

CONFLICTA SPOTLIGHT

TRANSNATIONAL VOTERS AND ELECTIONS: INSIGHTS FROM TWO QUALITATIVE STUDIES

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Summary

This paper explores the complex interplay between migration and elections, focusing on the political mobilization and voting behavior of Turkish postmigrants in Germany. Through two qualitative studies, we aim to provide insights into how citizenship status and transnational identities influence electoral participation and political preferences in both countries of origin and residence. The transnational dynamics of political preferences and engagements of postmigrants provide a deeper understanding of how migration influences political landscapes, offering valuable perspectives for fostering inclusive democratic practices. We believe this paper can be beneficial for researchers, policymakers, and political scientists interested in migration studies, electoral behavior, and transnational citizenship, as well as for those focusing on European, German and Turkish political dynamics.

Germany held its general election on February 23, 2025. In recent years, the rise of far-right parties as well as the increasing support to right-wing worldviews have become significant issues on the national agenda, often linked to discussions about migration and anti-immigrant sentiments. This has sparked numerous public debates.

However, the relationship between migration and electoral outcomes is more intricate than a simple cause-and-effect scenario. It involves various aspects, such as the strategic use of migration-related topics by political parties during campaigns, the granting of voting rights to migrants, the political preferences of migrants, and their participation in elections both in countries of origin and residence.

Given its importance to Germany's electoral landscape, we offer a brief overview of our previous research on postmigrants¹ from Turkey. We focus on their participation in the Turkish elections in May

2023 and the European Union elections in June 2024 through two studies conducted at ConflictA. Accordingly, this research explores the political mobilization of postmigrants from Turkey across different electoral contexts, highlighting their perceived roles and representations in shaping both national and transnational political outcomes.

Before delving into our research findings, several clarifications are necessary. First, it is crucial to identify whose perspectives on postmigrants' voting is being considered: We conducted our research with residents in Germany holding either German or Turkish citizenship or both (Study 1). Among German citizens, people without migration background were also included (Study 2). Second, it is essential to specify the country in which the elections are taking place: Germany or Turkey. Elections for EU Parliament also adds another layer at a supra-national level. As mentioned, the interplay between migration and elections is highly complex and it requires

¹ This term is used to refer social processes that continue after settling in Germany; see e.g., Forutan, 2019; Yıldız, 2015

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encompassing the politics of two national contexts.

Understanding these nuances helps to contextualize the varied influences and implications of postmigrants' electoral participation across different political landscapes.

Turkey-origin postmigrants in Germany have varying voting rights depending on their citizenship status. Those who have acquired German citizenship can participate in all local, parliamentary, and European Union elections within Germany. Conversely, approximately 1.5 million people of Turkey origin who hold Turkish citizenship retain the right to vote in Turkey, but only in presidential and parliamentary elections, and not in local elections. This distinction highlights the multiplex of electoral rights and participation among Turkish postmigrants in Germany.

This context highlights that the political engagement of Turkish postmigrants is significantly influenced by their citizenship status, affecting their participation and potential impact on political outcomes in both Germany and Turkey. Their dual engagement—participating in politics in both Germany and Turkey (e.g., Goerres et al., 2025)—exemplifies the compounded nature of transnational political identity. It underscores the importance of understanding how migrants manage their rights and responsibilities across different national contexts.

There is considerable interest in analyzing which political parties are favored by Turkish postmigrants with German citizenship in German and EU elections (e.g., Goerres et al., 2022), as well as their preferences in Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections (e.g., Abadan-Unat et al., 2014; Yener-Rodenburg, 2024). These analyses offer substantial insights into electoral tendencies and socio-political dynamics.

The voting behavior of individuals participating in Turkish elections while residing in Germany is often described using terms like non-residential, expatriate, or emigrant voting. However, we prefer the term „transnational voting“ as it more accurately captures the intricacy of navigating dual sovereignties, the legal frameworks of two nation-states, and the experience of managing political identities across two countries. This concept highlights the uni-

que position of these voters and reflects their connections and influences that span national borders.

Voting is a fundamental democratic right, yet for transnational voters—those who cast ballots in their country of origin while living abroad—this right is accompanied by numerous complication and challenges. The extension of voting rights to emigrants has evolved significantly on a global scale since 1980s. Currently, 141 countries allow their citizens residing abroad to vote, a substantial increase from just 21 countries in the past (e.g., Allen & Wellman, 2024).

However, transnational voting is often not regarded as a necessity or an inherent part of citizenship and democratic rights, leading to ongoing debates about its legitimacy (e.g., Bauböck, 2016; Owen, 2011). While domestic voting is universally recognized as a right, the legitimacy of external voting remains contested, particularly regarding its impacts on both the countries of origin and settlement. This debate centers on questions of political influence, representation, and the potential for external voters to affect domestic policies and outcomes in ways that might not align with the interests of residents in either context. As such, the issue of external voting continues to be a multifaceted topic in discussions of transnational citizenship and democratic participation.

Despite considerable progress in granting voting rights to non-resident citizens worldwide, debates persist over whether expatriates should be entitled to vote. This issue is particularly contentious for Turkish postmigrants in Germany, who face unique challenges and potential stigmatization from both their country of origin and their country of residence. This twist underscores the need for a detailed understanding of transnational voting and its implications for democratic participation and identity.

For Turkish citizens, the journey to secure voting rights has been both lengthy and challenging in their country of origin. Initially, Turkish emigrants were effectively disenfranchised due to their residency abroad. This situation persisted until 1987, when voting at airports and border crossings was permitted. A significant milestone was reached in 2017, when Turkish citizens residing abroad gained

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the ability to vote at consulates and embassies.

Despite these advancements, Turkish postmigrants often face criticism from residents in both Germany and Turkey, who argue that they are not directly affected by Turkey's policies. This misconception overlooks the legal obligations and bureaucratic challenges that transnational voters face. Furthermore, it fails to recognize their vested interest in the future of their country of origin, which is often linked to factors such as remittances, property ownership, and military service. These aspects highlight the diverse and meaningful connections that postmigrants maintain with their country of origin, underscoring the legitimacy of their right to participate in its democratic processes. This perspective challenges the simplistic view of external voting and emphasizes the intricate realities of transnational citizenship. Still, transnational voting continues to be a conflict issue, mirroring the underlying tensions and contestations surrounding its implementation.

We conducted two studies to explore this phenomenon. These studies aimed to investigate the complexities surrounding the voting behaviors and rights of Turkish postmigrants, examining both the criticisms they face and the legitimate connections they maintain with their country of origin. Through these studies, a deeper understanding of the challenges and motivations behind their participation in democratic processes was sought, highlighting the intricate interplay between their roles in both their country of residence and origin.

In the first study, the focus was on transnational voting by Turkish postmigrants in the 2023 elections in Turkey. Out of 3 million Turkish postmigrants in Germany, 1,504,967 were eligible to vote. The voter participation rate among these individuals was 48.69%, indicating that about half of them cast their ballots. Among those who voted, approximately 67% supported presidential candidate of AKP leader Erdogan (see Figure 1). This translates to about one-third of the voters or one-sixth of the overall postmigrant population, challenging the

prevalent stereotype that „Turkish postmigrants support Erdogan.“ This finding underscores the diversity of political opinions within the Turkish postmigrant community and highlights the importance of cautious interpretations of voting behavior. It reveals that there is a broad spectrum of political views and preferences, which defies simplified generalizations and calls for a more comprehensive understanding of their electoral choices.²

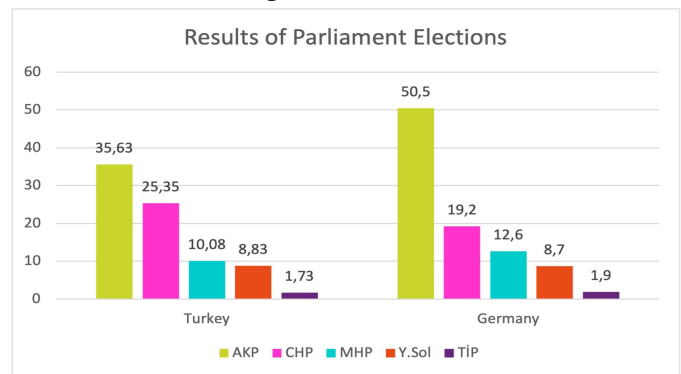


Figure 1. Distribution of Votes in the 2023 Elections by Country, Party and Candidate

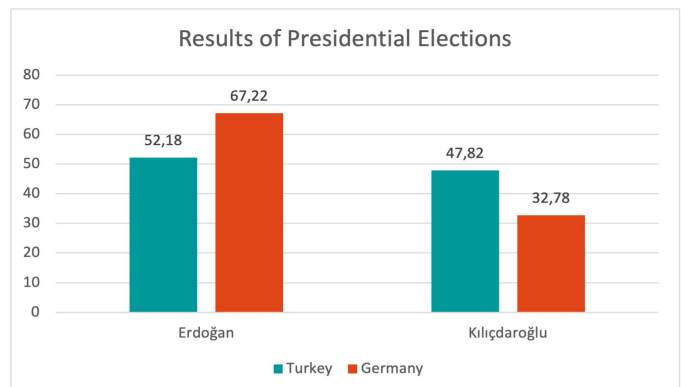


Figure 2. Results of Presidential Elections

Study 1

In this study, a crowd ethnography approach was utilized in May 2023, collecting diverse data from public spaces and social media platforms. The data included audio and video recordings, photographs, and observational field notes from events organized by postmigrant groups with various political orientations, all analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, 16 postmigrants (9 women, aged 18 to 64) from a Turkish and German bilingual social network living in a medium-

² Country Breakdown: The figure may display the proportion of votes cast by Turkish citizens residing in various countries, such as Germany and other locations where expatriates participated in the election. Party Distribution: It highlights the support each political party received from the Turkish diaspora, showing percentages for parties like the AKP (Justice and Development Party), MHP (Nationalist People's Party), CHP (Republican People's Party), Y. Sol (Green Left), TİP (Turkish Workers Party). AKP & MHP were in the same electoral bloc for presidential candidate of Erdoğan. Candidate Support: The figure also presents the distribution of votes among the key presidential candidates, indicating which candidates had the most support from Turkish voters abroad.

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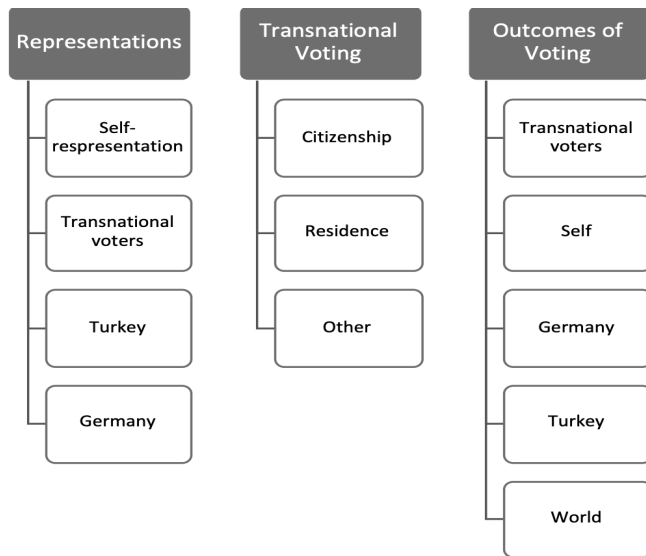


Figure 6. Results of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The study's findings are organized around three meta-themes: Representations, transnational voting, and outcomes of voting. Participants represented themselves by highlighting their personal characteristics and positioned transnational voters by legitimizing or delegitimizing their participation in elections in Turkey. They also provided narratives about the countries where this action is taking place, offering insights into the diverse perspectives and contexts involved. Citizenship and residence were the primary factors in the (de-)legitimization of transnational voting. These elements played a crucial role in determining whether individuals were viewed as having a valid stake or right in participating in elections beyond their country of residence. Participants also evaluated the results of participation in elections in terms of diverse representatives, including themselves, voters, and countries, as previously mentioned. Participants primarily highlighted the rise of right-wing populism in Germany as being influenced by transnational voting. They also criticized the support among migrants for an authoritarian leader in Turkey (double scapegoating of transnational voters) but enjoying democratic freedom in Germany. Additionally, they considered the implications for world politics, reflecting on how these dynamics influence global perceptions and international relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transnational voters operate within a unique political landscape that transcends national boundaries and defies simple categorizations. Their actions are influenced by diverse social group memberships and the broader geopolitical context. Current research highlights the need for a sophisticated understanding of transnational voting as a form of collective action, challenging assumptions of monolithic group identities and emphasizing the ongoing struggles for electoral justice.

There are diverse subgroups that cannot be reduced to a single category regarding citizenship status. Even within one family, there can be different citizenship statuses, such as German, Turkish, or bi-national. This diversity is reflected in eligibility for participation in elections, voting preferences, and alliances formed during elections. Therefore, it is not easy to predict any election result by only considering the origin country of postmigrants. Overly simplistic arguments based on generalizations can lead to false stereotypes, prejudices, biases, and misconceptions.

The dynamics of transnational voting provide valuable insights into broader processes of social change and the pursuit of justice in a globalized world. As the political environment continues to evolve, understanding this nexus of interconnections remains crucial for fostering inclusive and equitable democratic practices. Transnational voters, such as Turkish postmigrants in Germany, navigate a wide-ranging landscape of identity, rights, and responsibilities. They often face double scapegoating, encountering criticism in both their countries of origin and their countries of residence. Despite their significant contributions to society, they remain partially disenfranchised and subject to ongoing debates about their right to participate in democratic processes. To foster more inclusive and equitable democratic practices, it is crucial to understand the intricacies of transnational voting. As global mobility continues to rise, addressing the challenges faced by transnational voters will be essential to ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their residency, can fully participate in shaping the future of their countries.

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