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Between the “Left-Wing Tradition” and the “Middle Way”: The Evolution of the Republican People’s Party’s Political Identity (2002–2023)

rui sheng

gpc21100@outlook.com

Fuyang Normal University

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Abstract

The Republican People's Party (CHP) is the oldest political party in Turkey. Over nearly a century of political change, its political positioning has undergone a profound transformation. The 2002 Turkish general election marked the beginning of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era of single-party rule and plunged the CHP into a deep identity crisis: bearing the historical legacy of Kemalism while inheriting the "democratic left" tradition of the 1970s, the party was forced to seek a competitive position in a political landscape reshaped by Islamic conservatism and authoritarian populism. Over more than two decades from 2002 to 2023, the CHP's identity displayed marked vacillation: it repeatedly swung between adhering to tradition and embracing the middle way, while remaining locked in a sustained tug-of-war between upholding Kemalist orthodoxy and renewing a social democratic agenda. This vacillation stemmed both from the constraints of Turkey's particular political ecology and from the party's strategic choice, as the main opposition party under authoritarian pressure, to ensure its survival. It was not until the defeat in the 2023 presidential election and the leadership turnover at the party congress that this two-decade-long identity entanglement reached a critical juncture. During the Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu periods, the CHP's composite left-wing index stagnated at around 2.2 points on a five-point scale, far below the benchmark levels of European social democratic parties. When Özgür Özel was elected party chairman in November 2023, he put forward a vision of returning to the democratic left.

Introduction

Party identification is a core feature that distinguishes a party from its competitors, shaped jointly by ideological orientation, historical legacy, social base, and policy agenda. Party supporters tend to support their party consistently even when candidates or issues change. Party identification mobilizes the public to vote for the party and to work on its behalf during election campaigns（Dalton, R. J（2021). For a party that has shifted from long-term governing to long-term opposition, an identity crisis often constitutes the most severe existential challenge. The Republican People's Party is a typical example: founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, it governed for nearly three decades as the only legal party during the single-party period. However, with the advent of multiparty politics, it gradually lost its former glory and was reduced to a main opposition party struggling to survive in a political landscape dominated by Islamist conservative forces （Yavuz, M. H, & Öztürk, A. E（ 2023).

The Turkish general election held on November 3, 2002, is widely regarded as a watershed in the country's political history (Carkoglu, A, 2002; Cagaptay, S, 2002). Founded in 2001, the AKP swept the parliamentary election with approximately 34.2 percent of the vote, winning 363 of the 550 seats in the Grand National Assembly, and inaugurated an era of single-party rule lasting more than two decades. Although the CHP crossed the 10 percent electoral threshold with approximately 19.4 percent of the vote and became the only opposition party to enter parliament（Carkoglu, A,2002), a sharp contradiction emerged between its symbolic status as the founding party and its weakness as an actual opposition force. From then until 2023, the CHP repeatedly fell into a fundamental identity dilemma: Was it a secular

nationalist party loyal to Kemalist principles, or a progressive party rooted in the social democratic "left-wing tradition"? Should its strategic focus be on retaining its existing secular elite voters, or on actively expanding its appeal to conservative voters（Ciddi, S, & Esen, B（2014)?

I. Defining the Republican People's Party's "Left-Wing Tradition" and Its Dimensions

In political science, the "left" is one of the camps on the political spectrum, generally associated with egalitarianism and with the idea that the state or the people should control mainstream political and economic institutions. The term originated during the French Revolution in the 1790s, when members of the National Assembly who advocated social change sat on the left side of the speaker, hence the name "left." Left-wing groups typically oppose the interests of traditional elites such as the wealthy and the aristocracy, and tend to defend the rights of ordinary people and grassroots communities（Encyclopaedia Britannica,2009). In short, the core criterion for classifying a group (such as a political party) as left-wing lies in whether it advocates the implementation of more thoroughgoing ideas of freedom and progress （Merriam Webster,2026).

The central argument of this article revolves around the Republican People's Party's oscillation between the "left-wing tradition" and the "middle way." To avoid terminological ambiguity, it is necessary to clearly define the meaning of the "left-wing tradition" as used in this article. Although the CHP officially describes itself as a "center-left party," there is a significant gap between its political practice and the European social democratic tradition. European social democracy emphasizes achieving social equity through democratic institutions, building a welfare state, safeguarding workers' rights, and promoting economic redistribution（Delors, J,1997). Its intellectual roots can be traced back to the labor movement and the trade union movement of the late nineteenth century, and it advocates gradual socialist reform within the framework of the capitalist system. Although the CHP shifted to a center-left position under Bülent Ecevit in the 1960s and 1970s and formally joined the Socialist International, its core ideology remains rooted in Kemalism, upholding the three central principles of secularism, nationalism, and statism, and it does not treat class analysis and social justice as core ideological concerns. This point is crucial for accurately assessing the party's ideological positioning in different historical periods（Ugur-Cinar M, Acikgoz A, Esen B,2024).

This article derives five operational measurement indicators from three dimensions: economic redistribution, sociocultural stance, and state–society relations: (1) trade union rights and labor protection; (2) positions on taxing the rich and capital; (3) minority (Kurdish) rights; (4) relations with the military and judicial guardianship system; and (5) commitment to expanding social welfare. It should be noted that these five indicators form a continuum rather than a binary classification. A party may display left-wing tendencies on one indicator while deviating completely on another; the CHP is a typical example of such an "asymmetric left." Based on this framework, this article will examine the CHP's concrete performance on the above five dimensions during the Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu periods, thereby systematically assessing the rise and decline of the "left-wing tradition" and the shift toward the "middle way."

As opposed to the “left-wing tradition,” this article defines the “middle way” as a set of strategies by which the CHP, under specific structural constraints, deviates from its core social democratic agenda and reaches compromises with other political forces. In the Turkish context, the “middle way” is not a single concept but is embodied in three distinct dimensions (**Table 1**).

Table 1: The Three Dimensions of the “Middle Road”

Dimension	Specific Connotations of the “Middle Road”	Corresponding Period
Cultural-Religious	Shifting from a hardline secularist stance to softening posture toward conservative Islamic voters, downplaying the discourse of secularism, and accommodating the public expression of sectarian and religious symbols.	Late Kılıçdaroğlu period
Ethnic	Moving from social democratic pluralism and inclusiveness toward convergence with the nationalist right-wing agenda, adopting a tough stance on the Kurdish issue similar to that of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).	Baykal period and Kılıçdaroğlu’s “Nation Alliance” period
Economic	Shifting from redistributionism to compromise with neoliberal policy frameworks, avoiding issues such as progressive taxation and labour protection, and catering to the interests of business elites and the urban middle class.	Baykal period (neoliberalism as the default framework) and Kılıçdaroğlu period (hollowing out of welfare discourse)

It should be emphasized that the unfolding of the “middle way” along these three dimensions has not been synchronized. At one point, it may veer sharply to the right on the ethno-national dimension (as in the Kurdish policies of the Baykal era), while remaining silent on the economic dimension (tacitly accepting the neoliberal framework). At another point, it may court conservatives on the cultural dimension (as in Kılıçdaroğlu’s strategic adjustments in religious discourse), while briefly returning to the left on the economic dimension (as reflected in the 2011 election promises). This asynchronous adjustment is precisely the core meaning of the term “swing”: it is not an overall left-right movement, but the composite result of strategic displacements across different dimensions.

This study calculates the “Composite Left-Wing Index” using an equal-weight averaging method. This choice is not based on the substantive assumption that all dimensions are equally important; rather, it rests on the following considerations. First, the social democratic tradition itself comprises three

irreducible pillars—economic justice, cultural pluralism, and democratic deepening. Second, in the Turkish context, the military-civilian tutelage regime and ethno-national rights are structurally intertwined; reducing the weight of the former would obscure a core mechanism of the Republican People's Party's identity transformation. Third, in the absence of expert consensus data for calibrating weights, equal weighting effectively avoids the selective bias that could be introduced by researchers' subjective assignment of weights. Of course, equal weighting may obscure heterogeneity in the sources of high scores. For example, the high scores during the Baykal era came mainly from the "military-civilian tutelage" dimension, which, in normative terms, is precisely associated with non-left characteristics. Therefore, in addition to presenting the composite index, this study always retains the full presentation of the scores on each sub-dimension, supplemented by structural analysis, so as to avoid the risk of oversimplifying the data.

II. The Structural Roots of the Republican People's Party's Identity Tension

The Republican People's Party's prolonged oscillation between its "left-wing tradition" and the "middle way" is closely tied to the institutional legacies left at the time of the party's founding and the establishment of the Republic. Before analyzing its evolution after 2002, it is necessary to trace the structural roots of this core tension.

First, the ideological core of the party's founding: Kemalism. The Republican People's Party was originally a product of Turkey's War of National Independence (Cop, B,2024). At the party's third congress in 1931, Kemal Atatürk systematically codified his political thought into six principles, symbolized by the six arrows on the party emblem: republicanism, nationalism, populism, revolutionism, secularism, and statism. These six principles together formed the ideological foundation of Kemalism and for decades became an unchallengeable canon in Turkish political identity .

However, these principles were never fully embraced by the public. The people harbored enduring discontent toward this top-down modernization project, feeling that the state's will had been imposed on them while their own emotional needs were ignored"Ugur-Cinar M, Acikgoz A, Esen B ,2024) . It is worth noting that the six arrows contain no explicit reference to "left" or "right"; they represent the ideological expression of a top-down modernization project led by nationalist elites, with a strong statist and elitist character, and they penetrated the state system through authoritarian, top-down means (Köker, L, 2026).

From the perspective of party typology, the early Republican People's Party was a classic example of a "state party." A state party must meet one of the following two conditions: (1) it is a party that emerged within the framework of a democratic polity; or (2) it is a social organization whose goal is to seize state power. Such a party did not grow organically out of social change or class struggle; rather, it was a political organization isomorphic with the state governance system, with state-building as its core objective. In 1923, the party defined its mission as practicing the principle of popular sovereignty—government of the people, by the people, and for the people—promoting Turkey's entry into the ranks of civilized nations, and establishing the absolute authority of the rule of law in Turkish society (Kartal A,2004).

Second, the first transformation from a "state party" to a "center-left party" between 1960 and 1980. The Republican People's Party's first fundamental identity shift took place between 1960 and 1980 (Ahmad, F, 1993; Kili, S, 1976). During this period, socioeconomic changes and the transformation of class structures provided the economic foundation and conditions for the rise of a center-left party. The global religious revival triggered by the Iranian Islamic Revolution, together with the intensification of domestic ideological struggles, jointly pushed the Republican People's Party—which had previously appeared as a secular elite party and a nationalist party—toward a "center-left positioning"（Zürcher, E. J,1992).

In 1972, Bülent Ecevit succeeded İsmet İnönü as chairman of the Republican People's Party, formally initiating the party's transformation toward the "democratic left." As a leftist and nationalist, Ecevit opposed religious fundamentalism and helped preserve Turkey's status as one of the most secularized Muslim countries in the world .(Curtiss, R. H., & Curtiss, D. B,2007). At the time, the Republican People's Party explicitly defined its ideology as "democratic left" (Ciddi, S,2009), aiming to achieve a "transformation of the order" through social reform—from a "party of order" to a "party of change," and from a "state party" to a "people's party." This period represented the closest the Republican People's Party came to the European social democratic tradition, and it was the only moment in its history when it clearly presented a "left-wing" identity on the political stage. The historical narrative of the Ecevit era has served as a crucial reference point, continuously and profoundly shaping the strategic imagination of every subsequent CHP leader (Denizeau, A, 2024).

Third, the identity rupture after the 1980 military coup. The military coup launched by General Kenan Evren in 1980 dealt a devastating blow to the Republican People's Party. The party was dissolved by the military government, Ecevit's political career was forcibly terminated, the party organization disintegrated, and political activities were interrupted for nearly a decade. In 1985, Ecevit's wife, Rahşan Ecevit, established the Democratic Left Party (DSP) as a substitute for the Republican People's Party. By the time the CHP was re-established in 1992, its support base had severely contracted, and its internal ideological character had become extremely blurred. In other words, the "democratic left" identity forged during the Ecevit era was not institutionally continued in the re-established CHP; instead, it became a historical rhetoric selectively invoked by successive party chairpersons. It was precisely against this background of "rupture and reconstruction" that the CHP in 2002 faced an extremely awkward identity dilemma: the mobilizing power of the Kemalist grand narrative was being steadily eroded by the Islamist populist discourse of the Justice and Development Party (AKP); the industrial working-class base on which the democratic left had depended in the 1970s had already shrunk; and the neoliberal globalization wave exerted discursive pressure on demands for socioeconomic redistribution. Under these multiple pressures, the CHP was forced to reposition its policy stance, and the identity swings since 2002 have been more the result of reactive responses than of proactive choices.

III. Nationalist Rightward Turn and Secularism's Defensive Posture (The Baykal Era, 2002–2010)

1.The Impact of the 2002 General Election and the Contraction of Identity

After the November 2002 general election, Turkey's political map was completely redrawn. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) not only broke the pattern of frequently changing coalition governments in the early 2000s, but also almost simultaneously brought about the historic collapse of all centre-right and centre-left parties. Compared with the AKP's 34.2 percent vote share and an overwhelming parliamentary majority of nearly two-thirds of the seats, the Republican People's Party (CHP) obtained only about one-fifth of the vote and barely entered parliament, leaving it with no genuine competitive leverage inside the legislature. During this period, democracy no longer meant partisan political struggle between the CHP and the AKP, but degenerated into a model in which "the ruling party consolidated its authority through elections while the opposition existed merely as a decorative source of legitimation"(Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A,2010).

During this period the CHP was led by Deniz Baykal, who served as party chairman three times: 1992–1995, 1995–1999, and 2000–2010. He was known for his hardline secularist stance and repeatedly accused the AKP of "threatening Turkey's secular order" (The Irish Times. n.d,2026). From 2002 to 2010 he led the main opposition party in confrontation with the AKP. The 2007 parliamentary election further consolidated the CHP's position as the main opposition party, but also exposed its electoral weaknesses: the AKP won about 47 percent of the vote and 341 seats, while the CHP won only about 21 percent and 112 seats, and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) received about 14 percent and 70 seats. Baykal was also criticized for his elite image, which was seen as limiting the party's electoral appeal (Jenkins, G. H,2010).

2.Ideological Shift toward Hard-line Nationalism

At the ideological level, the CHP under Baykal shifted to a hard-line nationalist line. The party departed from its own left-wing position and alienated potential voters, especially Kurdish constituencies in eastern Turkey. On the Kurdish question, the party adopted an extremely hardline attitude; its rhetoric and actual policies were not only on a par with those of far-right forces such as the Nationalist Action Party, but also represented a departure from the tolerant spirit on minority rights advocated by the democratic left in the 1970s.

In the 1970s, under Bülent Ecevit, the CHP developed a political paradigm known as the "centre-left," emphasizing social democracy, civilian governance, and gradual reform, distinguishing itself from the dominant right-wing nationalism and religious conservatism of the time. Yet although it was widely regarded as a left-wing party, the CHP of the Baykal era effectively functioned as a centre-right party. Its ideology was aligned with secularist Kemalism; the party increasingly distanced itself from low-income voters, ceased to act as a check on neoliberal economic policies, and mainly confined itself to defending the nation-state model—secularism and Turkish nationalism—against rising Islamism and the Kurdish political movement(Ciddi, S., & Esen, B,2014). After 2002, the nationalist and statist features of this ideology were further reinforced, to the point that there was no essential difference between the CHP and other nationalist right-wing parties.

3.The Articulation of the "Anatolian Left" and the Reinterpretation of Kemalism

Faced with the AKP's conservative mobilization logic rooted in the Anatolian heartland, the CHP sought to fill its identity vacuum through discursive innovation. Baykal proposed the concept of the "Anatolian Left," referring to a political project rooted in Anatolian soil and at the same time carrying moderate left-wing concerns. However, despite this slogan, its translation into concrete policies and strategies remained seriously inadequate. Under Baykal, the CHP never abandoned its elitist, top-down style of governance, which made the "Anatolian Left" label seriously detached from grassroots social realities. Election surveys in 2007 showed that most poor voters supported the AKP, while wealthier voters mostly voted for the CHP (Turan, R,2007).

From an institutionalist perspective, the CHP of this period formed a de facto institutional alliance with Kemalist bureaucratic institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the military, and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). Studies of the CHP's ideology and organizational structure between 1992 and 2007 indicate that the party did not represent or aggregate popular demands, but instead sought to shape the political agenda through the judiciary and the military. The core concepts of its political discourse were "national interest," "national security," "nation-state," "secularism," and "unitary state," rather than the typical themes of social democracy—social solidarity, class equality, and labor rights. In a sense, this exactly explains why the post-2002 CHP, although nominally occupying a "left-wing" position, was unable to genuinely mobilize or represent the petty bourgeoisie and the urban working class. What made the CHP's "middle way" image especially awkward was its attitude toward the neoliberal agenda. The party never mounted a substantive or systematic critique of the neoliberal reshaping of Turkish society. Its sporadic criticisms of neoliberalism and globalization were directed not at issues of social distributive justice but arose from concerns over national sovereignty and national interests. This "nationalist-left narrative" ultimately led to a kind of self-deconstruction.

4.Ambiguity in Relations with the Military and the Emergence of the Constitutional Crisis

In the 2007 presidential election crisis, the CHP's response was both striking and highly controversial. The ruling AKP nominated Abdullah Gül, who had an Islamist background, as its presidential candidate, provoking strong opposition from secularist forces including the CHP. The Chief of the General Staff, long regarded as the guardian of the secular order, also issued a warning, while the CHP boycotted the first round of voting in parliament, insisting that the election was "illegitimate." Although this boycott tactic was formally lawful, it caused the CHP to become excessively identified in the public eye with the military's institutional conservative stance, while reinforcing a sharply polarized picture between secularist and religious camps. Poll data showed that as many as 65 percent of CHP voters supported the party out of concern over the rising influence of Islamist forces in Turkey (Bahar, H,2007). Provinces where the CHP exceeded the 15 percent threshold can be grouped into five categories: (1) Thrace; (2) metropolitan areas such as Istanbul and Ankara; (3) Aegean and Mediterranean coastal provinces; (4) two Alevi axes, one running through Erzincan, Tunceli, and Malatya and the other through Tokat, Çorum, and Amasya; (5) scattered social democratic areas along the Black Sea coast□Esen, B., & Ciddi, S□2011).

In 2008, when the AKP faced a closure case before the Constitutional Court over alleged unconstitutional activities, the CHP's stance was again striking: it did oppose the AKP's "overreach" and Islamist conservative forces in Turkey, but at the same time seemed to lack a unified political program capable of transcending sectarian conflict（Karaveli, H. M,2008). Moreover, because of its state-centric ideology and emotionally charged rhetoric against religious conservatives, the CHP's domestic appeal was largely confined to secular middle-class and intellectual groups in the capital and coastal metropolises, while its influence in the Anatolian heartland and rural areas continued to shrink.

During the Baykal era, the CHP scored relatively high only on the dimension of "relations with the military–judicial guardianship regime" (reflecting its strategy of reliance on state institutions). On the four dimensions on which a left-wing party should score high—labor rights, tax fairness, minority rights, and social welfare—its scores remained consistently low. Overall, the party displayed clear "rightward" characteristics, far beyond what its "left-wing tradition" could encompass (Table 2).

Table 2: Five-Dimension Performance Assessment of the Republican People's Party (CHP) during the Baykal Period

Dimension	Performance Summary	Score	Remarks
Trade union rights and labour protection	Virtually no substantive expansion of trade union rights; no positive response to the labour movement; distant relations with union organisations.	2	The close relationship with unions from the Democratic Left period has broken. Party discourse is dominated by national interest, with no labour mobilisation.
Tax stance on the wealthy and capital	No proposal for progressive taxation or capital tax reform; essentially acquiesces to neoliberal economic policies, lacking redistributive initiatives.	1.5	In practice maintains close ties with business elites; critics accuse it of "departing from the left".
Minority (Kurdish) rights	Extremely hardline stance, rhetoric approaching that of the Nationalist Movement Party; refuses any concessions on Kurdish-language education or local autonomy.	1	Represents a break from the more tolerant approach of the Ecevit period in the 1970s.
Relations with the military/judicial tutelage system	Forms an institutional alliance with the military, the Constitutional Court, and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK); relies on state institutions to counterbalance the AKP.	4.5	Essentially a "state-party", depending on tutelary mechanisms rather than social mobilisation.
Commitment to welfare expansion	Lacks a systematic welfare expansion plan; electoral pledges are piecemeal and do not address structural redistribution issues.	–	Social welfare issues are marginalised by nationalist and secularist discourse.

IV. The Cost of the Rightward Turn and the Predicament of the Nation Alliance (The Kılıçdaroğlu Era, 2010–2023)

1.Party Leadership Change and Early “Centre-Left Expectations”

In May 2010, after Baykal abruptly resigned following the leak of a sex scandal video, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had worked for many years in the Ministry of Finance and was known for his clean image and unpretentious manner, was elected as the new chairman. Compared with Baykal’s elitist style, Kılıçdaroğlu’s rise was initially widely seen as an opportunity for the CHP’s transformation. Commentators called him “Turkey’s Gandhi”(Smith, S, 2010), and he enjoyed considerable goodwill among ordinary urban residents and the working class of Istanbul. As an Alevi Muslim, Kılıçdaroğlu also brought representation of a religious minority, thereby reinforcing his political platform of “unity and inclusiveness.” The CHP continued to aim at maximizing its vote share and sent signals of a break with the policies of the Baykal era. Clearly, he did not advocate opposition for opposition’s sake, which had been a hallmark of the party under Deniz Baykal’s chairmanship (Ciddi, S., & Esen, B,2014).

The 2011 general election was the first test of whether Kılıçdaroğlu’s reformist line could effectively activate voter support. The final results of the June 2011 parliamentary election showed that the CHP’s vote share was approximately 25.9 percent, a significant increase from 20.7 percent in 2007. During the campaign, the CHP put forward a series of policy promises with pronounced “left-wing” redistributive features, including monthly subsidies for low-income families, low-cost fuel and free electricity for farmers, higher pensions for retired workers, and lower university tuition fees. At the same time, on the Kurdish question Kılıçdaroğlu adopted a stance entirely different from Baykal’s hardline period: the CHP openly advocated a set of relatively moderate and inclusive policies, including expanding local government powers in Kurdish-majority regions, lifting restrictions on Kurdish-language education, and lowering the parliamentary election threshold. On the surface, these policy agendas and the change in the party leader’s style should have brought the CHP an expanded social base in the 2011 election. Reality, however, produced different figures: the AKP continued to govern with an absolute majority of 327 seats, and Turkish society did not genuinely turn to the CHP because of the AKP’s authoritarian style.

2.The CHP Adopts a Pragmatic Strategy

Between 2009 and 2015, the AKP government and the Kurdish political movement launched a promising but short-lived reconciliation process that ultimately collapsed. In the 2010 constitutional referendum, Kılıçdaroğlu continued the CHP’s systematic opposition to the AKP’s judicial reforms and constitutional amendments. Under his leadership, the CHP launched a nationwide campaign for a “No” vote(Hürriyet Daily News,2017), accusing the constitutional amendments of seriously weakening the military-dominated secular institutions and encouraging the expansion of authoritarianism under the new presidential system. However, the referendum result of 12 September 2010 approved the constitutional amendments with about 57.9 percent support. The referendum showed that patience with secular elite discourse was running out across large parts of the Anatolian interior, prompting the CHP to adopt more

strategic thinking in subsequent years: if it stubbornly clung to the simple identity of “guardian of secularism,” its voter base would only continue to shrink.

Faced with this dilemma, Kılıçdaroğlu chose a cautious and pragmatic path during his thirteen years at the helm of the CHP. Under his leadership, the CHP gradually moved away from left-wing social democratic discourse and transformed into a political platform blending nationalism, conservative narratives, and right-wing populism. This trend was especially evident on the eve of the 2018 local elections. The CHP actively extended an olive branch to the conservative Nationalist Action Party and emerging centre-right parties, forming the “Nation Alliance.” By then, the dominant political categories in official public debate had shifted from standard social democratic demands for equality to stronger nationalist and anti-authoritarian overtones.

3.Factional Crisis and the Formation of the Nation Alliance

The 2015 election cycle was a tortuous and painful experience for the CHP. In the June 2015 parliamentary election, the AKP’s vote share fell sharply to about 41 percent and 258 seats, losing its ability to govern alone for the first time. But the election produced another unexpected consequence: the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) entered parliament for the first time after crossing the 10 percent threshold.

On 1 November 2015, Turkey held its 26th parliamentary election. The AKP camp used this repeat election to regain an absolute parliamentary majority, winning 49.5 percent of the vote and 316 seats. The CHP received 25.4 percent and 134 seats. This election split the CHP’s internal voter base. Many previously undecided lower-middle-class urban voters increasingly felt disappointed as they saw the CHP clinging to the existing social structure. Because the CHP lacked the grassroots mobilization capacity to match the AKP’s nationwide organizational potential, many voters with “left-wing critical” leanings, especially young people, turned to the HDP(Karaveli, H,2018). For those young people and oppressed groups long subjected to unjust distribution, the AKP, despite its strong Islamist conservative coloring, gained support in key constituencies through administrative patronage and religious social networks. As one side lost and the other gained, the CHP keenly realized that a single left-wing line could not win elections, and therefore accelerated its centralized bargaining strategy.

From the mid-2010s onward, the CHP formally joined a multi-party alliance composed of six secular parties, centrist groups, and moderate right-wing forces (the “Nation Alliance”), hoping to gather the broad middle ground and create an electoral wave capable of shaking the AKP. At the same time, Kılıçdaroğlu seized the opportunity to court the “nationalist-conservative” camp, signaling openness on religious discourse while hollowing out socialist discourse.

However, deep ideological tensions existed within the Nation Alliance, especially on the Kurdish question. When the alliance was initially formed in 2018, the CHP attempted to incorporate left-wing agendas such as “resuming the Kurdish peace process” into its election platform, but met open resistance from İYİ Party leader Meral Akşener, who threatened that any “overture to the pro-Kurdish

HDP” would cause the alliance to collapse. In the end, Kılıçdaroğlu chose to suppress the left-wing voices within the party, and all clauses concerning Kurdish language rights were removed from the joint declaration. This conflict marked the CHP’s loss of the ability to independently formulate an ethnic policy agenda within the alliance framework; its “centre-left” discourse was effectively hijacked by the nationalist positions of its right-wing allies.

4.The Debacle of the 2023 Election and the End of an Era

The presidential and parliamentary elections of May 2023 were the final verdict on Kılıçdaroğlu’s rightward turn strategy. Before the election, the CHP had briefly gained an advantage in public opinion by exploiting popular discontent caused by the economic collapse. Kılıçdaroğlu reshaped his value proposition into populist themes acceptable to conservative audiences, including “national priorities” such as the defence industry and a national identity discourse transcending “left, right, or centre.” But when the results were announced, Erdoğan led in the first round with 49.52 percent of the vote, slightly ahead of the CHP candidate’s 44.88 percent. Although the CHP maintained advantages in some metropolitan municipalities, its nationwide vote share remained below 25 percent. The election results showed that Kılıçdaroğlu’s strategy of using right-wing packaging to attract AKP voters did not make a substantive contribution to expanding the party’s support base.

Trust in Kılıçdaroğlu’s leadership collapsed within the party. At the party congress held on 4 November 2023, Özgür Özel, running for chairman as a relatively moderate challenger, defeated Kılıçdaroğlu, marking a new juncture in the internal debate over the party’s direction. In his victory speech, Özel invoked Ecevit’s 1972 speech, proposing to steer the CHP back toward social democracy, embrace trade unions, and fight for the oppressed.

To systematically assess the CHP's performance during the Kılıçdaroğlu era, Table 3 summarizes the party's five-dimension scores and provides explanatory remarks for each dimension(see **Table 3**).

Table 3: Five-Dimension Performance Assessment of the CHP during the Kılıçdaroğlu Period

Dimension	Performance Summary	Score (1–5)	Remarks / Explanation
Trade union rights and labour protection	Moderate statements in the early period, but later diluted by the nationalist alliance agenda; no influential trade union legislative reforms proposed.	2.5	Slight improvement over the Baykal period, but still far from European social democratic standards.
Tax stance on the wealthy and capital	Proposed redistributive measures such as low-income subsidies and cheap fuel in the 2011 elections, but did not pursue them after taking office; later shifted fully to pragmatism, avoiding taxation on capital.	2.5	Left-wing economic policies appeared only during election campaigns, lacking institutional commitment.
Minority (Kurdish) rights	Relatively inclusive stance at first (Kurdish-language education, local autonomy), but turned sharply rightward after 2015 due to coalition pressures, removing all provisions related to Kurdish language rights.	–	Followed a “rise-then-fall” trajectory, eventually being constrained by nationalist allies such as the İYİ Party.
Relations with the military/judicial tutelage system	Gradually distanced from the military (opposed the military-dominated system in the 2010 constitutional referendum), but still relied on judicial struggle (e.g., opposing the AKP’s constitutional amendments).	2.5	No longer allied with the military, but did not adopt a social-movement approach.
Commitment to welfare expansion	Proposed relatively systematic welfare promises in 2011 (pensions, tuition fee reductions); later displaced by nationalist security issues, with welfare discourse hollowed out.	2.5	Welfare issues were marginalised, giving way to populist nationalism.

During the Kılıçdaroğlu era, scores across the five dimensions were generally low (mostly fluctuating between 1.5 and 2.5), tracing a trajectory of “a slight leftward shift followed by a sharp rightward turn.” It is particularly noteworthy that the minority rights dimension regressed significantly under the exigencies of alliance politics, marking the CHP’s complete abandonment of an independent left-wing stance at the level of national policy. Overall, this period may aptly be described as a “pragmatic rightward turn,” in which the left-wing tradition was replaced by strategic calculations in the service of electoral alliances.

Table 4 presents a summary comparison of the five-dimension scores between the Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu periods, allowing for a cross-period assessment of the CHP's composite left-wing index(see Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of Comparative Assessment between the Two Periods

Dimension	Baykal Period (2002–2010)	Kılıçdaroğlu Period (2010–2023)
Trade union rights and labour protection	2	2.5
Tax stance on the wealthy and capital	1.5	2.5
Minority (Kurdish) rights	1	2→1
Relations with the military/judicial tutelage system	4.5	2.5
Commitment to welfare expansion	2	2.5
Composite Left Index (average score)	2.2	2.2

Cross-period observations show that the composite left-wing index scores for the Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu periods were almost identical (both 2.2), but their internal compositions differed significantly. The former relied heavily on the military–judicial guardianship dimension—a non-left-wing feature—whereas the latter shifted systematically to the right due to alliance politics. Both scores were far below the typical level of European social democratic parties (usually above 4). This data trajectory confirms the core argument of this article: the CHP's oscillation between its "left-wing tradition" and the "middle way" was essentially strategic fluctuation within a low-level equilibrium, and did not achieve a genuine deepening of social democracy.

To test the robustness of the measurement results, this article sets up different weighting schemes for sensitivity testing. Regardless of the weighting scheme adopted, the relative ranking of the two periods remains unchanged, and the core conclusions are unaffected. Scheme B further highlights the extreme weakness of economic left-wing attributes during the Baykal era, while Scheme C reveals compromises on the cultural-national dimension during the Kılıçdaroğlu era. Table 5 reports the alternative weighting schemes and the resulting composite left index scores for both periods(see Table 5).

Table 5: Alternative Weighting Schemes and Composite Left Index Scores

Scheme	Description	Baykal Period	Kılıçdaroğlu Period
Scheme A: Equal weighting (adopted in the main text)	All five dimensions equally important	2.2	2.2
Scheme B: Economic priority	Economic dimensions (unions + tax + welfare) account for 60%, the remaining 40%	1.8	2.1
Scheme C: Cultural priority	Ethnic + military-judicial + cultural dimensions account for 60%, economic 40%	2.6	2.3

V. Structural Challenges Facing the CHP's Transformation

First, Kemalism as an ideological constraint. From 2002 to 2023, the CHP's left-wing tradition faced an inescapable paradox: there existed a deep, systemic tension between the democratic left discourse it had developed in the 1970s and its deeply rooted Kemalist state philosophy. Mainstream Kemalism today is a top-down structural narrative emphasizing elitism, statism, and military-civilian guardianship, whereas the democratic left requires a party to rely on trade unions, grassroots civic movements, and bottom-up forms of struggle to reform institutions.

Between Kemalism and social democratic values, the CHP has always adopted a hesitant posture, aligning itself simultaneously with both systems while lacking the capacity to fully integrate them. The CHP must therefore place greater emphasis on the social democratic features within its internal value system rather than clinging to a classical restatement of Kemalism. It should be stressed that the high score (4.5) obtained by the Baykal era on the "civil-military relations" dimension does not reflect an enhancement of its left-wing attributes, but rather reveals a specific mechanism of the CHP's identity alienation. Within a standard social democratic evaluation framework, alliance with a military-civilian guardianship regime should be treated as a negative indicator—that is, the higher the score, the lower the left-wing purity. However, in the Turkish context of 2002–2010, this dimension constituted a key independent variable for understanding the CHP's strategic choices: it was precisely by attaching itself to the Kemalist state apparatus that the CHP was able to maintain its symbolic status as the "guardian of the secular order" amid electoral weakness, yet in doing so it completely forfeited the capacity to challenge the AKP through social mobilization. Thus, the high score on this dimension within the composite index effectively functioned as an indicator of "structural distortion"—it explains why the composite index score of the Baykal period (2.2) was comparable to that of the Kılıçdaroğlu period even though their internal compositions were fundamentally different: the former represented a distorted equilibrium of "rising statism and collapsing social democracy," while the latter was a mediocre equilibrium of "comprehensive moderate rightward shift."

Second, the problem of working-class detachment and embourgeoisement. The second structural defect of the CHP's left-wing tradition lies in the transformation of its social base and its increasingly pronounced embourgeoisement trend. In the 1960s and 1970s, the CHP was still able to effectively integrate working-class and civil servant constituencies through trade union links. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, its urban voter base has gradually narrowed, concentrating mainly on specific groups: metropolitan middle classes, retired civil servants, intellectuals, and university students. At the same time, the genuine worker-peasant alliance and marginalized poor populations were absorbed by the AKP through Islamist business association networks and family-based political patronage systems.

At present, the CHP also faces challenges such as the bureaucratization of grassroots organizations and negative public perceptions of internal party corruption. Against the backdrop of the AKP's long-term control of the media and public discourse, internal election disputes within the CHP are often portrayed

as elite power struggles rather than turning points for left-wing renewal. When the CHP attempts to advance social policies aimed at attracting cross-class voters while simultaneously needing to maintain a clear working-class identity label, the tension between these two objectives may further weaken the clarity of its political signals.

Third, Turkey's electoral geography continues to constrain the CHP's electoral performance. The party's strongholds are concentrated mainly along the Mediterranean coast and in certain affluent middle-class neighborhoods of metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, while it remains relatively weak in small towns and rural areas of the southeastern Anatolian interior, the north, and the center. Specifically, its vote share is highly concentrated in the western coastal regions, Thrace, and major cities, whereas its grassroots organizational strength is clearly insufficient in the Anatolian heartland, rural areas along the Black Sea coast, and Kurdish-populated areas of the southeast. For conservative voters in the Anatolian heartland, Erdoğan is widely seen as the first leader to embrace pious lower-class populations and give them a sense of dignity and identity(Gardner, D,2018).

Over the past decade, the ruling AKP has consolidated its electoral dominance within the right-wing political camp (Gumuscu, S2013).The ruling party controls the media and administrative resources, and opposition parties find it difficult to carry out grassroots social programs, which in turn weakens the incentives for center-left voters to participate.

The results of the 2023 general election fully exposed this set of structural dilemmas. The Kılıçdaroğlu era's election strategy centered on the Nation Alliance ended in failure. Even if opposition parties are able to integrate secular camp forces, it remains difficult for them to break through the existing social cleavages, geographic patterns, and institutional constraints imposed by competitive authoritarianism. Whether the CHP can complete its identity reconstruction in the future depends on whether it can deal with the Kemalist legacy, rebuild its class base, and break the electoral geography bottleneck. This is a major issue left for the post-Kılıçdaroğlu era.

Table 6: Theoretical Positioning of the Propositions

Proposition	Relevant Theoretical Field	Core Conceptual Contribution
The "Double Bind" of Former Ruling Party Transformation	Historical Institutionalism / Party Origin Theory	Historical-Institutional Heritage Constraint Coefficient
Asynchrony between Identity Politics and Economic Redistribution	Party Competition / Ideological Space Theory	Multidimensional Asynchronous Shift / Asynchronous Reconfiguration

Conclusion

Between 2002 and 2023, the Republican People's Party underwent two programmatic adjustments: from nationalist contraction during the Baykal era to right-wing pragmatic compromise during the Kılıçdaroğlu era. This evolutionary process can serve as a typical case of how an opposition party with a former ruling-party background makes adaptive strategic adjustments under a competitive authoritarian regime. Within the theoretical framework of "competitive authoritarianism" proposed by Levitsky and Way, the CHP's experience reveals that under systematically distorted electoral competition rules, opposition parties are subjected to multiple pressures arising from historical legacies, alliance politics, and voter structures. Based on the CHP case, this article distills two propositions with theoretical revisionary significance.

First, the "dual bind of former ruling-party transformation." This concept derives from Gregory Bateson's double bind theory, referring to a structural predicament in which an actor faces two mutually exclusive expectations, and satisfying either one will incur negative consequences. Introducing this concept into the analysis of party transformation, the CHP case provides an excellent illustration. On the one hand, Kemalism, as the party's founding legacy, endows it with distinctive symbolic capital; the historical identity of the "party of the nation's founder" gives it enduring authority among secularist voters. On the other hand, this same legacy simultaneously constitutes a cognitive constraint: conservative elites within the party tend to define attempts at social democratic transformation as deviations from Kemalist orthodoxy, while any adjustment toward conservative positions is perceived by traditional supporters as a compromise of founding principles. This proposition supplements and revises the assumption in Levitsky and Way's framework that opposition parties can simply be treated as "vote-maximizing rational actors," demonstrating that historical identity produces path-dependent institutional constraints. From a comparative perspective, similar tensions have emerged in the transformation processes of former ruling parties such as the Indian National Congress, the African National Congress in South Africa, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico. Research on competitive authoritarianism may introduce a "coefficient of historical-institutional legacy constraints" to distinguish the strategic space of former ruling-party-type opposition parties from that of newly emerging opposition parties.

Second, the non-synchronicity between identity politics and economic redistribution. The transformation of a party's ideology is not a monolithic shift to the left or right; different dimensions can undergo independent displacements, producing "multidimensional asynchronous shifts" and "asynchronous recombination." The CHP's practice demonstrates that it can shift sharply to the right on the ethno-nationalist dimension while retaining some left-wing discourse on the economic plane; it can also signal openness to conservative voters on the cultural dimension while briefly proposing redistributive programs on the economic plane. This asynchrony has produced a persistent gap between the party's nominal "centre-left" identity and its actual policies.

More than two decades of history demonstrate that if the CHP is to escape its identity predicament, it needs not only tactical adjustments at the electoral level, but also a reckoning with the Kemalist legacy, a

reconstruction of the class base of social democracy, and a resolution of Turkey's entrenched social and electoral geographic cleavages. The CHP's oscillating trajectory also provides an empirical sample from Turkey for understanding the survival dilemmas of established opposition parties in hybrid regimes. The theoretical positioning and core conceptual contributions of these two propositions are summarised below (see Table 6).

Declarations

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Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available sources, including official election results published by the Turkish Supreme Election Council (YSK), party manifestos and official statements of the Republican People's Party (CHP), publicly accessible newspaper archives, and peer-reviewed academic literature. All sources are cited in the Reference list.

The coding scheme, the five-dimension scoring criteria, the equal-weight and alternative weighting procedures, and the composite left-wing index calculations used in this study are provided in the manuscript (Tables 2–5 and the accompanying notes in Section I and Section IV). These materials are fully sufficient for editors and referees to verify and scrutinise the coding and scoring procedures.

As this study does not involve the collection of raw human-subject data, and as all empirical materials are publicly accessible and cited, no additional datasets require deposit. Any further clarification regarding the coding framework or scoring rationale can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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