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Neopatrimonial Rule through Formal Institutions: The Case of Turkey

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Abstract

This study examines how formal institutions in hybrid regimes, particularly presidentialism, party organization and electoral rules, actively foster and sustain clientelistic networks, leading to particularistic outcomes. While existing literature highlights the weakening of formal institutions and pervasive clientelism as drivers of democratic breakdown, this study uses the concept of neopatrimonialism to analyse how formal institutions themselves consolidate patron–client relationships to maintain power and stability. Focusing on Turkey, the analysis demonstrates that the institutional incentive structure consolidates the president's role as the central 'patron', controlling resources and offices, and encourages clientelistic networks to coalesce around the presidency. The discretionary allocation of resources through patron–client relationships sustains neopatrimonial authority as long as clients' loyalty is rewarded. However, this governance increases clients' dependence on the patron, binding them at the expense of representation and responsiveness. The analysis offers insights into how such institutional configurations contribute to authoritarianism and particularistic governance in hybrid regimes.

Keywords: hybrid regimes; presidentialism; neopatrimonialism; patron–client relationship; Turkey

Hybrid regimes, combining democratic rules with authoritarian practices, are often examined based on the extent to which formal institutions are undermined, violated or absent (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Linz and Stepan 1996; Merkel 2004). Democratic erosion is attributed to the weakness of formal rules in shaping political actors' preferences and enforcing compliance (Levitsky and Murillo 2009). When formal institutions fail to deliver expected outcomes, informal institutions emerge to fill the void, significantly shaping political behaviour (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Lauth 2000). If these informal institutions prioritize political and personal gains over public interests, through patronage, clientelism and corruption, they do not substitute for but compete with weak formal institutions, subverting their intended functions and leading to particularistic outcomes (Grzymala-Busse 2010; Ledeneva 2006; O'Donnell 1996). However, the interaction

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between formal and informal institutions complicates the delineation of where formal rules end and informal rules begin (Isaacs 2014). A predominant focus on competing informal institutions also obscures the critical role of formal institutions in fostering and legitimizing power consolidation and particularism (Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Hale 2011; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

This study employs the concept of neopatrimonialism to carry out a balanced examination of the impact of both formal and informal institutions on political outcomes in hybrid regimes. Neopatrimonialism is commonly associated with personal autocracies, particularly in postcolonial Africa, where institutions underpin the personalistic rule of a president who distributes resources through patron–client relationships in exchange for loyalty and compliance (Bach 2011; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Erdmann and Engel 2007; Sigman and Lindberg 2019). In such contexts, formal institutions are often seen as façades, typically yielding outcomes aligned with their autocratic creators' preferences (Pepinsky 2014). However, recent research challenges this view, showing that the institutionalization of democracy persists even under neopatrimonial rule (Sigman and Lindberg 2019). This is because neopatrimonialism is not a regime type specific to any region. Instead, it pertains to 'the nature of authority and legitimation within regimes' (Isaacs 2014: 230), where impersonal legal-rational institutions coexist and interact with clientelistic networks (Erdmann and Engel 2007; Guliyev 2011). This complex interplay between formal and informal institutions creates a hybrid institutional framework, extending beyond personal rule but neither wholly undermining nor fully supporting democratic governance.

In neopatrimonial systems, the apparent institutionalization of democracy fails to overcome the concentration of power that arises when key formal institutions, such as legislatures, parties, election systems, judiciary and bureaucracies, concede to a strong executive's authority, fostering clientelistic networks and particularistic policies that compromise democratic governance. This context raises crucial questions for understanding the underlying power dynamics that create neopatrimonial rule: Why do executives cultivate patron–client relationships? Why do political elites align with such executives? Why do political parties act as extensions of these leaders? Why do legislatures refrain from checking executive power? This study argues that the interaction of formal institutions can generate a strong incentive structure inducing actors to engage in informal institutions such as patron–client relationships and patronage, blending personal loyalty with formal legality and private with public interests. Accordingly, the exercise of power through both formal and informal institutions results in neopatrimonial rule, which legitimizes particularistic outcomes and undermines representation and responsiveness.

To understand how an institutional incentive structure fosters neopatrimonial rule, this study examines the interplay between presidentialism, party organization and electoral rules in cultivating patron–client relationships between the president and a wide range of actors in Turkey. These formal institutions reinforce the president's authority as the central 'patron', who controls resource distribution and appointments to secure actors' support. This system incentivizes these actors, as 'clients', to align with the president to access patronage. These relationships rely on the discretionary use of formal powers, resulting in the particularistic distribution of resources based on loyalty, which serves as a means of political legitimation. Expectations and behaviours shaped by both formal and informal institutions ensure

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that both the patron and clients maintain their status and fulfil their roles, thereby sustaining these mutually beneficial yet asymmetric relationships and bringing stability. Clients are reluctant to challenge the patron unless denied patronage or if a change in leadership or institutional rules alters their incentives. This alignment undermines representation with distinct policy alternatives or responsiveness beyond patronage distribution. This institutional analysis provides a balanced view of how formal and informal institutions interact to perpetuate neopatrimonialism in hybrid regimes, enhancing our understanding of democratic breakdown, institutional design and clientelism without overemphasizing the decline of liberal democratic institutions or the predominance of informal institutions.

Turkey's recent political and economic developments exemplify how formal institutions have been penetrated by clientelistic networks and pervasive patronage. The recent constitutional crisis between the Constitutional Court and the Court of Cassation over the Can Atalay case, along with strategic appointments to key bureaucratic positions, illustrates how formal rules are co-opted to serve the president and a narrow elite under patron–client dynamics. This results in particularistic policies that prioritize maintaining a loyal network of elites and voters over broader public interests. Similar patterns of elite entrenchment worldwide indicate that Turkey's political trajectory is part of a broader global trend. The following sections first present a discussion on the effects of formal and informal institutions on democratic governance with a particular focus on their interplay in hybrid regimes. Second, the discussion introduces the concept of neopatrimonialism and its operationalization through an institutional lens to provide a comprehensive account for understanding how patronage politics and patron–client relationships can be engendered through formal institutions. Then, the following three sections focus on the case of Turkey and break this argument down: the first presents a comprehensive view of the drivers of democratic breakdown, the second explains the incentive structure created by presidentialism coupled with party organization and electoral rules, and the third presents empirical evidence on the neopatrimonial rule generated in Turkey. The final section concludes the study with remarks on the importance of carefully calibrated institutional incentives to ensure democratic governance.

Formal and informal institutions in hybrid regimes

In political systems, institutions establish the 'rules of the game', creating incentives that shape behaviour and ensure compliance. These incentives include both rewards for adherence and sanctions for non-compliance, influencing how actors align with the rules. By fostering shared expectations that others will also comply, institutions align actors' preferences, guide behaviour and bring order and predictability to interactions (March and Olsen 2006; North 1990). Consequently, the stability of any regime fundamentally depends on its institutions' ability to create an incentive structure that aligns behaviour with its core norms and objectives.

Earlier research explored optimal configurations of constitutions, executive powers, legislature structures, party organizations and electoral rules aiming for an institutional equilibrium to promote democratic stability (Lijphart 1999; Linz 1990; Mainwaring 1993; Stepan and Skach 1993). Subsequent studies examined the conditions under which these formal institutions effectively shape political behaviour to ensure representative, responsive and accountable governance

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(Cheibub 2007; Figueiredo and Limongi 2000; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Power and Gasiorowski 1997; Shugart and Carey 1992). However, numerous political transformations in non-Western countries which adopted democratic institutions, but often deviated from anticipated outcomes, highlighted the importance of understanding the role of informal rules, influencing actors' expectations and guiding their behaviour. This recognition has shifted scholarly focus towards examining how informal institutions complement or counteract formal ones, aiming to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the political context.

In consolidated democracies, where constitutionalism and rule of law prevail, informal institutions often complement and coordinate with formal rules to reinforce their impact (Azari and Smith 2012). In developing democracies, they may accommodate formal institutions lacking appropriate incentives to shape behaviour. For instance, the Concertación alliance in Chile utilized informal coalition mechanisms which effectively mitigated risks of gridlock within its strong presidential system by promoting interparty and interbranch cooperation (Siavelis 2006). Informal institutions may also subvert the intended functions of formal institutions. Practices such as patronage, clientelism and corruption prioritize narrow interests over public welfare, leading to particularistic outcomes that hinder representation and responsiveness and thereby undermining the effectiveness of democratic institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). In autocracies, these competing informal institutions paradoxically produce complementary outcomes by filling the gaps left by weak or absent formal institutions (Lauth 2015). They support regime stability by managing collective action and monitoring problems yet undermine prospects for democratic transitions and the rule of law (Köllner 2013).

In hybrid regimes, combining democratic and authoritarian elements, informal institutions are perceived as either filling gaps left by ineffective formal institutions or subverting them to ensure elite loyalty and consolidate power (Grzymala-Busse 2010; Ledeneva 2006; O'Donnell 1996). The likelihood of democratization in such regimes largely diminishes with the prevalence of competing informal rules that actively undermine democratic processes. When formal rules fail to provide sufficient incentives for compliance, actors find incentives to explore and rely on informal alternatives outside officially sanctioned mechanisms. The influence of these informal rules intensifies as formal institutions become weakly enforced and unstable (Levitsky and Murillo 2009). If actors expect compliance with these informal rules from others, they are more likely to conform themselves. This adaptive behaviour reinforces them at the expense of formal institutions (Lauth 2015).

Recent studies challenge the notion that informal institutions merely compensate for or subvert formal institutions. Rather than placing formal vis-à-vis informal institutions, they highlight the dynamic interplay between them to explain why hybrid regimes often diverge from expected democratic outcomes. Political elites often use formal institutions to engage in patronage politics and rent-seeking behaviour, aiming to secure political support and stabilize the regime (Benton 2007; Figueiredo and Limongi 2000; Kellam 2015). Executives leverage resource control and appointments to sustain legislative support in fragmented legislatures and reduce gridlock (Mello and Spektor 2018; Pereira and Mueller 2004). In Honduras, the combination of fused elections and factionalized parties prompts

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elites to adopt caudillo politics, stabilizing their power at the cost of democratic consolidation (Taylor 1996). This pattern of behaviour stems not from ineffective formal institutions but from flawed institutional design, which disrupts the balance of power between government branches, prompting elites to use formal powers for personal or political gain and to build clientelistic networks (Hale 2011; Mello and Spektor 2018). This flawed institutional design helps maintain stable coalitions by actively involving formal institutions to reinforce patronage politics and clientelistic networks at the expense of responsiveness and representation.

Moreover, in hybrid regimes, frequent changes to formal rules are often seen as contributing to institutional instability and weakening the enforcement of those rules (Levitsky and Murillo 2009). However, the weakness of formal institutions usually arises not from an inherent incapacity to enforce rules but from a lack of support by deeply embedded informal rules that offer incentives different from those of formal institutions. Formal institutions often become effective by adapting to entrenched informal rules that already shape actors' expectations and behaviours (Hale 2011). When formal institutions evolve in response to entrenched informal rules that subvert democratic processes, they fail to produce democratic outcomes but become effective at generating particularistic outcomes that align with the expectations of clientelistic networks (Grzymala-Busse 2010; Ledeneva 2006). Therefore, rather than simply declining, formal institutions in hybrid regimes are strategically repurposed to realign their incentive structures in support of informal rules. This adaptation not only legalizes these informal practices but also legitimizes them.

Overall, formal and informal institutions are deeply interconnected, transcending mere effectiveness and enforcement issues. Informal institutions are closely linked to formal institutional design, prompting critical questions about how they emerge, interact with formal institutions, shape actors' expectations and preferences, and influence behaviour, thereby affecting political outcomes. Their interplay is particularly evident in hybrid regimes, where the incentive structure of formal rules, sometimes strategically repurposed, reinforces entrenched informal rules and helps maintain power. Neopatrimonialism offers a valuable analytical lens for examining this interplay in hybrid regimes, highlighting how political elites leverage both formal and informal rules to maintain power. By embedding patronage and clientelism within formal institutions, they legitimize neopatrimonial authority but simultaneously undermine democratic governance. This perspective provides deeper insights into regime change beyond the decline of formal institutions or the rise of informal ones.

Institutional dynamics of neopatrimonialism

Max Weber (1978) describes patrimonialism as a traditional form of authority vested in an individual leader, legitimized by widely accepted norms and customs, and exercised through personal relationships based on loyalty and reciprocity. The ruler, driven by tradition, provides care, food and security in exchange for compliance and loyalty, creating an asymmetric yet mutually beneficial relationship between the ruler and the ruled. In contrast, bureaucratic authority is legitimized by strict adherence to codified rules and operates through an impersonal, legal-rational framework.

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While this legal-rational authority fosters predictable and fair governance where legality is widely respected, it is rarely observed in its purest form.

Neopatrimonialism blends personalized and legal-rational authority within modern institutional frameworks through three key elements: a strong executive, typically a president, whose authority is bolstered above the law by both formal and informal rules; the exercise of power through patron–client relationships binding the executive and supporters; and the discretionary distribution of public resources and offices in exchange for support to ensure political legitimacy and stability (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Erdmann and Engel 2007; Guliyev 2011; Sigman and Lindberg 2019). Unlike patrimonialism, which relies solely on personal authority rooted in tradition, neopatrimonialism combines formal institutions with personalized rule, where political elites treat their formally defined powers as private property and engage in transactional interactions based on material exchanges rather than traditional customs and beliefs (Erdmann and Engel 2007; Pitcher et al. 2009). Although informal institutions intertwine with formal ones, they do not completely override them but rather coexist and influence governance to varying degrees (Erdmann and Engel 2007). Hence, neopatrimonial authority creates a hybrid form of governance, blurring the lines between public and private interests, making it difficult to discern whether political outcomes are driven primarily by formal or informal institutions.

When misconceived as a regime type, neopatrimonialism is often portrayed as predatory personalistic rule in non-Western contexts, disguised under a pseudo-Western façade of formal institutions (Erdmann and Engel 2007). This portrayal explains the resilience of patriarchal, authoritarian and sultanistic regimes that rely on familial, kinship and religious ties, along with material benefits, suggesting the legitimization of authoritarian and potentially criminal behaviours through traditional loyalties (Bach 2011; Bank and Richter 2010). These mischaracterizations blur distinctions between regime type and forms of authority, as well as between patrimonial and neopatrimonial domination, by overemphasizing traditional norms, which are less prevalent at the national level today, and overstating informal practices without considering their interaction with formal institutions (Pitcher et al. 2009). Moreover, such interpretations reduce neopatrimonialism to a cultural artefact incompatible with Western standards of legal-rational authority and overlook its potential to foster developmental policies through a regulated interplay of private and public interests across Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia (Bach 2011; Isaacs 2014; Mkandawire 2015; Pitcher et al. 2009).

Neopatrimonialism is a hybrid form of governance based on personalized authority within formal institutions, functioning through patron–client relationships and legitimized by patronage in exchange for support. This governance often disregards representation and responsiveness through programmatic policies, as political actors secure support by delivering goods and services to their loyal base while excluding those who do not align with them. While it can foster distributive and developmental policies when private and public interests converge, its focus on material exchanges and immediate rewards often undermines efforts to address broader societal issues with long-term policies. The persistence of patronage and clientelism, even within democratic formal institutions, raises important questions about democratic erosion. From an institutional perspective, these practices endure because of widely shared expectations about others' behaviour, which in turn shape

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individual actions. Strikingly, formal institutions can reinforce these practices by creating an incentive structure – comprising explicit mechanisms like legal provisions and informal mechanisms like social norms and expectations – that drives actors towards patronage and clientelism. This incentive structure operates by rewarding loyalty with access to resources, offices and political favours, while penalizing dissent. As more actors engage in these informal institutions, they expect others will comply as well, further entrenching these practices.

Concentrated power in a single authority, such as a president, fosters expectations of enduring political dominance, encouraging clientelistic networks to form around a dominant political machine led by the president (Hale 2011: 582). The president's control over public resources and appointments strongly incentivizes acting as a patron, as it offers a more secure way to maintain power. By focusing on securing just enough backing from a select group, the president avoids the risks of competing against alternative candidates in elections through programmatic policies, which might not generate the same level of allegiance and could lead to losing office. Other formal institutions, such as party organization and electoral rules, may further reinforce the president's patron status by expanding control over key political processes including resources, policies, candidate selection and re-election. This concentration of power incentivizes various segments of society – including political elites, bureaucrats, voters and business groups – to become clients, reciprocating with political support and loyalty in exchange for access to patronage. Consequently, political patronage, whether through the exchange of public goods, services or appointments, creates a mutually beneficial yet asymmetric relationship between the patron and clients, further entrenching neopatrimonial rule (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980; Erdmann and Engel 2007; Guliyev 2011).

The incentive structure perpetuates a cycle of mutual dependence that is deeply embedded in the strategic calculations of both patron and clients, making it difficult for either party to break away without jeopardizing their political and material gains. For clients – whether they are political elites, bureaucrats, voters or business groups – aligning with the patron offers immediate material rewards, while opposing the patron risks political, economic and social marginalization. This context makes loyalty the safer and more profitable strategy, particularly when access to resources and offices is tightly controlled by the patron. For the patron, sustaining a loyal base through patronage and clientelism is crucial for maintaining power. This dependence is carefully managed by ensuring that clients' continued loyalty is consistently rewarded, thereby minimizing the risk of defections that could threaten the stability and legitimacy of patron's authority. High-ranking clients, in particular, become subordinate due to their elevation based on loyalty in exchange for benefits, while lower levels may still operate on a merit-based system (Guliyev 2011: 584). Over time, this system becomes self-perpetuating: as more actors entrench themselves within a patronage pyramid through clientelistic exchanges, they anticipate that others will do the same, embedding neopatrimonialism and making democratic governance through programmatic policies less viable.

In conclusion, formal institutions in hybrid regimes are not merely declining or ineffective; their incentive structures, sometimes strategically realigned, legitimize practices that perpetuate neopatrimonialism. In this hybrid governance model, formal institutions not only coexist with but actively support clientelistic networks and

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loyalty-based resource distribution, creating a cycle of mutual dependence between patrons and clients. These relationships, where actors depend on material exchanges, make breaking away from neopatrimonial authority difficult without jeopardizing their gains. As a result, democratic governance becomes elusive, as these structures prioritize particularistic policies over broader societal goals. The following sections examine Turkey as a case study, showing how the institutional incentive structure generated by presidentialism, party organization and electoral rules aligns actors' behaviour to entrench neopatrimonialism and undermine democratic governance.

The drivers of democratic breakdown in Turkey: Institutional erosion, patronage and corruption

Studies of democratic breakdown in Turkey largely mirror the broader literature, emphasizing the weakening of formal institutions, the expansion of patronage and pervasive corruption under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly since the 2010s. Erdoğan has maintained power as prime minister from 2003 to 2014, as the first directly elected president under the parliamentary system from 2014 to 2018, and has been president under the new presidential system since 2018. Turkey's regime under Erdoğan is characterized as a 'delegative democracy', marked by a strong executive, clientelism and weakened horizontal accountability (Taş 2015). Others describe it as 'competitive authoritarianism', where the erosion of checks and balances and political and civil rights tilts the political playing field against the opposition (Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Özbudun 2015). David White and Marc Herzog (2016) emphasize Erdoğan's consolidation of power through control over the state's administrative, extractive and coercive capacities, referring to the regime as 'electoral authoritarianism'. Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov (2018) describe 'Erdoganism' as a blend of electoral authoritarianism, political Islam, populism and patronage that entrenches Erdoğan's rule. These studies emphasize how the erosion of formal checks and balances has concentrated executive power, driving democratic breakdown. However, they often overlook the underlying institutional incentives that compel actors to align with this consolidation of power.

Patronage has historically defined party–voter linkage in Turkish politics, obstructing democratic governance by prioritizing particularistic goods and services over programmatic policies. Since the transition to multiparty system in the 1950s, political elites have exchanged public services for votes, especially in rural areas (Heper and Keyman 1998). By the 1980s and 1990s, this focus shifted to urban areas, where the growing urban poor became a key electoral base, and patronage was extended to include infrastructure projects, zoning permits and cash transfers to secure their support (Sayarı 2014). Under the AKP, patronage expanded significantly, encompassing roads, coal, food, clothing, cash transfers and mass housing, distributed through a vast network of public institutions, municipalities and NGOs. For instance, strategic targeting of conditional cash-transfer programmes and public housing projects under the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) indicates how resources are distributed primarily to enhance the AKP's electoral success rather than addressing needs-based criteria (Aytaç 2014; Marschall et al. 2016).

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This system strengthens the AKP's ties with voters, particularly in urban poor regions, where access to public services and goods is increasingly tied to political support, fostering voters' dependence on the party (Ark-Yıldırım 2017). This pervasive patronage sustains support for Erdoğan and the AKP, despite policy failures and economic challenges, though with slight decreases over the years.

The AKP's manipulation of privatization and public procurement, at unprecedented levels compared to previous governments, drives corruption in Turkey by enabling political actors to use office for private and political gain, such as distributing state resources to favoured business groups to forge powerful alliances. Legal changes, such as numerous amendments to the Public Procurement Law, enable the government to bypass competitive bidding or recognize exemptions, awarding lucrative contracts directly to politically connected businesses (Çeviker Gürakar 2016). This is especially prevalent in sectors such as construction, where rent creation is high and large infrastructure projects are used as vehicles for patronage. Similarly, these business groups also benefit from large-scale privatization by acquiring state assets at below-market prices in the energy, mining, tourism and health sectors (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014). Profitable transfers of public funds and assets are reciprocated by these groups through media investments, creating pro-government media moguls who shape public opinion in favour of the AKP and Erdoğan (Esen and Gumuscu 2018). Their donations to the AKP's election campaigns, NGOs and municipalities are then redistributed as social assistance and services, further boosting voter support (Esen and Gumuscu 2021). Unlike previous periods, when corruption was more individualized, the AKP's selective application of legal instruments rewards supporters and puts sanctions on opponents, centralizing corruption through targeted legal reforms and amendments (Cengiz 2020; Kimya 2019).

These political economy incentives, such as access to state resources, public contracts and privatization, inducing political actors to engage in corruption, are not merely an alternative to institutional incentives but are products of deliberative institutional restructuring. Legal changes in formal rules have entrenched corrupt practices within state–business relations, reinforcing the cycle of institutional repurposing and corruption (Çeviker Gürakar 2016). Moreover, these changes were made possible by members of the parliament, incentivized by party and electoral rules to align their behaviour with the agenda of their leader, who controls their political careers and holds the means to distribute resources within the party. The lack of transparent formal rules governing political party and electoral campaign finance also exacerbates informal and corrupt relationships, particularly as business groups increasingly rely on the state for economic opportunities (Kimya 2019). Consequently, the partisan distribution of resources to economic elites is facilitated also by institutional incentives, or the absence thereof, compelling actors to use their offices for private and political gain.

While these valuable contributions explain Turkey's democratic breakdown by detailing *how* it occurs, they often overlook the deeper question of *why* actors align with subversive informal institutions despite the presence of formal institutions. Addressing this requires a closer examination of the institutional incentives that shape actors' preferences and drive their behaviours towards supporting undemocratic practices. This study shifts the focus to these underlying institutional incentives, especially following the transition to presidentialism in 2017,

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inducing actors to perpetuate neopatrimonialism. According to the V-Dem Neopatrimonial Rule Index, Turkey's score rose steadily from 0.37 to 0.65 between 2010 and 2016, reflecting the growing personalization of power, clientelism and corruption under the parliamentary system.[1] This rise in neopatrimonial practices correlates with significant constitutional and legal changes that expanded the AKP governments' executive power, altering institutional incentives and fostering the expectation that Erdoğan was becoming the primary authority in coordinating patronage distribution.

The 2010 constitutional referendum reorganized the high courts, curtailing their autonomy, which was further reinforced by radical legal changes in 2014 aiming to create a more cooperative and compliant judicial system (Özbudun 2015). Erdoğan's direct election as president in 2014 concentrated his authority, as he exercised power akin to a semi-presidential system, despite the president's position being constitutionally designed as non-partisan. However, tensions arose within the AKP, as executive power still largely rested with the prime minister and cabinet, both of whom, along with the parliamentary majority, were from the AKP and accountable to parliament. This dual executive structure further weakened parliamentary checks and balances, which, though weak and partisan, still existed. The declaration of a state of emergency following the 2016 military coup attempt enabled the government to rule by executive decrees, bypassing both parliament and judiciary oversight for two years and ended shortly after the presidential system was implemented. Although these changes expanded Erdoğan's and his governments' reach, allowing clientelistic networks to coalesce around them, the consolidation of power was not without constraints. Many founding members of the AKP left the party, criticizing Erdoğan's increasing centralization of power, and the direction the party had taken, with some later forming or joining opposition parties. This internal dissent, coupled with the parliamentary system itself, limited the emergence of neopatrimonial rule. Unlike a presidential system, where power is concentrated in a single leader independent of parliament, the parliamentary system dispersed authority among the president, prime minister, cabinet and parliamentary majority. This division of power prevented the full centralization of authority around one figure and created competing interests within the government, leading to confusion over who held ultimate authority in patron–client relationships.

Institutionalization of neopatrimonial rule with presidentialism

The shift to presidentialism marks a decisive transformation characterized as 'hyper-presidentialism' (Boyunsuz 2016) and 'executive presidency' (Akman and Akçalı 2017), dismantling the previous dual executive structure and centralizing authority in a single figure. This new system enables Erdoğan, first elected president in 2018 and re-elected in 2023, to directly personalize state resources and offices, laying the groundwork for entrenched neopatrimonial rule. This entrenchment is reflected in Turkey's V-Dem Neopatrimonial Rule Index score, which rose to 0.89 and has remained steady since 2017. Presidential powers enable the president to dissolve parliament, unilaterally control appointments and restrict parliamentary oversight of the cabinet, budget and decrees. Coupled with centralized party leadership and a closed-list proportional electoral system, this system incentivizes the president, as head of

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state, executive and party leader, to act as a patron who ties political survival and access to resources and offices to loyalty, thereby personalizing governance.

Studies suggest that autocratic leaders often rewrite or amend constitutions to amass executive power, resulting in weakened formal institutions unable to provide effective checks and balances (Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). However, this perspective overemphasizes the agency of the executive while portraying other actors as passive recipients of change, overlooking their active roles in shaping and adapting to evolving institutional dynamics. In Turkey, the shift to presidentialism has not simply weakened institutions but has established a new institutional equilibrium that strengthens the president's capacity to enforce authority directly. This new balance of power, rooted in stable and enforced rules, aligns actors' behaviour through incentives linking access to public resources and offices with loyalty. As actors anticipate mutual compliance, shared expectations foster conformity and bring institutional stability. Formal institutions, rather than being eroded, now legitimize and sustain patron–client relationships at the core of the state's functions, with loyalty-based distribution of resources and offices at the president's discretion, effectively perpetuating neopatrimonial rule.

Institutional incentives of party organization, electoral rules and presidentialism in Turkey

Turkish political parties, lacking strong grassroots connections, rely heavily on leadership to engage voters, centralizing power within the party hierarchy (Turan 2003). This top-down organization allows leaders to control nominations, promotions, party programmes and resource distribution, ensuring high party discipline and alignment with leadership (Ayan 2010; Gençkaya and Kabasakal 2024; Kabasakal 2014; Turan 2011). Leaders reinforce discipline by punishing or expelling members who deviate from the party line (Ayan 2010; Özbudun 2007). This centralized authority is further entrenched by the closed-list proportional representation system, where party leadership controls candidate selection and rankings on electoral lists, and voters cast ballots for parties rather than individual candidates (Gençkaya and Kabasakal 2024). The 7% election threshold (formerly 10% until 2023) and the lack of internal regulations on state financial aid distribution within parties further increase members and candidates' dependence on party leadership for their political careers (Gençkaya 2018). By centralizing control within the party, the leadership becomes the patron to whom members must demonstrate loyalty to secure their positions, transforming them into clients dependent on the party hierarchy for their advancement.

Under the presidential system, the incentive structure created by centralized party structures, electoral rules and presidential authority reinforce each other, concentrating power in the presidency over all branches of government and public institutions. This consolidation of power incentivizes the president to act as the ultimate patron in Turkey's political system and fosters clientelistic networks to organize around the president. Unrestricted control over cabinet appointments and budgetary powers allows the president to turn the executive branch into a personal domain. Unlike typical presidential systems, where parliamentary approval of cabinet appointments ensures responsible use of these powers, in Turkey the president can form the cabinet without negotiation or compromise with the legislature. Similarly, parliament's limited role in budget approval further consolidates the president's control over

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resources. If parliament fails to approve the budget, the president implements the previous year's budget with an inflation adjustment, undermining parliament's leverage to influence policies through budgetary control. This unchecked authority enables the president, acting as head of state, executive and party leader, to make appointments and allocate resources based on the presidential agenda, even without support from the president's parliamentary party group. The president's control over access to the executive and budget allocations creates incentives to reward or punish allies and opponents. This deepens the personalization of governance and entrenches the president's patron status, turning the executive, legislature and party into a network of patron–client relationships centred around the presidency, prioritizing loyalty over merit and policy-based governance.

This centralization of power extends to the judiciary, where the president's control over appointments to the Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK) and high courts further undermines judicial independence. The president and parliament appoint 11 of the 13 members of the HSK, rather than these members being selected by their peers. The remaining two HSK members, the minister of justice and the deputy minister, are also appointed by the president. The HSK appoints judges to the Court of Cassation, and, together with the president, appoints judges to the Council of State. These two high courts are responsible for appointing the members of the Supreme Election Council (YSK). Moreover, the president appoints 12 out of the 15 members of the Constitutional Court, with the remaining three elected by parliament. The president's control over judicial appointments incentivizes the distribution of positions based on loyalty, resulting in a compliant legal system that aligns with the president's agenda. Judges and prosecutors who diverge from the president's expectations face the risk of removal and replacement due to the president's control over the HSK. This centralized control undermines judicial independence and strengthens the president's hold over the legal system, fostering expectations that the judiciary serves and is accountable to a patron who is above the law, resembling a neopatrimonial authority.

The president also wields significant power to design state institutions without parliamentary oversight. Through presidential decrees, the president appoints and removes bureaucrats, establishes or abolishes ministries, and determines the structure of central and provincial institutions. Additionally, the president controls the National Security Council's General Secretariat and the State Supervisory Board, including the appointment, terms and duties of its members. This unrestrained authority enables the president to reward or punish bureaucratic elites based on personal interests, while also exercising scrutiny to ensure conformity. For example, the State Supervisory Board, which oversees public institutions, conducts investigations at the president's request, scrutinizing the very institutions shaped by the president. This consolidates the president's authority as a patron over the bureaucracy, further entrenching clientelistic networks within the state apparatus.

The president's constitutional power to issue executive decrees largely influences policy and legislative agenda. This power extends beyond executive responsibilities, enabling the president to usurp legislative functions. By combining legislative initiative with centralized control over ministries and bureaucracy, the president gains a significant advantage over parliament in handling policy. In theory, parliament can counterbalance this authority by passing laws that override decrees or

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filing annulment cases with the Constitutional Court. However, only the two largest political parties or one-fifth of parliament members can initiate annulment actions. Given the president's patron status as head of state, executive and party leader, these checks remain highly partisan and weaken parliamentary oversight. Both actions require a majority of deputies to act independently, which is unlikely when the president's party controls both branches. Parliament can only effectively scrutinize the president when the legislative majority and the president belong to opposing parties, a rare scenario given the concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections. Even in such cases, the constitution grants the president significant legislative authority, including the power to call new elections to resolve deadlocks.

Neopatrimonial rule generated by political institutions in Turkey

The concentrated authority of the president centralizes power and resources, fostering expectations that access to distribution and decision-making is contingent on supporting the president's patron status, and thereby inducing patron–client relationships between the president and a broad range of political actors. As these actors align with the president to secure resources and rewards and evade sanctions, they become clients embedded in a system of mutual dependence, compelled to prioritize loyalty. As more actors join these clientelistic networks, they reinforce one another's behaviour, further entrenching neopatrimonialism. The resulting interplay between formal institutions creates a self-sustaining feedback loop, where formal rules, rather than mitigating informal rules, actively reinforce them by incentivizing alignment with the president's agenda. In this environment, democratic governance is systematically undermined, making responsiveness and representation increasingly elusive.

Several actions and statements from political elites illustrate how loyalty to the president translates into practice, revealing the depth of clientelistic networks. For example, cabinet ministers frequently emphasize their accountability to Erdoğan by publicly stating that decisions are made 'under the instructions of our president' or 'with the approval of our president'. Rather than resigning publicly, ministers seek the president's pardon, reinforcing Erdoğan's role as the central authority who holds the power to dismiss them. This loyalty also manifests in targeting political opponents, such as İstanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, who won the 2019 mayoral election twice after the YSK ordered a rerun following his initial victory (Sayın 2019). In 2022, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu escalated this by launching an investigation into hundreds of İstanbul municipal employees, accusing them of ties to terrorist groups (*İçişleri Bakanlığı* 2022). These actions underscore how elites align with Erdoğan, with loyalty rewarded through access to decision-making and resources. Erdoğan frequently appoints close allies to key ministries and public institutions, including his son-in-law, who served as finance minister from 2018 to 2020. This practice allows the patron's clients to establish their own clientelistic networks within a patronage pyramid. For instance, Erdoğan's son-in-law facilitated the promotion of Hakan Atilla, who had been imprisoned in the US for 28 months for his involvement in bypassing sanctions against Iran, exposing bribery among high-level Turkish bureaucrats, to the position of Istanbul Stock Exchange general manager in 2019, following his release (BBC Türkçe 2021). Notably, when Erdoğan's son-in-law resigned from his ministerial role, Atilla also stepped down shortly thereafter. In 2019, Erdoğan created the

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High Consultation Council for the Presidency, appointing former cabinet ministers and parliamentary speakers from the parliamentary system as members, thereby co-opting them into the new presidential system rather than excluding them and risking the creation of potential rivals. One of these members, Bülent Arınç, explicitly stated that he was not 'finished, crushed, and decayed', emphasizing that he was assigned to his new position 'not by flattering President Tayyip Erdoğan, but because of his loyalty' (*T24* 2019).

The president's concentrated power over key ministries, procurement authorities and regulatory bodies enables the direct allocation of state resources to politically affiliated business groups. By appointing loyalists to these institutions and leveraging state contracts and legal mechanisms through presidential decrees and decisions, Erdoğan ensures that public resources are funnelled to his business allies, centralizing his control over the state resources. This integrates the business sector into the neopatrimonial system, blurring the lines between state and private interests. For instance, after courts annulled the project and the Council of State upheld the decision, Erdoğan declared a 25-hectare area on the shores of İznik Lake a special industrial zone for Varaka Paper Industry, part of the Albayrak Group, a close ally and pro-government media mogul, in August 2024 (Yılmaz 2024). Erdoğan also uses appointments to penalize those who defy his agenda, as demonstrated by frequent changes in the leadership of the Central Bank. Since 2018, central bank governors have been pressured to keep interest rates low, in line with Erdoğan's directives, despite severe economic consequences. Over the past six years, Erdoğan has dismissed and replaced the head of the Central Bank six times, often choosing individuals from the AKP's inner circle (Demiralp 2024). In a late-night decree in 2021, he abruptly removed three top bank officials, including two deputy governors (Freedom House 2022). This use of decrees extends beyond financial institutions. In under three years, Erdoğan replaced the head of Turkey's Statistical Institute (TÜİK) four times, widely viewed as a response to the TÜİK's controversial stance on rising inflation (*Cumhuriyet* 2022). In June 2020, Erdoğan issued a presidential decision ordering the closure of İstanbul Şehir University, co-founded by former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was once a close ally, but has been leading the opposition Future Party since 2019 (BBC Türkçe 2020). When formal institutions prioritize loyalty to personalized authority, those who do not align face sanctions, eroding fair and predictable governance with clientelistic networks centred around the president.

This neopatrimonial governance has severe drawbacks for public administration, as it ties officials' accountability directly to the president rather than to legal-rational authority. This dependency leads to administrative paralysis in emergency contexts, where officials are unable to act swiftly without the president's explicit approval. The February 2023 earthquakes, which tragically resulted in over 50,000 deaths, starkly illustrate this dysfunction. For at least three days, victims were left without official rescue efforts because ministers and high-ranking officials, bound by their loyalty to the president, were paralysed, unable to make decisive decisions without knowing Erdoğan's preferences. This delay severely hindered rescue coordination, volunteer mobilization and relief implementation. Amid the crisis, President Erdoğan threatened those who criticized the government's inadequate response, stating, 'we are taking note of those', implying that critics would face future

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repercussions. The disaster exposed the limitations of this system, where personal loyalty overrides competence in public administration. Key disaster-response agencies, such as the AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority) and Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent), were criticized for having their leadership filled based on party loyalty rather than expertise. Many high-level positions were occupied by former deputy candidates, officials from party-controlled municipalities or individuals with close ties to the AKP, rather than qualified professionals (Ayhan 2023).

The centralization of authority and resources discourages AKP deputies from directly engaging with voters or effectively representing their constituencies. Instead, they focus on advancing President Erdoğan's agenda in legislation to secure their own political futures, further enabling the president to consolidate his authority. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all major decisions regarding lockdowns, quarantines and restrictions on personal freedoms were implemented through ministerial decrees with Erdoğan's approval. Parliament remained largely passive, failing to assert its role in overseeing the executive or leading the pandemic response. Similarly, in 2021, Erdoğan unilaterally withdrew Turkey from the Istanbul Convention, an international treaty combating gender-based violence, which Turkey had been the first to sign and ratify in 2011. Despite the Turkish constitution stating that international agreements duly put into effect have the force of law, and that only parliament can annul such laws, parliament remained silent. In 2022, the Council of State ruled Erdoğan's decision legal, with a narrow vote of 3 to 2. That same year, parliament passed the controversial 'Disinformation Law', which imposes prison sentences of up to three years for individuals accused of spreading false information on social media. The law has been widely criticized as a tool for restricting dissenting voices. It is reported that by 2023, at least 33 journalists had been investigated under the law, with six detained and four arrested and later released (Öztürk 2023).

Deputies often demonstrate their loyalty by backing the president's policies that distribute benefits to secure support and maintain loyalty. In this patron–client dynamic, the president acts as the 'patron', deciding which interests to serve, while deputies function as 'clients', supporting his agenda to safeguard their positions. By treating voters as new clients and disincentivizing them from voting for alternatives, deputies actively expand the patronage network to secure continued support. Through the enactment of particularistic policies advocated or endorsed by the president, parliament becomes a venue for patronage distribution rather than representation and responsiveness through programmatic policies. Leading up to the highly competitive May 2023 elections, parliament increasingly focused on patronage distribution as a key legitimization strategy for Erdoğan's neopatrimonial authority, ultimately contributing to his electoral victory. In September 2022, Erdoğan announced the New Housing Project, touted as the largest social housing initiative for low-income earners, promising 250,000 apartments in collaboration with TOKİ and the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change. The project received over 5 million applications in just 1.5 months (TOKİ 2022). In January 2023, parliament passed a law providing financial support for the project, including contributions to instalment payments, with funds transferred to banks through a public bank designated by the president (AA 2023). Additionally, parliament passed a law granting permanent positions to around 450,000 contracted employees in public sector and another law allowing those

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affected by the retirement age rules to retire early, provided they meet the service duration and contribution requirements (*AA* 2023).

However, when elites monopolize resources, voters begin to perceive the system as exclusive and corrupt, since the legitimacy of the system is built on the strategic distribution of resources and offices. This dynamic became evident between the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections and the March 2024 local elections. Despite challenges like hyperinflation, currency devaluation, major wildfires and the February 2023 earthquakes, Erdoğan maintained a slight majority, largely due to the normalization of patronage as a routine governance tool. Over the years, the strategic allocation of resources through formal institutions transformed patronage from a political strategy into a core legitimizing mechanism of Erdoğan's authority, perpetuating neopatrimonialism by making loyalty the central organizing principle. However, after the May 2023 elections, Erdoğan appointed Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister, a neoliberal technocrat and former AKP minister, and endorsed his programme to restore macroeconomic stability. The resulting austerity measures – including a steep rise in the dollar's value against the lira (from 19 TL in May 2023 to 32 TL in March 2024), increased indirect taxes and cuts to salary raises, particularly for pensioners and minimum-wage workers, whose salaries remained below the hunger limit – led to widespread discontent. Minimal structural reforms further aggravated dissatisfaction among voters as they increasingly perceived themselves excluded from patronage, which was accruing mainly to political and business elites through tax incentives, exemptions and the cancellation of billions in tax debts (Zengin 2023). Consequently, voters began withdrawing their support from the AKP. This shift was clearly reflected in the March 2024 local elections, where voters overwhelmingly supported the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), allowing it to win the majority of metropolitan and provincial municipalities. For the first time, the CHP surpassed the AKP in vote share. This voter backlash underscores the fragility of neopatrimonial systems during times of resource scarcity and economic downturns as legitimacy hinges on material exchanges. When resource distribution is perceived as unfair and benefits are monopolized by a select few, the system's legitimacy erodes, leading to significant electoral repercussions.

The ongoing constitutional crisis surrounding the imprisonment of Can Atalay, who was elected as a deputy in May 2023 while still imprisoned on politically motivated charges, demonstrates how presidential authority has overridden judicial independence in Turkey. Despite the Constitutional Court's ruling that Atalay's imprisonment violated his personal rights and freedoms and that he should be released immediately, the lower courts and the Court of Cassation refused to comply, arguing that the ruling held 'no legal value' (*Oksijen* 2024). This resistance shows how parts of the judiciary align with the president's political objectives, prioritizing loyalty over the rule of law. Parliament's decision to strip Atalay of his parliamentary status, despite the Constitutional Court's ruling, further underscores the legislative body's complicity in maintaining the neopatrimonial rule. Another stark example is the Osman Kavala case, illustrating how neopatrimonial authority uses the legal system to suppress dissent. Despite the European Court of Human Rights' 2019 ruling for his release, Turkish courts have repeatedly refused to comply, keeping Kavala imprisoned since 2017 on politically motivated charges (Çalı and Leach

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2022). As formal institutions, particularly the judiciary, are co-opted into patron–client relationships by prioritizing loyalty to the president as the ultimate patron over legal principles, the president's authority becomes perceived as above the law, compelling actors to align their behaviours even more closely with the patron's agenda, thereby deepening the entrenchment of neopatrimonialism.

Concluding remarks

This study demonstrates that neopatrimonial rule is not merely a symptom of institutional failure, but a product of the interaction between presidentialism and party and electoral institutions in hybrid regimes like Turkey. The analysis shows that formal institutions are not inherently weak, nor are informal institutions simply pervasive; rather, it is the institutional incentive structure created by the interplay of political institutions that fosters neopatrimonialism, potentially accelerating authoritarianism. In Turkey, the institutional design entrenches the president's status as a patron, concentrating control over the political system through building clientelistic networks and distributing patronage. For instance, this design discourages deputies from engaging in meaningful constituency representation, instead aligning them with the president's legislative agenda to distribute spoils to supporters in exchange for re-election prospects, career advancement and rewards. As a result, diverse interests are systematically excluded, and the enactment of programmatic policies becomes secondary to the distribution of patronage. This erodes voters' control over elected representatives and undermines the legitimacy and credibility of political institutions.

This political system severely limits Turkey's potential towards democratization, since neopatrimonialism thrives on an institutional incentive structure that encourages the expansion of patron–client relationships. For sustaining neopatrimonial authority, maintaining control over both the presidency and a legislative majority is crucial, as shown above. However, the proportional representation electoral system fostering a multiparty system increases the likelihood of parliamentary fragmentation. This fragmentation poses a threat to the president's ability to sustain the clientelistic networks that are necessary for consolidating power. To counteract this risk, major parties running for the presidency strategically form pre-electoral alliances with minor parties, co-opting them into the neopatrimonial system through the promise of patronage. By distributing resources and political favours, the president secures the loyalty of minor parties, preventing further fragmentation and consolidating his legislative majority. Minor parties, lacking independent access to state resources, find these alliances appealing as they provide opportunities to distribute spoils to their constituencies. This expansion of patron–client networks through patronage distribution co-opts more actors into the neopatrimonial system, thereby reinforcing it. As neopatrimonialism coopts more actors, the prospects for democratization in Turkey diminish. The incentives that encourage patronage-based coalitions reduce the likelihood of a shift towards policy-driven politics, where parties would compete on alternative policy agendas and legislature would be driven by programmatic policies addressing long-standing societal problems.

This study offers significant insights for countries facing democratic breakdown, pervasive patronage and clientelism. While it may be tempting to attribute the

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spread of subversive informal institutions to elite cohesion alone, particularly as Turkey's political regime becomes increasingly authoritarian under a presidential system with sweeping executive powers – paralleling trends in Latin America, Asia and Africa – this study moves beyond such assumptions by uncovering the institutional mechanisms driving particularistic outcomes. Without 'appropriate' institutional incentives that foster policy responsiveness and representation, political outcomes will continue to deviate from democratic governance. Beyond deepening the understanding of Turkey's political trajectory, this analysis provides a comparative framework for examining similar dynamics in other hybrid regimes. By transposing the concept of neopatrimonialism from area studies to comparative politics through the lens of new institutionalism, this study highlights the underlying institutional incentives that generate neopatrimonialism, offering broader insights into governance across the spectrum from democracies to fully authoritarian regimes.

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Note

1 The V-Dem Neopatrimonial Rule Index is constructed by Rachel Sigman and Staffan Lindberg and uses Bayesian factor analysis of 16 indicators included in the three sub-indices of Clientelism, Presidentialism and Regime Corruption. The graph on Türkiye over the years is accessible at https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph by selecting Türkiye (by region) and Neopatrimonial Rule Index (by indicators).

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