



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Content Analysis of 2nd Round Campaigns of Candidates for the Presidency in the 2023 Turkish Presidential Election

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Received: Jul 17, 2024

Accepted: Sep 21, 2024

Keywords

Political Campaigns

Election Campaign

Qualitative Content Analysis

2023 Presidential Elections

This study aims to determine the tone and subject matter of the campaign speeches of the candidates competing in the 2nd round of the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. Content analyses in the field of political communication examine which types of messages—positive, negative, or defensive—politicians frequently use in their campaigns and which policies/issues they focus on. In this study, the speeches made by the candidates Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between May 14 and May 28 in the 2nd round of the 2023 election were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The results indicate that Erdoğan's campaign predominantly employed a positive tone, while Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign was characterized by a negative tone. Both candidates preferred to conduct their campaigns through praise, attack, and defense categories based on topics rather than on individuals and values. The primary focus in both candidates' campaign speeches was the election process and alliances. After the election process and alliances, it was determined that the candidates focused on different topics. Erdoğan emphasized terrorism, while Kılıçdaroğlu focused on corruption and degeneration. Other implications and findings have been discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Free, fair, competitive, multiparty elections that involve the participation of all segments of society and occur at regular intervals are considered as the minimum conditions for representative democracy. For elections to meet these criteria, fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly must be protected (Dahl, 2005; Zakaria, 1997). On other hand, election campaigns are the primary means through which candidates communicate their promises and differentiate themselves from their opponents to voters. In addition to ensuring the functioning of the democratic system, elections and election campaigns also contribute to the formation of a collective national memory about democratic processes (Trent and Friedenberg, 2008).

Candidates appeal to voters' emotions during election campaigns and thereby aim to increase participation and persuade them. Campaigns influence and change voting behavior (Brader, 2005). Therefore, the budget and expertise devoted to election campaigns in democracies where free elections are held, are increasing. In the literature, there is a growing body of research examining election campaigns (Nimmo, 2020), campaign speeches (Tilley, 2020), the use of emotional elements in campaign messages (Ridout and Searles, 2011; Seibt *et al*, 2018), the use of social media by candidates or parties (Borah, 2016), and campaign advertisements (Kaid and Dimitrova 2005; Can,

2012). In studies examining election campaigns, it is common to analyze the tone and the subject matter of the campaigns (Nai 2020; Mueller and Saeltzer 2022; Baumann *et al.*, 2019). It is possible to categorize the tone of campaign messages into three categories: negative tone, which includes attacks and criticisms of the opponent; positive tone, where the candidate praises themselves, their policies, and principles, and describes their projects; and defensive tone, where the candidate responds to criticisms. The subject matter of campaigns varies according to the priorities of the country in which the election campaign is conducted.

In Türkiye, there are studies examining the tone of political parties' campaigns (Çağlar and Ozkır 2015; Irak and Taşcıoğlu, 2017) and the subject matter of campaigns (Vodinalı and Akıncı Cötök, 2015). Studies have also been conducted on digital campaigns (Unür, 2024) and advertising campaigns (Baysal and Kavuran, 2024) in the 2023 Presidential election. This study aims to contribute to political communication research by analyzing the tone and the subject matter of election campaigns using qualitative content analysis.

In this study, qualitative content analysis was used to obtain descriptive results regarding the 2nd round campaign speeches of the candidates in the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. The following hypotheses were formed and research questions were addressed to guide the analysis:

H1: Both presidential candidates will prefer to speak on topics rather than on individuals and values in their campaigns.

H2: The topics that both presidential candidates focus on will differ.

H3: The tone of the speeches of both presidential candidates will differ.

RQ1: What is the tone of the candidates' campaign speeches?

RQ2: What topics did the candidates prioritize in their campaigns?

This study is significant as it provides a comprehensive and pioneering analysis in the field of political communication regarding the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. The study first addresses the theoretical background of political campaigns and campaign speeches. It then explains the data and content analysis method used and develops the codebook. The following section presents and discusses the results, and finally, concludes the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political campaigns are communication activities conducted by political actors to gain public support. Political campaigns are classified into election campaigns, referendum campaigns, public information campaigns conducted by government units to inform and gain support from the public, and image campaigns (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2003). Election campaigns are a way for candidates to become visible and preferred by voters during the election process. In this process, candidates try to differentiate themselves from their opponents and convey their messages to voters (Benoit, 2017).

Academic studies on political campaigns primarily focus on election campaigns. Steppat and Castro (2023) in their study showed that most research on election campaign communication is conducted within the disciplines of communication science, political science, marketing, and sociology. Political communication studies frequently use quantitative content analysis (Steiner 2020; Heiss, Schmuck, and Matthes 2019; Grusell and Nord, 2023), qualitative content analysis (Farkas and Bene, 2021), linguistic approaches (Hacker 1996; Chilton 2004; Can, 2012), and critical discourse analysis methods (Khajavi and Rasti 2020; Wodak 2014; van Dijk, 1997).

In election campaigns, candidates try to communicate their image and views on specific issues to voters. The main goal of campaigns is to differentiate candidates from their opponents. This feature of election campaigns necessitates comparison in campaign speeches. There are three ways to achieve this: acclaiming (praising oneself), attacking (criticizing the opponent), and defending (responding to attacks) (Benoit *et al.*, 2003). In content analysis studies on political communication, the act of a candidate giving positive messages about themselves, attacking their opponent, or making defensive speeches is referred to as the tone of the campaign (Steppat and Castro, 2023).

Each reason presented to voters for a candidate's election is considered positivity in the campaign. In such speeches, the candidate does not mention the opponent but talks about their own achievements, projects, and stance on political issues. Any criticism directed at the opponent during the election campaign is defined as negativity (Geer 2008). The increase in negativity in election campaigns is attributed to the increasing polarization between political parties (Geer, 2012: 2).

During the political campaign process, candidates attack each other based on policies or character. Candidates conduct character attacks to ensure cohesion within their voter base and weaken the support for the opponent. However, character attacks are not well received by voters. Policy attacks, on the other hand, are considered normal and more effective by voters (Budesheim, Houston, and DePaola 1996; Geer, 2008).

Issue attacks are shaped by the ideological positions of the candidate and the opponent. Character attacks do not involve any specific issues but directly target the opponent (Budesheim, Houston, and DePaola, 1996). During election campaigns, candidates may need to use defense strategies to protect their image against attacks. However, responding to attacks has some disadvantages, which is why it is not preferred much during the campaign process. For example, it can put the candidate in a defensive position. Additionally, responding to attacks by repeating them and reminding voters of them can work against the candidate (Benoit *et al*, 2003).

It is possible to categorize campaign speeches based on discussions about issues (policy topics). Discussions about issues can be about past actions, future plans, and general goals, and can be in the form of acclaiming (praising oneself) or attacking (criticizing the opponent) (Benoit, Brazeal, and Airne 2007). Issues such as the economy, foreign policy, corruption, national security, justice system, social security system, and projects for young people are among the topics on which candidates express their views and projects in campaign speeches.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the campaign speeches of the presidential candidates who participated in the second round of the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. The data collection involved transcribing the campaign speeches shared on a popular video-sharing site (YouTube) by the parties of the two candidates. In this context, 49 videos between the first round of the presidential election on May 14 and the second round on May 28 were listened and transcribed.

The campaign videos uploaded to the YouTube channel of the AKP, led by the candidate of the People's Alliance, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have a total duration of 29 hours and 22 minutes. The campaign videos uploaded to the YouTube channel of the CHP, led by the candidate of the Nation's Alliance, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have a total duration of approximately 6 hours (Table 1). Political advertisement videos and speeches not made by the two candidates were not included in the sample.

Table 1: Videos of candidates' 2nd round campaign speeches

DATE	VIDEO TITLE	DURATION	VIEWS*
May 15	"Milletin Lideri Balkonda"	1:55:46	360.374
May 16	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Soruları Yanıtladı"	59:05	115.719
May 17	"Cumhurbaşkanımız İl Başkanları ve Milletvekili Adaylarına Hitap Etti"	20:55	33.686
May 18	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Ulaşım Sektörü Buluşmasına Katıldı"	38:14	60.324
May 19	"Cumhurbaşkanımız İstanbul Modern'i Ziyaret Etti"	23:41	18.180
May 19	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Hemşeri Dernekleri Buluşmasında"	32:32	28.243
May 20	"Adıyaman Halk Buluşması"	55:39	61.250
May 20	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Kahramanmaraş'ta"	1:24:11	73.608
May 20	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Gençlerle"	56:48	37.811
May 21	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Adıyaman Gençlik Buluşmasında"	7:18	8.849
May 21	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Hatay Halk Buluşmasında"	1:40:28	66.163
May 21	"Cumhurbaşkanımız Defne Devlet Hastanesi Açılış Töreninde"	21:39	33.881

May 21	“Cumhurbaşkanımızdan Önemli Açıklamalar – Gaziantep Halk Buluşması”	58:27	68.683
May 22	“Cumhurbaşkanımız Büyük Rumeli Buluşmasında”	1:26:25	50.635
May 22	“Cumhurbaşkanımızdan Önemli Açıklamalar TRT Ortak Yayını”	1:05:12	58.743
May 23	“Malatya Halk Buluşması”	1:24:44	57.551
May 23	“Sivas Halk Buluşması”	1:27:10	56.840
May 24	“Keçiören Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları ve Muhtarlar Buluşması”	1:33:36	40.157
May 24	“Mamak Hemşehri Buluşması”	1:11:08	33.470
May 25	“Güçlü Sanayi Güçlü Türkiye/ Cumhurbaşkanımız İstanbul’da”	1:26:31	43.245
May 25	“Cumhurbaşkanı Özel / CNN Türk-Kanal D Ortak Yayın”	1:43:34	101.298
May 26	“Cumhurbaşkanımız “Kadınlar Buluşması”nda”	1:01:31	25.444
May 26	“Esenler Halk Buluşması”	1:17:24	61.308
May 26	“Cumhurbaşkanımızdan Önemli Açıklamalar/ ATV-A Haber Gündem Özel”	1:27:44	70.897
May 27	“Cumhurbaşkanımız, Adnan Menderes’in Anıt Mezarında”	18:28	41.255
May 27	“Beykoz Halk Buluşması”	2:44:05	95.035
Total		29:22:15	1.702.649
May 15	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Millet İttifakı Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu Basın Açıklaması”	1:37	48.033
May 15	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Millet İttifakı Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu Basın Açıklaması”	1:51	219.846
May 17	“Türkiye İçin Karar Ver”	2:24	46.594
May 18	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Millet İttifakı Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu Basın Açıklaması”	14:39	244.520
May 19	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – Ümit Özdağ Basın Açıklaması”	2:05	435.005
May 19	“Vatan Borcu”	2:13	88.606
May 20	“Bu artık Bir Seçim Değil, Referandumdur”	0:18	61.902
May 22	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – Vecdet Öz Basın Açıklaması”	6:11	31.804
May 22	“Gelen Kaçaklar, Vatanını Seven Sandığa Gelsin”	0:19	29.415
May 23	“Millet Buluşması – Hatay”	36:34	5.293
May 23	“Ekonomik Yıkımı Yaşayan Güzel Ülkemiz”	0:15	16.309
May 23	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Millet İttifakı Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – HaberTürk Yayını”	1:15:45	117.263
May 24	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – Ümit Özdağ Basın Açıklaması”	6:27	35.243
May 25	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – TRT Propaganda 2. Tur Konuşması”	2:22	203.339
May 25	“Millet Buluşması – Adana”	33:46	11.910
May 25	“Kredi Kartı Borcundan Dolayı...”	1:17	21.402
May 26	“Balkan Buluşması”	45:54	22.108
May 26	“Beni İster Sevin...”	1:16	88.794
May 26	“Tümüyle Karartma Altındayım”	0:42	112.957
May 27	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Millet İttifakı Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu Fox Tv Yayını”	1:35:11	127.353
May 27	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – Aile Destekleri Sigortası Buluşması”	14:01	6.502
May 27	“Sandık Müşahitlerimize Dokundurtmayız”	0:48	42.627
May 27	“CHP Genel Başkanı ve Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – TRT Propaganda 2. Tur Konuşması 2”	7:37	322.620
Total		5:53:32	2.339.445

Note: The relevant data were obtained from the video-sharing site YouTube on April 22, 2024.

The transcribed videos were repeatedly read, and content analysis was applied. The first step in content analysis involves selecting the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis can be a word, sentence, paragraph, section, article, the entire speech, characters in an interview, etc. Selecting a unit that is too short or too long can lead to incorrect results (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Therefore, the unit of analysis must be appropriately chosen for the study. In this study, contextual units with contextual integrity were used as the unit of analysis. Depending on the context of the speech, the unit of analysis could be a paragraph or several paragraphs. The context of the speech, such as questions, applause, election advertisement videos, and interruptions by journalists' questions, determined the boundaries of the unit of analysis. Each content was coded once within a unit of analysis, but if multiple contents were present in a unit, each content was coded separately. After the coding process, a codebook was created, and categories and themes were obtained.

The coding applied to the transcribed campaign speeches resulted in two main themes: the tone of the speech and the subject matter of the speech. The tone theme included categories of negative, positive, and defensive tones; the subject matter theme included categories of terrorism, economy, Syrians, infrastructure/facilities, local governments, industry, earthquake, family/youth, corruption, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2: Codebook used in the study

Theme	Category	Coding Scheme
Tone of Speech	Negative Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Character Attack: Any reference directed at the opponent. - Issue Attack: Criticisms directed at the opponent's party and allies based on issues. - Value Attack: Criticisms directed at the opponent's party and allies based on principles, ideals, ethical values, and ideas.
	Positive Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Character Praise: Any reference the candidate makes to themselves. - Issue Praise: Praise the candidate directs at their party and partners based on issues. - Value Praise: Praise the candidate directs at their party and partners based on principles, ideals, ethical values, and ideas.
	Defensive Tone	The candidate's defense against attacks directed at themselves (character), and the defense of their party and partners based on issues and values.
Subject Matter*	Terrorism	PKK, FETO, Kandil, collaboration with terrorism, etc.
	Economy	Employment, inflation, unemployment, wages,
	Syrians	Migration, border policy, return of Syrians, illegal entrants, ...
	Infrastructure/Facilities	Energy, water, finance, transportation, sewage, roads, electricity, natural gas, bridges, hospitals, conference centers, ...
	Local Governments	Municipal services, urban transformation, TOKI
	Industry	Defense Industry, Anka, Hürjet, TOGG, ...
	Earthquake	Earthquake on February 6 th , earthquake region, earthquake victims, search and rescue, Red Crescent, post-earthquake activities, temporary and permanent housing, ...
	Family/Youth	Women's rights, youth, children, marriage, violence against women, etc.
	Identity	LGBT, Alevi, Kurdish, etc.

	Social Policies	Fighting drugs, daycare support, insurance, retirement, economic/social assistance, minimum wage, ...
	Election Process	Alliances, election results, election process, ...
	Law	Constitution, law-making, laws, justice, crime-fighting
	Education-Culture-Art-Agriculture-Tourism	Education, freedom of education, museums, cultural activities, libraries, universities, livestock farming, agriculture, tourism, ...
	International Relations	Turkish World, Rumelia, EU, ...
	Corruption/Degeneration	Unfair gains, theft, bureaucracy, bribery, political ethics, fighting corruption, ...
	Other	Other policy topics

Note: Categories under the subject matter theme were coded as negative, positive, or defensive. General expressions that did not include the policies of the candidate's party and partners or the opponent's party and partners were not coded.

The study authors jointly prepared the codes and the codebook. To ensure inter-rater reliability and reproducibility, the responsible author independently coded the text. Another coder, trained in the coding process (PhD, peer review), coded 20% of the units of analysis identified in the study (20% of the units of analysis in the speech transcripts of both candidates) according to the coding book. Cohen's kappa value, developed by Cohen, was used to measure inter-coder agreement in content analysis. The average value for all codes was found to be 0.82, with detailed values shown in Table 3. According to the classification by Landis and Koch (1977), the calculated value indicates an almost perfect level of agreement.

Table 3: Inter-coder agreement results

	Agreement Coefficient*
Erdoğan's Speech	0.81
Kılıçdaroğlu's Speech	0.83

Note: *Cohen's Kappa

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 shows the tone of the campaign speeches of the candidates competing in the 2nd round of the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. The data in the table is suitable to answer the first research question of the study. According to the results, Erdoğan's campaign tone was positive, while Kılıçdaroğlu conducted a negative campaign.

Erdoğan used character attacks (26.4%) and value attacks (9.2%) more frequently than Kılıçdaroğlu (21.2% and 8.5%, respectively). On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu used character praise (30.8%) and issue attacks (70.3%) more frequently than his opponent (21.5% and 64.6%, respectively). Both candidates conducted their defensive speeches mainly through issues.

Table 4: Tone of campaign speeches in the 2nd round of the 2023 presidential election

		Positive		Negative		Defensive	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Erdoğan	Character	100	21.5	98	26.4	-	-
	Issue	312	67.2	239	64.4	18	100
	Value	52	11.2	34	9.2	-	-

Total 100		464	100	371	100	18
Kılıçdaroğlu	Character	53	30.8	50	21.2	- -
	Issue	108	62.8	166	70.3	20 100
	Value	11	6.4	20	8.5	- -
Total 100		172	100	236	100	20

Note: In their campaign speeches Erdoğan used more positive content, while Kılıçdaroğlu used more negative content.

To answer the second research question, the topics used in the campaign speeches of the candidates in the 2nd round of the 2023 Presidential election are presented in detail in Table 5. The election process/alliances were the most discussed topics by both candidates. Each candidate attacked their opponent based on election alliances, activities during the election process, and first-round election results. Both candidates also aimed to convey messages to voters by praising the election process, election results, and alliances. The fact that this category is at the top of the agenda of both candidates indicates that alliances are a relatively new phenomenon in the election system in Türkiye and that they are concerned about convincing the voters on this matter.

After the election process category, the most frequently used categories in Erdoğan's campaign were terrorism (14.23%) and earthquake (12.47%); in Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign, they were corruption/degeneration (13.60%), economy (11.22%), and terrorism (11.22%). After the election process category, Erdoğan's most frequently used categories for praise were earthquake (6.15%) and infrastructure/facilities (5.44%). Erdoğan criticized his opponent most frequently based on the election/alliances (11.07%), terrorism (10.54%), and earthquake (4.92%) categories. Erdoğan conducted most of his defensive speeches in the earthquake category.

Kılıçdaroğlu's most frequently used categories for praise were the election process (6.80%) and social policies (4.76%). Kılıçdaroğlu criticized his opponent most frequently based on the election process (11.56%), corruption (9.86%), economy (7.82%), and Syrians (5.78%) categories. Kılıçdaroğlu conducted most of his defensive speeches in the terrorism category (4.42%).

Table 5: Subject matter of campaign speeches in the 2nd round of the 2023 presidential election

Subject Matter	Erdoğan (N=569)				Kılıçdaroğlu (N=294)			
	Positive N %	Negative N %	Defensive N %	Total N %	Positive N %	Negative N %	Defensive N %	Total N %
Economy	19 3.33	13 2.28	- -	32 5.62	10 3.40	23 7.82	- -	33 11.22
Terrorism	18 3.16	60 10.54	3 0.52	81 14.23	6 2.04	14 4.76	13 4.42	33 11.22
Syrians	7 1.23	6 1.05	- -	13 2.28	10 3.40	17 5.78	- -	27 9.18
Infrastructure/Facilities	31 5.44	1 0.17	- -	32 5.62	- -	- -	- -	- -
Local Governments	15 2.63	14 2.46	- -	29 5.09	4 1.36	- -	- -	4 1.36
Industry	11 1.93	4 0.70	- -	15 2.63	3 1.02	- -	2 0.68	5 1.70
Earthquake	35 6.15	28 4.92	8 1.40	71 12.47	3 1.02	3 1.02	- -	6 2.04
Family/Youth	22 3.86	10 1.75	3 0.52	35 6.15	6 2.04	6 2.04	- -	12 4.08
Identity	15 2.63	13 2.28	- -	28 4.92	2 0.68	1 0.34	- -	3 1.02
Social Policies	15 2.63	- -	- -	15 2.63	14 4.76	4 1.36	1 0.34	19 6.46
Election Process	62 10.89	63 11.07	1 0.17	126 22.14	20 6.80	34 11.56	4 1.36	58 19.72
Law	8 1.40	5 0.87	1 0.17	14 2.46	11 3.74	16 5.44	- -	27 9.18
Education-Culture-Art-Agriculture-Tourism	14 2.46	5 0.87	2 0.35	21 3.69	2 0.68	3 1.02	- -	5 1.70

International Relations	17 2.98	10 1.75	- -	27 4.74	3 1.02	12 4.08	- -	15 5.10
Corruption/Degeneration	- -	- -	- -	- -	11 3.74	29 9.86	- -	40 13.60
Other	23 4.04	7 1.23	- -	30 5.27	3 1.02	4 1.36	- -	7 2.38

Erdoğan's lack of speeches in the corruption/degeneration category can be attributed to his current position as President and his party being in power. Despite his party's control over many municipalities, Kılıçdaroğlu did not discuss infrastructure/facilities positively or criticize the opponent. Notably, the Syrians category, which was prominent in Kılıçdaroğlu's agenda (9.18%), was at the bottom of Erdoğan's agenda (2.28%).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to determine the tone and subject matter of the campaign speeches of the presidential candidates who participated in the 2nd round of the 2023 Turkish Presidential election. The content analysis findings show that the campaign strategies of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu differed significantly in terms of tone and subject matter. The first difference is that Erdoğan's campaign speeches were more frequent and longer than Kılıçdaroğlu's (Table 1). Erdoğan conducted a positive campaign, while Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign had a negative tone. Erdoğan used character attacks and value attacks more frequently than his opponent. Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, attacked his opponent mainly through issues (Table 4). The category most frequently used by both candidates for praise was the election process and election alliances, also both candidates most often attacked their opponents in this category.

The terrorism category, which was the second most frequent attack category for Erdoğan, was the most frequent defense category for Kılıçdaroğlu. The second most frequent attack category for Kılıçdaroğlu, who was the main challenger to the incumbent president Erdoğan and his ruling party, was corruption/degeneration. The economy and Syrians categories were also frequently used by Kılıçdaroğlu for attacks. The second most frequently used category for praise by Kılıçdaroğlu was social policies.

This study is significant in understanding how the polarized politics of the People's Alliance and the Nation's Alliance in the 2nd round of the 2023 Presidential election in Türkiye were reflected in the campaign strategies of the presidential candidates Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu. The results obtained through the content analysis of political campaign speeches reveal the strategic topics brought to the election agenda by the two political camps and their candidates and the tones they adopted.

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