

Sentimental Utility Theory: Interpreting the Utilization of Collective Emotions by the Political Elite Through the Erdoğan-Obama Friendship

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Barack Obama's 2009 visit to Turkey resulted in an Obama-Mania in Turkish media, followed by a friendship between Obama and Recep Erdoğan, which was widely reported in the media and emphasized in their rhetoric. This article explains the existence of the Erdoğan-Obama friendship narrative, in spite of no actual political friendship existing. We first interpret their relationship through five key components of political friendship (affect, grand project, altruistic reciprocity, moral obligations, equality) and argue that, despite a strong friendship narrative, their histories, leadership styles, and political goals diverged to such an extent that a friendship never existed. We then introduce sentimental utility theory (SUT) to explain the utility of maintaining the appearance of a friendship. Through SUT, this article illuminates the utility of collective emotions and offers insight into how collective emotions produce ingroup identities and generate stability for a state's population. SUT reveals how Erdoğan utilized the Obama-mania in Turkey to create a personal bond with Obama which linked himself, and his policies, to Obama and his progressive policies. Future research can deploy SUT to make sense of other claims of friendship and special relationships between states and between state leaders.

KEY WORDS: Turkey, United States, Obama, Erdoğan, collective emotions, friendship

Turkey is a great country. It is growing in influence around the world. And I am pleased that America can call Turkey a friend, and I'm pleased that I'm able to call Prime Minister Erdogan personally a friend. —Barack Obama (2009)

Turkey was one of the first countries Barack Obama visited after his 2009 election, part of an international goodwill trip to show that the United States would take a different path. His visit produced an “Obama-Mania” in Turkish media, creating a “distinctly secular, Muslim, pro-Western stance” (Parlak & Tunç, 2012, p. 215). In 2012, Obama named Turkish President Recep Erdoğan among five state leaders he had forged “friendships” and “bonds of trust” with (Zakaria, 2012); this news was met with wide acclaim in Turkey (“Obama names Turkey's Erdoğan,” 2012). Erdoğan too saw “a friend in President Obama” (Ignatius, 2012); in 2011, only David Cameron was consulted

more by phone than Erdoğan (“Erdoğan and Obama’s phone chats,” 2011). Yet by the end of Obama’s second term, the relationship between them had deteriorated significantly, their amity replaced by divisive rhetoric and noncooperation. This shift was so significant it questions both the existence of a friendship and, in the absence of such, what utility maintaining the appearance of a friendship had.

Therefore, this article analyzes the utility of friendship rhetoric for the political elite by examining the Erdoğan-Obama bond from their first meeting in 2009 until their final meeting in 2016. While this analysis has several areas of alignment with Hall and Ross (2019), our approach focuses on collective emotions. In doing so, we follow Hone (2019) in that “emotions linked to empathy, sympathy, and compassion – in public discourse... become linked to a positive shift in collective identity” (p. 21). We first conceptualize political friendship, offering a theoretical framework to account for friendship between political elites based upon five key elements of a political friendship—(1) affect, (2) a shared (grand) political project, (3) altruistic reciprocity, (4) moral obligations, and (5) equality—through which the Erdoğan-Obama friendship is interpreted.

Our analysis reveals that their friendship was inflated both by media coverage and the leaders themselves. In particular, Obama’s status as a celebrity politician brought “global attention” (Pace & Rosamond, 2018), resulting in increased media coverage of his diplomatic maneuvers and providing Erdoğan the opportunity to utilize this heightened attention. Many states have amicable relations, maintaining economic, security, and diplomatic alliances without their leaders claiming to be friends with one another (Koschut & Oelsner, 2014). What is missing from International Relations (IR) scholarship is the rationale for propagating the image of a friendship where none existed. We then introduce sentimental utility theory (SUT), explaining how political leaders seek to mobilize positive collective emotions to stabilize their support base. Through SUT, this article illuminates the utility of collective emotions for the political elite in maintaining power and offers insight into how collective emotions produce ingroup identities and state stability.

Interpreting the Erdoğan-Obama Friendship

Conceptualizing Political Friendship

Amicable relationships between state leaders have repeatedly influenced world politics (Aldous, 2013; Dumbrell, 2013; Dumbrell & Schäfer, 2009; Meacham, 2003; Riddell, 2004; Treharne, 2015). Yet, despite the role state leaders play in politics, IR focuses on states rather than leaders (Berenskoetter, 2007; Oelsner, 2007; Roshchin, 2017), unlike foreign policy analysis (Berenskoetter & van Hoef, 2017). The lacuna of research on friendship between political actors is due to two prevailing factors: friendship itself being an individualized bond and conceptualizations of friendship being broad, including elements like shared character traits, values, and virtues (G. M. Smith, 2014, p. 36). This section offers an overview of the scholarship on friendship and a conceptualization of political friendship.

Friendship scholars distinguish between different forms of friendship, including a higher form based upon jointly striving towards the good (Aristotle, 2003). The relevance of this demarcation was highlighted by Carl Schmitt, for whom the very distinction between friend and enemy brings politics into existence (2007a, pp. 29, 30), distinguishing between two kinds of friendship: utilitarian and existentialistic (Schmitt, 2007b, pp. 77, 78). A common thread is that the other forms of friendship are entirely egoistic and more reminiscent of a business-like partnership than a friendship (van Hoef, 2014, pp. 68, 69).

Following van Hoef (2018b) and building on the work of Koschut and Oelsner (2014), political friendship between state leaders consists of five key components: (1) affect, (2) a grand project, (3) altruistic reciprocity, (4) moral obligations, and (5) equality (van Hoef & Oelsner, 2018, p. 121). Political friendships are characterized by a high degree of affect, (Sasley, 2010, p. 3), visible during

summits and face-to-face meetings (Holmes, 2018). Here, we follow Mercer (2014, p. 516) by treating emotions and affect as synonyms, and Hutchison and Bleiker (2014) who highlight that these “can be seen as intrinsically linked” (p. 502). The grand projects in a political friendship, “their world-building efforts” (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 67), distinguishes this form of friendship from other forms (van Hoef, 2018a, p. 55). The elements of altruistic reciprocity and moral obligations can overlap; the latter are active appeals for aid, while the former are altruistic acts made for the sake of the friendship alone. George W. Bush’s 2001 “with us or against us” ultimatum illustrates how these can overlap: A country joining after that speech is fulfilling a moral obligation, while a nation immediately supporting the United States after 9/11 demonstrates altruistic reciprocity. Finally, we follow Kirby’s (2017) concept of equality in authority, meaning that no friend falls under the natural authority of another.

Interpreting political friendship connects strongly to Nicholas J. Wheeler’s work on trust in politics, and provides “a better understanding... of why social bond formation and trust emergence takes place in some face-to-face encounters and not others” (2018b), while also building a bridge between Wheeler and friendship scholars (2018a, pp. 37, 38). In addition, the formation of friendship *after* the establishment of mutual bonds of trust provides an answer to the question whether a relationship of bonded trust can withstand temptation (Wheeler, 2018a, p. 293). Berenskoetter (2007) already proposed in 2007 to “insert friendship into the reading of International Relations, a conception which has so far remained outside the analytical focus of IR theorists” (p. 642). Our conceptualization of political friendship allows scholars to include political friendships in their analysis because it is the grand projects of the actors, their “world-building” which “not only create an exclusionary space that seals friends from criticism and creates bias, but also promote an idea of international order that affects others” (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 67). Therefore, it is crucial not only to make sense of the personal friendships that state leaders build, but also the reasons why they build them.

Situating the Erdoğan-Obama Friendship

Prelude: U.S.-Turkish Relations

American interests in Turkey are predicated upon “its geographical ‘eye in the storm’ location [making] Turkey a valuable partner for the US” (Müftüler-Bac, 2005, p. 61). Turkey’s increasing relevance to the United States coincided with a decline in its relationship with the EU (Aydın-Düzgüt, 2018, p. 22). But U.S.-Turkish relations began to wane with Turkey’s refusal to support the 2003 invasion of Iraq, especially clashing with the United States on the Kurdish issue (Müftüler-Bac, 2005, p. 68). Additionally, Turkey favored EU membership and “tried to justify its non-cooperation with the United States on the eve of the Iraq war by referring to the strong French-German opposition to U.S. policies” (Oğuzlu, 2010, p. 668). Under the Bush administration, relations had reached an all-time low (Güney, 2008, p. 481), and this growing anti-Americanism became more important to Erdoğan’s government as the processes of liberalization that Turkey had been undergoing to court the EU meant that “domestic politics has become heavily intertwined with foreign policy, and foreign policy has emerged as a major instrument for gaining a competitive edge in domestic politics” (Öniş, 2011, p. 57). Even so: “It is important to note... that a reversal of anti-American feelings is not out of the question and will depend on changes within America as well as of its foreign policy on matters that are of concern for Turkey” (Güney, 2008, p. 485). The election of Obama provided such a reversal of anti-Americanism.

An analysis of Erdoğan and Obama’s biographies reveals potential for a friendship. Both come from humble beginnings, facing trials and tribulations while growing up. Where Obama has always been inwardly concerned with his own existential paradigms, a trait that has led to his inability to cultivate close personal political allies (Obama, 2008; Wilson, 2011), Erdoğan is primarily

influenced by the external other: religion and the grand project of reestablishing Turkey as a regional strength. This divergence of character manifests in their leadership styles: Erdoğan considers his political projects his fifth child—deeply personal and intimately important (Yildiz, 2014)—while Obama maintained a strong separation between the personal and the political (Merriner, 2008, p. 3).

Erdoğan is seen both as charismatic and pragmatic and as authoritarian and undemocratic (Falk & Farer, 2013; Gurcel, 2014). This polarization is illustrated by a 2014 Metropoll survey with 46.9% approval and 49.3% opposition (Özer, Ergil, & Yıldız, 2014). Despite this, the 2016 coup attempt saw most of the Turkish population rally around Erdoğan, and a Metropoll survey conducted afterwards noted a 67.6% approval. The rally effect Erdoğan experienced was also based on his personality: He is viewed as a fighter who almost always wins (Gurcel, 2014). Görener and Uçal's (2011) analysis of Erdoğan's leadership style revealed that he sees the world in dichotomous terms, with a very low tolerance for ambiguity, resulting in a reliance upon an inner circle of advisers within the Justice and Development Party - Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP). Turkey's interests are paramount to Erdoğan, leaving little room for domestic or foreign actors opposing his vision. Furthermore, Erdoğan considers the AKP "his fifth child" which illustrates his divergence from the traditionally more neutral position of Turkish Presidents (Yildiz, 2014).

Fred I. Greenstein's (2009) seminal analysis of Obama's leadership style praised his strength in addressing crowds, his intelligence, organizational skills, political acumen in making alliances, and strong vision of political inclusiveness (pp. 216–218). Though charismatic and intellectual, one of Obama's weaknesses is cultivating close personal political allies. Relations between the White House and their Democratic colleagues in the Senate were characterized as tense under Obama's administration (Wilson, 2011), and there was an instrumentalism to his political career (Remnick, 2010, p. 404). While Obama attempted to surround himself with a large number of experts in Washington, only a small cadre of them were true and trusted friends (Bellandi, 2010; Harris, 2013; Kantor, 2008; Remnick, 2010, p. 357). Obama was well-known for keeping his political, social, and academic life completely separate (Merriner, 2008, p. 3).

Upon securing reelection, Erdoğan's congratulations was one of the few messages Obama personally responded to (Office of the Press Secretary, 2012). It is no surprise that this suggestion of friendship was quickly picked up by media outlets and disseminated to the general population (Simon & Xenos, 2000). This correspondence, coupled with Obama's mission to bring about a fresh start with the Islamic world, led news outlets to believe that "the ideal ally for the implementation of President Obama's... quest" had been found in Erdoğan and served to facilitate this narrative of friendship (BBC Monitoring European, 2013). With each statement and state visit, media outlets reproduced this representation, spreading the image of friendship (BBC Monitoring European, 2009; Charlie Rose Show, 2009; "Friends by the Bosphorus," 2009; Obama & Erdoğan, 2009). Yet, despite what the media and their rhetoric indicated, expectations of a political friendship, and statements by the two leaders, a friendship between them did not exist, as their leadership styles and political goals diverged significantly. The following section critically assesses the Erdoğan-Obama friendship through the five key components of political friendship: the existence of affect and equality; acts of altruistic reciprocity and moral obligations; and shared grand political projects.

Modeling the Erdoğan-Obama Friendship

Affect and Equality

Turkey was one of the first countries Obama visited after his election, part of an international goodwill trip to show that the United States would take a different path. There was a lot to gain in securing Turkey as an ally, not least its continued support in the war against terrorism. Obama walked a fine line, skilfully avoiding divisive issues, and in his speech to the Turkish Parliament, he stressed

that “the United States has been enriched by Muslim-Americans,” that “many other Americans have Muslims in their family, or have lived in a Muslim-majority country,” and added a very personal touch by stating: “I am one of them” (Cooper, 2009). Turkey embraced their “Huseyn,” and Obama’s positive reception led to an Obama-mania, where he was featured extensively on the front pages of the media/newspapers (Parlak & Tunç, 2012). That Obama considered Turkey an equal and important partner was clear from his approach to Turkey, while his warm rhetoric towards the Turkish people hinted at an even deeper connection than a mere partnership.

This new bond was not limited to the Turkish population alone. When Obama was interviewed in 2012 by Fareed Zakaria on becoming *Time Person of the Year*, he reflected on the accusation that he was seen as cool and aloof: “[T]he friendships and the bonds of trust that I’ve been able to forge with a whole range of leaders is precisely, or is a big part of, what has allowed us to execute effective diplomacy” (Zakaria, 2012). Obama identified five state leaders he shared a close connection with, including Erdoğan. The news that Erdoğan was one of Obama’s top five international friends was met with acclaim in Turkey (“Obama names Turkey’s Erdoğan,” 2012). This was reciprocated by Erdoğan, who “got along very well” (Dombey, 2015, p. 2) and saw “a friend in President Obama” (Ignatius, 2012). Closeness was also reflected in their frequent consultations: In 2011, Obama called Erdoğan more than any other world leader by phone, except for David Cameron (“Erdoğan and Obama’s phone chats,” 2011).

In the next few years, Erdoğan and Obama pursued different political goals, which put them increasingly at odds. Strikingly, a tit-for-tat exchange began to characterize their relationship. Obama criticized Erdoğan’s response to antigovernment protests in 2014, and he “showed his displeasure... by not speaking to Erdoğan for six months” (Peterson, 2014, p. 5). Falling out over U.S. support for Israel in the same year, Erdoğan refused to speak to Obama over the phone, while Erdoğan’s position on the Israeli situation led “the U.S. policy [to become] no personal one-on-one contact between President Obama and Taysyip Erdogan” (“Turkey: Erdogan’s rhetoric,” 2014). By 2016, the relationship was all but nonexistent, and for his final two years in office, Obama consistently refrained from personally talking to Erdoğan, leaving that to his vice president (Oran, 2014). Considering some of Joe Biden’s less tactful remarks concerning Turkey, this sent a strong message (H. Smith & Letsch, 2014).

Altruistic Reciprocity and Moral Obligations

Reciprocity and loyalty were clearly lacking between Obama and Erdoğan in the final years of their relationship. The tragic shooting of three Muslim students on February 11, 2015 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and the subsequent lack of an official response by the Obama administration led to Erdoğan’s condemnation: “If you stay silent when faced with an incident like this, and don’t make a statement, the world will stay silent towards you” (“Qatar Foundation calls solidarity walk,” 2015). Concurrently, Biden publicly blamed Turkey for supporting terrorists and pursuing a proxy war in Syria, disputed by Erdoğan, who retorted: “No one can accuse Turkey of having supported any terrorist organization in Syria, including IS.” Both sides did not align on Israel, continually condemned by Erdoğan (Simpson, 2014). Here, there was a clear failure in Obama’s foreign policy, who had been able to balance his two allies until May 31, 2010 when 10 Turkish citizens were killed in an Israeli army raid on a flotilla travelling to Gaza. Obama’s failure to respond to what Erdogan considered a grave transgression against Turkey further deteriorated the relationship.

Above we see both sides failing to fulfil their reciprocal duties. Some enter the terrain of moral obligations, such as Erdoğan expecting U.S. condemnation of the shooting in 2015, of Israeli in 2010, or his insistence that the United States extradite his political opponent, Fethullah Gülen. Despite the continued narrative of friendship by media sources and the leaders themselves, the fragmentation of

their relationship was spurred on by the lack of reciprocity and unfulfilled moral obligations, eroding any familiar sentiment present at the beginning of their relationship.

Grand Projects

While grand political projects have the potential to strengthen ties, for Erdoğan and Obama, their divergent goals produced the opposite. Erdoğan's reformation of the Turkish state, turning Turkey into a strong regional power (Dalay & Friedman, 2013, p. 130), and the war on terror, Syria, and ISIS were all factors in further fragmenting their relationship.

Erdoğan's political project of reforming the Turkish state focused on establishing Turkey as a dominant regional power (Kalin, 2010; Özcan, 2017, p. 10). This repeatedly put him at odds with the United States, which responded negatively to the way Erdoğan handled the Gezi protests in 2013–14, which Erdoğan blamed on internal traitors and external collaborators (Bilgiç, 2018), while Obama blamed Erdoğan for excessive use of police violence and a violation of freedom of assembly and expression (Agence France Presse, 2013). There were also corruption allegations targeting Erdoğan's inner circle, producing new protests, leading to several arrests and the removal of hundreds of police officers; a reformation of the judicial system, and the blocking of social media. Erdoğan's 2014 ascent to the Turkish presidency only exacerbated tensions between the two leaders.

Increasingly, Turkish regional interests clashed with those of the United States. If Erdoğan wanted Turkey to have a leading role in the region, Turkish foreign policy had to accommodate regional sentiments. That meant an increasingly harsher line towards Israel and friendlier overtures towards Iran. Both moves ran counter to U.S. interests. Concurrently, tensions between Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey had been on the rise, effectively ending U.S.-led reconciliation negotiations (H. Smith & Letsch, 2014). While Erdoğan tried to negotiate with Syria's al-Assad, Obama was attempting to secure international support for sanctions. In the end, Erdoğan only reluctantly agreed to follow Obama's lead on Syria (Landler, 2011). The Turkish newspaper *Radikal* (2014) managed to obtain notes from a meeting in September 2014 which underline the tensions between the leaders: Obama accused Erdoğan of supporting IS, while Erdoğan threw the accusation right back: "They were accusing us of supporting Daesh.... Now they give support to terrorist groups including Daesh, YPG (The People's Protection Units or People's Defense Units Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), PYD (The Democratic Union Party or Kurdish: *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*). It's very clear. We have confirmed evidence, with pictures, photos and videos" ("Russia, Turkey," 2016). Only days after a meeting with Biden, Erdoğan stated that he opposed "impertinence, recklessness and endless demands" from "12,000 kilometres away" ("Erdoğan slams US," 2014).

The war on terror took its toll on political and public opinion in Turkey as well. Erdoğan's AKP party increasingly took a critical stance on U.S. requests that Turkish fighters would fight fellow Muslims ("Testy Erdogan," 2009). A survey from 2014 showed that only 19% of the Turkish people held a favorable opinion of the United States, whereas 73% shared held a strong dislike (Pew Research Center, 2014). Obama's support for Kurdish rebels in the fight against ISIS led to further strains. Photographs of U.S. Special Envoy Brett McGurk meeting with Kurdish fighters hammered home accusations that the United States was indirectly arming the Kurds in Syria, leading to Erdoğan's reported exhortation: "How can we trust [you]?.. Is it me that is your partner, or is it the terrorists in Kobani?" (Nissenbaum & Lee, 2016).

When Erdoğan visited Washington in May 2013, he blamed Obama for not acting on Syria, repeating that al-Assad had crossed the red line Obama had previously drawn. Erdoğan had brought Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, to the meeting, to help him persuade the Americans. Hersh (2014) reports that when Obama had interrupted Fidan for a second time, Erdoğan lost his temper and pointed out that Obama's red line had been crossed. Obama immediately retorted: "We know what you're doing with the radicals in Syria" (Hersh, 2014, pp. 21–24). Although both states deny

Hersh's claim that Turkey was responsible for the sarin gas attack in Syria, government officials have refused to further discuss the incident between the leaders ("US dismiss Seymour Hersh report," 2014).

As the linchpin of political friendship, grand political projects are of paramount importance in determining the ability for a friendship to manifest between two leaders. Despite indicators to the contrary, Obama and Erdoğan's relationship has little basis to be considered a political friendship. Diverging grand projects characterized their political agendas, and affect and equality evaporated in the latter half of the relationship, while only a handful of acts of altruistic reciprocity and fulfillment of moral obligations were found. While our analysis falsifies the prevailing Obama-Erdoğan friendship narrative, the collective emotions present at the beginning of the relationship, combined with the affective rhetoric uttered, suggests that something else was at play. The next section introduces sentimental utility theory (SUT), through which we argue that Erdoğan utilized the mass positive sentiment surrounding Obama to stabilize ingroup identification within Turkey.

Sentimental Utility Theory

Conceptualizing SUT

The role of emotions and their effect on our political realities has seen a renewed call for study (Clément & Sangar, 2018; Prior & van Hoef, 2018). Emotions have begun to be considered an integral aspect of political life specifically, "[t]he inter-relations between emotions, social structures, and personal and collective identities" (Linklater, 2014, p. 574). As individuals, collectives, and states become increasingly connected through a rapidly globalizing world, emotional responses to political occurrences are seen to spread and affect populations in an exceptional manner. While SUT connects closely to Hall and Ross' (2019) three typologies, we demonstrate the utility of positive collective emotional responses. There has been a significant focus on negative emotions and their impact on a population (Sasley, 2011, p. 456) and an increasing focus on the role of trust in diplomacy and empathy in politics (Hoffman, 2002, 2006; Kydd, 2007; Michel, 2013; Oelsner, 2007; Rathbun, 2011). Additionally, the role of collective emotions within the process of constituting political identities and motivating action has emerged as an area of interest within IR. Following from the idea that "[g]roup emotion is as real as other categories that people create and agree upon such as normative structures, emotion, and identity" (Mercer, 2014, p. 516), collective emotions can potentially unify a population. They are a key component of identity and are a powerful agent in binding a population.

These collective emotional responses manifest in phenomena such as, though not limited to, national pride or shame and "in contrast to individual emotions, which are sometimes related to a dispositional system or physiological mechanisms, collective or group-based emotions are solely formed as a consequence of experiences in particular societal context" (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007, p. 443). Individuals then experience emotions outside of the context of their immediate personal experiences and in relation "to collective or societal experiences in which only a part of the group members have taken part" (p. 443). This emphasizes that collective emotions are something distinct from individual emotions—they "are not just an aggregation of individual emotions" (von Scheve & Ismer, 2013, p. 408) but are directly related to specific societal contexts, highlighting how the collective has the potential to influence the individual. While collective emotions can serve to further solidify the identity of a population, this process is not vertically integrated as group identification can also spur collective emotional responses. Specifically, "[t]he more people attach their identity to a nation, the more likely they are to feel stronger emotions toward other countries when those countries" are viewed in a binary fashion (Herrmann 2017, p. 61). This co-constitutive nature of emotion and identity means that these phenomena are of vital importance for the stability of a state and the political elite's ability to maintain power.

The collective emotions discussed in this section focus on the societal level; specifically, the extent to which positive emotions have the potential to influence Turkish citizens to identify with the Turkish ingroup under Erdoğan's leadership. Collective emotions (Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) are distinguished from group-based emotions (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) in that "group-based emotions consider an individual's emotional experience in response to group-related events, whereas collective emotions refer to the collective as the entity that experiences the emotion" (Goldenberg Saguy, & Halperin, 2014, p. 582). The processes constituting group-based emotions can apply to a wide variety of groups, from public moods, group sentiments, to popular emotions. But the determining factor in producing affect for group members is an individual's self-categorization with the group: "In situations in which identification is weak, we can expect a reduced relevance to the individual and a decreased emotional response" (Goldenberg Halperin, van Zomeren, & Gross, 2016, p. 122) and vice versa. Following both collective and group-based emotions scholarship, these group-based emotions, if experienced widely enough across a society, have the potential to produce a collective emotional response.

More importantly is that these group-based and collective emotions are distinct from individual emotions (E. R. Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007, p. 444) and "are qualitatively different from individual or private emotions because they are the result of acting and feeling together as a group" (Sullivan, 2015, p. 383). Put differently "individual emotions are elicited by events concerning one's personal identity whereas group-based emotions are elicited by events concerning one's social identity as a member of a particular group" (Kessler & Hollbach, 2005, p. 677). The process by which an individual identifies as part of a group is down to self-categorization, "[w]hen people self-categorise as group members rather than as individuals, they tend to think, feel, and act in accordance with their group-level self, rather than their individual-level self" (Iyer & Leach, 2008, p. 91). Just as these self-categorizations lead to group-based emotions, an accumulation of similar group-based emotions can produce a collective emotion at the societal level. The emergence of collective emotions is dependent on the context from which they originate, "just as individuals may be characterized by a dominant emotion, societies, too, may develop a collective emotional orientation... [t]his process occurs as a result of particular societal conditions, common experiences, shared norms, and socialization in a society" (Bar-Tal et al., 2007, p. 442). The utility of both group-based and collective emotions is rooted firmly in their potential to generate collective actions: "[G]roup emotions should be important causes of people's participation in political campaigns, social movements, strikes, demonstrations, and other collective acts—and therefore, in turn, be important causes of large-scale social change" (E. R. Smith et al., 2007, p. 444).

Since societies are predisposed to certain emotional responses, and because collective emotions can mobilize a population, the political elite can make use of them, especially since "people are also motivated to regulate the emotions of others to maximize personal instrumental benefits" (Netzer, Van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015, p. 133). An exploration of how the political elite interpret, react to, and utilize collective emotions experienced within their population is needed. This study fills a gap within IR scholarship through offering SUT as an explanation for the Erdoğan-Obama friendship narrative and posits a hitherto unexplored interaction between the political elite and their populations. In instances where there is an impression of an emotional response being collectively experienced, the political elite are provided with both the opportunity and motivation to utilize these. SUT highlights that collective emotions have the potential to solidify a leader's grip on power. Specifically, positive collective emotions strengthen ingroup identification and have the potential to produce short-term stability. The key utility of these collective emotions for the political elite is their tendency to generate predictability (Herrmann, 2017).

Erdoğan provides an insightful subject to interpret SUT in politics both because under his leadership Turkey experienced political instability and because Erdoğan had ample personal motivation to construct a unified Turkey. In contrast, Obama presided over a stable state, and there

was no equivalent to “Erdoğan-mania” in the United States, therefore lacking the preconditions for SUT. Due to the absence of a collective emotional response in the United States, Obama’s role in constructing this “friendship” was reflective of a foreign policy shift, and consequently rationalist theories are more applicable for interpreting his perspective. Alternatively, Erdoğan could generate a cohesive ingroup identity for his divided population through the collective positive emotions surrounding Obama, thereby bringing stability to his leadership. SUT explains the existence of the Erdoğan-Obama friendship narrative in lieu of an actual political friendship existing. SUT, then, (1) provides us with a fuller understanding of the motivations behind the actions of political elites, stressing the motive for producing indicators of friendship, (2) emphasizes the importance of emotions in generating and influencing the actions of political leaders, highlighting the opportunity provided by the collective emotions experienced through Obama-mania, and (3) underscores the pertinence of collective emotions in solidifying ingroup identities, as a result (potentially) generating stability. The next section interprets the Erdoğan-Obama “friendship” through SUT.

Applying SUT

While we have argued there was no friendship between Obama and Erdoğan, the question of why the image of friendship was proactively constructed remains open. While both leaders promoted this “friendship,” the necessary preconditions to produce collective emotions, which could be utilized by one of the leaders, were only present in Turkey. Erdoğan’s leadership style has divisive implications for the population of Turkey: At its peak, discontent with the Turkish leader fomented into an attempted coup in 2016. The question remains how long Erdoğan’s Islamic revival can “be sustained without affecting... life in local neighborhoods” (Shankland, 2007, p. 367). Within this context, SUT proposes a motivation for Erdoğan’s construction of a friendship with Obama.

Building an image of friendship mobilized the popular sentiment for Obama that had captivated the Turkish population to strengthen Erdoğan’s own position. There is a low-opportunity cost for these actions which have the potential to capitalize on mass-positive sentiment. When leaders are faced with a divided population and domestic strife, they seek remedies to control unrest. SUT proposes that positive, collective emotions, like Obama-mania, can be utilized by the political elite to divert the focus of their population from domestic discontent and concentrate it on positively perceived external phenomenon. What follows is a discussion of collective emotions and their role in constituting identities of an ingroup/outgroup distinction separated into three components of SUT: motive, opportunity, and stability.

SUT as Motive

The utility of collective emotions are evident in a country marked by sharp identity distinctions such as Turkey where “[t]he conflict is over not only the principles of the Turkish Republic, but also two competing definitions of nation, state, secularism and democracy” (Yavuz & Özcan, 2007, p. 118). The emotional connections felt by the Turkish population are often the catalyst for collective political action which potentially threaten Erdoğan’s position. This is particularly the case when political actions jeopardize group identities or values because groups will then attempt to secure their interests (Van Zomeren, 2016, p. 96). In Turkey, collective actions often emerge related to the protection of particular values as vocal secular portions of the population “believe that Erdogan and the people around him... constitute a ‘threat’ to the secular nature of the state and society” (Yavuz & Özcan, 2007, p. 124). One such manifestation of this was the emotional response to the handling of the Gezi protests, which quickly transformed from protests about urbanization to a greater dissent regarding the broader state of political affairs, producing a redrawing of:

[i]dentity dichotomies that had been constructed in Turkey over decades, such as Islamist vs. secular, Kemalist vs. Islamist, Turk vs. Kurd, men vs. women, [which] were abandoned in that particular space and time. (Bilgiç, 2018, p. 269)

This highlights the co-constitutive nature of emotions and identity: They define and reinforce each other, and “[a]s such, individuals’ personal or group identity is an important determinant of whether they feel angry alone or together and whether they feel personally weak or collectively strong” (Van Zomeren, 2016, p. 98).

Collective emotional responses to events serve to reinforce ingroup/outgroup identity distinctions. Negative emotional responses have fractious consequences for a state while positive collective emotions have been demonstrated to reinforce ingroup identification (Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008). Alternatively, “[t]he more positively one feels about one’s group the more one will identify with it (and vice versa)” (Mercer, 2014, p. 523). Widely experienced positive emotional responses to an event, then, have the potential to act as a unifying agent within a state. The political elite have motive to utilize positive collective emotions to their own benefit, capitalizing on popular sentiment to solidify a population’s identification as a cohesive ingroup and thereby suturing potentially fragmental divides.

SUT as Opportunity

The political elite can co-opt positive collective emotions that are widely expressed and visible. Obama’s election provided an opportunity for Erdoğan to galvanize the Turkish population’s ingroup identity, as the positive reception of “Obama’s visit to Turkey in April 2009 was unprecedented in terms of the warm reaction he received from the Turkish media as well as popular culture outlets” (Parlak & Tunç, 2012, p. 223). This highly visible coverage of Obama-mania, particularly intensified by nontraditional media outlets, meant Erdoğan had to “contend with new media actors whose role, rules of engagement, and values are still evolving” (Owen, 2000, p. 174). The power of the media, both new and traditional, to influence the political elite is seen to manifest “[i]f the news creates impressions that [an] idea is held widely and intensely by large swaths of the public, [and] it can affect leaders’ strategic calculations and activities” (Entman, 2003, p. 420).¹ Further compounding the potential for these depictions of Obama-mania to influence Erdoğan is the fact that

[e]lites monitor public attitudes because they want people to behave in ways that favor or passively acquiesce in elite choices. Inducing people to think (and behave) as desired requires elites to select some things to tell them about and others not to tell them, and embedding cues on how this little narrative coheres with their prior attitudes and values. (Entman, 2010, p. 392)

Multiple public polls have traced drastic increases in the Turkish population’s trust in U.S. leadership and positive sentiment towards the United States upon Obama’s election. On the conservative side, a 2008 Pew Poll demonstrated a 31% increase in trust from Bush to Obama (Wike, Carriere-Kretschmer, & Inquiries, 2009), while Infakto conducted an opinion poll in 2009 which demonstrated that 52% of those polled trusted Obama (Yegin & Ersoy, 2013). Additionally, this transition in American leadership coincided with the United States rising to fourth (from 12th) place in the Turkish population’s opinion of friendliest states (Dogru, 2019). The media and popular-culture depictions of Obama-mania provided Erdoğan with the opportunity and motivation to capitalize on the goodwill and positive collective emotions to secure his own political position. The sharp increase in

¹Entman (2003) notes that whether these ideas are widely held or not is also a matter of framing, meaning that the media has the potential to construct a perception that may not be actively held by the population.

public sentiment surrounding Obama was heightened by his celebrity status because celebrity politicians “overcome the cynicism that often is attributed to politicians” and “attract more attention and wider audiences” (Pace & Rosamond, 2018, p. 2).

That Erdoğan cultivated such an image is not unheard of: “Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gull leverage[d] the European Union accession process to create an illusion of tolerance and reform... [Turkey] presents itself in European terms, but its commitment to both Europe and democracy is instrumental” (Tibi, 2009, p. 49). Utilizing the positive collective emotions had little opportunity cost for Erdoğan as it required no commitments of physical or monetary resources. By constructing an image of friendship with Obama, Erdoğan capitalized on the collective positive emotions surrounding Obama. Furthermore, since “people regulate the emotions of other group members to satisfy both personal and group-level goals” (Netzer et al., 2015, p. 133), a concerted effort to generate Obama-mania by Erdoğan is feasible.

SUT as Stability

The utility of such collective emotions for the political elite arises through the individual’s identification with the collective, specifically when they can be seen to be “[h]olding such emotional beliefs and knowing that other people hold beliefs similar to ours makes social order on a large scale possible” (Srblijinovic & Bozic, 2017, p. 397). If these sentiments are effectively utilized by the political elite, then the collective positive emotions that cultivate an ingroup identity for the population “will evoke emotions that motivate reasoning in predictable directions” (Herrmann, 2017, p. 62). It is this predictable direction, particularly for a divided population, that the political elite seek to produce. By harnessing the collective positive emotions experienced through Obama-mania and channelling those into the image of friendship, Erdoğan could cultivate stability through the prism of his friendship with Obama. The Turkish population’s view of Obama as “an agent of change, a reformer, a guarantor of freedoms, a harbinger of a new era of peace, a promoter of dialogue, [and] an alleged Muslim” (Parlak & Tunç, 2012, p. 221) was transposed onto Erdoğan, thereby assuaging the secular dissent that had plagued his regime. While his “charisma as the supreme leader of the conservative masses” (Yavuz & Özcan, 2007, p. 13) was never under threat, Erdoğan’s appeal to the secular half of his population had increasingly weakened. Obama-mania provided Erdoğan an avenue by which this dissent could be mitigated. As discussed above, positive emotions reinforce ingroup identities (Mackie et al., 2008), thereby solidifying the Turkish population’s recognition of the self through an external event. In this case Obama-mania was indicative of a phenomenon whereby

individuals in contemporary societies establish relations of intimacy with non-present or distant others . . . incorporated into subjective self-understandings as well as routine aspects of everyday social interaction, (Elliott, 1998, p. 834)

The Obama-Erdoğan “friendship” provided the Turkish population with an emblem through which their threatened cohesive identity was reaffirmed, providing a positive rallying point that citizens could coalesce around, “[a]s individuals feel vulnerable and experience existential anxiety, it is not uncommon for them to wish to reaffirm a threatened self-identity... It is a war of emotions, where world leaders... are seeking to rally people around simple rather than complex causes” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 742). The rallying point was the “friendship” with Obama with the intent of solidifying Erdoğan’s fractious political base as “[t]he bonds between individuals can help transform a conglomeration of self-interested individuals into a true community” (Green & Brock, 1998, p. 527). The process by which the individual transforms into the collective provides political elites with the opportunity to utilize widely experienced emotional responses. Positive emotions provide a particularly

useful tool for leaders as they solidify ingroup identities. The positive collective emotions experienced by the Turkish population, manifested in the form of Obama-mania, provided Erdoğan with the opportunity to align himself with Obama. If seen to be in a friendship with Obama, Obama's progressive policies would be associated with Erdoğan. Further to this, Erdoğan's relationship with Obama would place the Turkish leader firmly within the ingroup generated by these positive collective emotions, not only allying him with his political detractors but, potentially, bridging the identity divide present within Turkey's turbulent political system. It is under these pretences and for these ends that we hypothesize that Erdoğan constructed the image of a friendship with Obama, effectively utilizing collective sentiment to stabilize his position.

Conclusion

This article interprets the prevailing Erdoğan-Obama friendship narrative and introduces both an approach to assess political friendship in international politics and an explanatory framework to interpret why state leaders engage in friendship rhetoric. Both were applied to the Erdoğan-Obama relationship.

Following van Hoef (2018b), we define a political friendship as containing five key elements: (1) affect, (2) a shared grand political project, (3) altruistic reciprocity, (4) moral obligations, and (5) equality. We find that Obama and Erdoğan's relationship has little basis to be considered a political friendship. Most importantly, the political projects of Turkey and the United States are wildly divergent, and this, above all, is the reason for the falling out between the leaders. Thus, while our analysis falsifies the idea that Erdoğan and Obama were ever friends, despite claims by the media and the leaders themselves, what remains is how to interpret their claims of friendship.

Building upon the idea of collective emotions, we introduce Sentimental Utility Theory (SUT), an explanatory framework that illustrates Erdoğan's motivation to utilize the Obama-mania in Turkey to create, in the eyes of the Turkish people, a personal bond with Obama. Erdoğan seized this collective emotional opportunity to align himself with Obama, and his secular policies, to produce ingroup stability for his divided population. That this friendship was contrived further explains the increasing diplomatic hostility between Turkey and the United States since the construed image was incongruous with the political reality. Consequently, Erdoğan and Obama found themselves increasingly at odds, despite early declarations of friendship. The more the actual situation diverged from the presented image of progressive friendship, the more U.S. rhetoric condemned Turkey. Additionally, diverging political projects, Turkey's ambitions of positioning itself as regional hegemon, and differing agendas on both Iran and Israel confirm that the friendship was no more than a façade.

While the Erdoğan-Obama friendship is thus falsified, and Erdoğan's attempt at utilizing collective emotions theorized, the value of SUT needs to be tested empirically and in other case studies. SUT might very well be able to explain why claims of friendship frequently appear in international politics, and could, for example, be deployed to assess the role collective emotions played in the attempts of Russian state leaders to link themselves to their American counterparts, to the special relationship, and to other claims of friendship, both between states, and between state leaders. Finally, while SUT offers a rationale for the use of collective emotional opportunities for political elites, further research is needed on other actors, contexts, and phenomena.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are especially grateful to our anonymous reviewers and to Ali Bilgiç and Michelle Pace for their insightful remarks that have improved this article immensely. Alex Prior's thesaurus brain-storming sessions were instrumental in coining SUT. We would also like to thank participants at the following conferences for their feedback on earlier versions: the EISA Pan-European Conference

2017 (Barcelona); CIAP2016: Emotions in Politics and International Relations (University of Leeds); CEEISA-ISA 2016 Joint International Conference (University of Ljubljana); and Past, Present & Future of Peace Research (University of Groningen, 2014). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yuri van Hoef, Drift 6, Kamer 1.02A, 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands. E-mail: y.vanhoef@uu.nl

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