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Imagined Majorities: Perceived Group Size and Population Replacement Beliefs in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Population-replacement beliefs are often treated as an intensified form of demographic misperception. This article instead argues that they comprise three distinct layers: perceptions of the current migrant population size, expectations of future growth and the attribution of deliberate political agency. Using an original nationally representative survey in Turkey ($N = 1136$), we test whether these layers form a single attitude or operate independently. Respondents overestimate the migrant population and expect further growth, yet current misperception does not independently predict belief in deliberate replacement. Projected growth is more strongly associated with replacement belief, while partisanship structures the attribution of hostile intent. Overestimation is concentrated among far-right voters, whereas replacement belief extends more broadly across opposition constituencies. Socio-demographic effects are weaker and less consistent. The findings show that replacement belief is not simply a mistaken assessment of present demography. It is a future-oriented political interpretation that links anticipated group change to intentional agency. By demonstrating this layered structure in a majority-Muslim refugee host, the article also shows that replacement belief is not confined to Western white-majority settings.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary migration politics is increasingly organised around claims of 'population replacement' (Sedgwick 2024; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2024). In Europe and North America, far-right and, increasingly, mainstream political actors describe immigration as part of an ongoing or imminent process through which native populations will be displaced by migrants and their descendants. These accounts do not treat demographic change as an unintended consequence of migration, fertility, or social transformation, but as the product of deliberate decisions by political and economic actors accused of abandoning or betraying the national majority. The 'Great Replacement' has become the most visible formulation of this logic, combining immigration, differential fertility and cultural change into a single narrative of demographic and civilizational decline (Camus 2011; Ekman 2022).

Replacement narratives contain several analytically distinct claims that are often treated as a single disposition. One concerns the present: migrants and minorities are believed to be more numerous than official data indicate. A second concerns the future: these groups are expected to grow rapidly, cross demographic thresholds and eventually outnumber the native population. A third adds intentional agency: demographic change is attributed to governments, elites or other powerful actors who are said to be deliberately promoting the displacement of the national in-group. The first two claims concern perceived demographic conditions and trajectories. The third converts those perceptions into a political narrative of purposeful replacement.

Existing research provides important insights into each component, but it has rarely examined whether they form a single

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belief system. Classic group-threat theory argues that larger minority populations intensify perceived competition and majority hostility (Blalock 1967). Research on demographic innumeracy shows that citizens systematically overestimate the size of immigrant and minority populations and that such misperceptions are associated with stronger perceptions of competition and support for restrictive policies (Herda 2010; Semyonov et al. 2008; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020). Experimental studies further demonstrate that projections of future demographic change can heighten status threat even when current population shares remain unchanged (Craig and Richeson 2014; Craig et al. 2018; Krosch et al. 2022). Survey research on replacement beliefs, meanwhile, finds substantial public support for claims that native populations are being displaced through the purposeful actions of governments or elites (Dennison and Kustov 2025; Jedinger et al. 2023; Obaidi et al. 2022).

These literatures leave an important question unresolved. Does belief in deliberate population replacement arise directly from misperceptions of current migrant numbers, or does it require an additional interpretation of demographic change as future-oriented and politically engineered? Treating numerical overestimation, projected growth and intentional agency as interchangeable obscures the different cognitive and political processes involved. A person may greatly overestimate the current migrant population without believing in a coordinated replacement project. Another may make a relatively modest numerical error while believing that political actors are intentionally producing a threatening demographic future. Replacement belief may therefore depend less on how people miscount the present than on how they imagine the future and assign responsibility for it.

This article develops a layered account of population-replacement belief. It distinguishes among perceived current size, projected future growth and the attribution of deliberate political agency. The argument is not that these dimensions are unrelated. Rather, they represent distinct interpretive steps. Current-size perceptions provide an image of the demographic present. Future projections transform that image into a trajectory. Intentional-agency claims give the trajectory a political cause and a hostile purpose. Replacement belief emerges when demographic expectations are incorporated into a narrative in which powerful actors are deliberately working against the national in-group.

Turkey provides a strategic case for examining this argument. The country hosts approximately 4.2 million migrants and refugees, most of them Syrians under temporary protection, amounting to roughly 5% of the population.¹ Migration has become a central axis of political competition, with opposition parties criticising the government's migration policies and new nationalist parties organising their platforms around repatriation, border control and the protection of the 'native' population (see Elçi et al. 2025; Kentmen-Cin et al. 2025). Claims about demographic balance, future minority status and deliberate population engineering have entered mainstream political debate.

Turkey is theoretically important because it alters the racial and religious configuration within which replacement narratives are usually studied. Most existing research focuses on Western Europe and North America, where such narratives are structured around white majorities and non-European, often Muslim, minorities. Turkey is a majority-Muslim refugee-hosting country in which a largely Sunni Muslim migrant population has become the object of demographic anxiety. The case, therefore, separates replacement belief from its conventional association with white demographic decline. It also combines large-scale displacement, temporary protection, irregular migration, disputed population figures and intense party competition, creating conditions in which current numbers, future projections, and political responsibility are all highly contested.

A substantial literature has examined Turkish attitudes toward Syrians and other refugees, emphasising economic, cultural, and security threats, national identity, social distance, humanitarian concern, intergroup contact, local context and partisan cues (Erdoğan 2018, 2023; Erişen 2018; Topal et al. 2017; Getmansky et al. 2018; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019). This research shows that refugee attitudes are neither uniformly hostile nor reducible to material self-interest. Yet it has not examined whether perceptions of current migrant numbers, expectations of future growth, and belief in deliberate replacement constitute a single attitude or separate layers of opinion.

Using an original nationally representative face-to-face survey conducted in late 2024, this article measures these layers separately. The results show that overestimation of the current migrant population does not, by itself, predict belief in deliberate replacement. Expectations of future demographic growth are more closely associated with replacement belief, while partisan alignment structures the attribution of political intent. The central empirical distinction is therefore between a misperceived present and a politically interpreted future.

The article makes three contributions. First, it separates perceived current size from projected future growth and shows why they should not be treated as equivalent measures of demographic threat. Second, it identifies intentional agency as the defining feature distinguishing replacement belief from broader concerns about immigration or demographic change. Third, it demonstrates that replacement belief travels beyond Western racial settings and can be organised around partisan responsibility in a majority-Muslim refugee host. The next section develops this layered theoretical framework by examining how perceived size, projected growth and intentional agency are connected without collapsing into a single belief.

2 | Perceived Size, Projected Growth and Replacement Narratives

Do citizens respond to how many migrants are present, or to how many they expect there to be in the future? Classic group-threat theory begins from the premise that numbers matter. As minority populations grow, majority-group members may

¹The numbers are from the official website of the Presidency of Migration Management for the year 2024, available at <https://www.goc.gov.tr/istatistikler> (Accessed December 2025).

perceive greater competition over employment, housing, welfare and political power, leading to stronger support for exclusion and control (Blalock 1967). Integrated threat theory extends this argument by distinguishing realistic threats to material interests from symbolic threats to identities, values, and established ways of life (Stephan and Stephan 2000; Stephan et al. 2008).

Objective group size, though, does not translate directly into perceived threat. Citizens often have limited knowledge of demographic realities and systematically overestimate the size of immigrant and minority populations (Herda 2010; Sides and Citrin 2007; Landy et al. 2018; Lutz and Bitschnau 2023). Such errors reflect both general difficulties in estimating proportions and motivated reasoning shaped by identity, insecurity and media exposure. Perceptions also depend on relative position. Cikara et al. (2022) show that hostility responds not only to a group's absolute size but also to its rank among local minorities and to changes in that rank. These perceptions matter politically because those who overestimate immigrant shares tend to perceive greater competition, support more restrictive migration policies, and express stronger exclusionary attitudes (Strabac 2011; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020).

Demographic perceptions are also spatially relational. Replacement anxiety may intensify where citizens perceive their own communities as losing population, status, services or economic vitality while migrant populations appear to be growing. In such settings, demographic change is experienced as a simultaneous expansion of the out-group and decline of the in-group. Research on emigration and radical-right support similarly shows that out-migration can reshape local electorates and generate material and psychological grievances among those who remain (Dancygier et al. 2025).

Perceptions of current size, though, capture only a static demographic image. Replacement narratives are inherently temporal. They concern not only how many migrants are present but also whether they are believed to be growing rapidly, approaching a demographic threshold, or eventually outnumbering the native population. Projected growth, therefore, constitutes a distinct perceptual layer. Two individuals may estimate the current migrant population similarly while imagining very different demographic futures. Research on demographic change demonstrates that such projections can shape political attitudes even when present conditions remain unchanged. Craig and Richeson (2014) show that informing White Americans about an approaching loss of national majority status increases perceived status threat and support for conservative policies, including restrictions on immigration and welfare. Subsequent research finds that projections of a coming 'majority-minority' society heighten implicit and explicit bias and reduce support for diversity initiatives (Craig et al. 2018). Abascal (2020) likewise shows that perceived Latino population growth can harden White identity boundaries and alter definitions of inclusion. These findings indicate that citizens respond not only to present population shares but also to trajectories, rates of change and anticipated tipping points.

Expectations of future ethnic or religious decline are associated with stronger exclusionary identities and greater support for

radical-right politics. Kaufmann (2018) places narratives of White demographic decline at the centre of the appeal of populist radical-right parties in Europe and North America. Jardina (2019) shows that anticipated loss of majority status is especially consequential among White Americans with strong in-group identification, increasing opposition to immigration and multiculturalism. Gest et al. (2018) similarly connect fears of group decline and being outnumbered to support for radical-right and anti-system parties.

This literature suggests that perceived current size and projected future growth should be treated as related but distinct dimensions of demographic perception. The current misperception concerns the number of migrant citizens present now. Projected growth concerns where they believe the demographic balance is heading. The latter is more closely aligned with replacement narratives, which are organised around anticipated displacement rather than present numerical presence alone. Although this literature has developed mainly in Europe and North America, research on refugee-hosting contexts in Africa, Jordan and Lebanon shows that innumeracy and perceived demographic threat are not confined to Western white-majority settings (Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Betts et al. 2023; Gordon et al. 2020; Harris et al. 2018; Herda 2010; Lehmann and Masterson 2020). These studies also caution that such perceptions are shaped by context-specific patterns of contact, cultural proximity and local economic relations.

When, then, does perceived demographic change become a replacement narrative? The decisive step is the attribution of intentional agency. Citizens may believe that migrant populations are large or growing without concluding that this change is deliberately engineered. Replacement narratives emerge when demographic change is interpreted as the outcome of coordinated political action directed against the national in-group.

The best-known formulation is the 'Great Replacement', which alleges that 'replacist elites' are orchestrating the demographic substitution of white Europeans through mass immigration and differential fertility (Camus 2011). This contemporary narrative draws on a longer genealogy of 'race suicide', 'white genocide', and 'Eurabia', all of which interpret demographic transformation not as an unintended social process but as evidence of an elite project to displace the native population (Bergmann 2021; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2024; Sedgwick 2024). What distinguishes replacement narratives from broader demographic anxiety is therefore not the expectation of change alone, but the claim that powerful actors are deliberately producing it.

Political actors play a central role in supplying this interpretive frame. Radical right parties do not merely respond to concerns about immigration. They connect migrant numbers to narratives of invasion, loss of control and national decline. Wodak (2015) describes this strategy as a 'politics of fear', in which crime, border insecurity and metaphors of floods or demographic overrun turn migration into an existential threat. Mudde (2007) similarly argues that populist radical-right parties do not simply harvest pre-existing grievances. They organise and intensify them by defining immigration as a threat to national identity and political sovereignty. Media framing reinforces this process.

Boomgaarden and Vliegthart (2009) show that the volume and tone of immigration coverage shaped public attitudes in Germany more strongly than actual changes in immigrant inflows. Through such framing, migrants may be perceived as omnipresent, rapidly expanding and beyond political control even when their objective population share remains limited.

Replacement narratives add a conspiratorial structure to this politics of demographic threat. Ekman (2022) characterises the Great Replacement as a ‘systemic conspiracy theory’ because it presents immigration, fertility and cultural change as components of a coordinated elite strategy. Far-right and mainstream actors help normalise this claim by combining demographic projections, visual data, and moral panic about borders, identity and national survival. Bracke and Hernández Aguilar (2024) similarly define replacement conspiracy theories as narratives in which the national population is portrayed as facing displacement or erasure through concerted elite action. Demographic projections, therefore, acquire political meaning through a causal story: migrants are not simply increasing in number. Governments and other powerful actors are said to be making that increase happen.

Survey research confirms that these elements can be analytically separated. Dennison and Kustov (2025) show that belief in the Great Replacement comprises distinct components, including the perception that natives are being displaced and the attribution of responsibility to governments or elites. Obaidi et al. (2022) further demonstrate that endorsement of the replacement conspiracy is associated with anti-Muslim hostility and support for violent extremism. Research on conspiracy beliefs and innumeracy helps explain why intentional-agency claims are politically potent. Conspiracy theories identify powerful and hostile actors, offer simple causal explanations for complex change and become especially attractive under conditions of uncertainty and low institutional trust (Bruder et al. 2013; Douglas et al. 2017; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018).

Replacement narratives may also take a biopolitical form by linking migrant fertility and native demographic decline to fears about national continuity (Marchesi 2012; Kinnvall 2023). For the present argument, the crucial point is that projected demographic change becomes the replacement belief only when it is interpreted as intentional, politically promoted and harmful to the national in-group. This intentional-agency layer distinguishes replacement belief from both numerical overestimation and expectations of future growth in migrant numbers. The next section examines how Turkish parties have made these distinct layers politically available by connecting current migrant numbers, projected demographic futures and claims of deliberate population engineering.

3 | Migration and Replacement Frames in Turkish Party Politics

Turkey provides a useful setting for examining how perceived size, projected growth and intentional agency are connected in

party-political discourse. Syrians under temporary protection and other migrant groups remain a numerical minority, yet migration has become a central axis of political competition. Political actors do not merely dispute the number of migrants present. They also construct demographic futures in which migrants become local or national majorities and assign responsibility for these trajectories to governments, foreign powers or other political actors. This section identifies publicly available examples of these frames. It does not offer a systematic content analysis or claim that party discourse directly causes the attitudes examined below.

The ideological organisation of refugee politics in Turkey does not map neatly onto the Western European contrast between a cosmopolitan left and an anti-immigrant far right. Religious conservatives may combine Islamic solidarity and humanitarian obligation with support for eventual return. Secular and conservative nationalists may converge in framing migration as a threat to sovereignty, citizenship and demographic continuity. Attitudes among the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) supporters may also reflect evaluations of a migration policy identified closely with their own party. Party affiliation, therefore, captures ideology, government-opposition alignment, institutional trust, retrospective policy evaluation and partisan cue-taking.

Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*, ZP) most clearly illustrates the fusion of the three layers: inflated current numbers, projected future majority status and the attribution of demographic change to intentional political action. Party leader Ümit Özdağ has built his profile around warning that Turkey is turning into *Göçmenistan* (Migrantistan). In a widely viewed speech on the party’s YouTube channel titled ‘Let Turkey not become *Göçmenistan*’, Özdağ describes migration as an *occupation* that will change who owns the country and calls on voters to stop this process at the ballot box. On ZP’s official site, the same video is framed with the slogan that Turkey must not ‘become *Göçmenistan*’.² In another talk, ‘Demographic change in critical provinces and the 2040 scenario’,³ Özdağ presents slides on the share of Syrians in selected provinces and projects scenarios in which Syrians are expected to approach or surpass the Turkish population by 2040. He labels this outcome a ‘demographic disaster’. In interviews and short clips, he repeatedly states that ‘they want to turn Turkey into a *Göçmenistan*’ and characterises current policy as a ‘demographic invasion’. The structure of the argument matches comparative work on replacement narratives. A large but still minority migrant population is presented as the spearhead of a future in which natives become strangers in their own territory, and government officials and other political actors are held responsible for this shift.

New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*, YRP) occupies a more ambivalent position and shows that the same demographic-threat frame can coexist with religious solidarity and humanitarian language, which makes it useful for distinguishing anti-immigrant positioning from a fully developed replacement narrative. Erdoğan depicts Syrians as a demographic threat and links their presence to Western–Israeli plots,

²<https://www.zaferpartisi.org.tr/Zafer-Tv/turkiye-gocmenistan-olmasin-prof-dr-umit-ozdag-zafer-partisi/>.

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4T2yR-pj9g>.

yet the party rejects forced returns, allows skilled migrants to remain, warns against investor uncertainty and Islamophobic rhetoric, and emphasises peaceful, humane and unifying repatriation policies rather than marginalisation (Elçi 2026). This ambivalence is analytically useful because it shows that demographic-threat language does not always translate into an unqualified replacement narrative; it may be constrained by religious solidarity, humanitarian obligation, or economic pragmatism.

The Good Party (*İYİ Parti*) illustrates how current migrant numbers and citizenship concerns are translated into a demographic-security frame, even when the party presents itself as a centrist and reformist alternative. The party's 'Strategy Paper and Action Plan for Syrian and Other Foreign National Asylum Seekers and Undocumented Migrants—National Migration Doctrine (NMD)' states that an İYİ government will re-adopt the principle 'The border is our honour'⁴ to prevent irregular border crossings, and complete the physical wall and surveillance systems along the Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian borders. This is framed as a defence of national sovereignty and as a rejection of turning Turkey into a holding area for refugees. In a 2023 press conference, current İYİ president Müsavat Dervişoğlu argued that, because of the government's migration policies, 'the Turkish homeland is under demographic invasion' and that 'the Turkish national identity is facing a major threat',⁵ describing current policy as a deliberate attempt to alter Turkey's demographic structure. These interventions take raw numbers about refugees and citizenship and transform them into a story of intentional population engineering. Migration is costly or mismanaged. It becomes evident that someone is reshaping the population against the will of 'real' citizens. As we explain in the next section, in our data, İYİ supporters sit between ZP voters and other opposition voters in their estimates of migrant numbers and in their endorsement of replacement beliefs, which is consistent with the party's mix of centrist positioning and securitised demographic language.

The centre-left Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), Turkey's main opposition party, is more ambivalent about migration than ZP or İYİ, yet parts of the party frame it in overtly demographic terms. CHP is important because it shows how demographic-threat language can enter mainstream opposition politics without producing a single unified party position on migration. In March 2022, CHP proposed a parliamentary enquiry into the Syrian population in Hatay, which is a border province. Presenting the motion, CHP MP Suzan Şahin stated that demographic change in Hatay had become a national security concern.⁶ However, some other figures in the party stress legal obligations, human rights, and social cohesion, and criticise racist attacks. The party thus blends a legalistic and humanitarian vocabulary with claims that the demographic structure of key provinces is shifting in favour of refugees and against citizens. This internal tension is important for interpreting the survey results, where CHP

voters show substantial dispersion on both misperceptions and replacement beliefs.

The longtime ruling AKP provides the contrast case for the intentional-agency layer: government actors reject the claim that migration policy is designed to alter Turkey's demographic composition, while presenting the state as a manager of migration rather than an agent of replacement. AKP MP Ahmet Salih Dal, for instance, dismissed claims that migration is being used to 'change the demographic and social structure of our country', emphasising instead that the state maintains detailed knowledge of 'how many Syrians there are in each province and district, what they do and what they are engaged in', given that all are fully registered and monitored by the authorities.⁷

At the same time, government actors articulating a security-centred narrative acknowledge demographic engineering as a real phenomenon, though one situated beyond Turkey's borders. Former Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli, for example, argued that the PYD/YPG had 'changed the demographic structure' of northern Syria to establish a terror-controlled political entity.⁸ Within this narrative, Turkey is not cast as an agent of demographic replacement but rather as a guardian of a threatened status quo, both domestically and in its immediate neighbourhood. Across these party examples, Syrians become politically salient not only because of their present numbers, but because political actors attach those numbers to future scenarios and claims about who is responsible for demographic change.

These party frames show how demographic perceptions acquire political form. Political actors emphasise current numbers, situate them within projected trajectories, and identify the agents responsible for the anticipated outcome. Turkey does not simply reproduce the Western European radical-right model. Replacement-compatible discourse crosses ideological boundaries and is structured by the government-opposition divide, religious solidarity, nationalism and competing claims about state responsibility. This context generates the empirical expectation that perceived current size, projected future growth, and belief in deliberate replacement will be related but will not necessarily align across the same partisan constituencies.

4 | Hypotheses

We argued above that beliefs about migrants' current numbers, expectations about future growth and belief in deliberate replacement are related but not identical. Perceived and projected group size captures how large people think migrants are and will become. Replacement belief adds how politicians are deliberately promoting demographic change. Our empirical analysis uses four dependent variables to trace these links. The first two measures perceived current size and misperception gaps. The third measures the expected change in migrant

⁴https://iyiparti.org.tr/storage/img/content/2vGM/strateji-belgesi-ve-eylem-planı-6-eylul-2022-1-redakte.pdf?utm_source=utm_source.

⁵https://cdn.tbmm.gov.tr/TbmmWeb/Tutanak/28/2/32/Tam/726aa4fe-08bc-4f59-9dc6-9136d4fb3ee4.pdf?utm_source=utm_source.

⁶<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/chpnin-suriyeli-nufus-arastirma-onergesi-reddedildi-1919095>.

⁷<https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Tutanaklar/Tutanak?Id=76fa7918-7337-4032-9e29-018925fa325c>.

⁸<https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=39f09e6c-52dd-42d1-8495-f1f65b2543b0>.

numbers over the next ten years. The fourth measures belief in a deliberate population replacement project.

From the literature on innumeracy and demographic change threats, we expect that stronger overestimation of the migrant population will be associated with greater openness to replacement narratives. Individuals who already see migrants as numerically prominent should be more likely to interpret demographic change as dangerous. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1. *Higher overestimation of the current migrant share of the population will be associated with stronger agreement with the replacement statement, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and partisanship.*

Theories of demographic change threat and majority–minority projections emphasise that imagined trajectories matter. Replacement narratives are explicitly future-oriented. They are built around claims that migrants will soon ‘outnumber’ or ‘replace’ natives. We therefore expect that respondents who foresee faster migrant growth will be more receptive to the replacement frame than respondents who expect stability or decline, even when they hold similar beliefs about the present.

H2. *Larger projected increases in migrant numbers over the next 10 years will be associated with stronger agreement with the replacement statement, net of misperceptions about current migrant size.*

The literature on radical right parties and the politics of fear suggests that demographic perceptions and replacement narratives may cluster around parties that strongly politicise migration. In Turkey, opposition and nationalist party leaders have made migration a central issue and have used language resembling European replacement narratives. We therefore expect partisan differences in both misperceptions and replacement beliefs: voters of parties that most strongly politicise migration, such as ZP and the main opposition CHP, will exhibit larger misperceptions and higher replacement beliefs than voters of the incumbent AKP and other parties.

H3. *Supporters of parties whose leaders or prominent representatives have politicised migration through demographic-threat frames, especially ZP and segments of CHP, will overestimate migrant numbers more and will be more likely to endorse the replacement statement than AKP supporters.*

Finally, work on status threat and conspiracy mentality suggests that socio-demographic position may shape both demographic misperceptions and replacement beliefs. In the Turkish case, the literature points to uneven rather than uniform expectations. Some studies find that men, religiosity, blind patriotism and nationalist-conservative orientations are associated with more negative attitudes toward refugees, while other work shows that attitudes toward Syrians are strongly mediated by

perceived threat, partisanship, political ideology, local context, and competing frames of religious solidarity and national belonging (Aktaş et al. 2021; Erdoğan 2018, 2023; Erişen 2018; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019; Topal et al. 2017). We therefore treat gender, income, religiosity and Kurdish-language ability as theoretically relevant covariates, but we expect their associations to be weaker and less consistent than partisan differences.

H4. *Socio-demographic covariates, including gender, income, religiosity and Kurdish-language ability, will be associated with misperceptions of migrant numbers and agreement with the replacement statement, but these associations will be weaker and less consistent than partisan differences.*

5 | Data and Variables

We implemented a nationally representative face-to-face survey in Turkey with 1500 participants drawn from the voting-age population. Individuals under 18 and those ineligible to vote were excluded. The sampling followed a three-stage process. First, provinces were selected from NUTS-1 regions based on population shares, as defined by TURKSTAT. Second, households were identified using TURKSTAT's address database with blocks of 100 addresses. Third, twenty addresses per block were randomly chosen, and interviews were conducted on-site. The regional design is substantively important because migrant settlement is highly uneven across Turkey: visibility and potential contact are greater in metropolitan and border regions than in many other parts of the country. Therefore, province selection within NUTS-1 regions ensured broad regional coverage. In the multivariate analysis, NUTS-1 fixed effects absorb regional differences in migrant presence and political context. Because the survey includes only twelve provinces, it does not permit a reliable province-level analysis of migrant density or border proximity.⁹

We generated four dependent variables using three survey questions. First, we asked respondents, ‘How many migrants do you think live in Turkey?’¹⁰ From this item and DMM data, we built two measures. Against the official ratio of 4.9% (4.2 million migrants against a 2024 population of 85,664,944; IOM 2024), we computed each respondent's deviation as a percentage (Misperception as a ratio). We then calculated the deviation between respondents' estimates and the official migrant population. To calculate this discrepancy, we subtracted the official number of migrants (4.2 million) from the respondent's guess (Misperception as discrepancy). This ratio should be read as an approximate national benchmark rather than a precise resident-population share. The denominator is TurkStat's 2024 Address-Based Population Registration System count of Turkey's registered resident population (85,664,944). This figure includes foreigners holding residence permits but excludes Syrians under temporary protection, who fall outside the address-registration system. Because most of our migrant numerator (above all the temporary-protection population) lies outside this denominator,

⁹ Ethical approval was obtained from Özyeğin University Ethics Committee (2024/05/06), and fieldwork was conducted by Research Istanbul Survey Company between 18 November and 9 December 2024.

¹⁰ In the Turkish questionnaire, we used the generic term ‘göçmen’ (migrant) without restricting the wording to Syrians. Enumerators introduced the question as referring to ‘people who have come from other countries and live in Turkey’, and most respondents spontaneously mentioned Syrians and other recent refugees when answering.

while residence-permit holders appear in both, the ratio benchmarks perceived migrant presence against the registered resident population rather than an exact population share.¹¹ We report both the percentage deviation and the absolute discrepancy from the 4.2 million benchmark.

Next, we asked, ‘So, how many migrants do you think will be living in Turkey in 10 years?’ We then generated a variable by subtracting the current number of migrants from respondents’ predictions (*the Discrepancy between today and 10 years*). Finally, we asked, ‘Some politicians are deliberately trying to replace the original Turkish population with non-Turkish immigrants’, where the answers range between 1 (completely disagree) and 5 (completely agree) (*Population replacement*).

We analysed the correlates of four dependent variables using three sets of independent variables. The first group comprises demographic variables, including age, education level (0 = less than high school; 1 = high school graduate; 2 = college graduate), sex (female), and income level (1 = less than 20,000 TL – 4 = more than 80,000 TL). To assess whether replacement belief maps onto cultural and identity cleavages in Turkey, we used two items: religiosity and Kurdish-speaking. To measure behavioural religiosity, we asked respondents, ‘If you think about the last year, how often do you pray?’ and recoded those who answered ‘every day’ as 1 and 0 otherwise. For the Kurdish language, we asked respondents, ‘Which of the following languages and dialects can you speak?’ and coded their responses as 1 for Kurdish and 0 for all other languages and dialects.¹² Finally, we asked, ‘If there were a parliamentary election this Sunday, which party would you vote for?’ to test whether party supporters differ.

Table 1¹³ and Figure 1 show that three of the four dependent variables depart substantially from approximate normality, motivating the distribution-sensitive modelling strategy described below.

6 | Methodology

Ordinary least squares performs poorly when errors are skewed and heavy-tailed (Tabachnick and Fidell 2013), as three of our four outcomes are. Thus, we model each dependent variable with a specification matched to its distributional shape and support, and estimate them within the *Generalised Additive Models for Location, Scale and Shape* (GAMLSS) framework. GAMLSS extends regression beyond the exponential family, allowing the location, scale and shape of the response distribution to depend on covariates (Rigby and Stasinopoulos 2005; Stasinopoulos et al. 2024).

Misperception as a ratio is strictly positive and right-skewed. We model it with a Box-Cox Cole-Green (BCCG) distribution, which estimates a Box-Cox power parameter that captures skewness, alongside the location and scale (Rigby and Stasinopoulos 2005). The estimated power parameter is well below 1, confirming that the variable requires a transformation but not a simple logarithm.

Misperception as discrepancy and the 10-year discrepancy take both positive and negative values, since respondents may estimate fewer migrants than the official figure or anticipate a future decline. Strictly positive families such as the BCCG or the log-normal, therefore, do not apply. For the discrepancy measure, we apply the inverse-hyperbolic-sine transformation, which is defined across the real line, preserves the sign of the deviation, and compresses extreme values in both tails (Burbidge et al. 1988), and model the transformed variable with a Gaussian distribution. We model the ten-year discrepancy with the Johnson SU distribution, which estimates skewness and kurtosis as free parameters on the real line (Rigby and Stasinopoulos 2005).

For the Population replacement item, we use ordinary least squares with heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) standard errors.¹⁴ To test the hypothesised links between perceptual layers and replacement belief (H1 and H2), we estimate a set of additional models in which agreement with the replacement statement is regressed on current misperceptions and projected growth. We standardise both predictors so that their coefficients are comparable. We estimate the models with ordinary least squares and HC1 standard errors, consistent with our treatment of the replacement item elsewhere. We present these models with and without partisanship, which allows us to assess whether any association between perceived numbers and replacement belief is independent of party or operates through it. Because the two predictors are only moderately correlated, they can be entered jointly without collinearity concerns.

All models include NUTS-1 regional fixed effects to absorb spatial variation in migrant presence and political context across regions. We rely on regional fixed effects rather than province-level covariates because the survey samples 12 provinces. With so few clusters, province-level predictors yield unstable estimates and unreliable standard errors under cluster-robust inference (Cameron and Miller 2015), so fixed effects provide the more defensible spatial control. We estimated the models in R using the *gamlss* package (Rigby and Stasinopoulos 2005) and, for the robust-standard-error specification, the *estimatr* package (Blair et al. 2018).

¹¹The migrant total (4,192,950) comprises Syrians under temporary protection (2,901,478), international-protection holders (9,009), residence-permit holders (1,056,632), and irregular migrants (225,831), from PMM (2024). The irregular-migrant figure is based on apprehension data and is therefore an approximation of irregular residence rather than a precise count.

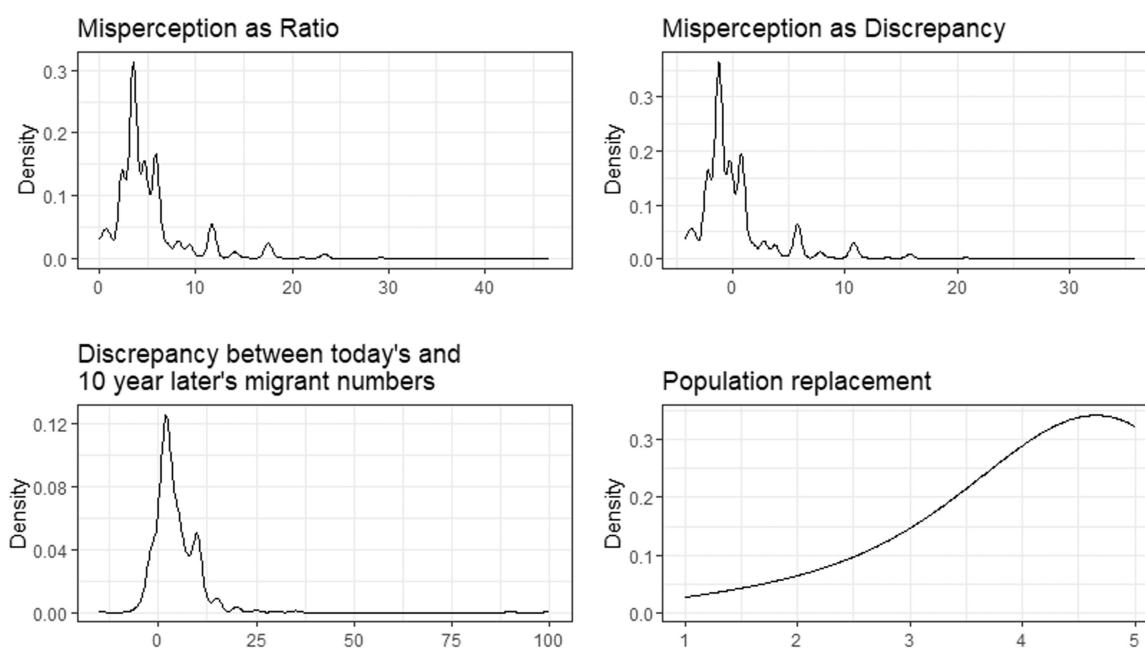
¹²Kurdish-language ability is included as an imperfect proxy for exposure to a minoritized ethnolinguistic identity, not as a direct measure of ethnic self-identification. Respondents who speak Kurdish may interpret references to the “original Turkish population” differently because the statement presupposes a singular and uncontested national in-group. At the same time, Kurdish-language ability should not be equated with support for DEM or with a uniform political identity. The distinction between Kurdish-language ability and DEM support is therefore substantively important. Kurdish-speaking respondents include secular, conservative, Islamist, nationalist, and non-partisan voters, and many do not vote for DEM. Conversely, DEM support also includes non-Kurdish leftist and pro-democracy voters. Language and party identification may therefore move differently across outcomes.

¹³We use a complete-case sample to maintain a common estimation sample across models. Sample size decreases mostly stem from “don’t know” and “will not vote” answers to the party support question.

¹⁴The item is measured on a five-point scale and is treated as continuous, following common practice for Likert-type dependent variables.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics ($N = 1136$).

Variables	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Misperception as a ratio	5.27	4.17	3.5	0	46.69	2.8	13.33
Misperception as discrepancy	0.31	3.58	-1.2	-4.2	35.8	2.8	13.33
Discrepancy between today and 10 years later	4.35	6.3	3	-15	99.9	6.01	77.13
Population replacement	4.24	1	5	1	5	-1.37	1.34
Age	41.87	12.03	40	19	84	0.47	-0.32
Education	0.86	0.69	1	0	2	0.2	-0.93
Female	0.59	0.49	1	0	1	-0.36	-1.87
Income	2.9	0.88	3	1	4	-0.4	-0.6
Religiosity	0.21	0.41	0	0	1	1.41	-0.02
Kurdish	0.18	0.39	0	0	1	1.64	0.68
AKP	0.34	0.48	0	0	1	0.66	-1.57
CHP	0.43	0.49	0	0	1	0.3	-1.91
DEM	0.07	0.25	0	0	1	3.38	9.43
IYI	0.05	0.22	0	0	1	4.07	14.61
MHP	0.07	0.25	0	0	1	3.52	10.4
ZP	0.02	0.15	0	0	1	6.37	38.64
YRP	0.02	0.14	0	0	1	6.65	42.28

**FIGURE 1** | Density plots of dependent variables.

7 | Analysis and Results

Figure 2 provides a descriptive overview of party differences across the four outcomes. The key pattern is that ZP voters show the largest overestimation of current migrant numbers. While replacement belief is not confined to ZP and is also high among CHP voters, projected future growth is expected across all party groups.

The upper-right graph shows Misperception as Discrepancy, with values closer to 0. The largest deviation is among ZP voters, with YRP supporters second, and the largest variation is

among CHP supporters. ZP and YRP supporters predict a migrant population 3.2 and 1.2 million higher than the official number, whereas the CHP voters claim that migrants in Turkey are 0.7 million higher than the official data. The lower-left graph indicates that all party supporters anticipate an increase in the migrant population over the next 10 years, ranging from 2.7 million (AKP) to 8.6 million (ZP). Interestingly, even CHP, IYI, and YRP voters, who also carry strong anti-immigrant sentiments, expect less increase compared to MHP (Turkish nationalist) and DEM (Kurdish nationalist) voters. Finally, the lower-right graph illustrates the mean support for the

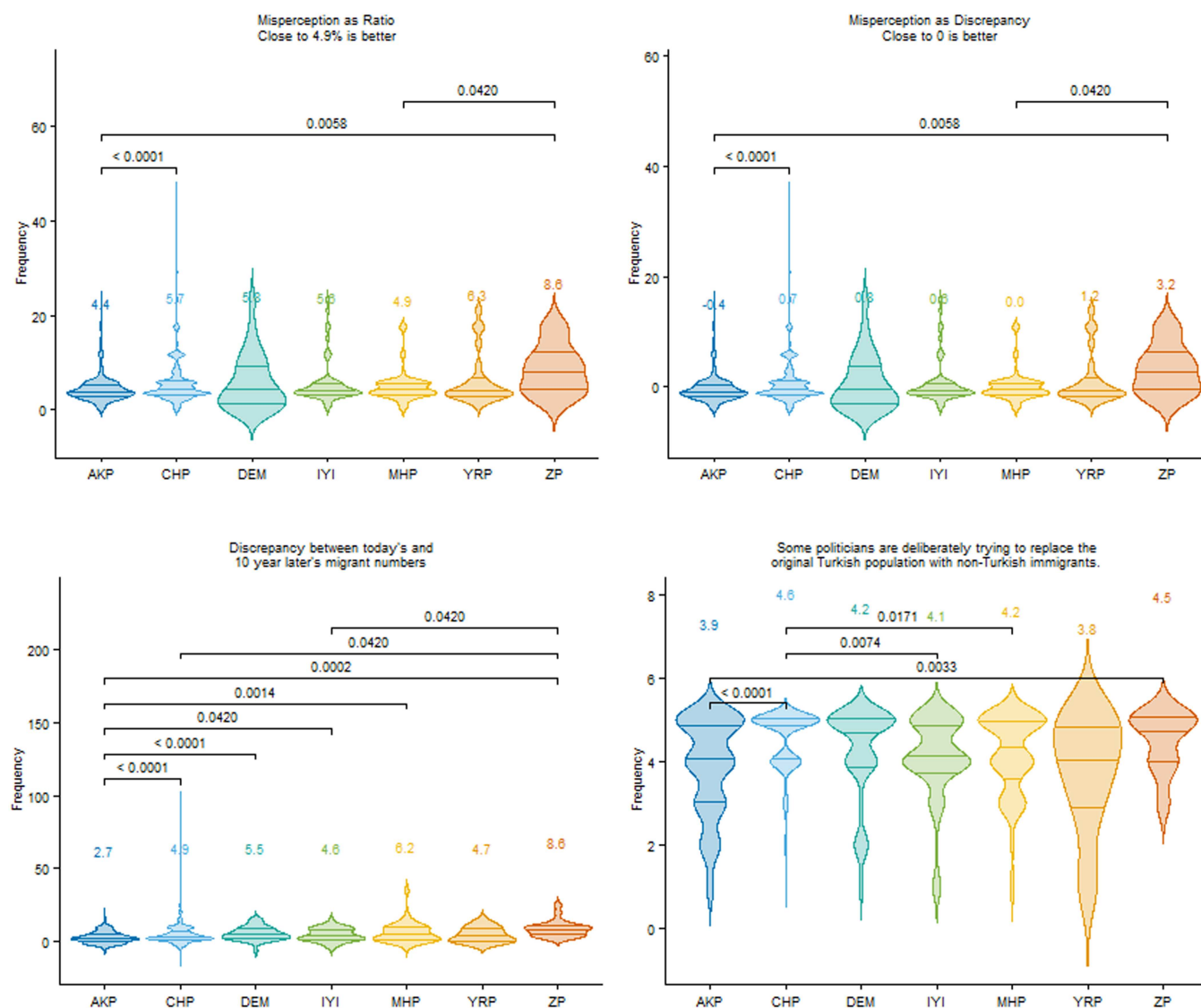


FIGURE 2 | Violin plots and mean differences across parties.

Population Replacement item. While the AKP and YRP supporters show lower support than the overall average (4.24), CHP and ZP voters are more in agreement with the arguments for deliberate population change.

Table 2 shows that with AKP supporters as the reference category, ZP voters register the largest and most reliably significant deviations across the three misperception measures (the ratio, the discrepancy and the 10-year projection), while CHP voters are significantly elevated on all four dependent variables. Net of region and individual characteristics, then, both the over-estimation of migrant numbers and the endorsement of a deliberate-replacement narrative are organised primarily along partisan lines rather than by socio-demographic position.

The two constructs nonetheless diverge in their partisan signature, and this divergence substantiates the article's central claim that misperception and replacement belief constitute distinct layers. On the misperception measures, the gradient is steep and concentrated in the far-right ZP, which stands well ahead of the rest of the opposition. On the replacement-belief

measure, the gradient flattens and broadens. The largest party coefficient belongs to CHP, followed by ZP, DEM and MHP. Endorsement of the replacement statement is therefore not confined to the constituency that most overestimates migrant numbers. It extends across the opposition, consistent with the interpretation that the belief responds to an anti-incumbent attribution of intent rather than to numerical estimation alone.

Socio-demographic characteristics play a limited and uneven role, in line with H4. Age, sex, income and Kurdish-language use are statistically insignificant across most specifications, and when significant, their associations are confined to a single outcome. Religiosity is the main exception. Non-religious respondents report significantly stronger agreement with the replacement statement and anticipate larger future increases in the migrant population, while showing no distinct pattern in their estimates of the present migrant share.

Table 2 establishes that misperception and replacement belief share a partisan structure, but it does not show whether perceptions of migrant numbers translate into replacement belief

TABLE 2 | Correlates of demographic misperception, projection and replacement belief.

DV Estimation	Misperception (ratio) <i>BCCG</i>	Misperception (discrepancy) <i>Asinh, Gaussian</i>	10-year projection <i>Johnson SU</i>	Replacement belief <i>OLS (HC1)</i>
Age	0.010 (0.007)	0.001 (0.004)	−0.020* (0.008)	−0.001 (0.003)
Female	0.014 (0.148)	0.091 (0.078)	−0.217 (0.158)	0.044 (0.055)
Education	0.201 (0.125)	0.181** (0.066)	−0.077 (0.140)	−0.005 (0.046)
Income	−0.058 (0.098)	0.088 [†] (0.051)	−0.070 (0.112)	0.004 (0.038)
Not religious	0.100 (0.174)	−0.022 (0.103)	0.547* (0.229)	0.325*** (0.085)
Non-Kurdish –speaking	−0.241 (0.267)	−0.154 (0.132)	0.559 [†] (0.302)	0.092 (0.100)
CHP	0.727*** (0.166)	0.425*** (0.091)	0.951*** (0.181)	0.709*** (0.064)
DEM	1.399** (0.477)	0.409* (0.169)	0.735 [†] (0.436)	0.541*** (0.132)
IYI	0.836* (0.329)	0.483** (0.175)	0.943* (0.381)	0.231 [†] (0.137)
MHP	0.212 (0.261)	0.166 (0.164)	1.083*** (0.315)	0.473*** (0.138)
YRP	0.825 (0.571)	0.732** (0.260)	0.818 (0.622)	0.209 (0.282)
ZP	2.090** (0.807)	1.166*** (0.252)	2.293*** (0.576)	0.656*** (0.146)
(Intercept)	4.456*** (0.585)	−0.700* (0.295)	8.734*** (0.643)	3.012*** (0.226)
AIC	5461.5	3709.0	5954.5	
R ²				0.255

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include NUTS-1 regional fixed effects (coefficients omitted). Reference categories are AKP (party), religious (religiosity) and Kurdish-speaking (language). *N* = 1136. [†]*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed).

TABLE 3 | Replacement belief regressed on current misperception and projected growth.

	Model 1 (without party)	Model 2 (with party)
Misperception (current, <i>z</i>)	0.022 (0.029)	−0.010 (0.028)
Projected growth (<i>z</i>)	0.109* (0.049)	0.080 [†] (0.045)
Age	−0.002 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.003)
Female	0.011 (0.058)	0.050 (0.055)
Education	0.056 (0.047)	0.001 (0.046)
Income	−0.009 (0.040)	0.002 (0.038)
Not religious	0.500*** (0.089)	0.317*** (0.084)
Non-Kurdish-speaking	0.054 (0.103)	0.075 (0.100)
CHP		0.693*** (0.065)
DEM		0.529*** (0.132)
IYI		0.227 [†] (0.137)
MHP		0.454** (0.138)
YRP		0.198 (0.281)
ZP		0.620*** (0.146)
(Intercept)	3.366*** (0.227)	2.979*** (0.229)
R ²	0.182	0.259
<i>N</i>	1,136	1,136

Note: OLS with heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is agreement with the population-replacement statement. Misperception (current) and projected growth are standardised. Both models include NUTS-1 regional fixed effects (coefficients omitted). Reference categories: AKP (party), religious (religiosity), Kurdish-speaking (language). [†]*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed).

at the individual level. Table 3 addresses this directly. The results indicate that the two perceptual layers behave differently. The current misperception is unrelated to the replacement belief. Respondents who overestimate the present size of the migrant population are no more likely to endorse the

replacement claim than those whose estimates are accurate. Projected growth, by contrast, is associated with stronger replacement belief, and although this association weakens once partisanship enters the model, it does not disappear. Contrary to the expectation in H1, misperception of present numbers does

not predict replacement belief, and consistent with H2, anticipation of future growth does, net of both current misperception and party.

Two features of the table reinforce the interpretation. The partisan coefficients are essentially unchanged when the perceptual measures are added, indicating that the party effects documented in Table 2 stand independently of misperception and projection rather than operating through them. And the contrast between the two predictors is sharper than either coefficient alone. It is the imagined demographic trajectory, not the misperceived present, that connects to replacement belief. This fits the future-oriented logic of replacement narratives, which stage scenarios in which migrants come to outnumber natives rather than merely asserting that they are numerous now, and it supports the article's claim that the layers are distinct rather than collapsing into a single anti-migrant disposition.

8 | Conclusion

This article examined how population-replacement beliefs are structured beyond the Western settings in which they have most often been studied. The Turkish case shows that such beliefs cannot be reduced to inaccurate estimates of current migrant numbers. Respondents overestimate the migrant population, but those who make the largest numerical errors are not necessarily those most likely to endorse deliberate replacement. Replacement belief is more closely associated with expectations of future growth and with the attribution of hostile intent to political actors. Partisanship structures both perceptions, but in different ways. Numerical overestimation is most concentrated among ZP supporters, while belief in deliberate replacement extends more broadly across the opposition.

The central theoretical implication is that demographic misperception and replacement belief should not be treated as a single attitude. They form distinct layers. Perceived current size concerns how many migrants citizens believe are present. Projected growth concerns where they believe the demographic balance is heading. Replacement belief adds a claim of intentional agency by interpreting that trajectory as deliberately produced by political actors. These layers are related, but they do not collapse into one another. Citizens may misperceive current numbers without accepting a replacement project, and they may endorse replacement even when their numerical estimates are comparatively modest.

This distinction also clarifies why replacement belief is not confined to white-majority Western societies. In Turkey, a majority-Muslim population directs replacement anxiety toward a largely Sunni Muslim refugee population. The relevant boundary is therefore not religious difference alone. It is a politically constructed division between an imagined native population and migrants portrayed as the beneficiaries of state action. Replacement belief is a portable way of organising anxiety about national continuity, political control, and the perceived betrayal of the in-group.

The findings also identify projected demography as a key link between political discourse and public belief. Party actors do more than claim that migrant populations are already large. They place current numbers in future scenarios, identify moments when natives may lose demographic predominance, and attribute those outcomes to government policy or political design. In this process, static numbers become trajectories, and trajectories become evidence of agency. This helps explain why corrections to present-day population estimates alone may have limited effects. The belief does not rest only on a mistaken count. It rests on an interpretation of where demographic change is headed and who is driving it.

The article also shows that these interpretations are structured by party competition. Opposition voters are more likely to interpret projected growth through the lens of government responsibility, while government supporters are more likely to view migration as a condition managed by the state rather than as a deliberate project. Partisanship, therefore, shapes not only attitudes toward migrants but also the causal stories through which demographic change is understood.

The analysis has several limitations. The cross-sectional design does not establish whether party cues produce replacement beliefs, whether voters select parties that reflect prior beliefs, or whether both develop through reciprocal processes. Turkey is also a distinctive case shaped by war-driven displacement, temporary protection, contested statistics, and polarised party competition. Comparative and longitudinal research is needed to determine which features of the layered model travel across cases.

Measurement constraints also require caution. The survey refers to migrants in general, while the official benchmarks and much of the political rhetoric focus primarily on Syrians. The highly dispersed numerical estimates and small subsamples for some parties also make certain coefficients less precise. The limited number of sampled provinces restricts analysis of local migrant density, emigration, and regional demographic decline. Future research should examine how local demographic contexts interact with party cues and should treat the boundaries of the 'native' population as an empirical question rather than a fixed category.

The broader conclusion is that replacement belief is not simply a magnified form of demographic innumeracy. It is a future-oriented political interpretation that combines projected group change with intentional agency. Understanding it, therefore, requires attention not only to how citizens count populations, but also to how they imagine demographic futures, assign responsibility, and define who belongs to the threatened national 'we'.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical Approval was obtained from Özyeğin University Ethics Committee (2024/05/06).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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