

# Partisans' Online Discourses Against Opposing Information: Affective Polarization Thwarting Democratic Debate

## Abstract

Affective polarization, characterized by entrenched partisan hostility, is increasingly threatening democratic norms by fostering exclusionary and uncivil discourse, particularly in digital spaces. This study investigates how individuals respond to fact-checks that contradict their political beliefs in the polarized and authoritarian context of Turkey. Focusing on 1,543 user comments responding to 23 fact-checks published by Teyit.org during the 2023 Turkish presidential elections, this analysis dissects the emotional tone, targets, and rhetorical strategies employed in online political discourse. A key contribution of the study is distinguishing between uncivil comments, profane or insulting remarks primarily targeting political elites, and intolerant discourse, which directs hostility toward marginalized groups, posing a greater risk to democratic pluralism. Findings show that partisans, ignoring factual content, reframe fact-checkers as biased actors and use tactics such as whataboutism, sarcasm, and source discrediting to reject inconvenient truths. The results also highlight how online polarization during elections sustains elite-focused antagonism and facilitates social exclusion and the scapegoating of minorities. These dynamics illustrate that, though designed to promote truth, fact-checking efforts can become entangled in broader struggles over identity, trust, and legitimacy in deeply divided societies.

**Keywords:** affective polarization, social media, fact-checking, misinformation, depolarization, uncivil discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Affective polarization, defined as inter-party animosity stemming from intense partisanship that turns into a social identity (Sood and Iyengar, 2016), has increasingly disrupted democratic deliberation. This hostility frequently manifests in the form of dismissive, derogatory, or intolerant language, particularly in online discourse. Such expressions not only undermine civil discourse

but also serve to deepen societal divisions. Moreover, the proliferation of manipulative content on social media impedes users' ability to navigate online spaces and exploits emotional appeals to intensify polarization and distort public understanding (Serrano-Puche, 2021). In response to this challenge, fact-checking organizations have taken on the task of providing accurate information and debunking misconceptions surrounding opposing groups.

At the center of this dynamic lies the interaction between partisanship and information credibility, particularly in how audiences engage with fact-checks that contradict their political views. These organizations received praise, resistance, and criticism simultaneously for their neutral referee role in politically polarized social settings, questioning their effectiveness in correcting the misbeliefs of partisans (Walter et al., 2020). This study examines user reactions to debunking stories posted by Teyit.org, a renowned civil society-based fact-checking organization in Turkey, during the 2023 Turkish presidential election. It focuses particularly on the language tone, whether civil, uncivil, or intolerant, and the discursive strategies employed, aiming to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of partisan responses to corrective information. The presidential election unfolded in a context marked by extreme polarization and authoritarian rule, exacerbating social cleavages for political advantage. Under these circumstances, democratic institutions, individual rights, and press freedom were considerably restricted. (Büyükbay, 2025). Twitter (X) has emerged as a pivotal platform for political expression in the country, providing a space for diverse and relatively uncensored voices.

The existing literature on emotional hostility on social media during political debates primarily focuses on several key areas. Researchers have examined disinformation strategies used on social media to exacerbate polarization (Palau-Sampio, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2023) and the effectiveness of online fact-checking interventions during elections (Hameleers and van

der Meer, 2020). The other research focuses were differences in online political discourse across various platforms and news outlets (Humprecht et al., 2020), the relationship between social media usage and levels of affective polarization (Nordbrandt, 2023), and emotional responses to the online presence of political leaders (Buyens, 2024). Affective polarization has been shown to heighten emotional responses and deepen partisan divisions; however, less attention has been paid to the specific forms and targets of hostility expressed in reaction to corrective information, particularly in non-Western, highly polarized settings.

A thorough examination of online users' discursive strategies to incite hostility toward out-group members is essential for informing the development of more effective intervention tools. It is crucial to understand how partisan users on social media platforms contribute to affective polarization by vilifying political opponents and rejecting dissonant information. Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of this hostility requires more than just tracing emotional tone, ideological bias, or discursive strategies. In terms of the tone of political talk, there is an essential theoretical distinction between uncivil discourse, marked by vulgarity or disrespect, and intolerant discourse, which targets minorities or marginalized groups in ways that undermine democratic pluralism. While both reflect polarization, intolerance poses a direct threat to democratic inclusion (Rossini, 2022).

The Turkish context, characterized by authoritarian backsliding, historical identity cleavages, and state-sponsored misinformation, presents a critical case for exploring these dynamics and enriching comparative scholarship on democratic resilience. This research aims to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between fact-checking organizations as neutral bodies, partisan identity, and discursive hostility, offering valuable insights for safeguarding democratic dialogue in polarized digital environments.

## 2. Affective Polarization and Online Political Talk

Scholars generally distinguish between political polarization, which is characterized by ideological divergence moving to the extremes, and affective polarization, rooted in social identity and described as a strong dislike and distrust for the out-group (Iyengar et al., 2019; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016). Affective polarization is driven less by divergent policy preferences than by identity-based emotional reactions to information perceived as threatening partisan worldviews. Unlike ideological polarization, affective polarization is highly correlated with democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022, p. 727). Partisans often depict the opposing camp with simplistic stereotypes, regardless of their accuracy. Prior research indicates that correcting individuals' misconceptions about other groups could decrease partisan animus (Harteveld and Wagner, 2023; Iyengar et al., 2019). The key lies in reversing the perception of an entirely different and *dangerous* other by encouraging in-person contact.

Although increased affective polarization is often associated with politicization through social media, different approaches exist to the relationship between the two. Social networks were initially praised for enabling grassroots mobilization, encouraging diverse opinions, and challenging the top-down logic of mass media. However, as Waisbord (2018) pointed out, social media often serves as a space for audiences to connect with like-minded individuals and seek evidence that confirms their version of the truth. Consequently, people become more comfortable expressing extreme ideas thanks to in-group support, and the notion of tolerance for the *other* tends to become marginalized. This dynamic fosters incivility, which undermines pluralism by triggering negative emotional responses and further polarizing attitudes (Esau, 2022).

Affective polarization and partisan tension tend to increase during intense political contention, such as general elections, when negative campaigning is utilized as a political strategy.

Negative campaigns typically feature ads that portray the opposing camp as an existential threat, thereby crystallizing partisanship by isolating parties based on their identities (Sood and Iyengar, 2016). These inflammatory statements, widely circulated and debated on social media, make partisanship salient at the expense of civil democratic discourse. One positive outcome of affective polarization, as suggested by previous literature, is that it spurs voter turnout and political participation by mobilizing citizens who are less interested in political affairs (Harteveld and Wagner, 2023). However, during intense political campaigns, online discussions on social media can be rife with misinformation and filled with uncivil and intolerant comments towards opposing views, often fueled by the anonymity that these platforms provide.

While affective polarization is often described as hostility between opposing voters, in contemporary democracies, it increasingly centers on contradictory factual claims and the erosion of a shared reality. Populist rhetoric thrives on unverified assertions, turning disagreements over evidence itself into a site of polarization. In this context, fact-checkers become central figures: by adjudicating factual disputes, they stand at the heart of epistemic conflict. As a result, debates about polarization are inseparable from the role of fact-checkers, who are cast simultaneously as neutral arbiters of truth and as lightning rods for partisan hostility. To analyze these reactions, it is crucial to consider the communicative repertoires through which hostility is expressed, particularly the distinction between uncivil tone and intolerance.

According to Rossini (2022, 400-404), intolerant political talk, defined as antinormative discourse that is harmful to democracy and constitutes an extreme form of incivility, poses a direct threat to democratic values. Intolerant discourse often offends and demeans minority groups based on their sexual, ethnic, or religious characteristics. Uncivil discourse, however, characterized by vulgar language or a disrespectful tone, is a rhetorical act that can serve various strategic goals in

political discussions. As Sydnor (2019) claims, some individuals become more engaged in heated political debates due to the entertainment provided by a certain amount of incivility. This distinction between uncivil and intolerant language is crucial as it allows for “disentangling expressions that, albeit potentially offensive or disrespectful, are not inherent threats to democratic norms from those that have clearer detrimental consequences and hence undermine the value of political talk” (Rossini, 2022, p. 400). Finally, civil disagreement, seeking respectful engagement with legitimate adversaries, plays a crucial role in online political discourse by facilitating contestation while avoiding uncivil language (Marichal and Neve, 2020). In the realm of online political talk, the variety of language tones employed is often contingent upon the polarizing nature of the issue at hand and the intensity of public sentiment surrounding contentious topics.

Distinguishing uncivil tone from intolerance is both conceptually essential and empirically insightful. Failing to make this distinction risks misinterpreting rhetorical attacks on elites, which may be disruptive but not necessarily exclusionary, as threats to pluralism driven by ethnic, religious, or gender prejudice. This approach enables a more precise analysis of how different forms of discursive hostility play distinct roles in shaping political discourse during polarized elections. Thus, I pose the following RQ:

*RQ.1 What are the targets, tone, and content of uncivil and intolerant comments posted in response to political fact-checks on social media?*

While these dynamics reveal the tone and targets of online hostility, it is equally important to examine how fact-checkers’ role itself becomes contested. Fact-checkers generally aim to scrutinize suspicious information and correct misconceptions. This work is carried out through the production of systematic, evidence-based evaluations of claims advanced by public figures and media outlets (Amazeen, 2020). However, confirmation bias, defined as the tendency to favor

information that supports existing beliefs and ignore information that contradicts them, coupled with political propaganda, complicates the practice of fact-checking. As a result, individuals tend to prefer online political information that aligns with their existing beliefs and their party's interests. Moreover, politicians often try to associate their opponents and supporters with misconduct, violence, and dishonesty. This tactic is found to be useful as it constructs the *other* that followers can emulate, deepening the divide between *us* and *them* (Novais, 2025). The vilification of out-groups can be observed in sarcastic and humorous remarks that often possess a derogatory and discriminatory undertone (Filibeli and Ertuna, 2021).

The emotionally charged atmosphere complicates the work of fact-checkers as they strive to debunk false claims by providing accurate information while maintaining impartiality. In their study, Vinhas and Bastos (2022) identified several fundamental issues with fact-checking that organizations often face as points of online criticism. First, fact-checks are perceived as biased in settings with polarization and a partisan divide, especially from right-wing partisans who accuse them of taking sides (Mena, 2019). This can lead to questioning and discrediting the methodologies of organizations, suggesting a political or economic bias. The selection criteria and relevance are other significant issues; organizations mainly focus on popular and viral content, which has been criticized for leading to unnecessary fact-checking of obvious claims while overlooking more dangerous cases of misinformation. Another discursive tactic to challenge debunking stories is *whataboutism*, a method of deflecting criticism or scrutiny by pointing to unrelated or comparative flaws in the critic or their context (Graham, 2025, p. 5). Additionally, post-truth discourse, i.e., prioritizing emotions and personal beliefs over objective facts, began to affect online political discussions by dismissing facts that conflict with one side's political positions and emotions.

Furthermore, while political fact-checkers aim to combat misinformation and reduce polarization, their role is often contested. In hyperpolarized environments, these actors may be discursively reframed as partisan tools themselves while intending to be neutral. Understanding how audiences interpret and respond to fact-checks can provide deeper insights into the emotional and ideological underpinnings of polarization. This perspective allows us to examine how polarized audiences respond not only to political statements but also to efforts aimed at verifying truth. **It also highlights how fact-checks themselves become sites of contestation, shaping partisan discourse.** This leads us to the final RQ of the research:

**RQ.2** *What reactions and discourses do online audiences exhibit when faced with a fact that contradicts their previously expressed political positions?*

### **3. Democratic Backsliding in Turkey**

The Justice and Development Party (JDP)<sup>1</sup> rose to power in Turkey in 2002, positioning itself as a democratic model for the Islamic world. The party emphasized social reforms, fostered strong ties with the European Union, and actively sought to address historical issues related to the Kurdish community (Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım, 2024). During the 2010s, there was a notable decline in democratic values, characterized by crackdowns on opposition, restrictions on social media, and a decline in press freedom. Since the Gezi Protests in 2013, ignited by the authoritarian policies of the ruling party, Twitter has become a vital platform for political discourse in Turkey, allowing diverse voices to be heard without censorship, unlike the pro-government mainstream media. According to research by Bulut and Yörük (2017), following the national bans on Twitter<sup>2</sup>, the ruling party mobilized Twitter trolls to increase government-led polarization and promote right-

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<sup>1</sup> In Turkish Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Parti)

<sup>2</sup> Twitter was banned in Turkey in 2014, 2015, 2016 for several weeks with reasons related to national security.

wing populism. This strategy disrupted the emerging digital sphere and its capacity to foster expressive participation, primarily through smear campaigns and the dissemination of manipulated information. This added another layer to Twitter's disorderly and generally uncivil debate environment, blurring the lines between authentic citizen arguments and top-down manipulations. Moreover, JDP strived to consolidate its electoral base by adopting a populist discourse and labeling the opposition as elite, anti-religious, and anti-native (Baykan, 2018), which had broad repercussions in the digital sphere. Today, this political attitude is salient in online political talk, deepening the ideological divide and polarization between modern secularists, mainly represented by the Republican People's Party (RPP)<sup>3</sup>, and conservative Islamists by the JDP.

According to Laebens and Öztürk (2021, p. 247), "partisan social identities in Turkey are tightly connected to the perception that other political parties pose a threat to one's economic well-being and political freedom". Then, for zealous party supporters, the possibility of losing grip on power started to be perceived as a matter of life and death, implying total decimation of political and economic power. Lauka et al. (2018) measured the intensity of mass partisan and affective polarization across nearly 40 countries, with Turkey ranking first in affective polarization and third in mass partisan polarization. In addition, previous research has shown that severe polarization echoes in the Turkish media landscape, including social media, where 60% of users report following only accounts that align with their political interests (Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci, 2018). Democratic backsliding in Turkey has increased pressure on the media sector and journalists. Consequently, mainstream media coverage of politics has become increasingly polarizing and biased (Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım, 2024, p. 1195). The decline of journalistic integrity due to political

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<sup>3</sup> In Turkish Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP)

pressure has led to the rise of independent fact-checking organizations online, which aim to hold politicians accountable based on factual information and evidence.

#### **4. Political Fact-Checking: Teyit and Elections**

Teyit, established in Turkey in 2016, is a non-profit, civil society organization dedicated to fact-checking. It adopts a proactive approach to reducing polarization by actively challenging and correcting widespread myths and misconceptions. The platform is designed to verify the accuracy of questionable information primarily through open-source investigations. Teyit is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), which sets ethical and methodological principles for fact-checking organizations. Moreover, the independent assessors under these networks regularly evaluate fact-checking organizations to ensure accountability (Çömlekçi, 2022). As a signatory to the IFCN's code of principles, Teyit is committed to non-partisanship and fairness, transparency in methodology, sources, and funding, as well as an open and honest correction policy. Their team comprises editors, journalists, educators, and full-time and freelance fact-checkers. During election periods, the platform enhances its operations and takes the initiative to address the growing issue of information disorder, aiming to mitigate polarization. As put by a *Teyit* editor, the platform invests in “tethering politicians to the truth and elevating political discourse, thereby fortifying our democracy” (Yılmaz, 2023, para. 5)

Teyit's strategy for disseminating fact-check stories relies mainly on its website and social media channels. Twitter serves two primary purposes for them. First, after publishing content on their website, they share it on Twitter to reach a wider audience, as their account boasts nearly a million followers. Audiences come across this content either by following their account or seeing retweets from others, especially since they often fact-check claims that have gone viral. The second

strategy involves actively responding to viral posts by engaging with the sources of misinformation. They do this by quoting the original posts to debunk the claims or explain the actual story. This approach often puts them on the radar of partisans, leading to hostile comments from non-followers amid heated political discussions.

## **5. Methodology**

Debates on social media during political events offer valuable insights into citizens' arguments, emotions, and discussions, while also highlighting instances of uncivil political discourse. Users generally comment anonymously, allowing for a clearer understanding of their feelings and capturing citizens' emotions more effectively. Analyzing user comments is essential for understanding the impact of offensive content and promoting interventions that foster a healthier democracy (Naab and Kuchler, 2022). This research examines user comments on Twitter posts by the fact-checking organization Teyit during the three weeks preceding the first round of the 2023 Turkish presidential election. For the occasion, the organization launched a dedicated section on its website that compiles fact-checking articles regarding suspicious claims, evaluations of the reliability of election polls, and foundational information about online propaganda techniques.

The primary reason for selecting this period was to focus on the pre-election phase when political discussions intensified and instances of disinformation peaked. Fact-checking organizations work full steam during pre-election periods to debunk suspicious claims circulating on social media, which are often aimed at smearing a political candidate or party. As a predictable outcome, the amount of both positive and negative feedback that fact-checking organizations receive from society increases over time. Thus, the current analysis of user comments aims to understand the wide range of emotional responses that *neutral entities* receive in a politically

polarized environment and to evaluate the limitations of intervention strategies in response to the negative impacts of affective polarization.

The study avoids portraying the ruling party and the primary opposition party as equivalent political entities, thus preventing the creation of a “false balance” in the analysis. JDP utilizes government funds for political purposes, primarily through the Directorate of Communications and public media channels, and controls most mainstream media outlets. Turkey’s Directorate of Communications, established in 2018, operates as a pro-JDP political entity rather than a neutral bureaucratic organization, utilizing public resources (Özer and Özçetin, 2024). The Center for Combating Disinformation, along with other government-backed fact-checking initiatives, has recently sparked controversy over its lack of transparency and accountability in defining what constitutes accurate information and disinformation. Their significant advantages in resources and media influence underscore the disparity between the two parties in the electoral landscape.

In conducting the analysis, I relied on the platform’s advanced search function to identify posts published between April 24 and May 14, 2023. During the three weeks leading up to the elections, Teyit fact-checked a total of 65 suspicious claims. From this, I compiled a list of 53 posts from Teyit’s Twitter account that specifically addressed claims about the election campaigns, focusing on the two major candidates: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president, and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition party. I focused on the two primary candidates and their respective political parties, which have the most popular support and are positioned against each other, to better understand the effects of polarization. In contemporary Turkish politics, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, primarily represent the conservative-religious segments of society. In contrast, the Republican People’s Party (RPP) gained the support of secular and Western-oriented voters. I did not include posts related to Sinan

Oğan and Muharrem İnce, the two remaining presidential candidates who received a combined total of 5.6% of the votes in the first round.

Another sampling criterion was to concentrate on posts that attracted more than 20 user comments or replies, prioritizing viral posts that sparked discussions between social media users from opposing political camps. After applying these filters, I identified 23 fact-check posts by Teyit regarding pre-election rumors and claims. Out of the 1,596 comments on the sampled fact-check stories, 53 were unrelated emojis, words, and bot messages. Excluding those, I coded 1,543 user comments and quotes shared as replies to selected Teyit.org fact-checks using MAXQDA 24 software. The number of comments on posts ranged from 20 to 225, with an average of 67 comments per post. I regarded user quotes as comments, as quotes on Twitter typically indicate “retweet with comment” when a user reposts a tweet with their own comments or thoughts. Thus, I tried to include every user comment for fact-checking stories regardless of the form.

I designed a codebook to categorize user comments on their discourses through a hybrid approach that combines deductive and inductive methods. Deductively, the initial categories were derived from the established literature on fact-checking, affective polarization, and online political discourse. This included predefined response types, such as out-group vilification (othering), sarcastic comments, whataboutism, and perceived platform bias (Filibeli and Ertuna, 2021; Graham, 2025; Mena, 2019; Novais, 2025; Vinhas and Bastos, 2022). Inductively, during the preliminary rounds of coding, the categories were refined and expanded through a close reading of user comments to identify recurring rhetorical patterns or discursive tactics that were not fully captured by the deductive codes. To understand the nature and language of online political discourse, I expanded the codebook based on existing literature on incivility, including comment categories such as uncivil, intolerant, and civil disagreement (Coe et al., 2014; Rossini, 2022). The

aim was to disentangle forms of incivility that, while offensive, may not directly undermine democratic inclusion (uncivil comments) from those that do (intolerant comments), thereby providing a more precise understanding of threats to pluralistic dialogue in the Turkish political context. For analytical clarity and interpretive consistency, each user comment was treated as an individual unit of analysis and assigned a unique label based on its dominant discourse and tone. The approach was to prioritize the most prominent rhetorical feature. For instance, when a comment is found to include both uncivil (such as profane language) and intolerant (such as xenophobic claims) tone, intolerance is prioritized as the main code, as it is considered a more direct and substantive threat to democratic pluralism. This approach ensures the analysis foregrounds content that erodes deliberative norms and civic respect at a systemic level. Arguments with civil disagreement, on the other hand, refer to seeking respectful engagement with legitimate adversaries without resorting to foul language (Marichal and Neve, 2020, p. 348). Some comments contain facts without objection or argumentative discourse, coded as other comments.

After finishing the codebook, I collaborated with two independent researchers to code the user comments. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's alpha on 154 (10% of the data) comments. The intercoder agreement was high for all variables, exceeding 0.80 (see detailed statistics in the Appendix), ensuring the reliability of the coding process.

## **6. Findings**

Teyit's fact-checks during the 2023 Turkish presidential election primarily focused on false claims of supporting terrorism, historical inaccuracies by politicians, manipulated videos, and inflated statistics regarding mobilized supporters. Fabricated brochures and visuals linking the opposition to terrorism went viral, sparking intense discussions despite attempts to fact-check the information. Other viral themes included exaggerated claims regarding the ruling party's public performance,

downplaying the positive contributions of opposing politicians, and manipulating their words to attract additional supporters. Furthermore, misleading narratives intended to provoke religious intolerance and link the ruling party to fundamentalism received considerable scrutiny from fact-checkers. The use of deepfake videos to confuse voters emerged as a new tactic, distinct from those used in previous election cycles.

**Table 1. Debunked viral claims and user interaction**

No	Date (2023)	Interaction (Views, Retweets, Likes, Comments)	Categories of Misinformation	Fact-check (Summary)
1	8 May	3.3M, 3456RT, 11.5KL, 225C	Associating with terrorism	The claim that terrorists appeared in the Millet Alliance (pro-RPP) campaign video is incorrect.
2	9 May	458K, 1.067RT, 2.896L, 118C	Associating with terrorism	The derogatory texts (linking them with terrorist organizations) on RPP leader Kılıçdaroğlu's banners are edited.
3	10 May	441K, 955RT, 3.011L, 130C	Associating with terrorism	Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu posters containing incorrect claims on separatist movements are manipulated.
4	10 May	660K, 369RT, 2.329L, 33C	Associating with terrorism	Kaftancıoğlu's (RPP politician) following claim (We will bring peace to those who make the propaganda of terrorist organizations) is a distortion.
5	26 April	168K, 167RT, 855L, 22C	Associating with terrorism	The brochures linking RPP them with terrorist organizations are examples of asymmetric propaganda.
6	27 April	921K, 704RT, 4.938L, 101C	Associating with terrorism	The claim that Kılıçdaroğlu said that drug trafficking should be taxed is not true.
7	3 May	778K, 349RT, 2.608L, 93C	Political Allegations	The claim that Mansur Yavaş (mayor of Ankara, member of RPP) said drone projects related to the defense industry would be shelved if the National Alliance wins is false.
8	7 May	113K, 17RT, 135L, 32C	Political Allegations	Millet Alliance Presidential Candidate Kılıçdaroğlu's claim that martyrs' families are charged "luxury cost tax" on vehicle purchases is a distortion.
9	9 May	1.1M, 1583 RT, 4.320L, 75C	Political Allegations	The newspaper cut used by President Erdoğan does not prove that Kılıçdaroğlu defrauded the Social Security Administration.
10	10 May	142K, 277RT, 749L, 22C	Political Allegations	President Erdoğan's claim that the RPP was in power during the 1999 Marmara earthquake is incorrect.
11	12 May	232K, 1.22RT, 447L, 45C	Political Allegations	The tweet showing that Kılıçdaroğlu asked for votes for the Memleket Party (a small oppositional party) is not real.
12	30 April	136K, 27RT, 176L, 48C	Political Allegations	The claim by President Erdoğan that Antalya Airport was opened during the JDP era is false.
13	12 May	353K, 434RT, 1.217L, 57C	Political Allegations	The claim that RPP Konya Derbent district president was caught with stamped ballot papers for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and RPP is false.
14	1 May	243K, 643RT, 2.627L, 20C	Political Allegations	The claim that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Facebook advertising costs amounted to 1 million dollars is false.
15	2 May	93K, 14RT, 152L, 38C	Voter Mobilization	President Erdoğan's claim that Ankara Esenboğa Airport was opened during the JDP era is exaggerated.
16	6 May	184K, 79RT, 420L, 32C	Voter Mobilization	The photo is not from the Millet Alliance's (pro-RPP) Maltepe rally on May 6, 2023.
17	7 May	597K, 648RT, 2.504L, 160C	Voter Mobilization	President Erdoğan's claim that 1,700,000 citizens attended the rally at Istanbul Atatürk Airport on 7 May 2023 is an exaggeration.
18	30 April	536K, 31RT, 393L, 61C	Voter Mobilization	The claim that the images of the JDP's Izmir rally with huge crowds were edited is false
19	24 April	340K, 43RT, 401L, 53C	Leader Popularity	The claim that Kılıçdaroğlu's video, 'Alevi,' is the most-watched video in Twitter history is false.
20	28 April	290K, 26RT, 301L, 32C	Leader Popularity	The claim that RPP President Kılıçdaroğlu was featured on the cover of Time magazine is false.
21	2 May	175K, 16RT, 179L, 24C	Leader Popularity	The headlines (claiming a new world leader -Kılıçdaroğlu- is emerging) in the international press are false.
22	10 May	417K, 221RT, 752L, 44C	Religious Intolerance	The song played on the election vehicle of the JDP's parliamentary candidate is not in Arabic but in Turkish.
23	11 May	597K, 426RT, 2.955L, 78C	Religious Intolerance	The video in question is not from a current JDP rally. It is from a rally organized by the Qur'an Generation Platform in Batman on 22 January 2023 after the burning of the Quran in Sweden.

Amidst the abundance of misleading information spread on social media during the campaign, stories that effectively debunked false associations between the opposition and terrorist organizations generated the highest level of audience engagement. For instance, a fact-check on an edited video that portrayed opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as a supporter of terrorism garnered 3.3 million views, 3,456 retweets, and 241 comments. This indicates a strong emotional response and notable attention from online audiences. In parallel, research on affective polarization suggests that focusing on mostly fabricated threats from out-groups is often used to galvanize in-groups through aggressive political campaigning (Coleman, 2021). Together, these preliminary findings provide the necessary backdrop for understanding the partisan discourses and rhetorical strategies that surfaced in user responses to fact-checks, which will be explored in the following sections.

### **Targets and Content of Uncivil and Intolerant Remarks (RQ.1)**

The content analysis results show that a significant portion (45%) of user comments in response to fact-checks exceeds the limits of democratic debate and civil language. When the arguments and beliefs of the *us* camp are challenged, the *others* often receive comments filled with humiliation and defamation; this includes fact-checkers who are frequently criticized for aligning with the opposing party's political aims. **Notably, fact-checkers were subjected to a volume of uncivil comments comparable to that directed at the commenters' political opponents.** They are accused of bias when fact-checks contradict strong political positions and affiliations. There exists a discourse among individuals from opposing perspectives, asserting that their counterparts are financially supporting fact-checking organizations to distort the objective truth. Conservative pro-JDP users also accuse fact-checkers of being *agents of external powers* due to their international funding sources, which include the European Union and German non-profits. They are verbally

attacked with sexist insults, internet slang, and profane language. Ultrationalist discourse portrayed them as an apparatus of the liberal West, intending to *stir up the country*.

**Table 2. Language Tone and Incivility: Types and Frequencies**

Type	Explanation	Examples	K.'s alpha	Targeting oppositional voters		Targeting political party or its leader		Targeting fact- checkers		Total	
				n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Uncivil comments</b>	Profane or vulgar language, swear words	“The idiots...”, “Don't you have the balls...”, “He is retarded”, “Low IQ people...”, “Sycophants...”, f-word, etc.	0,89	159	10,3	241	15,62	153	9,92	553	35,84
<b>Intolerant comments</b>	Comments including Xenophobia-Racism, Hate Speech, Violent Threats, Religious Intolerance, Attacks toward gender and sexual preferences	“Lgbti disrupts the Turkish family...” “Kurds are like that...” “The country is full of Afghans and Syrians” “...not in proper Turkish, as if it were Arabic”, “He is not even a Turk..”	0,9	23	1,49	103	6,68	17	1,1	143	9,27
<b>Civil Disagreement</b>	Respectful engagement with legitimate adversaries without resorting to foul language	“You should stop lying to citizens” “They use all the government funds...”, “They use religion for propaganda...” “Such rhetoric is unbecoming of a president.”	0,87	141	9,14	423	27,41	216	14	780	50,55
<b>Other comments</b>	Neutral comments or factual posts	“Important fact-check...”, “I'm glad that you addressed...”	0,86	11	0,71	17	1,1	39	2,53	67	4,34
<b>Total</b>				334	21,67	784	50,84	425	27,49	1,543	100

Fact-checkers also received some arguments in a respectful tone expressing disagreement, which were classified as civil disagreement. Criticism was directed at Teyit for selecting specific questionable claims for fact-checking and for their cautious wording in presenting the findings. More than 25% of user comments express disagreement in a civil tone directed at the opposing

party or its leader. A typical pattern involves responses to statements made by President Erdoğan, where critics accuse him of deception, partisanship, and employing illiberal discourse. Supporters of the RPP often argue that the president has not acted impartially and has added to the growing polarization in society. The ongoing threat of prosecution for social media posts about the president is likely the one reason for the cautious and relatively civil language used in objections. In general, these responses offer a glimpse of deliberative potential, but they were often drowned out in threads saturated with incivility.

Uncivil comments containing hate and insults were disproportionately directed at political elites and party organizations rather than at ordinary citizens or voters, which is seen as an institutionalized form of wickedness. Their historical baggage and perceived misdeeds, deeply rooted in society, provide a convenient target to channel accumulated hatred. Elites, as symbols of influence and decision-making power, often provoke greater public resentment than individual members of the opposing camp. Relatively rare uncivil comments targeting citizens from the opposite camp include calling them *sheep* who follow their leader unquestioningly and using vulgar language to imply their supposed *sub-intelligence*.

Intolerant remarks are often targeted at marginalized groups, particularly when they are scapegoated for perceived collusion with the other camp. Conservative pro-JDP users leveraged the LGBTI controversy in Turkey as a political strategy to outmaneuver the opposition, asserting that if the RPP gains power, same-sex marriages will become legal. Appealing to the conservative mindset, the fearmongering about the *destruction of the traditional Turkish family structure* portrayed the LGBTI community as a societal threat to raising nationalist and religious generations. Moreover, some comments by pro-JDP users denigrated the oppositional leader

Kılıçdaroğlu due to his minority religious sect allegiance, especially after he openly declared being an Alevi and breaking a long-held taboo.

On the other hand, pro-RPP users questioned the faith of the JPD leaders and pro-JDP citizens, implying that they are not true believers if they comply with the propaganda of their party. Pro-RPP users have also clashed with the ruling party over the public use of the Arabic language and the presence of Afghan and Syrian immigrants in the country, employing intolerant language intertwined with ultra-nationalism. Interestingly, while there are no fact-checks directly related to immigration, immigrants are often used as scapegoats for discursive polarization by associating them with political adversaries. The comments, such as “the country is full of Afghans and Syrians,” appear out of context to prompt emotions in online discursive clashes. In sum, one political party was accused of favoring immigrants, while the other was accused of being too tolerant of gender issues and ethnic minorities. *Teyit* is also harshly criticized for its alleged *sympathy* towards immigrants because of the Western funding sources.

Finally, conservative users defamed the opposition over their so-called collaboration with the Kurdish party, which implies some degree of intolerance towards minorities. This resulted in labeling the opposition as *traitors* and *terrorists*, further fueling hatred to consolidate the supporters of the ruling party. Fact-checkers, too, faced similar accusations verbalized in comments like “I have no sympathy for you after seeing a fact-check vindicating Kurdish politicians.” In sum, intolerant comments predominantly targeted religious and ethnic minorities, the LGBTI community, and immigrants, mostly portraying them as an imminent threat if the other party succeeds. Instead of being related to the fact-check content, these remarks appear to be emotional displacements, using politically charged discussions as entry points for spreading

prejudice. The fact that Teyit was also accused of *favoring immigrants* simply by reporting facts underscores how deeply fact-based neutrality has become conflated with cultural threat perception.

### **Emotional and Discursive Responses to Politically Challenging Evidence (RQ.2)**

The fact-checks during the highly polarized election campaign triggered a variety of audience reactions, encompassing different types of discourse, thereby revealing the degree of unquestioned loyalty to the in-group. Almost half of the user comments include criticism of opposing political parties and their leaders, often using the discourse of out-group vilification and accusing them of outright lying. This attitude devalues the practice of fact-checking as futile and disqualifies the epistemic relevance of factual correction, suggesting that individuals continue to lie despite fact-checkers' efforts. This is because such attacks frame the opposing side as inherently dishonest, leading to the perception that fact-checking serves no purpose since it cannot change the behavior of those deemed untrustworthy. Disregarding the perspectives and arguments of others while ridiculing interventions sets the stage for emotional and polarizing responses. User comments associate the other camp with evil, darkness, and villainy, creating simplistic black-and-white antagonisms that leave no room for self-reflection.

Pro-RPP users often highlight government propaganda and ruling party disinformation as tools for political gain while criticizing oppositional social media users for spreading disinformation. While politicians' discourses frequently incite rage and intense emotions, *lay people* from opposing camps are depicted as naive individuals who are easily deceived. Pro-JDP supporters accuse the opposition of distorting the truth to mislead and mobilize their supporters, and of relying on external political support at the expense of national interests.

**Table 3. Discourse and Frequency Analysis of User Comments**

Category	Comment (n)	Percentage	K.'s alpha	Examples
<b>Out-group Vilification</b>	704	%45,63	0,91	“You don't need to fact-check. Everything they say is already a lie.” “This is organized evil; we are facing a dark mob,” “Unfortunately, there are sheep who believe in these deceptions,”
<b>Sarcastic Ridicule</b>	259	%16,79	0,88	“My taxes are used for PR!” “Those who believe this must also believe that the earth is flat!”, “Your job would be easier if you only share the true words of this man :)”
<b>Perceived Platform Bias</b>	173	%11,2	0,86	“Do you fact-check opposition videos too?”, “Time to unfollow Teyit,”, “How much money did you get for this?” “Teyit has found a sponsor” (implying government funding),”
<b>Whataboutism</b>	143	%9,27	0,84	“What about the oppositions’ support for terrorism?”, “Will you also fact-check that 17 of our islands belonging to the Republic of Turkey have been occupied by Greece since 2004!” “Can you fact-check too if Erdogan has a diploma?”
<b>Methodological Discrediting</b>	98	%6,35	0,85	“We need someone to check on you, too!”, “Are we going to believe the state minister of internal affairs or you!?”, “Since when is lying called exaggeration?”
<b>Questioning Relevance of Fact-Checks</b>	71	%4,6	0,83	“Why analyze this? It’s so obvious.” “We all know it's fake on Twitter. How can we tell that to people on the street?” “Why fact-check this? Everyone knows they are trolls!”
<b>Dismissal of Factual Accuracy</b>	56	%3,63	0,82	“Yes, it's not the most watched video, but it's been watched a lot!” “Maybe the visuals are fake, but they already have such statements!” “Shut up even if you are right!”, “Anyone who says otherwise is a terrorist!”
<b>Supportive Validation of Fact-Checks</b>	39	%2,53	0,81	“A very good, detailed analysis. Don't call what is real nonsense just because it is not what you want to believe.” “We follow you because you are not biased.” “Whoever doesn't like the truth attacks Teyit.”
<b>Total</b>	1,543	%100		

Many pro-RPP user comments contain sarcasm and humor directed at the Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communications and its director, F. Altun, a renowned government official who is often criticized by the opposition for justifying the JDP’s controversial actions and further polarizing the country. These comments suggest that the fabricated pro-JDP stories circulating on social media were created by Altun himself or his staff and were indirectly funded by taxpayers. Opposition party supporters argue that the use of government funds to finance public relations campaigns for the ruling party raises serious ethical concerns. In general, users from both sides

often suggest that the *other side* is likely to accept the most obvious falsehoods without critical thinking. As Filibeli and Ertuna (2021, p. 2241) highlighted in their study on hate speech against refugees, sarcastic remarks may carry a discriminatory and derogatory undertone rather than innocent jokes. In our case, sarcastic comments also implied a lack of intelligence in the opposing group, questioning their ability to distinguish between facts and misinformation. In addition, pro-RPP users turned to black humor, highlighting the risk of imprisonment due to oppositional social media comments, writing “Silivri should be cold now,” a detention center in İstanbul accommodating political prisoners. In return, pro-JDP users mock oppositional leader Kılıçdaroğlu for being “incompetent” and “clumsy,” while secular voters are ridiculed for “following a weak leader.” This recalls internet slang that categorizes assertive leaders as *alphas* and more reserved leaders as *betas*.

Also, *Teyit* was mocked and criticized for its *unnecessary* fact-checking of common knowledge. When fact-checks are perceived as useless because *the outcomes are apparent*, users adopt a more critical and satirical position against the platform. They question the relevance of published fact-checks, urging the platform to select more complex and contentious issues as cases. For instance, the most repeated strategy by JDP supporters was associating the opposition party RPP with separatist terrorist organizations through manipulated visuals and brochures to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of conservative voters. These visuals appeared online and were distributed as leaflets on the streets. Due to the severity and potential risks of the claims presented, *Teyit* fact-checked these claims repeatedly, enduring users’ cynicism that “they are just too obviously fake”. Pro-RPP users regarded terrorism claims in edited videos as absurd and pointed out the possible intervention of trolls on the public payroll. Another argument suggests that online

fact-checking may be futile, as people are unlikely to change their opinions regardless of the evidence presented.

When commenting, some audiences claimed that fact-checking initiatives are biased, often without offering any counterarguments related to the content or methodology of the fact-checking process. Proponents of JDP argued that Teyit primarily focuses on refuting statements made by their leaders, thereby underscoring an *explicit bias* within its operations. Conversely, several stories by *Teyit* scrutinizing suspicious claims of oppositional leaders led to frustration among pro-RPP users, who felt that the platform had finally crossed over to the dark side and succumbed to political oppression. Facing conflicting information sometimes provoked negative emotions towards fact-checking organizations, shifting aggression away from the political opponents or the out-group. Users often claimed that the organization does not effectively fact-check others' wrongdoings, and they announced that they would unfollow the platform. The criticism sometimes exceeded the boundaries of civil disagreement and led to accusations that practitioners were "propaganda tools with price tags." Most interestingly, depending on the fact-check's outcome, *Teyit* was labeled either as a government apparatus by one group or an externally funded interest group aimed at dividing the country by the other.

Another theme directed at fact-checkers is questioning and sometimes challenging their methodology, which generally occurs in a relatively civilized manner. The typical reaction involves questioning fact-checkers with cynicism, suggesting that "someone should fact-check them!". This reaction often serves to challenge their credibility, as partisans seek to undermine fact-checkers when their findings do not align with their political beliefs. Another objection pertains to the language used in debunking certain statements made by President Erdoğan. In some comments, it is argued that instead of labeling misleading statements as false, fact-checkers often

choose to call them *exaggerations*. Some users interpret this choice of wording as a form of cowardice, suggesting that fact-checkers avoid labeling them as *blatant lies* to prevent possible backlash from the government.

Whataboutism is also a widely used discursive tactic by the partisans when confronted with a debunked story deemed damaging for their camp. The culprits or their supporters respond to accusations or plain truths with counteraccusations, often without providing relevant arguments, in order to avoid criticism by diverting attention from the subject. In our case, claims linking political leaders to terrorists, conspiracy theories suggesting the US as a co-conspirator, or historical *wrongdoings* attributed to the opposing side were employed as diversions to lessen the impact of the fact-check. This attitude hinders the development of an argumentative discussion, as it is impossible to counter conspiracy theories presented as the root cause of the adversaries. A rare but concerning response is the outright rejection of factual accuracy, which can escalate to efforts to silence fact-checkers with comments such as “shut up, even if you are right!”, regardless of the truth itself. Evoking the popular term *post-truth*, emotionally charged partisan users underestimate the importance of objective facts and, in response, draw attention to the *apparent* nature of their enemies and occasionally label them terrorists. By overlooking the evidence provided by fact-checkers, these users prioritize protecting their political positions and, without providing any counterarguments, sometimes submit to conspiracy theories, saying, “I’m sure they are evil like that.” This indicates a retreat into political essentialism where truth is subordinate to identity loyalty.

The number of positive comments validating and praising fact-checks was the lowest among all categories. This is probably because some users demonstrate their approval by liking or retweeting posts, while others do so without leaving any online trace, choosing not to engage in

*toxic* social media discussions. Partisans generally use Teyit's fact-checking posts to confront each other and vilify the platform by ignoring the facts presented. Rare positive comments defended Teyit against those who target and harass fact-checkers for their work.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate how affective polarization influences online political discourse in an authoritarian context, with a focus on partisans' responses to fact-checks that contradict their political views. In Turkey, this phenomenon is intricately linked to historical and ideological cleavages between Western-oriented secularists and conservative Islamists, as well as between nationalists and liberals who express solidarity with the Kurdish minority. This complexity presents significant challenges in addressing and rectifying the deeply entrenched misconceptions that exist within the social memory about the opposing group. A key contribution of this research lies in its focus on differentiating between uncivil and intolerant online political discourse. This distinction helps reveal how discursive hostility confronts political adversaries and perpetuates entrenched patterns of social exclusion.

While both forms of incivility reflect affective polarization, they entail different risks for democratic debate. In our case, uncivil remarks, including insults, sarcasm, and profanity, were primarily aimed at political elites and party organizations. Rather than inciting direct animosity toward specific communities or individual voters, these comments reflect a broader discontent with those in power. Intolerant comments, however, extended hostility toward marginalized communities (e.g., ethnic, religious, sexual minorities), thereby undermining the pluralistic norms essential to democratic discourse. Disadvantaged groups became targets of intolerant comments when they were framed as complicit in the supposed wrongdoing of rival parties. By disaggregating these forms of speech, this study reveals how polarized environments foster elite-

directed antagonism and promote social exclusion. This distinction is significant because it demonstrates that affective polarization generates animosity between partisans and transforms public discourse into a site where the inclusion of vulnerable groups is actively contested.

Misleading or inaccurate information could be disseminated by governments, political parties, and leaders for political gain, undermining key democratic norms, including political engagement, tolerance, and the integrity of free elections (Hunter, 2023, p. 1056). This dynamic is particularly evident in Turkey's illiberal democratic setting, where government bodies responsible for public communication actively intervene during election campaigns to associate the opposition with terrorism. Such narratives are not confined to official discourse. They are readily adopted and amplified by pro-government partisans on social media. Affective polarization during election periods extends far beyond immediate emotional reactions to perceived out-groups or disagreements over facts. With the ruling party framing the opposition as a *terrorist threat* and online users reproducing this language, intolerant remarks become a tool that deepens societal divisions and entrenches exclusionary attitudes within public discourse.

Another critical finding concerns the nature of uncivil comments. Rossini's (2022, p. 415) research on Facebook comments on a Brazilian news outlet concluded that even uncivil comments lead to meaningful argumentative online political talk and engagement. However, during a heated election campaign in a highly polarized political atmosphere, as in our case, uncivil comments did not lead to any argumentative or constructive discussion but instead appeared in a derogatory and highly disrespectful manner. Partisan comments often exist in isolation, rarely inviting constructive responses, which frequently devolve into exchanges filled with profanity. Although Twitter's character limit can constrain the depth of argumentation, it remains possible to engage in civil disagreement. By maintaining respectful dialogue, users can effectively counter the

pervasive incivility and intolerance that frequently characterize online interactions. Furthermore, discussions framed in a more civil manner tend to attract fewer offensive replies, highlighting the impact of tone on the quality of interactions within the platform.

Brundidge and Garrett's (2024, p. 1) recent study suggests that "exposure to incivility via social media as a form of personal contact" intensifies the effects of online partisan news and escalates affective polarization. Additionally, as depicted in experimental research, individuals who are subjected to online uncivil comments tend to perceive that people are generally hostile towards one another, even if this is not the case (Yamamoto et al., 2020). Therefore, incivility on social media during periods of political turmoil may reinforce and deepen existing cleavages, potentially leading to intolerance, especially when political identities are closely tied to religious, ethnic, or ideological affiliations. During intense political contention, as in our case, the distinction between uncivil and intolerant discourse can sometimes become intertwined when partisan rhetoric appeals to deeply held, group-based identities. This contributes to a more hostile and less deliberative public sphere.

Moreover, this research suggests that when fact-checks contradict firmly held political positions, partisans from both sides view fact-checkers as adversaries, integrating them into their polarized mindset. Audiences display confirmation bias when engaging with political content, selecting information that confirms their existing political positions or opinions and ignoring fact-checks that contradict them (Hameleers and Meer, 2020), and occasionally antagonizing fact-checkers with swear words and threats. The violence towards journalists in illiberal democracies has long been discussed, and now fact-checkers are subjected to psychological violence, which also needs to be addressed. Considering that the comments include swear words, threats, and

insults, fact-checkers may need psychological support in the future, especially during periods of political turmoil.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the study contributes to the evolving models of affective polarization by revealing how neutral institutions, such as fact-checking organizations, are discursively redefined as partisan actors within polarized environments. This implies that affective polarization not only distorts inter-party perceptions but also reshapes how politically engaged citizens interpret institutional credibility and neutrality. As polarization seeps into areas that were once neutral, it poses a significant risk to democratic accountability and meaningful deliberation.

The study also revealed significant discourses partisans use to ignore the facts when they contradict the entrenched opinions, such as resorting to *whataboutism*, discrediting the source of truth, or completely denying the need for *accurate information* to close the ranks of the in-group. These patterns reinforce the argument that affective polarization operates not merely at an emotional level but as a discursive process. The apathy of the general audience in distinguishing between truth and manipulative content is the main challenge for future attempts to alleviate polarization through initiatives aimed at correcting misconceptions. Moreover, biased media outlets and political trolls muddy the waters by amplifying the uncivil discourse of politicians, creating a vortex that draws in online audiences who are prone to polarization.

Therefore, future intervention tools should consider the socio-political context, seek collaboration with social media platforms to address hate speech, encourage community-level democratic debates, and prioritize creating offline safe spaces to foster dialogue. Meanwhile, the findings inspire new questions for future research. Cross-country experimental research on online voter behaviors towards contrary but accurate information could shed light on the political and cultural differences that influence the discourses of partisans between liberal and illiberal

democracies. Additionally, examining the end or turnaround points of emotionally charged and uncivil political quarrels may offer insights into depolarization strategies. These could enhance our understanding of the primary drivers and mitigators of online affective polarization, incorporating socio-cultural sensitivity to inform hybrid interventions for deliberative democracy. Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that the findings of this study are shaped by the affordances and user demographics of Twitter, which may differ from those of the broader Turkish public sphere. The platform's non-representative user base, comprising more politically engaged and often more extreme individuals, as well as the restrictive character limit that favors brief, slogan-like messages over nuanced argumentation, likely influenced both the tone and nature of the observed conversations.

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