

## Media Influence on Voting Behavior across Generations in Türkiye: A Two-Step Flow Theory Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study explores how voters from different generations in Türkiye form their political preferences during election periods, focusing on the influence of traditional media, social media, and interpersonal communication. It revisits the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory in the context of digital transformation and evaluates its relevance in the social media era. The research employs a qualitative design based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 participants, including three women and three men from each of four generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z). Generational categories were defined according to year of birth, and the data were analyzed through descriptive content analysis. The findings show that generational differences strongly shape media use and decision-making processes. Baby Boomers rely heavily on long-standing political commitments and family traditions. Generation X combines traditional media with selective use of digital platforms. Generations Y and Z depend more on social

media, influential figures active on these platforms, and peer discussions, which highlights the growing role of online opinion leaders. While the Two-Step Flow theory still provides valuable insights, opinion leadership now extends beyond interpersonal networks to include digitally amplified figures such as influencers and content creators. The findings indicate the necessity of conceptually updating the theory to address the dynamics of digital communication, particularly among younger generations. Contemporary political communication is shaped by a complex flow of information, where the traditional role of opinion leaders persists among older cohorts but is increasingly replaced by digitally mediated interactions among younger ones.

**Keywords:** Two-Step Flow Theory, Media Influence, Voter Behavior, Opinion Leadership, Digital Media, Türkiye.

**JEL Codes:** D72, L82, Z13, O33

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## 1. Introduction

Mass media have long-shaped social dynamics, but the twenty-first century's digital technologies have triggered a profound transformation. Traditional organizations have been compelled to adapt to new media technologies, a process that has redefined both content production and consumption practices. Audiences are no longer merely passive recipients of content but increasingly act as "prosumers" combining the roles of consumers and producers (Toffler, 1980). Yet whether this participation can truly be considered "active participation" remains a subject of academic debate. Media are no longer one-way channels of information but have evolved into interactive arenas where multidirectional communication is possible (Jenkins, 2006).

The proliferation of digital platforms has profoundly altered media consumption habits. In this context, concepts such as "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) are frequently employed to describe experiential differences between generations. Web 2.0 technologies facilitated the expansion of social media and enabled individuals to act not only as consumers but also as producers. Generation Z, born entirely into a digital world, exhibits strong engagement on social media platforms and differs significantly from earlier generations in terms of media consumption patterns (Dimock, 2019; Özdemir, 2021). This generational shift has led some scholars to revisit classical arguments that emphasize the direct influence of media messages over interpersonal mediation. Historically, this perspective was rooted in the works of Deutschmann and Danielson (1960) and Gitlin (1978), who challenged the limited effects paradigm by highlighting medias capacity to reach audiences directly. In the contemporary digital era, this "direct flow" is being redefined. Researchers like Bennett & Manheim (2006) argue that digitally targeted and personalized content delivery have minimized the role of traditional interpersonal intermediaries, especially for digital-native cohorts.

In the traditional sense, an opinion leader refers to individuals who engage in direct, face-to-face interaction with their communities and share information acquired from mass media through interpersonal communication. Today, however, this role can also be enacted in social media environments (Xu et al., 2014). This transformation has extended beyond everyday media practices and has also shaped the field of political communication. Political actors, particularly during election periods, have adopted multi-platform strategies to reach broader audiences. Campaigns conducted through both traditional and digital channels have become one of the primary instruments for influencing voter behavior. Consequently, understanding the nature and scope of media influence on electoral decisions has become a central concern in communication research.

In the Turkish context, some studies have addressed the relationship between media and electoral behavior (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2014; Öztürk Küçük & Toklu, 2020; Özdemir, 2021; Kapusizoğlu, 2025). Some research highlights the enduring role of traditional media in shaping political preferences (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2014: 80), while more recent analyses emphasize the growing influence of digital platforms and social media in mobilizing younger voters (Özdemir, 2021). The general trend identified in these post-2020 studies points to a transition toward a hybrid media environment where traditional media maintains its influence among older cohorts, while digital platforms have emerged as the primary arena for political mobilization and information acquisition among younger generations. These studies underscore the need for further investigation into how generational differences intersect with evolving media practices in Türkiye. This local perspective further emphasizes the relevance of revisiting classical communication theories in today's media environment.

In this context, the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory, developed by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues during the U.S. presidential elections of the 1940s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), offers a significant theoretical framework. This model emerged as a response to the deterministic assumptions of the "Magic Bullet" theory, which claimed that media exerted direct and powerful effects on passive audiences. According to the Two-Step Flow model, media effects do not occur directly but are mediated through "opinion leaders," who interpret media content and influence their social networks. These opinion leaders play a crucial role by transmitting their knowledge and interpretations about election campaigns to individuals who are less directly exposed to media messages (DeFleur, 2016). Lazarsfeld conceptualized these figures as gatekeepers who scan media content, extract information, and communicate elements that may shape the perspectives of others. He coined the term "opinion leader" for such individuals and referred to those who rely on their views as "opinion followers" (Baran & Davis, 2010).

Over time, this approach has become one of the cornerstones of communication research and has provided important insights into how media operate within social contexts. Yet the rise of interaction-based digital media, particularly social platforms, has necessitated a reconsideration of the theory. Opinion leadership, once traditionally associated with community figures, experts, or elites, is now increasingly redefined by influencers, content creators, and micro-celebrities. Consequently, the boundary between producers and consumers has become progressively blurred, complicating the linear assumptions of the theory. As Choi (2015) observes, even individuals who do not embody the qualities of opinion leadership on social media platforms can

reach large audiences through the content they generate and shape public opinion. However, this shift is driven by more than just the merger of production and consumption roles. The need for reconceptualization is also deeply rooted in the algorithmic logic of digital platforms that dictates content visibility, and the emergence of pseudonymous or anonymous

digital authorities. Furthermore, communication has transitioned from a linear two-step flow to a complex, multi-directional network of influence (Karlsen, 2015). Therefore, the phenomenon of opinion leadership requires reconceptualization within the context of digital media and redefinition in accordance with contemporary communication practices.

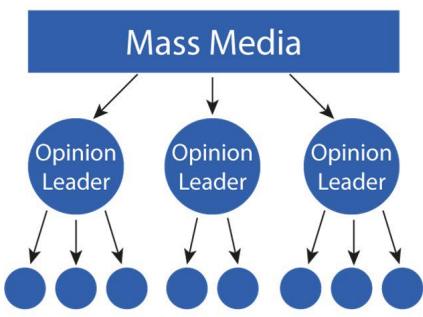
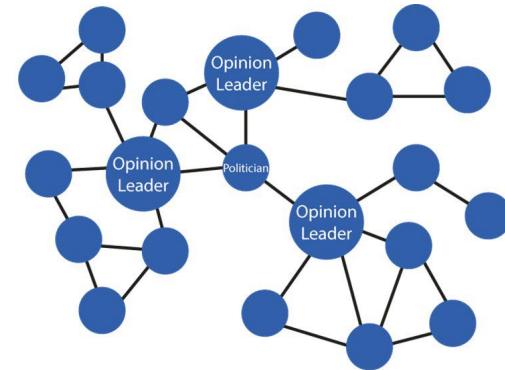


Figure 1. Opinion Leadership in the Original Conceptualization and on Social Networking Sites (Adapted from Karlsen, 2015: 8)



The digital media environment also raises new questions concerning trust, authority, and credibility. To what extent do today's influencers fulfill the role traditionally associated with opinion leaders? Do they exert a comparable influence on political decision-making? Furthermore, generational differences in technological familiarity and political participation have been widely documented as shaping distinct patterns of media use and influence across cohorts (Dimock, 2019; Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Karlsen, 2015). Empirical research shows that Baby Boomers tend to rely more heavily on traditional media sources, whereas Generation Z operates within a fragmented, user-driven, and digitally mediated information environment characterized by platform-based content flows (Dimock, 2019; Özdemir, 2021).

This study aims to revisit the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory in the context of the contemporary media ecosystem by examining how traditional media, new media, and opinion leadership shape voting behavior from a comparative generational perspective. Based on qualitative field research conducted in the city of Eskişehir, Türkiye, the study draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants from four generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z). It examines the perceived influence of traditional media, social media, and interpersonal communication on voting behavior and explores whether media messages reach voters directly or are mediated through opinion leaders embedded within social contexts, as well as how these processes vary across generations in today's hybrid media environment.

Taken together, the observed transformation of opinion leadership, the rise of platform-based intermediaries, and the continued significance of interper-

sonal influence challenge the classical assumptions of the Two-Step Flow of Communication and render its empirical re-examination across generations necessary. Rather than assuming a uniform or linear media effect, this study conceptualizes voting behavior as a differentiated and mediated process shaped by generational media repertoires and evolving forms of influence. Within this theoretical context, the following research objectives and research questions are formulated to empirically examine how media influence and opinion leadership operate across generations in Türkiye's hybrid media environment.

### 1.1. Research Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the direction and form of media influence on individuals' voting behavior within the framework of the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory. Specifically, it aims to examine and compare how traditional media, social media, and opinion leadership shape the voting process across generations. This analysis seeks to determine whether media messages exert influence directly or through intermediaries, and whether this process varies according to generational differences.

While the bidirectional communication opportunities offered by the new media environment suggest that voters are no longer merely passive recipients of information, this perceived autonomy remains a subject of intense academic debate. Despite the technical potential for active participation, the digital sphere is simultaneously shaped by structural constraints such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, and algorithmic bias, which may limit information diversity and give rise to new forms of mediated passivity.

Accordingly, this study examines how this complex dynamic redefines the role of the voter as both a potential content producer and an information receiver navigating through algorithmically structured digital flows, and how this transformation influences voting behavior. The research integrates theoretical and empirical data to investigate this evolving dynamic. Beyond its theoretical contribution to the academic discourse on media effects and political communication, this study provides practical insights for media professionals, public relations practitioners, political campaign strategists, policymakers, and communication experts. The findings aim to inform the development of more effective political messaging by identifying which media channels influence specific voter groups and in what ways.

Conducted in the city of Eskişehir, Türkiye—a diverse setting that encompasses multiple generational and socio-economic groups as well as a vibrant university population—this research also provides a regionally grounded perspective. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for future comparative studies exploring the relationship between media influence and electoral behavior.

Based on the theoretical framework of the Two-Step Flow of Communication, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do traditional media, social media, and interpersonal communication influence voting behavior across different generations in Türkiye?

RQ2: How does the role of opinion leaders differ across generations in a hybrid media environment shaped by digital platforms?

## 2. Method

This study employs qualitative research design informed by the framework of the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory. Its purpose is to examine the influence of media and opinion leaders on generational differences in voting behavior. A qualitative approach was selected to provide deeper insights into the subjective processes of meaning-making, particularly in relation to political decision-making and individuals' engagement with media content. This method enabled a detailed exploration of how individuals interpret political messages within their everyday communication contexts (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018: 40–41; Kümbetoglu, 2019: 35). In-depth interviewing, one of the effective methods in the social sciences, was used to explore the research topic comprehensively. This technique uses open-en-

ded questions to elicit detailed, experience-based responses rather than restricted answers. During the process, the researcher maintained neutral communication without providing leading cues (Mack et al., 2005: 29–30).

The field research was conducted in Eskişehir, a medium-sized Turkish city characterized by socio-economic diversity and a multi-generational demographic structure. The city's media consumption dynamics, along with its role as an academic hub, provided an appropriate setting for comparative generational analysis.

Employing purposive and maximum variation sampling strategies, 24 participants were selected, consisting of three women and three men from each of the four generations. Beyond age and gender, participants were selected based on three primary inclusion criteria: (1) being a registered voter who cast their ballot in the Eskişehir electoral district during the 2023 general elections, (2) having resided in Eskişehir during the campaign period to ensure exposure to local and regional communication flows, and (3) representing diverse occupational and educational backgrounds to ensure maximum variation within each generational cohort. The purposive sampling method enables the deliberate selection of participants with characteristics most relevant to the aims of the research, rather than relying on probability-based sampling (Tarhan, 2015: 655). This approach is particularly suitable when it is necessary to study individuals with specific attributes or criteria (Neuman, 2020: 432). As detailed in Table 1, the sample includes individuals from various sectors, such as education, engineering, trades, and retirees. While occupation was considered to ensure heterogeneity of perspectives, it was not treated as an independent analytical variable. Although the sample size may appear limited in terms of generalizability, qualitative research prioritizes analytical depth and the achievement of theoretical saturation rather than statistical representativeness. Methodological studies indicate that in comparable qualitative designs involving relatively homogeneous groups or focused comparative objectives, saturation can often be achieved with relatively modest sample sizes, when additional interviews no longer generate new themes or insights (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In the present study, interviews were conducted until recurring patterns across the four generational cohorts became evident, suggesting that theoretical saturation had been reached within the scope of the research.

Table 1. Basic Demographic Distribution of Participants

Generation Z (1997 and later) Ages 18–27		Generation Y (1981 – 1996) Aged 28 – 43		Generation X (1965 – 1980) Aged 44 – 59		Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964) Aged 60 – 78	
Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
26 / Graduate Student	27 / Advertiser	36 / Graduate Student	31 / Archaeologist	49 / Teacher	58 / Imam	65 / Retired	76 / Chemist
24 / Copywriter	24 / Student	29 / Teacher	31 / Tradesman	59 / Retired	53 / Welder	64 / Retired	69 / Retired
26 / Chemist	26 / Engineer	41 / Customer Repr.	31 / Editor	59 / Retired	58 / Self-employed	75 / Housewife	64 / Retired

According to generational theory, generations emerge as a result of similar social interactions and share a collective consciousness, experiences, and ideas (Gürbüz, 2015: 41). The literature indicates the existence of multiple generational classifications across different age groups, and it is evident that there is a lack of consensus on this matter in both international and national scholarship (Şalap, 2016: 19). Although there is no consensus in the literature regarding generational classifications (Aydoğdu, 2022: 184), this study adopts the Pew Research Center's classification due to its international validity and currency (Dimock, 2019). Accordingly, the generational cohorts are defined based on birth years as follows: Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Generation Y (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997 and later). All participants were registered voters in the 2023 general elections in Türkiye and resided in Eskişehir at the time of the interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This technique ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on their individual perspectives. The interview guide was developed on the basis of an extensive literature review and reviewed by two academic experts in communication studies. A pilot study with two individuals was conducted to test clarity and reliability. The field research was conducted between March 11 and April 29, 2024, following the ethics committee approval. All interviews were carried out face-to-face in settings where participants felt most comfortable, such as quiet cafes, offices, or their own homes, to ensure a natural flow of conversation. Informed consent was obtained and audio recordings made with participants' permission. The interview durations ranged from 15 to 50 minutes, resulting in approximately 7.5 hours of total audio data for transcription.

The interview guide consisted of the following five open-ended questions:

- Do you follow traditional media (television, newspapers, radio) for election coverage?

- Do you follow any social media platforms or content creators that cover political content?
- Do you discuss political topics with family, friends, or colleagues? If so, with whom and in what settings?
- Which do you consider more effective, reliable, or useful: traditional media, social media, or interpersonal discussions?
- Have you ever experienced indecision in your political choices? If so, from whom or where do you seek guidance?

Additional probing questions were employed when necessary to clarify responses and gain deeper insights.

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. This approach corresponds to a thematically structured descriptive analysis, which is commonly employed in qualitative communication research when the aim is to interpret participants' narratives within a predefined theoretical framework. This method involves organizing qualitative data according to pre-determined themes and presenting it systematically with interpretation. In this study, the structure of the interview questions served as the basis for the thematic framework. Each response was first described, then explained, and finally interpreted in line with the descriptive analysis process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018: 239–240). Approximately 7.5 hours of audio data were transcribed verbatim. The coding and analysis were conducted manually to preserve contextual depth, without using software. To strengthen reliability, the initial coding framework was reviewed by the thesis supervisor, who provided feedback through an example coding. This expert consultation guided the refinement of categories and ensured consistency in the subsequent coding process. While the inclusion of an independent second coder is a recognized practice for enhancing reliability, this study followed a single-coder approach supported by expert supervisory review, which is widely accepted in qualitative research for ensuring thematic accuracy and contextual depth.

The analysis revealed five main themes:

- Interaction with Traditional Media
- Interaction with Social Media and Influencers
- Role of Interpersonal Communication
- Trust in Information Channels and Perceived Usefulness
- Experiences of Indecision and Sources of Support

The findings section was organized around these themes. Direct quotations were frequently incorporated to support the interpretations, and all participants were anonymized using generational and gender codes (e.g., ZF1 = Generation Z Female 1; XM2 = Generation X Male 2).

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Anadolu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date: 26.02.2024, Protocol No: 697488) prior to data collection.

## 2.1. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative research project involving 24 participants, the findings provide in-depth insights but are not intended to be statistically generalizable to the entire population of Türkiye. Second, the research was conducted exclusively in the city of Eskişehir. Although the city represents a diverse socio-demographic structure and functions as an important academic hub, the findings may nonetheless reflect local socio-political dynamics. Finally, the study relies on semi-structured interviews, which are based on participants' self-reported accounts and subjective interpretations of their own media consumption and voting behavior. Future research employing quantitative surveys or mixed-method designs would be beneficial to examine the generalizability of these generational patterns on a larger scale.

## 3. Results

The findings are presented thematically in line with the research questions guiding the study. The five themes collectively address how the media influence, opinion leadership, and interpersonal communication shape voting behavior across generations in a hybrid media environment: Interaction with Traditional Media, Interaction with Social Media and Influencers, Role of Interpersonal Communication, Trust in Information Channels and Perceived Usefulness, and Experiences of Indecision and Sources of Support.

For each theme, generational differences (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z) are illustrated through direct quotations from participants. The discussion integrates these findings with the theoretical framework of the Two-Step Flow of Communication, highlighting both continuities and changes in patterns of media influence across generations in the digital era.

### 3.1. Interaction with Traditional Media

*BBF1: "I watch television. I watch the news on television. That's where I find out what the President of Türkiye said and what the other parties said."*

Generation X primarily follows information about the electoral agenda, candidates, and parties via television and, to a lesser extent, through local and national newspapers. Their consumption is not passive; rather, the information obtained is filtered through individual evaluative lenses. Debate programs and panel discussions attract interest, while trust placed in particular journalists and a tendency to watch channels that host diverse viewpoints indicate critical media awareness. Although traditional media remains the dominant actor, confidence in media content is not absolute. Individuals appraise content in light of their historical and ideological values. This pattern is consistent with the "limited effects" perspective and the role of opinion leaders highlighted in the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory.

*XF1: "Even though I watch a lot, I don't really trust it. I watch and store information, but I don't trust it; I don't make decisions in line with their steering. I make sure to watch not only channels that are the voice of one side, but also their exact opposite. I especially follow İsmail Küçükaya, and I really like his commentary."*

Among Generation Y, a transitional pattern is observed between Generations X and Z. While traditional media consumption continues, its intensity is declining. As trust in traditional media diminishes, the gap is increasingly filled by new media platforms. Some participants prefer social media, whereas others gravitate toward television channels they perceive as closer to their own views. For a subset of participants, election specials on traditional media are regularly followed. This generation maintains a critical stance toward traditional media content, and it is increasingly common to follow content originally broadcast on traditional outlets via new media platforms.

*YF1: "In the past, I would wait for panel-style programs from the moment their air dates were announced. I would be in front of the TV on the day and at the hour. To be honest, I don't have that interest now. If a major topic arises, I watch*

*via social media."*

For Generation Z, traditional media have been virtually abandoned. Reliance on traditional media is almost nonexistent; even when used, content is approached critically - distrust is pronounced. Speed and efficiency are among this generation's core expectations, and traditional media are seen as inadequate in meeting them. Traditional media are characterized as "untrustworthy" and "a waste of time." Social media has become the primary source of information, and the influence of traditional media is quite limited.

*ZF3: "Unfortunately, no channel is independent anymore. Because they broadcast with bias, I don't follow any TV channel. I don't consume or watch any of their content, including the evening newscasts and election programs."*

Overall, among Baby Boomers and Generation X, television continues to serve as the dominant source of information. Among Generation Y and Generation Z, traditional media usage declines markedly. Among younger generations, social media and the internet have largely displaced television. While distrust toward traditional media increases in Generations Y and Z, Baby Boomers and Generation X tend to engage in selective/critical viewing and to base their evaluations on specific opinion leaders.

### 3.2. Interaction with Social Media and Influencers

Baby Boomers keep considerable distance from social media platforms and prioritize traditional media - especially television - in their information gathering. Although social media is not entirely excluded, use is sporadic and selective, shaped by digital literacy levels and the comfort of established habits. Content related to the electoral agenda is not followed regularly; rather, such content is encountered through one's social circle or incidentally as it appears in feeds. Consequently, social media does not function as an active channel for information seeking or opinion formation.

*BBM3: "I don't always check social media - not very often. I watch videos when I happen to come across them. I do watch them when they pop up, but I can't sit and watch something on the internet for long periods."*

Among Generation X, the relationship with social media is marked by caution and distance. Doubts about the reliability of social media content - e.g., trolling, misinformation, and manipulation - are frequently expressed. Incidental consumption is also notable in this generation, and its impact on decision-making processes is quite limited. Information seeking is supported by traditional media and face-to-face communication. In terms of opinion leadership, media figures rooted in traditional outlets

and perceived as trustworthy (e.g., Cüneyt Özdemir, Fatih Altaylı) stand out as accounts followed on social media as well.

*XF3: "It's very rare that I follow anything about the elections on social media. On Instagram and YouTube, I watch things about the elections as I see them - as they appear in my feed; I don't follow them deliberately. People share them or they just pop up. I only started following Fatih Altaylı during the election period."*

Among Generation Y, social media is followed intensively to obtain information about the electoral agenda and political developments. YouTube, X, and Instagram stand out as the main platforms. Individual creators and alternative media outlets are also among the frequently consulted sources. In this generation, social media is influential not only for information acquisition but also in the formation of opinions. Through this content, outcomes such as developing trust in particular actors, feeling sympathy toward candidates, and even changing one's views can be observed. The frequent mention of figures like Fatih Altaylı and Oğuzhan Uğur indicates that a new form of opinion leadership continues to operate effectively in digital spaces.

*YF3: "I watched all the BaBaLa broadcasts on YouTube. No matter how many hours they ran, I stayed up until morning to watch. They're effective, too. For example, even though his views were very much at odds with mine, I was influenced when I watched Ali Babacan's broadcast. The same with Sinan Oğan."*

Among Generation Z, social media is regarded as the primary - indeed, often the sole - source of information. Individual creators and news accounts are followed regularly and selectively, with criteria such as ideological proximity and perceived content reliability guiding these choices. Alongside creators who previously worked in legacy media but now produce on digital platforms (e.g., Fatih Altaylı - prominent Turkish journalist and commentator, Nevşin Mengü - journalist, and Özlem Gürses - journalist), figures native to new media, such as Oğuzhan Uğur (YouTuber and host of the BaBaLa channel) and "Erlik" (a pseudonymous digital commentator), are followed intensively, especially during election periods. Pseudonymous creators like "Erlik," whose real names, educational backgrounds, or formal credentials are not publicly known, function as a distinct form of opinion leadership and are notably influential among younger generations. Freed from time-and-place constraints and amplified by viral dissemination, this new opinion-leader profile enjoys a substantially greater capacity for reach and impact than earlier forms of opinion leadership. For this generation, social media plays a central role not only in information acquisition but also in processes of identity formation and political positioning.

ZM2: "We can say there are only a limited number of political content creators on social media who really reach the younger generation. Everyone in my age group who is interested in politics has surely encountered these creators. I, in particular, follow 'Erlik' very closely and find him highly successful; his command of the field is evident. I'm curious about his views, and I even watch his non-political content just to hear what he has to say."

Social media's prominence in tracking the electoral agenda increases from older to younger generations. While social media is used cautiously and remains secondary among Baby Boomers and Generation X, it is used extensively - and exerts an opinion-shaping influence - among Generation Y and especially Generation Z. Indeed, younger generations may change their vote choice in line with the content they follow on social media and the views of its creators. Beyond mere attitude reinforcement, an opinion-leadership dynamic emerges that is strong enough to prompt departures from individuals' settled ideological predispositions. This pattern calls for a reinterpretation of the Two-Step Flow of Communication within the context of new media and new-media actors.

### 3.3. Role of Interpersonal Communication

Among Baby Boomers, conversations about the electoral agenda mostly take place within the family and a limited social circle. Traditional social venues - such as kahvehaneler (traditional Turkish coffeehouses), home gatherings, and altın günleri (women's home gatherings often organized as rotating savings circles) - provide settings for these exchanges. A cautious stance is common in order to avoid tensions and misunderstandings associated with political polarization, leading to a tendency to refrain from debating opposing views. As a result, exchanges of opinion often remain among like-minded individuals, and opinion leadership is shaped within the family and close networks. This configuration suggests that the intermediary roles posited in the Two-Step Flow of Communication remain salient in this generation.

BBF1: "I have a sister, she'll say, 'Let's vote for this one, let's vote for that one.' I'm influenced a bit, of course. I consult my son; he knows well. I talk with my family; I have nothing to do with outsiders. I don't talk to anyone else."

Among Generation X, conversational practices with one's social circle about the electoral agenda are heterogeneous. Some participants see such talk as an important space for exchange, whereas others deliberately avoid it out of concern that it may create conflict in everyday relationships. Conversations

often proceed as assessments of the current situation and typically involve no attempts at persuasion. In both decision-making and communication style, participants take into account not only personal values and experiences but also relational sensitivities.

XF1: "Never! I absolutely do not talk about it. I think it harms my one-to-one relationships a great deal. I can never get my point across, so I don't talk about it, and I don't allow people to talk about it with me."

Among Generation Y, the inclination to converse about politics with close contacts is high. Communication is maintained especially within circles of friends and in "safe" relationships (i.e., where interpersonal trust is strong). Within the family, by contrast, discussions about the electoral agenda are often avoided to reduce potential tensions and exhausting arguments. Although debates can occasionally become heated, the general tendency is toward sharing views and mutual assessment rather than persuasion. In this generation, conversations about the electoral agenda unfold in a flow where offline talk and online interaction reinforce one another.

YF3: "I do talk, but then I regret it. I usually get into these topics within the family, yet we stand on opposing sides politically. I get angry; I can't make myself understood. We can't agree. With my co-workers, since we share similar views, it's easier to talk-we exchange what we've heard and what we know."

Among Generation Z, talking about politics is regarded as a natural part of everyday life. The desire to communicate is quite high, and especially during election periods the frequency of such conversations increases-at times moving to the center of daily routines. Dialogue with differing views is possible, and conversations are conducted both to persuade and to exchange ideas. Public attention, amplified by social media interaction, also broadens the scope of face-to-face discussions.

ZM2: "If I had to rate this on a scale of 1 to 10, I'd say 10! I talk everywhere, with everyone."

Political communication practices diverge across generations in terms of participation level and context. Baby Boomers exhibit a cautious and limited profile, whereas Generation X is more variable and approaches interaction with a sensitivity to preserving relationships. Generation Y tends to confine interactions largely to circles of friends. By contrast, in Generation Z, conversations about the electoral agenda are frequent and widespread. While family members and the local milieu function as opinion leaders for Baby Boomers and Generation X, peer networks and online contacts in Generations Y and Z serve as a mediating layer that also frames face-to-face talk. Thus, a hybrid configuration emerges in which traditional and digital intermediaries operate together.

### 3.4. Trust in Information Channels and Perceived Usefulness

Among Baby Boomers, television stands out as the most useful and trustworthy source. This is followed by interpersonal conversations. Social media is generally not regarded as useful. For some participants, communication within the family or among friends is more influential; others approach media content cautiously and prioritize individual evaluation. Overall, the pattern suggests that traditional media retains its influence in this generation, while both individual and social interactions also play a notable role in decision-making processes.

*BBM3: "There are a few people around me with whom I already talk about these matters; talking with them is influential. Their opinions matter. I also watch television. I follow it a lot. I'd say it's half and half. Both are influential for me."*

Among Generation X, the channels perceived as useful for obtaining information are more diverse. Participants view traditional media as reliable and effective while also emphasizing the decisive role of face-to-face interaction and one-to-one conversations. At the same time, levels of trust in the media vary within this generation. Consequently, both traditional media and personal relationships exert comparable influence in information acquisition.

*XF3: "I can say the most influential is the media. Traditional media, in particular, lays the groundwork for forming my opinion. Next come the people whose views I value. I compare what I hear and learn from them with the information I get from television, and that's how I make my decision."*

Among Generation Y, a multi-sourced, comparative approach stands out. Social media, interpersonal relationships, and traditional media are evaluated together. The influence of opinion leaders on social media and the importance of one-to-one conversations are salient. While trust in traditional media is comparatively lower, social media has become an important channel due to its accessibility and capacity for personalization. This generation adopts a flexible and questioning orientation in accessing and evaluating information.

*YM1: "I follow social media, and my thinking is shaped by the information I obtain there. But I don't mean ordinary users' comments or posts, I'm not influenced by those. I'm curious about the views of people whom I believe are more experienced and knowledgeable and who have developed themselves; I follow them and take inspiration from them. Listening to their views is more effective."*

Among Generation Z, social media and one-to-one conversations come to the fore. Rather than relying on a single source, information from different chan-

nels is compared and evaluated. Critical thinking and verification strategies are salient. On various platforms, both individual creators and news pages/accounts are followed regularly. The influence of opinion leaders is frequently emphasized. Thus, a practice emerges that blends digital and face-to-face interaction while excluding legacy media.

*ZF1: "In terms of discourse, I trust my immediate circle more than social media... Still, I do turn to social media as well. I don't blindly accept as true the information I obtain from either side; I verify it. I can say the two are equally influential."*

As generations get younger, the effectiveness of traditional media weakens, while digital sources and interpersonal channels come to the fore. Among Baby Boomers and Generation X, traditional media and face-to-face interaction are more dominant; among Generation Y, a multi-sourced, comparative approach prevails; and among Generation Z, a configuration that combines social media with one-to-one interaction is observed. Overall, preferences for primary information sources exhibit a gradual shift from traditional media to digital platforms when moving from older to younger generations; at the same time, face-to-face (interpersonal) interaction remains a durable and influential channel across all generations.

### 3.5. Experiences of Indecision and Sources of Support

Among Baby Boomers, most participants report not experiencing indecision. In the rare instances when indecision arises, consulting one's close circle and turning to traditional media come to the fore. Personal histories, political identifications, and long-standing habits are strong determinants in the decision-making process. In addition, traditional forms of opinion leadership appear to continue to play a role in resolving indecision.

*BBF1: "I consult my children on this as well. They tell me who has done what and what they can do."*

Among Generation X, individual judgments and contextual influences become decisive when indecision arises. A substantial portion of participants report not experiencing indecision; in cases where it does occur, solutions are sought through personal evaluation informed by political traditions and past experiences. Strategies such as consulting one's close circle, looking at poll results, drawing on media content, and speaking with trusted figures come into play. The influence of traditional opinion leaders persists in this generation as well.

*XF3: "If I can't see my way through, if I can't make a decision... I would consult people around me whose judgment and qualities I trust."*

Among Generation Y, resolving indecision mostly proceeds through individual evaluation, online research, and interaction with one's social circle. When indecision occurs, obtaining information from social media and engaging in one-to-one consultations come into play; nevertheless, a flexible, questioning approach that draws on multiple sources is adopted. Because social media is a powerful channel for accessing information and engaging with digital opinion leaders, participants sometimes perceive it as exerting pressure on individual agency.

*YM2: "I'm undecided right now, for example. I'm talking with my circle of friends these days in order to make a decision. Our agenda is usually the election anyway; we're trying to decide by talking with each other."*

Among Generation Z, emotional and rational factors are weighed together in decision-making. Viewing voting as a civic duty, this cohort tends to cope with indecision by consulting family members, engaging in personal reflection, and drawing on public opinion polls and survey data. Early access to information can shape decisions in advance. However, in this generation - the heaviest users of new media - if indecision persists until the last moment, poll results and the views of one's immediate circle become key reference points.

*ZF3: "Let's not call it indecision, if there was a small point of hesitation, I immediately turned to the numbers and tried to make the most rational decision by looking at them. Polls can be important for understanding the public's overall leanings."*

The frequency of indecision and the ways it is resolved vary across generations. Among Baby Boomers, where indecision is rare, resolution is sought mostly through traditional media and consultation within the family. Among Generation X, likewise, when limited instances of indecision occur, individuals tend to rely on personal reflection, consultation with close contacts, and media content. Among Generation Y, where indecision is more common than in earlier generations, solutions are pursued by turning to multiple information sources. Among Generation Z, personal reflection, discussion with one's circle, and poll- and survey-based, ostensibly rational choices come to the fore. Social media functions as an indirect channel for information and opinion formation.

As age increases, the prevalence of indecision declines, and decision-making processes are shaped more strongly by past experiences and long-standing habits. Among younger generations, perceived representation gaps, dissatisfaction with candidate quality, and the influence of multiple information sources make indecision more frequent. These episodes are addressed through social media, one-to-one consultation, and the use of numerical evidence (e.g., polls and surveys). Overall, the landscape po-

ints to a multi-channel ecosystem in which the role of opinion leadership during episodes of indecision is shared between traditional and digital actors.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a multi-layered understanding of how political information flows across generations in Türkiye's hybrid media environment. While the core premise of the Two-Step Flow theory, the mediation of influence, remains valid, the results confirm that the nature and actors of this mediation have undergone a profound digital transformation. The influence of traditional media is weakening across generations, giving way to a more decentralized, digitized, and multi-layered influence model.

The heavy reliance of Baby Boomers and Generation X on traditional media (specifically television) aligns with Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu's (2014) observations regarding the enduring role of legacy media in Türkiye. However, the critical and selective viewing patterns observed in these cohorts suggest that they do not act as passive recipients, reinforcing the "limited effects" paradigm within a modern context. In contrast, the shift toward social media and influencers in Generations Y and Z is consistent with the "one-step flow" arguments articulated by Bennett and Manheim (2006), where algorithmically tailored digital content often bypasses traditional interpersonal intermediaries.

A key finding of this research is the necessity of re-conceptualizing opinion leadership. The emergence of digital-native figures and content creators as decisive influencers for younger voters illustrates a departure from the traditional, community-based opinion leaders described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). These digital actors exert influence not through face-to-face interaction, but through "parasocial" and digitally amplified authority. This is particularly evident among Generation Z respondents, who report that digital producers and anonymous commentators can directly affect (and even reverse) their political choices. This is consistent with Turcotte et al. (2015), who found that recommendations from digital opinion leaders significantly shape media trust and information-seeking behaviors.

Furthermore, the patterns identified among Generation Y, who place more trust in interactive digital content than in legacy media, suggest that social media has become central to political opinion formation. As Weeks et al. (2015) argue, social media use encourages individuals to see themselves as opinion leaders, creating new spaces for political persuasion. However, the persistent importance of interpersonal talk across all generations confirms that the "personal influence" element of the theory is not replaced by digital media, but rather augmented by it. This creates a hybrid configuration where

information flows not only vertically from media to leader, but also through horizontal and decentralized exchanges.

In sum, the Two-Step Flow model requires reinterpretation to reflect the complexity of today's network-based communication flows. The concept of opinion leadership must be redefined to account for structural changes, where follower counts and algorithmic visibility now compete with traditional social authority. These findings point to a transformation with broad implications for media sociology and political communication, suggesting that modern voter behavior is shaped by a complex flow of information across both legacy and digital interaction channels.

### 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the generational transformation of political information flows and media influence within the framework of the Two-Step Flow theory in Türkiye. The results demonstrate a clear generational shift from legacy media to digital platforms, while highlighting the enduring significance of interpersonal communication across all cohorts.

The research concludes that the classical Two-Step Flow model remains a valid descriptor for Baby Boomers and, to a large extent, Generation X. For these older cohorts, voting decisions are rooted in long-standing experiences and family traditions, with television serving as a primary source of information that reinforces existing political orientations. In these groups, the process of mediation remains relatively linear and aligned with the theory's original logic.

In contrast, younger generations (Y and Z) operate within a hybrid, network-based influence pattern that necessitates a theoretical evolution from a "two-step" to a "multistep" flow. Generation Y exhibits a cautious yet extensive engagement with social media, characterized by multidirectional flows where online and offline interactions are constantly cross-checked. Generation Z represents the most significant departure from traditional models, relying on platform-native creators and pseudonymous opinion leaders who possess the authority to directly alter political choices. For this digitally integrated cohort, social media has evolved beyond an information source into a primary site for persuasion and identity expression.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of opinion leadership in the digital era. The findings show that contemporary influence operates through hybrid networks that combine legacy actors with digitally amplified, often anonymous, intermediaries. Consequently, the traditional face-to-face mediation described in classical communication theory is not replaced but rather

augmented and multi-layered by digital platform dynamics.

### 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be offered. Election campaigns should reflect generational differences; traditional media remains relevant for older cohorts, while digital opinion leaders are integral for younger voters. Social media content should emphasize interaction and transparency to build credibility. Furthermore, political parties and NGOs should promote digital literacy to help voters cope with disinformation, while legacy media must renew its emphasis on quality and independence. Future research should investigate the role of algorithms and platform policies in shaping opinion formation through comparative designs.

### Ethics Statement

The research was approved by the Anadolu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date: 26.02.2024, Protocol No: 697488).

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