

Democratization and Authoritarian Drift in Türkiye: The Democrat Party Era, 1950-1960*

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Received: 06.12.2025, Accepted: 17.04.2026
DOI Number: 10.5281/zenodo.20800521

Abstract

This study examines the coexistence of democratic opening and authoritarian drift during the Democrat Party era in Türkiye (1950–1960). Rather than portraying the period as either a linear transition to democracy or a simple authoritarian rupture, the article analyzes how democratic expansion and authoritarian practices evolved within the same political trajectory. The study employs qualitative historical analysis based on parliamentary proceedings, official legislation, party programs, parliamentary group records, contemporary newspapers, memoirs, and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis is structured around three phases of Democrat Party rule: 1950–1954, 1954–1957, and 1957–1960.

The findings show that the Democrat Party initially broadened political participation, incorporated previously marginalized rural and conservative groups into the political system, and softened some exclusionary features of the single-party era. However, especially after 1954, the absolutization of electoral legitimacy, the delegitimation of the opposition, restrictions on press freedom, growing pressure on the judiciary and universities, and intensifying political polarization made authoritarian drift increasingly visible. The study concludes that the Democrat Party period was a formative episode that revealed both the possibilities of democratization in Türkiye and its enduring structural vulnerabilities.

Key words: Türkiye, Democrat Party, Democratization, Authoritarian Drift

JEL Code: P16, D72

* This article is derived from Ömer Taylan's doctoral dissertation entitled *The Role of the Democrat Party on the Democratization and Authoritarianism of Politics*, supervised by Gökhan Tuncel.

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1. Introduction

The trajectory of democratization in Türkiye has not followed a linear path from authoritarian closure to stable democratic consolidation. Instead, it has been shaped by recurrent tensions between electoral inclusion and institutional control, between popular representation and centralized authority, and between democratic aspirations and restrictive political practices. In this respect, the transition to multi-party politics after 1946 and the peaceful transfer of power in 1950 constituted a major political turning point, but not the beginning of an uncontested democratic order. Rather, these developments opened a new political sequence in which democratic expansion and authoritarian tendencies coexisted in shifting and often unstable forms (Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

The Democrat Party (DP), which came to power in 1950 with broad electoral support, occupied a pivotal place in this process. In its early years, the party broadened political participation, mobilized social groups that had long remained peripheral to the political system, and softened some of the exclusionary practices associated with the single-party era (Karpat, 1972; Ahmad, 2010; Çavdar, 2013). At the same time, however, the DP period also witnessed the gradual concentration of executive power, the narrowing of legitimate opposition, growing pressure on the press, intensified conflicts with the judiciary and universities, and deepening political polarization, especially after 1954 (Demirel, 2016; Eroğlu, 2017; Özbudun, 2016). This dual character makes the DP era one of the most revealing episodes for understanding the historical tensions of democratization in modern Türkiye.

The existing literature has made important contributions to understanding the Democrat Party period. A substantial body of scholarship has examined the DP's social base, its challenge to the bureaucratic legacy of the single-party regime, its economic policies, its relationship with religion and laicism, its conflicts with the opposition, and the crisis atmosphere that culminated in the military intervention of 27 May 1960 (Karpat, 1972; Ahmad, 2010; Çavdar, 2013; Demirel, 2016; Eroğlu, 2017). Yet much of this scholarship has tended to emphasize either the democratic opening created by the transition to competitive elections or the authoritarian turn that became visible in the second half of the decade. Although both perspectives are valuable, they often remain analytically separated. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a phase-based analysis that explains how democratic expansion and authoritarian restriction were produced within the same political trajectory and shaped by changing institutional, social, and international conditions.

This article addresses that gap by examining the Democrat Party era between 1950 and 1960 as a historically layered process in which democratic opening and authoritarian drift evolved together. Its central argument is that the DP government should be understood neither as a straightforward vehicle of

democratic consolidation nor as a uniformly authoritarian project from the outset. Rather, the article argues that the expansion of participation and representation in the early 1950s gradually generated new asymmetries of power, which later became visible in the form of majoritarian rule, delegitimation of the opposition, restrictions on civil and political freedoms, and the increasing politicization of institutions. In this sense, the DP era reveals not a simple transition from one regime type to another, but a more complex process in which democratic gains and authoritarian practices became mutually entangled.

The main research question guiding the study is as follows: how did democratic opening and authoritarian drift evolve across different phases of Democrat Party rule between 1950 and 1960, and how did political actors, institutional structures, and broader societal dynamics shape this transformation? To answer this question, the article employs qualitative historical analysis based on documentary sources, including parliamentary proceedings, official legislation, party programs, parliamentary group records, contemporary newspapers, memoirs, and the relevant scholarly literature. Rather than treating the period as a single undifferentiated whole, the analysis is structured around three phases of DP rule: 1950-1954, 1954-1957, and 1957-1960. This periodization makes it possible to trace changes, continuities, and turning points in the relationship between democratic incorporation and authoritarian restriction more systematically.

The article makes two main contributions. Empirically, it offers a phase-based interpretation of the DP period that brings together political participation, opposition rights, press freedom, institutional conflict, economic crisis, nationalist discourse, and political polarization within a single analytical framework. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature by arguing that the Turkish experience of the 1950s is better understood through the interaction between democratization and authoritarian drift than through rigid binaries such as democratic progress versus authoritarian breakdown. From this perspective, the DP era emerges as a formative historical episode that illuminates both the possibilities of democratization in Türkiye and the structural vulnerabilities that continued to shape its political development.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework and clarifies the core concepts and analytical tools used in the study. The subsequent three sections examine the evolution of the Democrat Party era across the periods 1950-1954, 1954-1957, and 1957-1960. The final section discusses the broader implications of the findings for understanding the historical trajectory of democratization in Türkiye.

2. Theoretical Framework: Democratization, Authoritarian Drift, and the Democrat Party Era

This study is grounded in the assumption that democratization should not be understood as a linear and irreversible progression from authoritarian rule to democratic consolidation. The comparative literature has long shown that political

regimes frequently move through hybrid and unstable configurations in which democratic openings coexist with authoritarian reflexes, and where electoral competition survives alongside restrictions on pluralism, opposition, and institutional autonomy (Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996). For that reason, the analytical value of democratization lies not only in tracing electoral change, but also in examining whether political competition is accompanied by institutional restraint, recognition of opposition, and durable protection of civil and political freedoms.

Within this broader discussion, the concept of authoritarian drift provides a particularly useful lens for the present study. Authoritarian drift refers to a gradual movement away from pluralist and accountable democratic practice without necessarily involving the immediate abolition of elections or a formal regime rupture. In such contexts, democratic institutions may continue to exist formally while their substantive content is progressively weakened through executive concentration, selective repression, institutional interference, and the narrowing of legitimate opposition (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Way, 2010). This concept is especially relevant to the Democrat Party era because the political transformation of the 1950s did not begin with an explicit rejection of electoral politics; rather, it unfolded within an elected government that increasingly interpreted majoritarian support as a source of unbounded political authority. The term authoritarian drift is preferred here to authoritarianization because the article does not claim that the period produced a fully consolidated authoritarian regime. Instead, it captures a gradual, uneven, and politically consequential movement away from pluralist competition, institutional restraint, and democratic accountability within an electoral framework.

A second key concept informing this study is delegative democracy. O'Donnell (1994) argues that in some electoral regimes, governing elites treat electoral victory as a broad and largely unrestricted mandate to rule in the name of the nation, often with limited regard for horizontal accountability and institutional checks. Under such conditions, elections remain important, but courts, legislatures, universities, and the press are increasingly viewed not as legitimate counterweights but as obstacles to be overcome. This framework is highly relevant to the DP period, particularly after 1954, when the language of the “national will” became more central to the government’s self-understanding and when criticism from opposition actors and autonomous institutions was more readily framed as illegitimate obstruction. In this sense, delegative democracy helps explain how electoral legitimacy could be converted into a justification for executive predominance.

The study also draws selectively on the literature on competitive and electoral authoritarianism. This body of scholarship shows that authoritarian practices may emerge and deepen within formally competitive political settings through the politicization of law, unequal access to public resources, restrictions on media freedom, and attempts to tilt the political field in favor of incumbents (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010). The value of this literature for the

present article does not lie in rigidly classifying 1950s Türkiye as a fully developed competitive authoritarian regime. Elections remained meaningful, opposition activity was not entirely eliminated, and the institutional framework of multi-party politics was not formally abandoned. Rather, this literature is useful because it helps identify the mechanisms through which incumbents can progressively weaken autonomous institutions, narrow the substance of democratic competition, and tilt the political field without immediately dismantling its formal procedures.

At the same time, the article departs from explanations that reduce authoritarian drift to the intentions or personalities of political leaders alone. To explain the trajectory of the DP era, it is necessary to consider longer-term structural and historical conditions. Historical sociological approaches have shown that democratic outcomes are shaped not only by contingent political choices but also by state traditions, class configurations, institutional legacies, and patterns of center-society relations (Moore, 1973; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992). In the Turkish case, the state-centered modernization trajectory of the single-party era left behind a political field characterized by strong central authority, weak pluralist depth, and limited tolerance of organized opposition. While this legacy created the conditions for a strong reaction against bureaucratic tutelage, it also constrained the consolidation of democratic norms and institutions (Heper, 2015; Kahraman, 2008; Özbudun, 2016).

This structural perspective is complemented by an emphasis on political culture. Democratic institutions do not operate through formal rules alone; their stability also depends on whether political actors accept restraint, tolerate adversaries, and recognize opposition as a legitimate component of the political order. Where political struggle is framed in existential or moralized terms, the opposition can easily be redefined as a threat rather than a rival. In such contexts, majoritarian rule may slide into anti-pluralist politics even without a formal abandonment of elections (Tuncel and Bakan, 2013; Özbudun, 2016). This insight is particularly important for the DP era, where the weakness of a deeply institutionalized pluralist culture shaped both the possibilities of democratic opening and the limits of democratic endurance.

Taken together, these approaches make the DP period theoretically suitable for analysis as a case of democratic opening followed by authoritarian drift. The transition literature helps explain why the 1950 transfer of power mattered, but also why electoral alternation did not automatically produce democratic consolidation (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996). Delegative democracy clarifies how majoritarian legitimacy could be translated into claims of unrestrained authority (O'Donnell, 1994). The literature on competitive authoritarian tendencies and democratic backsliding helps illuminate how democratic procedures could coexist with the progressive erosion of pluralist content (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Bermeo, 2016). Historical sociology and political culture, in turn, explain why these developments were embedded in longer-term institutional and normative patterns rather than being reducible to short-term political conflict alone (Moore, 1973; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Heper, 2015).

On the basis of this theoretical framework, the article adopts a clear analytical strategy. It examines the DP era through four interrelated dimensions. The first is political incorporation, including the expansion of participation, representation of previously marginalized constituencies, and the broadening of electoral legitimacy. The second is pluralism and opposition rights, including the treatment of opposition parties, the boundaries of legitimate dissent, and the extent to which competition remained substantively open. The third is institutional autonomy, focusing on the press, the judiciary, universities, and parliament as arenas in which democratic restraint could either be strengthened or weakened. The fourth is contextual acceleration, referring to the role of economic crisis, nationalist rhetoric, and foreign policy tensions in intensifying authoritarian drift.

These dimensions also provide the criteria through which the three phases of Democrat Party rule are interpreted. The period 1950-1954 is analyzed primarily in terms of democratic opening and the expansion of political incorporation. The period 1954-1957 is examined as a phase in which majoritarian legitimacy increasingly translated into institutional intervention and narrowing pluralism. The period 1957-1960 is treated as the stage in which authoritarian drift became more visible through the politicization of law, the hardening of executive discourse, and the escalation of social and institutional conflict. This phase-based analytical design allows the article to move beyond descriptive chronology and to trace how democratization and authoritarian drift interacted across time.

Accordingly, the article does not treat democratization and authoritarianism as mutually exclusive categories or as neatly sequential stages. Instead, it conceptualizes the Democrat Party era as a political trajectory in which democratic gains, institutional fragilities, executive concentration, and anti-pluralist tendencies coexisted and reshaped one another. Such a framework makes it possible to interpret the DP period not simply as a failed democratization story or a prelude to military intervention, but as a foundational historical episode that exposed both the transformative potential and the structural limits of democratic politics in Türkiye.

3. Democratic Opening and Emerging Authoritarian Tendencies under Democrat Party Rule, 1950–1954: Political Incorporation, Secularism, and Economic Development

The first phase of Democrat Party (DP) rule marked a significant opening in the history of political representation in Türkiye. The transition to multi-party competition after 1946 had already weakened the monopoly of the single-party system, but it was the 1950 transfer of power that gave this transition substantive political meaning. In this early period, the DP broadened access to the political sphere by incorporating social groups that had long remained weakly represented within the state-centered framework of the Republican People's Party (CHP), particularly rural, conservative, and religious constituencies (Albayrak, 2004; Karpat, 1972; Kahraman, 2008). In that sense, the early DP years constituted not merely an electoral alternation, but a wider process of political incorporation in

which previously marginalized segments of society acquired greater visibility within the national political arena.

This expansion of political participation was one of the most important democratic gains of the period. The DP's electoral success rested partly on its ability to transform diffuse social discontent into political representation and to present itself as a credible alternative to the bureaucratic and exclusionary legacy of the single-party era (Karpas, 1972; Keyder, 2015). By establishing a closer relationship with provincial society and by adopting a more responsive political language, the party contributed to a significant degree of social mobilization in favor of competitive politics. Yet this initial expansion of participation did not automatically generate a deeply institutionalized democratic culture. As later developments would show, the inclusion of new constituencies into the political system did not by itself ensure the consolidation of pluralist norms, mutual restraint, or durable respect for opposition rights.

One of the clearest areas in which the early DP government differentiated itself from the preceding period was secularism. The decision to lift the ban on the Arabic call to prayer in 1950 was widely interpreted as a democratic step in terms of religious freedom and public recognition of popular belief (T.B.M.M. Tutanak Dergisi, June 16, 1950; Cumhuriyet, June 17, 1950). More broadly, this policy reflected an important divergence between the CHP and the DP in their understanding of the relationship between state and religion. Whereas the CHP had defended a stricter and more exclusionary form of secularism during the single-party era (C.H.P. Programı, 1935), the DP adopted a more flexible approach that sought to reconcile republican institutions with the moral and cultural values of broader society (Demokrat Parti Programı, 1946). Accordingly, secularism became not only an ideological point of difference between the two parties, but also a central axis through which state-society relations were redefined.

This redefinition of secularism, however, did not amount to a fully liberal settlement. Rather, it reflected a political strategy that widened the symbolic boundaries of representation while remaining embedded in a still-fragile democratic framework. The crisis atmosphere following the assassination attempt on Ahmet Emin Yalman illustrates this fragility. In the aftermath of the incident, the CHP accused the DP of encouraging anti-secular tendencies, and the government increasingly responded through security-oriented reflexes, thereby slowing the reformist momentum of the early period (Erdoğan, 2012). This episode is important because it shows that even during the years of democratic opening, the expansion of freedoms could quickly be constrained when political competition became entangled with regime anxiety and ideological polarization.

A similar tension emerged in the field of press freedom and civil society. In its early phase, the DP introduced reforms that appeared to strengthen democratic rights, including improvements in the legal and social position of journalists. Yet these openings gradually narrowed as criticism of the government intensified. The transfer of CHP immovable properties to the Treasury in 1953, although justified by the government in terms of fairness and the separation of party and state

resources, raised serious concerns from the standpoint of the rule of law because it was executed through legislative action rather than an ordinary judicial process (Resmi Gazete, December 16, 1953). Likewise, the government's increasingly restrictive approach to the press revealed the limits of its commitment to pluralist contestation. Although the extension of unionization and social protections to journalists was initially welcomed as a democratic advance, later sanctions against critical publications weakened freedom of expression and indicated the early emergence of a more restrictive political logic (Resmi Gazete, June 20, 1952; Zürcher, 2015).

These developments should not be read as evidence of a fully formed authoritarian order in the early 1950s. Rather, they point to the emergence of authoritarian tendencies within a still-open competitive framework. The significance of this period lies precisely in this coexistence: democratic opening remained the dominant feature of the 1950–1954 phase, yet the first signs of majoritarian intolerance also began to appear. The tension between reform and control became visible in the government's growing discomfort with autonomous criticism and in its increasing tendency to interpret opposition not as a legitimate component of democratic politics, but as a destabilizing force. In this respect, the early DP years already hinted at the broader structural weakness of pluralism in Turkish political life (Mardin, 2018; Tuncel and Bakan, 2013).

Economic development constituted another crucial pillar of the DP's early legitimacy. During this period, the government pursued a developmentalist strategy centered on infrastructure expansion, agricultural modernization, and the stimulation of production through external borrowing and public investment. Industrial facilities such as sugar, cement, and flour factories, together with road construction and dam projects, generated visible improvements in everyday life, especially in the countryside (Ağaoğlu, 1972; Karpat, 1972). These policies strengthened the social basis of the DP and contributed to the perception that the party was delivering not only political recognition but also material progress. In this sense, the party's developmentalist orientation reinforced its democratic appeal by linking representation to tangible improvements in welfare and access.

Agricultural modernization was especially important in this regard. Mechanization, rural infrastructural investments, and production-oriented policies did not merely increase economic capacity; they also deepened the DP's connection with its rural electorate and transformed economic development into a political resource (Çavdar, 2013; Keyder, 2015). At the same time, these successes placed increasing pressure on the CHP, which struggled to generate a persuasive alternative response. The ideological tensions and strategic disorientation visible at the CHP's Tenth Congress in 1953 reflected this difficulty (C.H.P. X Kurultay Beyannamesi, 1953). The ensuing fragmentation within the CHP, including the departure of several prominent figures and regionally influential deputies, further weakened the opposition's credibility and organizational coherence (Tuncer and Tuncer, 2015). Thus, the early DP years were shaped not only by the party's own

successes, but also by the inability of the opposition to adapt effectively to a new era of mass electoral politics.

Yet the same political environment also revealed the narrow limits of democratic tolerance. The closure of the Nation Party, supported by both the DP and the CHP, demonstrated how fragile pluralist commitments remained across the political spectrum (Çaylak, 2004). Although the move was justified in the name of protecting secularism, it also showed that both governing and opposition elites could endorse restrictions on political competition when confronted with actors perceived as threatening the established boundaries of legitimacy. This episode is analytically important because it indicates that the early weaknesses of pluralism in the 1950s were not reducible to the DP alone; they were embedded in a broader political culture in which opposition was often viewed with suspicion rather than accepted as a normal element of democratic life (Mardin, 2018; Tuncel and Bakan, 2013).

Taken together, the years 1950–1954 should be understood primarily as a phase of democratic opening, political incorporation, and developmental legitimacy under DP rule. The party expanded participation, reconfigured the meaning of secularism in line with broader social expectations, and strengthened its mass support through economic growth and rural development. At the same time, however, this period also exposed the first limits of that opening. Growing pressure on critical media, the controversial use of legislative power against the opposition, and the weak institutionalization of pluralist restraint signaled the emergence of authoritarian tendencies that would become more visible in the following phase. The importance of the early DP years, therefore, lies in their dual legacy: they widened the social basis of competitive politics while simultaneously revealing how vulnerable democratic opening remained in the absence of strong pluralist norms and institutional safeguards.

4. Majoritarian Turn and Authoritarian Drift under Democrat Party Rule, 1954–1957: Nationalism, Institutional Intervention, and Political Polarization

The 1954 general elections marked a critical turning point in the trajectory of Democrat Party (DP) rule. Having secured its highest electoral support to date, the DP emerged from the elections with a greatly strengthened parliamentary position and a heightened sense of political legitimacy. This victory was not simply the result of campaign performance; it was rooted in the social and economic gains of the party's first term, its effective connection with provincial society, and its capacity to present itself as a viable alternative to the bureaucratic and exclusionary legacy of the single-party era (Baban, 2009; Doğaner, 2013; Karpat, 1972). Yet the significance of 1954 lies not only in the consolidation of electoral power, but also in the new political logic that followed from it. After this point, the DP increasingly interpreted electoral success not as one source of democratic legitimacy among others, but as the principal basis of political authority. In doing so, it moved toward

a more majoritarian understanding of democracy, one that narrowed the space for pluralism and treated institutional restraint with growing suspicion.

One of the earliest and most revealing indications of this majoritarian turn was the government's reaction to opposition success at the local level. Although the DP achieved overwhelming parliamentary dominance in the 1954 elections, it did not respond with greater political tolerance. On the contrary, even limited opposition victories were treated as politically problematic. The most striking example was Kırşehir, where support for the Republican Nation Party was followed by the province's downgrading to district status through legislative action (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, June 30, 1954). This measure was widely interpreted as a politically motivated intervention into local administrative organization and raised serious concerns about the fairness of democratic competition. The issue here was not merely administrative restructuring; it was the use of parliamentary dominance to discipline opposition strongholds and redefine political contestation in punitive terms.

This shift became more visible through legal and institutional interventions that curtailed the effective space of opposition. Changes introduced through the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 6428 restricted the political environment in ways that favored the incumbent party and narrowed the operational conditions of competitive politics (Resmî Gazete, July 7, 1954). Formally, the multi-party framework remained intact. Substantively, however, the balance between government and opposition became increasingly asymmetrical. In this respect, the second DP period illustrates how electoral legitimacy can coexist with the gradual erosion of pluralist competition. Rather than abolishing democratic procedures outright, the government increasingly sought to manage them in ways that reinforced executive predominance.

The relationship between the DP, the press, and the judiciary also deteriorated significantly during this period. Political tensions were further deepened by publications targeting the government and its leading figures, while judicial responses to such disputes became part of a broader struggle over legitimacy and institutional alignment (Erer, 1964; Koçak, 2017). As trust between political actors and judicial institutions weakened, the government adopted a more interventionist stance. New legal measures affecting judicial personnel and growing restrictions on critical media reflected an increasingly defensive and centralized mode of governance. These developments were important not simply because they restricted particular actors, but because they signaled a wider transformation in the government's understanding of criticism: dissent was no longer treated as a legitimate element of democratic contestation, but more often as a destabilizing force to be contained.

Foreign policy and nationalism further accelerated this authoritarian drift. The Cyprus issue, which became increasingly central in the mid-1950s, contributed to a harder and more exclusionary political discourse. Nationalist mobilization

around Cyprus did not remain confined to external affairs; it fed directly into domestic politics by intensifying suspicion toward minorities and by reinforcing a majoritarian conception of national unity (Ahmad, 2010; Balıkçioğlu, 2016). This development marked a clear departure from the relatively more inclusive tone of the DP's first term, during which the party had been able to attract support from some non-Muslim groups partly by distinguishing itself from earlier exclusionary practices, including the legacy of the Wealth Tax (Resmi Gazete, November 12, 1942). By contrast, the mid-1950s witnessed a narrowing of that inclusive stance. The events of September 6-7, 1955, and the declaration of martial law that followed, exposed the extent to which nationalist escalation could undermine civil peace, public accountability, and democratic oversight (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, September 12, 1955; Güven, 2025). Restrictions on press and assembly rights in the aftermath of the events further demonstrated how crises could be used to justify the contraction of public freedoms.

At the same time, the internal structure of the DP itself became less tolerant of dissent. Decision-making grew increasingly personalized, and mechanisms of internal deliberation weakened. The resignation of Fuat Köprülü, one of the party's most prominent founding figures, was highly symbolic in this regard, as it pointed to growing internal tensions and a declining capacity to accommodate disagreement within the ruling party (Cumhuriyet, September 8, 1957; Ulus, September 8, 1957). This process was accompanied by tighter control over the media, the restriction of journalists' right to prove allegations against public officials, and the consolidation of government influence over radio broadcasting through legal means (Neşir yoluyla veya radyo ile işlenecek bâzı cürümler hakkında Kanun, 1954). In this context, the discourse of the "national will" acquired increasing political significance. It functioned not merely as a democratic claim to popular support, but as a legitimating language through which legal and institutional constraints could be portrayed as secondary to the government's electoral mandate.

These developments also produced fragmentation within the ruling coalition and contributed to the reconfiguration of the opposition. The debates surrounding the "right to proof" revealed growing unease among some DP circles regarding executive centralization and the weakening of civil liberties. These tensions eventually led to the formation of the Liberty Party (Hürriyet Partisi), which criticized the concentration of decision-making around Adnan Menderes and articulated a more explicit defense of constitutionalism and democratic restraint (Yeni Sabah, November 20, 1955). The importance of this split lies not merely in party competition, but in the fact that it exposed the internal limits of the DP's majoritarian project: authoritarian drift was beginning to generate resistance not only from the external opposition, but also from actors who had once belonged to the ruling bloc itself.

The conflict between the government and autonomous institutions became even more pronounced in the field of higher education. During this period, universities emerged as important sites of opposition to growing executive intervention. The Turhan Feyzioğlu crisis became emblematic of this broader tension, reflecting the government's increasing intolerance toward academic

criticism and institutional autonomy (Akşam, January 26, 1956). The resignations of prominent intellectuals such as Muammer Aksoy, Münci Kapani, Aydın Yalçın, Coşkun Kırca, and Şerif Mardin symbolized the widening distance between the DP government and major segments of the intellectual field (Erer, 1964; Turan, 1999; Çavdar, 2013). At the same time, journals such as Forum became platforms for defending the separation of powers, the rule of law, and stronger mechanisms of democratic accountability (Toker, 1991). What was at stake here was not only a dispute over universities, but a broader struggle over the place of autonomous institutions in a democratic order increasingly shaped by executive predominance.

By the approach of the 1957 elections, these tensions had converged into a more polarized political environment. Opposition parties, including the Republican People's Party, the Republican Nation Party, and the Liberty Party, sought to coordinate their efforts more closely, supported by journalists and intellectual circles critical of the government. In response, the DP attempted to preserve its dominance through further electoral and political maneuvering, including legal amendments and strategic interventions designed to fragment or weaken the opposition front (Çavdar, 2013; Eroğlu, 2017). Although the party retained its parliamentary majority in 1957, the decline in its vote share revealed that its social legitimacy had become more fragile than the parliamentary arithmetic suggested. Thus, the years 1954–1957 should be understood as the phase in which the DP's early democratic opening gave way to a more visible pattern of majoritarian rule, institutional intervention, and escalating polarization. This was not yet the terminal crisis of the regime, but it was the period in which authoritarian drift became more systematic and politically consequential, laying the foundations for the deeper conflicts of the 1957–1960 period.

5. Hardening Authoritarian Drift under Democrat Party Rule, 1957–1960: National Will, Legal Politicization, and Regime Crisis

The period between 1957 and 1960 marked the most acute phase of authoritarian drift under Democrat Party (DP) rule. Although the DP retained its parliamentary majority in the 1957 general elections, the electoral process itself became the subject of intense controversy. Opposition parties argued that the elections had not been conducted under fully fair and competitive conditions, and the early announcement of results from some provinces through state radio before voting had ended further deepened public suspicion regarding the integrity of the process (Ulus, November 1, 1957; Demirel, 2016). The significance of the 1957 elections therefore lay not only in their outcome, but in the fact that they intensified doubts about the neutrality of state institutions and widened the gap between electoral legality and political legitimacy.

In the aftermath of the elections, the central political question concerned the relationship between parliamentary majority and constitutional restraint. The DP interpreted the qualified majority it still possessed in parliament as a direct

expression of the national will and, increasingly, as a mandate to govern with limited institutional constraint. Opposition actors, by contrast, emphasized the need for stronger mechanisms of constitutional oversight and proposed the establishment of a Constitutional Court as a safeguard against executive overreach (Dünya, October 11, 1957; Ulus, October 11, 1957; Toker, 1991). In this sense, the late DP period was shaped by a growing conflict between a majoritarian understanding of democracy and a more constitutionalist conception of political legitimacy. What was at stake was no longer simply electoral competition, but the institutional boundaries of political authority itself.

This shift toward majoritarian rule became increasingly visible in the government's treatment of opposition, autonomous institutions, and public criticism. The language of the "national will," which had earlier functioned as a democratic claim to popular representation, now acquired a more exclusionary meaning. It was increasingly used to portray opposition not as a legitimate rival within democratic politics, but as an obstacle to national unity and effective governance (Kahraman, 2008; Zürcher, 2015). As a result, political control expanded beyond parliament into the press, universities, and the judiciary. In this period, authoritarian drift did not take the form of an explicit rejection of elections; rather, it unfolded through the narrowing of pluralist competition and the growing subordination of institutional autonomy to executive priorities.

Economic deterioration reinforced this process. By the late 1950s, the developmental momentum that had sustained the DP's early legitimacy had given way to mounting structural difficulties, inflationary pressures, and growing public dissatisfaction. The August 4, 1958 decisions failed to resolve these deeper problems and instead highlighted the limits of short-term crisis management (Demokrat Parti Meclis Grubu Müzakere Zaptı, August 8, 1958; Ahmad, 2010; Eroğlu, 2017). Economic instability weakened confidence not only among consumers but also among producers and investors, thereby intensifying criticism of the government and contributing to the broader erosion of its social legitimacy. Regional developments also sharpened the sense of insecurity surrounding the regime. The Iraqi coup of 1958 and the wider climate of instability in the Middle East did not determine Turkish politics directly, but they formed part of the context in which the DP leadership increasingly adopted a more centralized and defensive political posture (Kocabaş, 2011).

Debates over the electoral system further exposed the contradictions of the period. The disproportional outcomes of the 1957 elections renewed criticism of the majoritarian electoral model, particularly because opposition parties collectively secured a larger overall vote share while remaining underrepresented in parliament (Yalman, 1997; Karatepe, 2001). Yet this debate also revealed the strategic flexibility of the opposition, since earlier resistance to proportional representation had given way to criticism once the distributive effects of the system changed. The significance of this issue lies less in identifying one-sided democratic consistency than in showing how both government and opposition operated within a political field in which institutional rules were increasingly interpreted through partisan advantage. Even so, the DP's position was more consequential, since it

controlled the state apparatus and could shape the electoral environment in ways that reinforced its incumbency.

Against this background, opposition coordination became more visible. Different opposition forces attempted to consolidate a broader political front, while the DP responded by seeking to fragment and delegitimize this alignment. The emergence of the National Opposition Front and, in response, Menderes's creation of the Fatherland Front transformed political competition into a sharper friend-foe distinction and further deepened societal polarization (Cumhuriyet, October 13, 1958; Cumhuriyet, November 25, 1958; Milliyet, November 25, 1958; Erer, 1964). The Fatherland Front was not simply an electoral strategy; it also represented an effort to reorganize political loyalty through a more exclusionary conception of national belonging. In this sense, political competition became increasingly moralized and polarized, leaving less room for legitimate dissent or negotiated coexistence.

This polarization intensified with İsmet İnönü's nationwide tours, which sought to mobilize opposition constituencies and highlight what the Republican People's Party presented as the anti-democratic practices of the government (T.B.M.M. Zabit Ceridesi, December 25, 1957; Yalman, 1997; Eroğlu, 2017). The DP, however, interpreted these efforts as attempts to destabilize political order outside electoral channels, and Menderes described them as efforts to engineer a transfer of power without elections (Zafer, May 1, 1959). The confrontations and disturbances surrounding these visits revealed how severely the political sphere had hardened. By this stage, political conflict was no longer confined to parliamentary disagreement; it had become a broader struggle over legitimacy, public space, and the meaning of democratic opposition itself.

The clearest institutional expression of this hardening was the establishment of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission in 1960. Composed exclusively of DP deputies and endowed with far-reaching powers, the commission became one of the most controversial instruments of the late DP period. Its authority to censor the press, summon witnesses, take statements, and initiate criminal proceedings blurred the line between legislative and judicial power and raised profound concerns regarding the separation of powers (T.B.M.M. Zabit Ceridesi, April 27, 1960; Demirel, 2016). For this reason, the commission should be understood not merely as a tactical move against the opposition, but as a key moment in the politicization of law. The problem was not only that law was being used in politics, but that legal authority itself was being reconfigured in a way that subordinated institutional safeguards to partisan control.

The regime crisis widened further as conflict spread beyond parliament into universities, student movements, and eventually sections of the military. Student demonstrations in Istanbul and Ankara, supported in part by members of the academic community, became important expressions of mounting public discontent. The government's harsh response, including the declaration of martial

law, further intensified the crisis and underscored the shrinking space for peaceful protest (Schwarzmantel, 2010). Events such as the “555K” protest and the silent march of military academy students revealed that dissatisfaction with the government had moved beyond organized party opposition and had begun to affect broader sectors of society (Erer, 1964). What made this phase especially significant was not simply the existence of protest, but the inability of the political system to process conflict through legitimate institutional channels.

Taken together, the years 1957–1960 represent the phase in which authoritarian drift under DP rule became most visible, most institutionalized, and most destabilizing. The language of the national will was used to justify executive predominance, legal mechanisms were increasingly politicized, and social opposition was met with tighter control rather than negotiated accommodation. At the same time, opposition responses were not free from strategic calculation, and the broader political field remained deeply polarized. Yet the decisive imbalance lay in the fact that the government controlled the instruments of state power and increasingly deployed them against pluralist competition and institutional autonomy. In that sense, the late DP period should be understood as a regime crisis in which democratic procedures formally survived, but the constitutional, legal, and political conditions necessary for democratic coexistence were progressively eroded. The significance of this final phase lies precisely here: it exposed how an elected government, acting in the name of popular sovereignty, could deepen authoritarian drift by weakening the very institutions that make democratic politics sustainable.

6. Conclusions

The Democrat Party decade reveals that the central problem of democratization in Türkiye was not the simple presence or absence of competitive elections, but the fragility of the institutional and normative limits capable of containing electoral power. What made this period historically consequential was not merely that an elected government became increasingly restrictive over time. More importantly, it showed how democratic incorporation itself could generate new claims to unmediated authority when political legitimacy was interpreted in overwhelmingly majoritarian terms. Once electoral victory was treated as the sole foundation of rule, pluralism, opposition, and institutional restraint became increasingly vulnerable.

Seen in this light, the Democrat Party era should be understood not as an interrupted democratization story or as a delayed authoritarian rupture, but as a formative episode in which the tensions internal to democratic politics became starkly visible. The case demonstrates that democratization is not exhausted by alternation in office, expanded participation, or social incorporation. Unless these developments are accompanied by a durable commitment to constitutional restraint, institutional autonomy, and the legitimacy of opposition, democratic opening may deepen rather than resolve regime fragilities. In this sense, the Turkish case of the 1950s speaks directly to broader comparative debates on delegative rule, democratic backsliding, and the political uses of popular sovereignty.

This study is not without limitations. Its argument is based on qualitative historical interpretation and documentary evidence, which makes it possible to reconstruct institutional conflict, political discourse, and regime transformation in depth, but also means that the analysis depends on the availability, selectivity, and positionality of surviving sources, especially parliamentary records, memoirs, and newspapers. Future research could deepen this argument through archival materials, provincial-level case studies, and more systematic comparisons with other episodes of democratic erosion in Türkiye or beyond. Such work would make it possible to assess more precisely how local dynamics, media environments, and institutional variation shaped the uneven course of authoritarian drift.

The broader contribution of this study lies in showing that authoritarian drift may emerge not despite democratic inclusion, but through the unresolved contradictions that democratic inclusion can produce in weakly institutionalized settings. The Democrat Party experience makes clear that where pluralist norms remain shallow, where the state retains a strong tradition of concentration, and where political rivalry is easily translated into existential conflict, democratic gains are likely to remain exposed to reversal. The period therefore remains a crucial historical vantage point for understanding not only the possibilities of democratic opening in Türkiye, but also the enduring fragilities that continue to shape its democratic development.

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