicopters anymore. Our soldiers use our own drones rather than useless drones imported from Israel. Thanks to you, Azerbaijan liberated Karabakh after three decades. TCG Anadolu ship has been added to our inventory; the deliveries of SUNGUR, AKYA, MAM-T and ATMACA is about to begin. There is also Teknofest. We have reached a point where we produce the products and materials we used to buy expensively from abroad. This pride is ours, this pride is Turkey's, this pride belongs to SSB. My daughter is four years old, and when I ask her what she will become, she already says she will be a pilot.

Message III (Health care): Last June, I had a heart attack. Following my initial treatment, the doctor requested an emergency helicopter ambulance. The helicopter arrived in 12 minutes and transported me to the research hospital, where I was brought back to life with urgent intervention. By the grace of God first, and then with your efforts, my three-year-old daughter did not grow up without a father. Without these resources, no matter what the doctors did, I could not have survived. May God spare you to your kids.

Following the treatment, there was a short question module to distract respondents and a manipulation check. For the main analysis, we keep the respondents who fail the manipulation check (Aronow, Baron, & Pinson, 2019) but run a robustness check with a sub-sample without these respondents as well.

As the main dependent variable, we measure normative/diffuse support. We must note that some classical support questions (such as military rule or preferring an authoritarian government without elections) would not necessarily work in Turkey, as the baseline support for democracy is already high. Neundorff et al. (2024, p. 13) compiled a list of indicators for operationalising normative support that includes items both on nostalgia, support for majoritarianism, strongman rule and specifically on Erdoğan as a leader and the AKP. Two potential problems with such an aggregate measure are that, first, there may be differences between leader-level and party-level evaluations (Reiljan, Garzia, Silva, & Trechsel, 2024), and second, people's evaluations of a personalist authoritarian regime with a high centralisation of power may differ from those concerning a type of authoritarian governance with strong institutions. In the context of our experimental design, seeing CIMER as an effective centralised organisation with a high performance level may lead to the justification of power grabs and undermine other institutional checks and balances (see Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). That is why we measure diffuse support in a disaggregated way, as follows:

- **Support for strong leader:** A battery of questions measuring their support for power centralisation and strong leader as a norm.
- **Leader evaluations:** Questions on evaluations of Erdoğan as a leader who protects national interests, and also on Ekrem İmamoğlu, his main rival.

- **Trust in the incumbent alliance and institutions:** Their trust in the political parties of the incumbent coalition, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the Turkish defence corporation ASELSAN, the Ministry of Health, the police, the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, and the Supreme Election Council.
- **Support for civil liberty restrictions:** The government's right to censor media as well as ban protests and political parties for the national interest (see Carlin, 2018).

In our modules, we include both positive and negative items to mitigate agreement bias. We measure respondents' attitudes towards each item, but also create a unidimensional graded response model to construct a latent index for each module.

In addition to measuring attitudes towards the regime, we also adopt a quasi-behavioural measure for how much respondents are "invested" in the regime. We told respondents that they were hypothetically given 40,000 Turkish lira (TL) (roughly US\$1,000) and asked them to allocate it (see Thaler, Mueller, & Mosinger, 2023). They could either keep it for themselves or offer it as a donation to state institutions such as CIMER for improvement in services, the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAS) for the defence industry, the Turkish Red Cross, or the Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion (TEMA), an independent non-governmental organisation.

There may be two causal pathways by which our responsiveness treatments impact diffuse support for the regime and the leader. First, exposure to positive messages from citizens may result in an overestimation of popular support, which we measure with a question on the perceived popularity of the leader. Second, these messages may invoke certain emotions about the leader and the government: Although the regime may invoke fear or worry among opposition supporters suppressing dissent (Young, 2019), autocratic regimes do not just thrive on fear (see Greene & Robertson, 2022; Stockmann, Esarey, & Zhang, 2018). The respondents may feel pride in their system of government, hopeful about the country's future, dignified with acknowledgment and altruistic regarding the common good. Following Chaudoin, Gaines and Livny (2021), we randomise the order of modules for the mediator and outcome variables.

Lastly, following the end of the experiment, all treated respondents received a "corrective statement" that these messages are only posted by the DoC, and there is no way to prove their authenticity. Then we measured whether this propaganda reminder impacted the respondents' trust in the government as well as their perceptions of government responsiveness and transparency.

5 Main findings

We conducted likelihood ratio tests to ensure randomisation was successful. Following our pre-analysis plan, we ran pairwise contrasts with Tukey adjustments, and linear and ordinal regressions with pre-treatment controls. We estimate the treatment effects using the following specifications: For continuous and interval outcomes (leader popularity and quasi-behavioural measures), we estimate ordinary least squares regressions:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Treatment}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_i represents the outcome variable for individual i , Treatment_i is a categorical variable indicating assignment to one of the experimental conditions, \mathbf{X}_i is a vector of pre-treatment controls and covariates, and ϵ_i is the error term. For ordinal outcomes (Likert-scale responses on attitudinal measures of normative regime support), we estimate cumulative link models (ordinal logistic regression):

$$\text{logit}[P(Y_i \leq j)] = \alpha_j - (\beta_1 \text{Treatment}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i) \quad (2)$$

where $j = 1, \dots, J - 1$ represents the threshold parameters for J ordered categories, and α_j are cut-point parameters estimated alongside the regression coefficients.

In both specifications, the vector of controls \mathbf{X}_i includes pre-treatment measures, responsiveness perceptions, pre-treatment institutional trust index, satisfaction index, and prior CIMER usage; and individual characteristics, namely religiosity, education level, income level and age cohort. The parameter β_1 captures the average treatment effect(s), and γ is a vector of coefficients on the control variables.

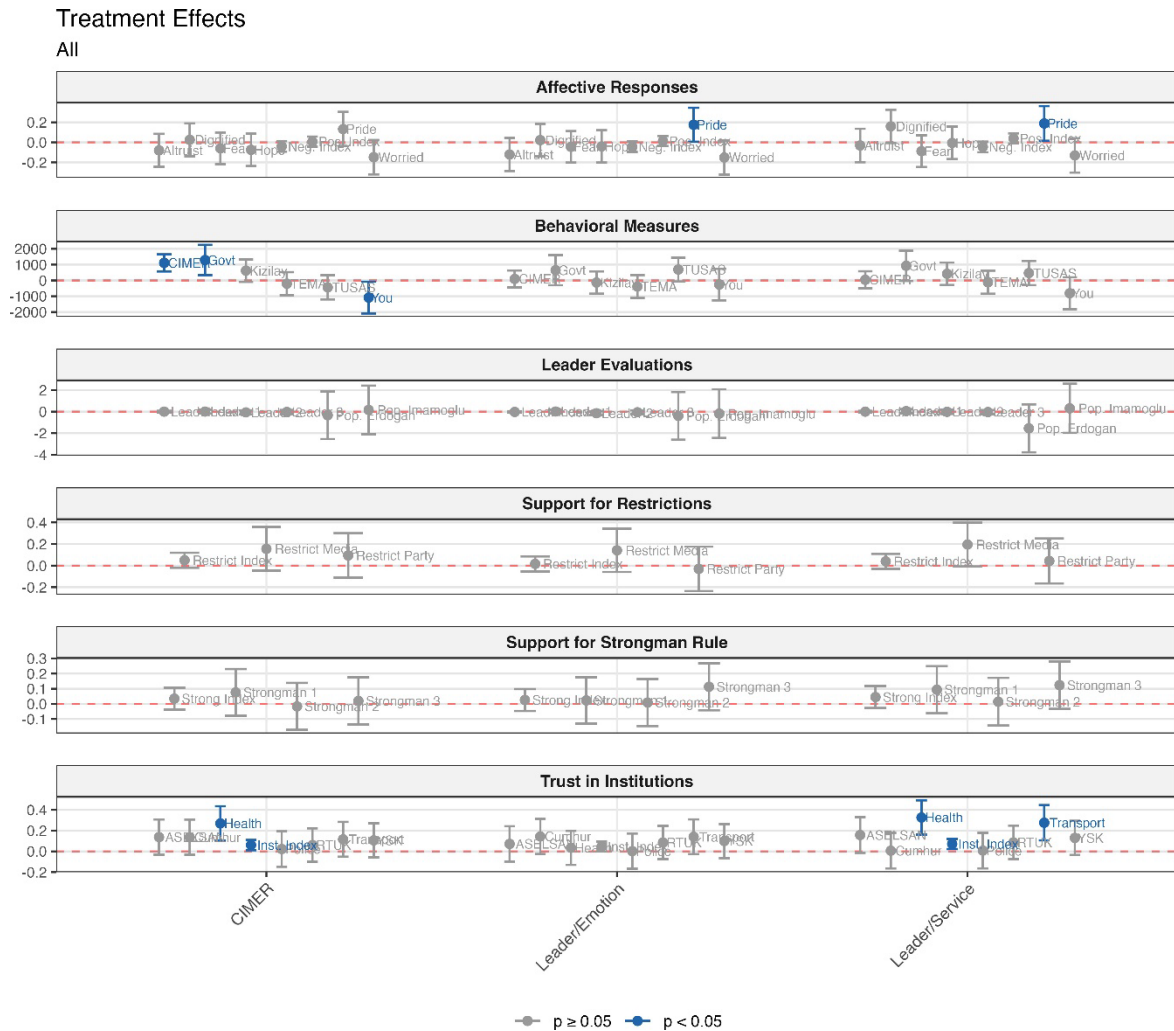
Figure 3 displays the coefficient estimates from regressions with pre-treatment controls with 95 per cent confidence intervals (CIs) for the full sample, and two subsets based on partisan identity: Cumhur, the supporters of the incumbent alliance, and the opposition voters. Each panel presents the estimated effects of three experimental treatments, CIMER (performance and social delivery treatment), Leader/Emotion (emotional messages to the leader) and Leader/Service (developmentalist, visionary and service-oriented leader) across different outcome measures.

For the full sample, two out of three treatments significantly boost trust in government institutions, as measured by the latent index. In particular, exposure to government propaganda about CIMER and the history of service delivery as a developmentalist narrative increases the odds of expressing more trust in the Ministry of Health by 31 per cent and 39 per cent compared to the baseline, reflecting a small to moderate effect. Government propaganda about the effectiveness of CIMER may also have behavioural implications: Exposure to the CIMER message significantly increased respondents' willingness to donate to state institutions – specifically hypothetical donations to CIMER – by about 1,100 TL (2.8 per cent of the total endowment), and reduce the share they kept for themselves. Finally, two out of three interventions significantly evoke feelings of pride, though they are effective only for one affective measure out of six.

For Cumhur supporters – the voters of the incumbent electoral coalition – the findings show that two out of three treatments significantly increase their trust in at least one government institution. Specifically, propaganda about CIMER's effectiveness significantly raises the odds of expressing more trust in the Cumhur electoral alliance by approximately 42 per cent. The developmentalist propaganda narrative raises the odds of having more trust in institutions, as measured by the latent index, and in the Ministries of Health and Transport by 63 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively. On the other hand, all three types of propaganda messaging backfire for the regime in terms of the perceived popularity of Erdoğan as a leader among his

constituencies: All treatments result in a decline in perceived popularity by 3.5 per cent to 5.32 per cent, while Leader/Service treatment increases the perceived popularity of İmamoğlu – the presidential candidate of the main opposition – by 3.4 per cent.

Figure 2: Treatment effects for the full sample

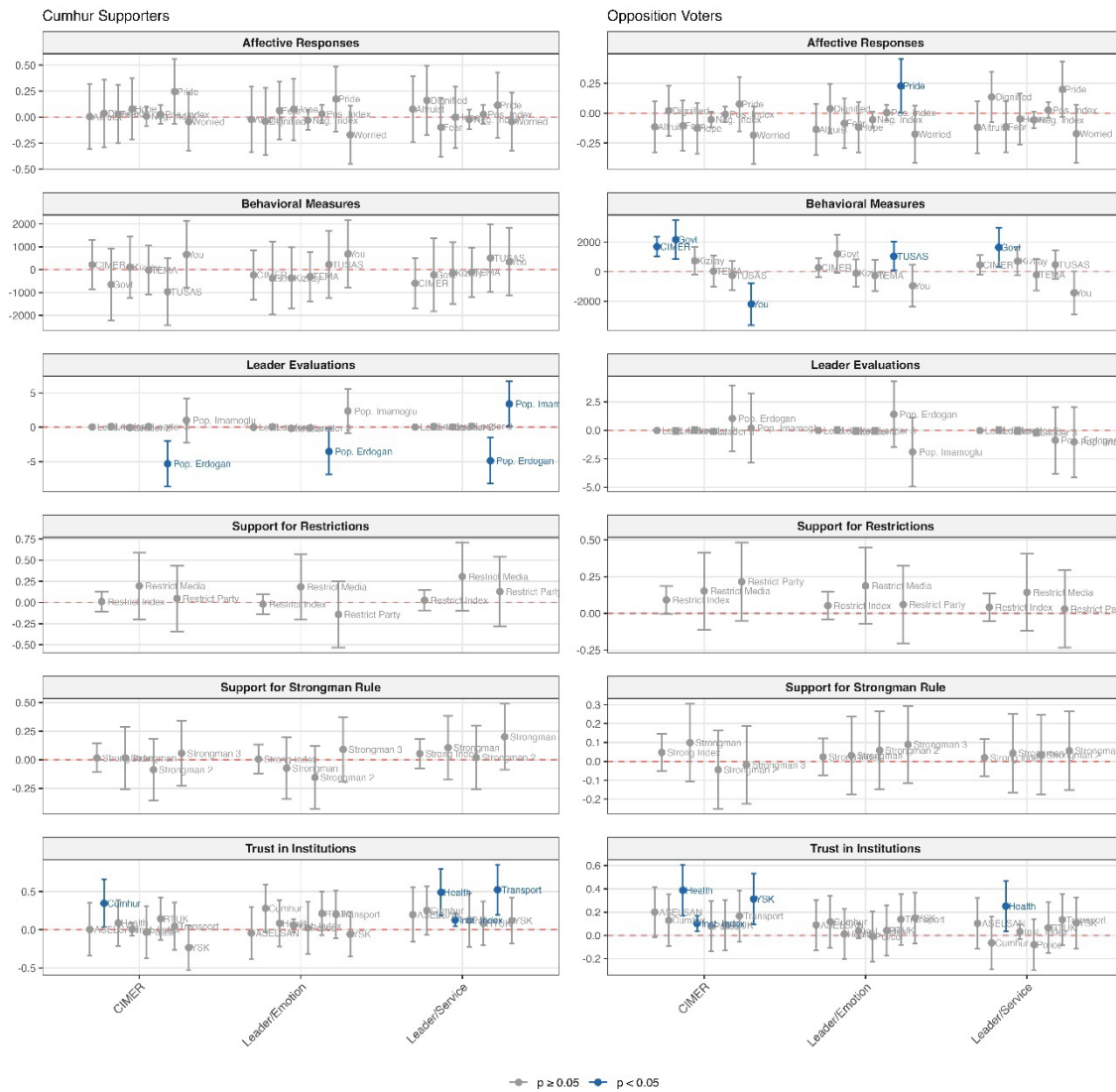


Notes: Each panel shows estimated treatment effects of three experimental interventions – CIMER, Leader/Emotion and Leader/Service – on different outcome categories for the full sample. Coefficient estimates are displayed with 95 per cent CIs from linear and ordinal regression models that control for pre-treatment attitudes and demographics. Blue points indicate statistically significant effects, while grey points denote non-significant results.

Source: Authors

Figure 3: Treatment effects for subset of supporters of main incumbent coalition and subset of opposition voters

Treatment Effects

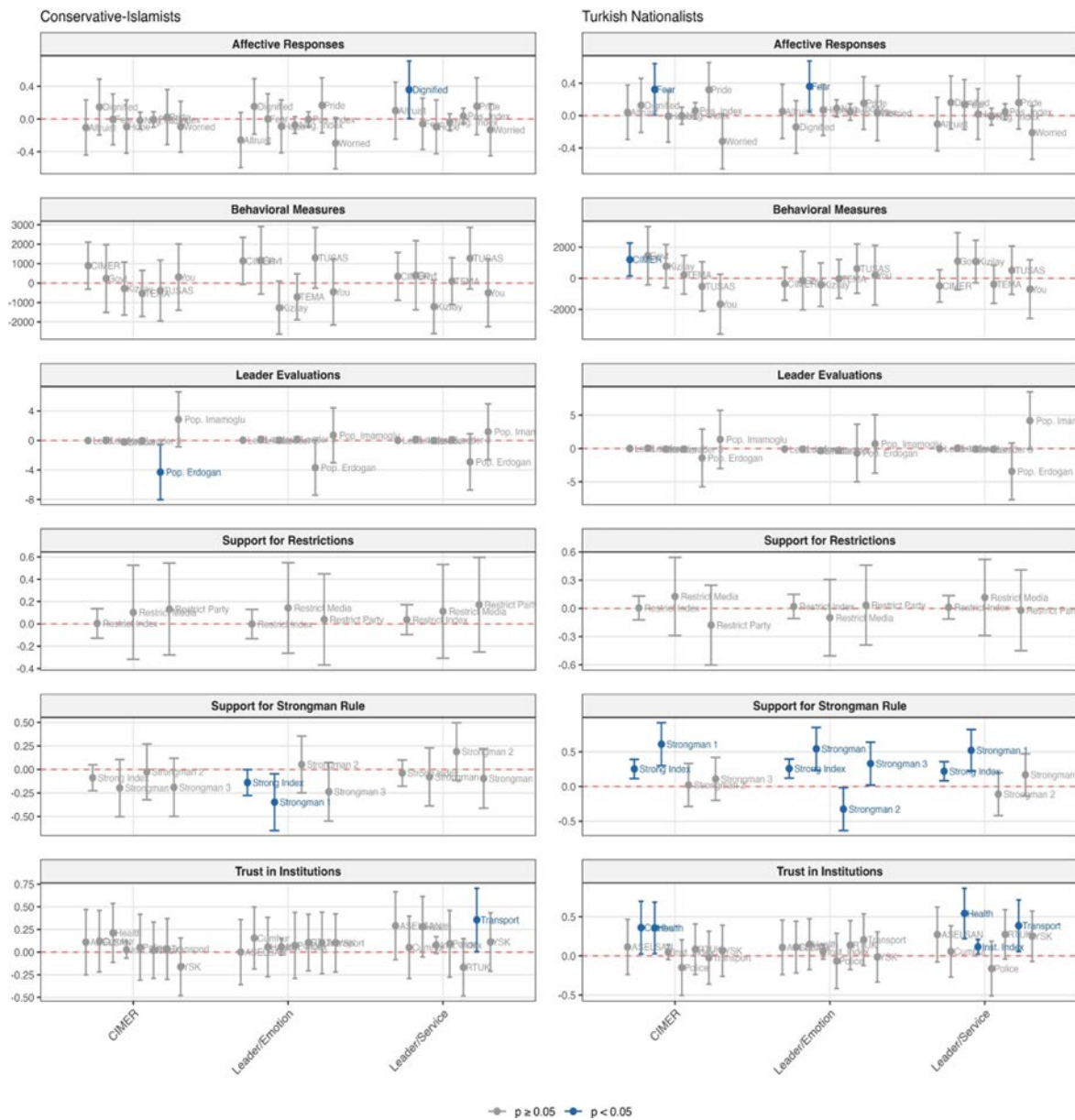


Notes: Each panel shows estimated treatment effects of three experimental interventions – CIMER, Leader/Emotion and Leader/Service – on different outcome categories for the subset of supporters of main incumbent coalition, Cumhur, and a subset of opposition voters. Coefficient estimates are displayed with 95 per cent CIs from linear and ordinal regression models that control for pre-treatment attitudes and demographics. Blue points indicate statistically significant effects, while grey points denote non-significant results.

Source: Authors

Figure 4: Treatment effects for two ideological subgroups: Turkish nationalists and conservative-Islamists

Treatment Effects



Notes: Each panel shows estimated treatment effects of three experimental interventions – CIMER, Leader/Emotion and Leader/Service – on different outcome categories for the subsets of two ideological groups, Turkish nationalists and conservatives-Islamists. Coefficient estimates are displayed with 95 per cent CIs from linear and ordinal regression models that control for pre-treatment attitudes and demographics. Blue points indicate statistically significant effects, while grey points denote non-significant results.

Source: Authors

Among the opposition voters, the results indicate that two out of three treatments significantly increase trust in at least one institution. Specifically, CIMER propaganda messaging increases the odds of more overall trust in government institutions – as measured by the latent index – the Ministry of Health and the Supreme Election Council by 36 per cent to 47 per cent, which is a moderate and unexpected amount, as regime propaganda is expected to be ineffective against regime opponents. All three types of propaganda messaging seem to be behaviourally effective, which is a surprising finding, given the ongoing financial crisis and the perceived mismanagement of public resources from the opposition's perspective. Following exposure to

CIMER propaganda, respondents significantly allocated more money to CIMER and government bodies: approximately 1,700 TL to CIMER (4.3 per cent of the total endowment), and 2,170 TL to government bodies (5.5 per cent of the total endowment). Similarly, developmentalist Leader/Service propaganda also significantly boosted hypothetical donations to government bodies by 4.1 per cent of the total endowment. Finally, Leader/Emotion treatment increases on average their allocation to the defence corporation ASELSAN and also significantly evokes feelings of pride.

There are two significant ideological groups that cross-cut the pro-government vs opposition partisan cleavages, as some do not identify with either the mainstream incumbent or the opposition party: Turkish nationalists and conservative-Islamists. Figure 4 displays the coefficient estimates for these two subset groups. As for Turkish nationalists, all treatments significantly increased their support for strongman rule, as measured by the latent index. In particular, all three types of propaganda messaging raise the odds of supporting strongmen for bending the rules to get things done by approximately 68 per cent to 84 per cent, which is a substantial amount. However, two out of three treatments also significantly evoked feelings of fear about government repression. Two out of three treatments also significantly enhanced respondents' degree of trust in at least one government institution: For example, the developmentalist Leader/Service narrative on average increased their likelihood of trusting the Ministries of Health and Transport by 71 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively. Propaganda around CIMER may have behavioural implications among this ideological group, too, as it motivates them to allocate more of their hypothetical donations to CIMER (by 3 per cent of the total endowment). As for conservatives-Islamists, Leader/Emotion treatment backfires from the regime's perspective, as their support for strongmen decreases, as measured by the latent index. One out of three treatments also significantly eroded their perceptions of Erdoğan's popularity. However, the developmentalist Leader/Service narrative makes them feel dignified.

The findings are interesting and surprising for three reasons. First, regime propaganda demonstrates limited but significant persuasive power, even among opposition voters. Depending on the outcome measure, two out of three treatments significantly raised their trust in at least one government institution by a considerable amount. More importantly, all three types of propaganda messaging significantly increased their hypothetical donations to government bodies – an unexpected finding given the fact that corruption, mismanagement and the partisan use of public resources have fuelled a salient public debate in recent electoral cycles amidst a protracted financial crisis. Propaganda about social delivery through the CIMER portal proves to be especially effective for increasing their overall trust and investment in government institutions. In other words, government propaganda yielded behavioural compliance among opposition voters, suggesting a disconnect between partisan attitudes and the willingness to engage with state institutions.

Second, contrary to our expectations, loyalty to the leader through emotional connections does not materialise through CIMER propaganda. Among *Cumhur* supporters – the regime's constituents – two out of three treatments strengthened the degree of institutional trust, but paradoxically all three types of propaganda messaging seem to backfire and erode perceptions of Erdoğan's popularity. These findings indicate that core regime supporters may face “wearing off” effects after constant exposure to propaganda, with responsiveness also revealing critical issues in the country.

Third, the effects of propaganda display important partisan asymmetries. The results show that different ideological groups that cross-cut pro-government vs opposition partisan cleavages respond differently to government propaganda about CIMER. Turkish nationalists showed the most pronounced authoritarian response, with all treatments increasing support for strongman rule by a significant amount, though coupled with heightened fears of government repression. Conversely, among conservatives and Islamists, the emotional connection with the leader backfired for the regime, decreasing support for strongman rule.

6 Conclusion

Digitalisation enthusiasts argue that, by facilitating additional and more direct channels of communication between citizens and government, e-government tools are likely to strengthen pro-democracy mobilisation. Digital tools may promote transparency and responsiveness among public administrations and political actors. Through tools such as CIMER, citizens can publicly share information rapidly and raise issues that might otherwise go unnoticed or be suppressed within traditional bureaucratic processes. The hope is that such tools enable not only journalists or opposition politicians, but also ordinary citizens to scrutinise governments and public institutions more closely. The use of e-government tools may thus help erode traditional obstacles, making it easier to reach citizens and offering them more accessible and frequent opportunities to interact directly with the state.

However, this is only one side of the coin. Sceptics highlight the growing risks that digitalisation poses to democracy. They underline the unprecedented expansion of monitoring powers by the state that digitalisation enables. The vast amounts of personal data that public institutions now collect digitally can be misused in various ways, including for surveillance and political persecution. Digitalisation so far has not lived up to the high expectations held of it at the beginning of the century (Bannister & Connolly, 2018).

Contrary to earlier assumptions, autocratic regimes have not demonstrated significant reservations about the adoption of digital governance tools. Previous arguments suggested that less democratic governments would resist e-government initiatives due to their inherent opposition to transparency, interactive citizen engagement and fears of losing control over information flows. However, these expectations have not been empirically substantiated. Today, countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Russia are among the leading adopters and promoters of e-government instruments (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024).

That said, authoritarian governments still face notable challenges when pursuing digital governance initiatives. The deployment of e-government tools entails both informational and expectational risks. Yet, it seems like autocrats often perceive these risks as outweighing the potential benefits, particularly in terms of enhancing administrative efficiency and legitimising the regime.

In this paper, we analyse whether that calculation adds up. Drawing on a survey experiment, we examine the effects of different types of official propaganda messaging disseminated through and about the CIMER platform on normative support for the regime and its leadership. Overall, the results suggest that e-government tools such as CIMER – whose democratic credentials and credibility may be questioned – significantly affect support for the regime, even among opposition supporters. Autocratic regimes seem to derive tangible benefits of legitimacy from the deployment of tools such as CIMER, particularly in terms of bolstering citizens' normative support. Interestingly, the observed effects are concentrated in attitudes towards state institutions, rather than in personal levels of support for President Erdoğan, suggesting important limits to the personalisation of legitimacy gains.

In sum, tools such as CIMER appear well-suited to strengthen regime legitimacy and perceptions of state capacity. They project an image of responsiveness that is on average received positively by citizens. In this sense, they are not intrinsically pro-democratic or pro-authoritarian but function primarily as instruments that reinforce the status quo, which logically has implications for the effect of e-government on the expected stability of autocratic regimes.

This point is crucial for the ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) community to acknowledge, given its tendency towards excessive optimism. The introduction of any digital government tool embodies what is termed a “digital development dilemma” (Akbari, 2025). Digital technologies have the potential to make services and systems more efficient, accessible and participatory, yet they can also enable surveillance, control and discrimination with unprecedented effectiveness. Which effects become predominant and what level of risk is acceptable are empirical and strategic questions that actors supporting these developments must confront more explicitly.

In this vein, some reservations about the generalisability of our results are warranted. CIMER certainly has its peculiarities, and these effects need to be contextualised. That said, most tools of this type aimed at citizen engagement share fundamental characteristics (see e.g. Citizeneye, Audit Service Ghana, 2024). Future research should test the degree to which the identified effect on regime support is robust in other contexts, but also if the specific design features of such platforms – including governance structures, content management and user experience – may condition the political and normative effects, in particular among different subgroups of the population.

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Appendix

We used block randomisation based on partisan identity (whether the respondents are supportive of the incumbent government coalition parties or not). That is why covariate balances are reported below conditional on party identification.

Table 1: Covariate balance for pro-government respondents

	Control	CIMER-delivery	Leader/Emotion	Leader/Service
Characteristic	N = 368	N = 361	N = 357	N = 361
Age	38	38	38	38
Female	0.48	0.48	0.51	0.51
Education	4.14	4.15	4.32	4.17
Religiosity	4.69	4.71	4.68	4.69
Income	5.32	5.32	5.36	5.22

Note: Table shows averages

Source: Authors

Table 2: Covariate balance for anti-government respondents

	Control	CIMER-delivery	Leader/Emotion	Leader/Service
Characteristic	N = 628	N = 632	N = 643	N = 611
Age	38	37	37	37
Female	0.51	0.52	0.50	0.52
Education	4.01	4.05	3.91	4.09
Religiosity	4.20	4.23	4.22	4.24
Income	5.07	5.04	5.05	5.17

Note: Table shows averages

Source: Authors

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Characteristic	N = 4,603
Treatments	
Control	1,163 (25%)
CIMER	1,148 (25%)
Leader/Emotion	1,160 (25%)
Leader/Service	1,132 (25%)
Age	37 (12) [18, 78]
Gender	
Male	2,169 (47%)
Female	2,434 (53%)
Education	4.05 (2.12) [1.00, 9.00]
Religiosity	4.42 (0.87) [1.00, 5.00]
Income	5.12 (1.64) [1.00, 10.00]
Pre-treatment responsiveness	2.27 (1.04) [1.00, 4.00]
Pre-treatment CIMER usage	1.47 (0.50) [1.00, 2.00]
Polarization index	-27 (37) [-100, 87]
Pre-treatment trust	0.00 (0.93) [-2.02, 1.69]
Pre-treatment satisfaction	0.00 (0.93) [-1.84, 1.98]

Note: Table shows for all variables the number of observations. For binary variables, the percentage of the overall sample is depicted in parentheses. For all the other variables, the mean standard deviation is depicted in parentheses and the minimum and maximum in square brackets.

Source: Authors