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Vasiliki Triga, Nikandros Ioannidis & Constantinos Djouvas

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## The Waning of Ideology? Presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus, 5 February 2023

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the 2023 Presidential Election in the Republic of Cyprus, an unexpectedly close election and victory of Nikos Christodoulides that took place against a backdrop of political distrust and disillusionment towards the political system. There is a discussion of the background context of the elections before focusing on an analysis of the media campaign, candidate positioning, and voter preferences drawing on a variety of data sources to add further insight. The article concludes with the significance of this election for the future of politics in the Republic of Cyprus, where the political transformation and fluidity is manifested towards the declining role of ideology and the preference of the electorate towards the centre of the political map.

### KEYWORDS

Presidentialism; political trust; corruption; election campaign; Cyprus problem; voting advice application

The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is the only full presidential democracy within the European Union. The President is directly elected by the people and must govern for a term of five years. If no candidate receives more than 50 per cent in the first round, a runoff is held between the top two candidates. The winner is the candidate with the most votes in the runoff, becoming the president of the RoC. As both the Head of State and Head of Government, the President wields significant power and is not reliant on parliamentary support to remain in office. Indeed, in several past instances where the President lacked the backing of a parliamentary majority, such as during the presidency of Nicos Anastasiades (who had the support of only 17 out of 56 MPs in the parliament), the president's ability to govern effectively was not hindered. Given the power and authority that the 1960 Constitution vests in the President of the RoC, the presidential election is the most important election in the RoC and traditionally sees high levels of participation.

In the latest presidential election held on 12 February 2023, Nikos Christodoulides was elected for a five-year tenure as the new President of the RoC after winning the run-off vote with 52 per cent against Andreas Mavroyiannis, who gained 48 per cent of the vote share. Officially both

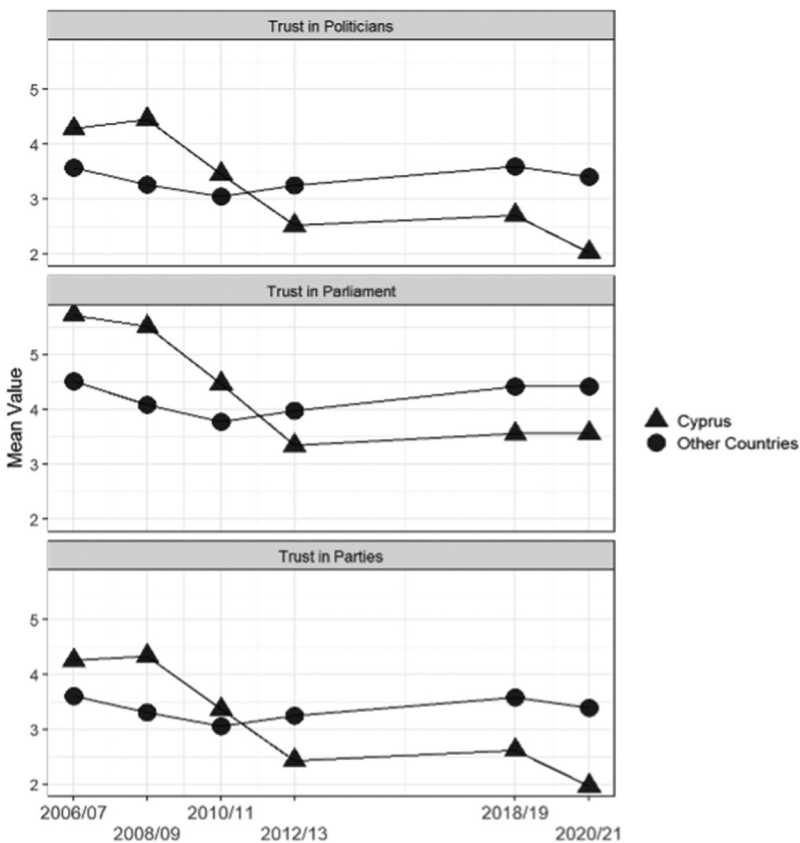
**CONTACT** Vasiliki Triga  [vasiliki.triga@cut.ac.cy](mailto:vasiliki.triga@cut.ac.cy)  30 Archbishop Kyprianou St., Lemesos CY-3036, Cyprus

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candidates were independent. However, their candidacies were strongly endorsed by various political parties. Before the election, a debate arose as to whether the incumbent Nicos Anastasiades had the right to run for a third term. Midway through his second term, Anastasiades passed a government bill that was ratified by the parliament limiting presidential terms in office to two. While legal experts opined that the constitutional amendment was not retrospective on the presidential term limit and that if this was brought to the Supreme Court, Anastasiades would likely get the green light. Nevertheless, Anastasiades himself stated emphatically that he did not intend to run for a third presidential term.

The 2023 presidential elections were held against a backdrop of widespread political distrust and disillusionment towards both the political parties and the system as a whole - a trend that had been evident for over a decade in the RoC. Until the early 2010s, the established parties, DISY (Δημοκρατικός Συναγερμός – Democratic Rally), AKEL (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού – Progressive Party of Working People), DIKO (Δημοκρατικό Κόμμα – Democratic Party) and EDEK (Ενιαία Δημοκρατική Ένωση Κέντρου – United Democratic Union



**Figure 1.** Trust in institutions (politicians, parliament, parties). *Source:* Authors' elaboration of data from the European Social Survey (ESS) (Rounds 3,4,5,6, 9 and 10). Weighted Mean: Post-stratification weight including design weight.

of the Centre), dominated elections and enjoyed the trust of a large part of the electorate (see [Figure 1](#)). However, various internal and external challenges reshaped the Cypriot party system over time. The Eurozone crisis (approximately from 2009 to 2013) brought the political leadership into the uncomfortable position of implementing austerity measures. The consequences of these economic failures, combined with the unresolved Cyprus problem,<sup>1</sup> led to internal rifts within these significant parties and were the main cause for political distrust along with a growing political fragmentation, the rise of the far right and increased voter abstention (Triga, Mendez & Djouvas 2019). Furthermore, the development of corruption scandals, most notably the 'golden passports' scandal (discussed in detail in the next sections), intensified the erosion of the electorate's trust in the mainstream parties.

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, disillusionment manifested itself as abstention rates soared to a record 34.3 per cent. In addition, the fragmentation of the party system was exacerbated (Effective Number of Parties: 6.3); for the first time, 14.5 per cent of votes went to parties and formations that did not pass the 3.6 per cent electoral threshold. Although these emerging parties failed to cross the parliamentary threshold, their growing popularity signalled a shift in the electorate's priorities. Conversely, the vote share of the four biggest parties in Cyprus (DISY, AKEL, DIKO and EDEK) was altogether 68.1 per cent with an 8.6 per cent drop from the previous elections (2016). Coupled with this, the far-right party, ELAM (*Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο* – National Popular Front), was established as the fourth largest party in the Cypriot parliament with 6.8 per cent of the vote. Despite being marginalised by the rest of the parties due to its extreme positions, ELAM succeeded in gaining traction in society, using far-right populist rhetoric that targeted the 'old party system' and immigrants.

Although these changes may be occurring gradually in Cyprus, they embody what can be described as a 'silent crisis of representation' as noted by Ellinas & Katsourides (2021). Indeed, these changes mirror what is also observed in other Southern European countries and throughout the European Union (Bosco & Verney 2016; Hernández & Kriesi 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou 2018; Vries & Hobolt 2020).

While for previous elections the question was whether the aforementioned political phenomena were becoming ingrained in the political system, in the 2023 presidential election the critical question was how political actors were adapting to these challenges. The first significant reaction was that 12 out of 14 candidates were independent. The exceptions were the DISY party candidate, Averof Neophytou, and the ELAM party candidate, Christos Christou. The presence of independent candidates can be a response to the dissatisfaction of the electorate with traditional political parties aiming at offering alternative views or solutions (Glaudić & Fel 2022). While some candidates claimed independence, the reality is that the leading candidates were strongly endorsed by the main political parties. Besides, without support from parties, it is hard to imagine how

a candidate could be elected to the presidency in the RoC. This is because 'partitocracy' is the dominant system that pervades all dimensions of political and social life (Charalambous & Christophorou 2016). That said, the interesting question that emerges is the extent to which political parties that endorsed independent candidates were willing to compromise on their ideological positions, and how their support influenced the positions of the independent candidates running for the election. As shown in the sections below, an analysis of voter preferences and the electoral results indicates that the Cypriot electorate favoured independent candidates whose positions converged towards the political centre. Whether such preferences indicate a declining role for ideology in Cyprus politics or rather a more pragmatic and less polarised stance is what the present article attempts to address.

In the next sections, we discuss the background context of the elections before focusing on the campaign and presenting the candidates in more detail. An analysis of the media campaign, candidate positioning and voter preferences adds further insight. The last section presents the results from both electoral rounds and concludes with the significance of this election for the future of politics in Cyprus.

## Background to the 2023 election

### *The road to the scandals*

In mid-2020, President Nicos Anastasiades achieved his highest approval ratings since re-election in 2018 (Vryonides 2020). His party, the centre-right DISY, polled at 33 per cent, eleven and a half points ahead of the second-placed party of the left, AKEL. The government's handling of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate funding provided to the business sector to deal with the lockdown consequences, and the termination of austerity measures implemented during the Eurozone crisis helped boost the party's popularity. Furthermore, the opposition was distracted with AKEL (the main opposition party) going through a period of introspection as it suffered a series of consecutive electoral defeats and relatively low polling ratings, while DIKO was dealing with internal party divisions and the consequences of a new splinter party DIPA (*Δημοκρατική Παράταξη* – Democratic Front).

Support for the ruling party was soon to decline due to a series of revelations and scandals. In October 2020, an Al Jazeera sting operation revealed serious problems with the Cypriot citizenship-for-investment programme, commonly referred to as the 'golden passport' scheme. The scandal involved granting Cypriot citizenship to potential foreign investors that had criminal convictions in their home countries. Al Jazeera's undercover operation implicated dozens of politicians from mainstream parties (such as an AKEL MP and business tycoon, Christos Tziovanis, and the speaker of the

Parliament and former member of the DISY leadership, Demetris Syllouris), as well as President Anastasiades' (ex)-law firm that was run by his children. Granting Cypriot citizenship to convicted individuals is illegal, but the two politicians were caught on hidden camera vowing to help overcome this obstacle (Al Jazeera 2020). The successive revelations (half of the passports were improperly issued) and the clumsy communication approach of DISY provoked fierce criticism against the ruling party. As the 2021 parliamentary elections approached, opposition parties intensified their campaign against DISY, and polarisation increased sharply. For the first time in history, the state budget required a second round of voting in Parliament with DIKO demanding the immediate handover of the investigation of the 'golden passports' scandal to the Auditor General. Nonetheless, despite the scandal and criticism, DISY won the 2021 parliamentary election with a five per cent lead over second-placed AKEL.

It is well known that scandals in a political system can have significant effects on incumbents. Apart from reputational damage and erosion of the public's trust in the political system, scandals can amplify voter disillusionment leading to apathy and lower support for established parties (Bowler & Karp 2004; Heywood 2009). Scandals can also ignite internal divisions within political parties, with members splitting into factions and turning against one another (Heywood 1997). Many of these phenomena were already growing in Cyprus, making it clear that nominations of career politicians from the mainstream parties would be received with disfavour by voters. This dynamic partly explains the high number of 'officially' independent candidates in the 2023 presidential elections.

### *The Cyprus issue*

Cyprus is renowned for its enduring ethnic conflict, which has led to the de facto division of the island into the southern Greek Cypriot and northern Turkish Cypriot regions since the 1974 Turkish invasion following a coup in Cyprus. The RoC in the southern part stands as the only internationally recognised state on the island, making Cyprus the sole EU member-state with a divided territory. This issue forms the core political divide in Cypriot politics (Christophorou 2007; Christophorou, Sahin & Pavlou 2010), attracting heightened attention with each negotiation attempt, primarily due to the President's pivotal role.

Despite numerous unsuccessful attempts to find a solution, the Cyprus problem persists, with the most significant setback being the rejection of the Annan plan by Greek Cypriots in 2004. Subsequent crises, such as the recent financial downturn, temporarily reduced the issue's prominence, although public disappointment endured. Under Anastasiades' leadership, there was limited progress, particularly during talks with Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci in 2017. Regrettably, negotiations in Crans Montana ultimately failed<sup>2</sup>, with Anastasiades attributing blame to Turkey's inflexibility, while some critics

suspected his reluctance of a final agreement was influenced by the forthcoming 2018 presidential elections.

The remnant of this last failed attempt at the Crans Montana summit, was a set of proposals by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, collectively known as the Guterres Framework. These proposals outlined the creation of a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality between the two communities and a single international personality. While the proposal for a bizonal, bicomunal federation enjoys support from the dominant parties DISY and AKEL, smaller parties remain in disagreement.

The ongoing Cyprus problem remains a focal point in Cypriot politics, recurring during government efforts to seek resolution, election campaigns, and notably, it assumed renewed importance in the context of the 2023 presidential elections.

## Heading to the campaign: the nominations of the candidates

### *The DISY drama*

In light of the populist discrediting of career politicians, some members of DISY had started to promote the candidacy of Nikos Christodoulides, the Foreign Affairs Minister, who was a close associate of President Nicos Anastasiades. It was felt that his candidacy would have a broader appeal to the fragmented electorate. Christodoulides did not deny some early reports that he had initiated talks about his candidacy. He subsequently declined an invitation to attend an enlarged political bureau in November 2021 that would decide on the party's nomination for the 2023 presidential election, stating that it was too early to make any decisions. This decision drew harsh criticism from members of DISY leadership, who saw it as a failure to participate in the democratic process within the party.

In the end, only Averof Neophytou, the president of DISY, submitted his bid for DISY's nomination and thereby secured the party's nomination without an intra-party election. Christodoulides was subsequently forced to step down as Foreign Affairs Minister, following political norms that require government officials to step down from their roles to prevent conflicts of interest while pursuing political candidacy. Shortly after his resignation, he announced his candidacy. To have any realistic chance of getting elected as President, Christodoulides would need the support of political parties. To achieve this, he sought the support of the so-called 'centrist' parties. DIKO, EDEK, DIPAs and the Solidarity Movement (*Κίνημα Αλληλεγγύης*) all endorsed his candidacy. At the same time, Christodoulides could count on the support of some of the more conservative factions of DISY. Furthermore, some close associates of President Anastasiades, who were serving in various government positions (e.g. the Director of the

President's press office and the Deputy Minister to the President), stepped down from their government positions to support Christodoulides' candidacy. Not surprisingly, during the election campaign tensions among DISY factions intensified over the question of whom to support, with Neophytou accusing Christodoulides of betrayal.

### *The opposition parties*

Despite being the largest opposition party, AKEL's position was significantly weakened after the 2021 parliamentary elections (it only secured a vote share of 22.3 per cent). AKEL attempted to revive its strategic alliance with DIKO, which had led to significant electoral victories in the past, particularly in the 2003 and 2008 presidential elections. However, the talks in early 2022 did not bear fruit as the two parties disagreed on the preferred candidate. Eventually, AKEL decided to run on its own and went through an intra-party nomination process, with two individuals suggested for the nomination. The first candidate was Andreas Mavroyiannis, a long-time diplomat and negotiator on the Cyprus problem. What is striking from a partisan perspective, is that Mavroyiannis actually served in the Anastasiades-DISY-led government. The second candidate was Achilleas Dimitriades, a well-known human rights lawyer active in the movement for the rapprochement of Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The leadership voted by a small majority in favour of Mavroyiannis, who became the party's candidate on 5 June 2022. Despite failing to garner the official support from AKEL (or any other party), Demetriades did not withdraw his candidacy for the presidency and entered the race as an independent candidate. AKEL's endorsement of Mavroyiannis was very significant since it represented an opening up of AKEL towards the centre.

After the unsuccessful attempts to find a joint candidate with AKEL, DIKO called for an extended convention with party members. The members agreed with the leadership's intention to seek a common candidate with other parties in the ideological centre, particularly with EDEK. Nicholas Papadopoulos, the leader of DIKO, who himself had been defeated in the first round of the 2018 presidential election, approached Christodoulides and launched a campaign to support him as DIKO's candidate. The talks between the leadership of DIKO and Christodoulides were fruitful, and on 26 June 2022, DIKO confirmed their support for Christodoulides' candidacy.

A few weeks later, EDEK announced that they would join forces with DIKO to support the candidacy of Nikos Christodoulides. On 31 August, the Solidarity Movement also declared their support for Christodoulides. Finally, on 15 October 2022, DIPA, the party created by expelled DIKO members, also decided to support the candidacy of Nikos Christodoulides. Thus, within the space of a few months, Christodoulides had secured the support of parties with



a combined vote share of over 26 per cent in the previous 2021 parliamentary election, which was only one percentage point less than that of DISY.

The far-right ELAM pursued the same strategy as in the past three presidential elections and fielded its own candidate, Christos Christou. This marked his third consecutive bid. Given ELAM's radical, anti-systemic, and often chauvinistic and racist rhetoric, the party, along with its candidate, is largely isolated from other political parties.

Finally, the Green Party of Cyprus (*Κίνημα Οικολόγων-Συνεργασία Πολιτών* – the Movement of Ecologists – Citizens' Cooperation) conducted an intra-party election to nominate its presidential candidate. None of the candidates exceeded the required threshold for the party's nomination (which is set at 60 per cent),<sup>3</sup> and the party decided to invite its members and supporters to vote for the candidate of their choice. Most of the party's voters and officials supported one of the two left-wing candidates: AKEL's candidate Andreas Mavroyiannis or the independent candidate Achilleas Demetriades.

Aside from the aforementioned candidates, there were nine others from various backgrounds and political leanings who ran in the election. These included Constantinos Christofides, former rector of the University of Cyprus and founder of the New Wave party; George Colocassides, a former DIKO deputy president and lawyer; Alexios Savvidis, an anti-vaccine activist; Charalambos Aristotelous, a Marxist left activist, former AKEL member and for many years president of the Cyprus Students' Organisation in Bulgaria; Celestina de Petro, a former member of the ELAM Women's Organisation; Andronicos Zervides, a businessman; Ioulia Khovrina Komninou, a member of the Russian community in Limassol; Andreas Efstratiou, a perennial candidate; and Loukas Stavrou, a far-right painter.

## Electoral campaign

Unlike the more turbulent economic and social context of the preceding 2013 and 2018 presidential pre-election campaigns, the pre-election period before the 2023 presidential election was markedly calmer. In part, this was due to the long duration of the campaign and secondly the convergence of the three leading contenders (Averof, Christodoulides and Mavroyiannis) on some of the key issues. Below we describe the agenda setting by the media and the campaigning of every candidate in the period before the elections.

### *Media and electoral agenda*

In the run-up to the presidential election, our research team tracked the online content of the main Cypriot newspapers. A corpus of news articles was collected for six months before the election; however, for the purposes of this analysis our focus is on the five-week campaign period. A number of issues dominated the

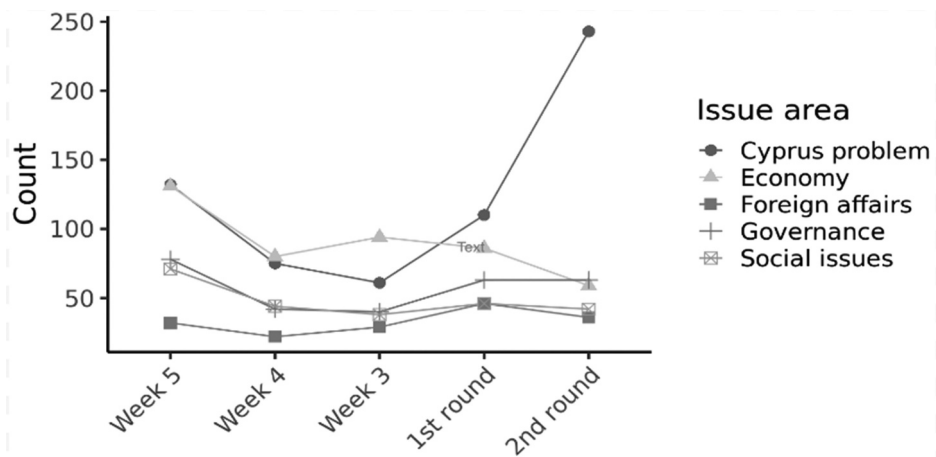
news cycle that can be broadly grouped into five themes. The Cyprus problem, the economy (especially the cost-of-living crisis), foreign affairs (in particular the Ukraine war and NATO), governance issues (mainly about institutional checks and balances and corruption) and social issues (especially immigration issues).

The relative prevalence of these themes during the electoral campaign period is shown in Figure 2 (see Annex I for technical details regarding the computational text analysis conducted). Of the five themes, two were especially salient as the first-round election approached, the Cyprus problem and the economy. Nonetheless, broader issues related to governance (and especially corruption), societal problems and foreign affairs were also given attention. Interestingly, the Cyprus problem then took centre stage during the final week (a similar dynamic was detected in the 2018 presidential race (see Triga, Mendez & Djouvas 2019).

### Candidates' campaign

#### Averof Neophytou

Averof Neophytou's campaign was multi-faceted and he was potentially the candidate who had to contend with the most challenges. On the one hand, he had to rebuild a poor personal image, and on the other, he had to deal with the split in the DISY voter base caused by Christodoulides' candidacy. To achieve these, his campaign focused on undercutting Christodoulides by emphasising the importance of DISY's identity and history, while defending the accomplishments of Anastasiades' government and playing down the scandals. He accentuated salient issues, presenting himself as the most competent candidate to deal with the challenges under his 'Averof Can' campaign slogan -drawing inspiration from Barack Obama's 'Yes We Can'. On the Cyprus problem, he



**Figure 2.** Salient issues in the media during the electoral campaign. *Source:* Data corpus compiled by the authors from the 13 most popular online news outlets (see Annex I for details).

underlined his unwavering support for a resolution plan envisaging a bizonal bicomunal federation and promised to use his long experience and international contacts to break the current stalemate in the negotiations. On the issue of immigration, he proposed a plan to reduce immigration flows by fencing and surveilling the Green Line (which is the demarcation line that separates the southern part of the island, controlled by the Republic of Cyprus, from the northern part, and is under the control of the unrecognised Turkish Cypriot regime; this division has persisted since the 1974 Turkish invasion). In order to combat the inflation crisis and bolster the economy, he proposed a structural reform of the state's fiscal and welfare policy. His opponents accused him of making populist promises given that his party had been in government and some of the proposed policies could have already been implemented. As a result, aside from the hardcore followers of the party, few voters could relate to the narrative being presented by the DISY candidate.

### *Nikos Christodoulides*

Nikos Christodoulides' presidential campaign effectively began after his resignation as Minister of Foreign Affairs. He sought to promote himself as a young, moderate politician who, through dialogue and consensus, could unite the political parties and create an open and widely accepted government. His narrative of cooperation and compromise was challenged by the other candidates, particularly Averof Neofytou and other DISY officials, who accused him of strategically avoiding taking clear positions on controversial issues, such as the Cyprus problem. Christodoulides did, however, publicly advocate for a bizonal bicomunal federation as the resolution of the Cyprus problem. This was in contrast to the hard-line views of the parties supporting him, such as DIKO, EDEK, and Solidarity Movement, all of which had declared their opposition to such a solution. On other issues, like immigration and inflation, he proposed reducing immigration flows and an indexed wage increase. However, he remained non-committal on the topic of church-state relations. Over the years, church political influence has diminished, leading to a more defined separation between religious institutions and state affairs. He also avoided taking a definitive stance on LGBTQ+ rights. He additionally highlighted the need for increased investment in education and technological innovation. He also announced measures against corruption and crime, even though his close collaboration with the incumbent President Anastasiades had resulted in some attributing to him indirect responsibility for certain scandals.

Overall, his conscious decision to avoid conflicts and confrontations, and his optimistic message of unity and progress as reflected in his main campaign slogan 'Force that Unites Us', presented him as a moderate politician who aligned himself with ordinary people. This soon put him at the first place in the voting intentions of a large portion

of society, as recorded by the opinion polls. Despite several campaign missteps, such as publicly expressing a willingness to collaborate with all parties, including ELAM, only to later deny it during a debate with other candidates, and facing allegations from the head of his social media campaign – who resigned mid-campaign – regarding the use of fake accounts on social media to criticise opponents, none of these incidents notably affected his popularity. By capitalising on the public's disappointment with political parties and through a very effective communication network he developed with some of the media and journalists, he cultivated a positive public image. Not even President Anastasiades denied his close ties with Christodoulides despite 'officially' campaigning for the DISY candidate.

### *Andreas Mavroyiannis*

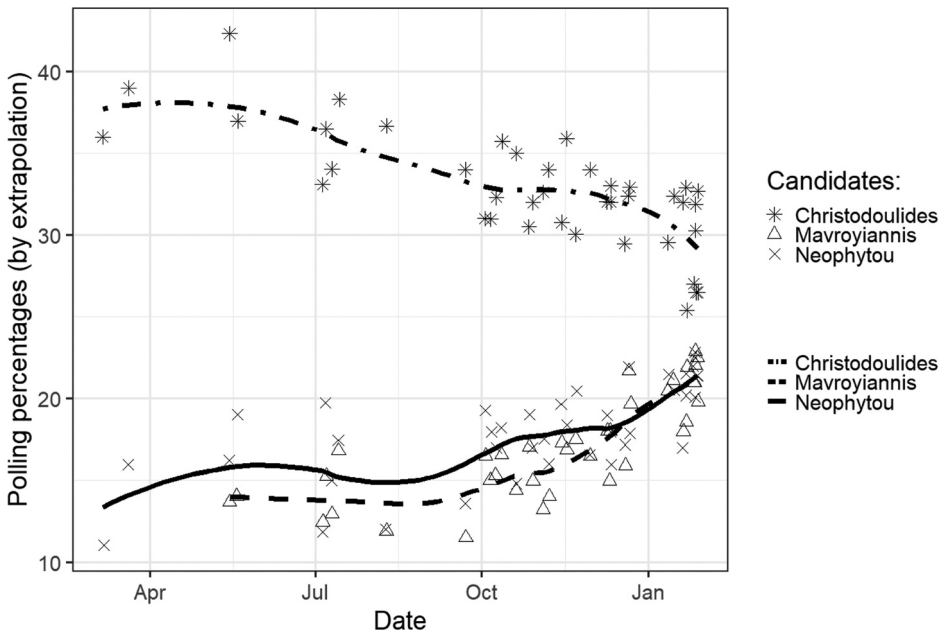
Andreas Mavroyiannis was the leading candidate least associated with the scandals of Anastasiades' government. Relatively unknown in the political arena, he used this to his advantage to put forward reform proposals to empower the independent institutions that oversee the executive and the legislature. His extensive experience as a negotiator on the Cyprus problem and his representation of Cyprus in various international institutions was emphasised to portray him as a technocrat with a distinct political alignment. Echoing AKEL's position on the economy, Mavroyiannis proposed a modernised model of economic development that would be 'human-centric' with more state intervention to help households in need. On the immigration issue, sensing the electorate's preference for more restrictive policies, he did not align himself fully with the AKEL left-wing ideology. As with Neophytou, his campaign slogan 'Cyprus can' was influenced by Obama's rhetoric. However, unlike the former, it addressed various social, economic, cultural, and demographic groups, encompassing all strands of society. His public image was of a modest, gentle, and low-profile candidate – although there were instances where he attacked his opponents, as in the last TV debate with Christodoulides. The support of AKEL was viewed as his main problem, and very often he was invited to comment on how he could implement his programme of economic reforms given his close association with AKEL.

### *The remaining candidates*

The leader of ELAM, Christos Christou, followed an extreme right-wing and ultra-conservative agenda. He was against any federal formula for resolving the Cyprus problem and proposed radical reforms to lessen the number of immigrants significantly. Additionally, he did not meet with minority groups

and highlighted his party's close relationship with the church. On the economic front, he argued for an index-based wage increase and a rise in the state's subsidy policy. Inspired by the campaign of Donald Trump, his slogan of 'Cyprus first' emphasised an ethno-centric approach (as was the case in the previous parliamentary elections, see Ellinas & Katsourides 2021).

The rest of the candidates had varied levels of resources at their disposal, which impacted their campaign strategies. Consequently, some candidates had far fewer public appearances and organised events. Given the length of the campaign, a record number of televised debates across the main TV channels and a total of 40 opinion polls were published, the highest number ever recorded. The polls conducted nearly a year before the election showed Nikos Christodoulides in the lead with close to 40 per cent of voting intentions and a 20-point advantage over Averof Neophytou and Andreas Mavroyiannis (see Figure 3 for an aggregate visualisation of 40 opinion polls and Annex III for the detailed data of these polls). As the election date drew closer, the gap between Christodoulides and the other candidates narrowed significantly, although it still remained around ten points. In the last month before the election, the opinion polls indicated a close competition between Averof Neophytou and Andreas Mavroyiannis for the second place and a spot in the second round. However, there were significant discrepancies between the results of the various polling companies, with one showing a difference



**Figure 3.** Aggregation of 40 pre-electoral public opinion polls. *Source:* Data compiled by the authors from 40 published opinion polls (see Annex III for details).

of 18 points between the first and second candidates, while another revealed only a five-point difference.

## Mapping candidates and their supporters in the ideological space

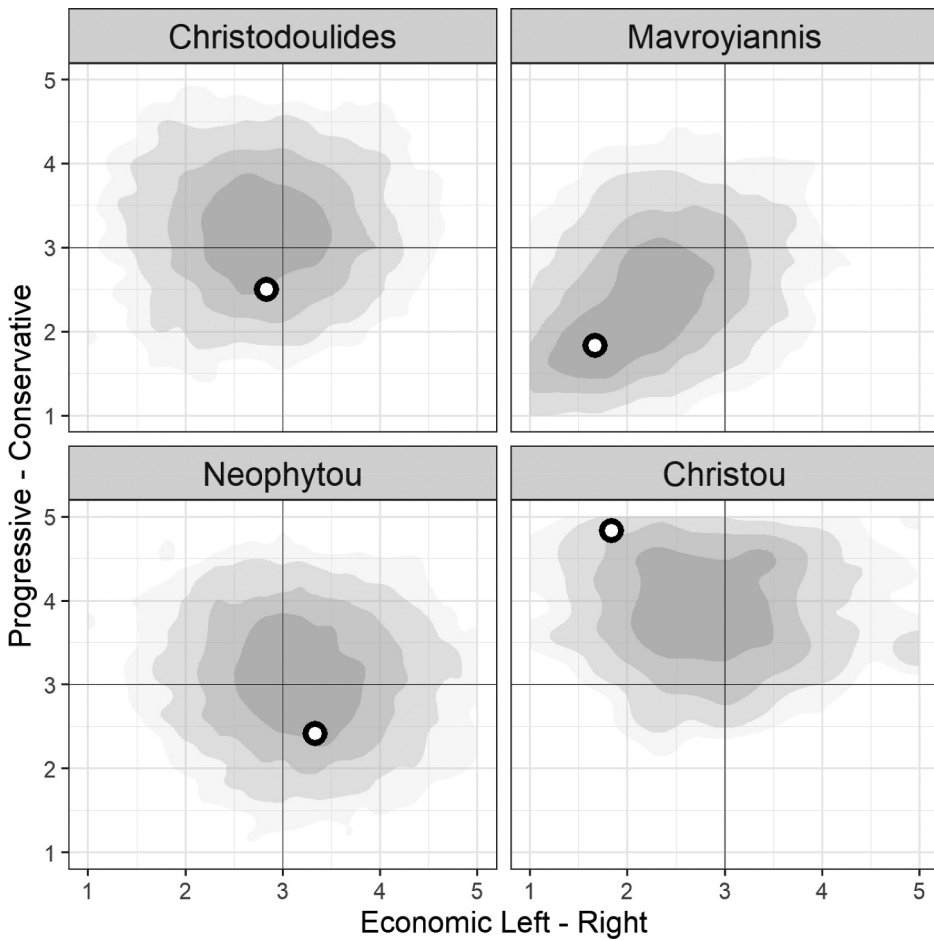
### *Choose4Cyprus: the design of the voting advice application (VAA)*

The themes discussed during the campaign (and in the long period leading up to the formal election campaign) were incorporated into the design of a VAA. This type of online tool is used to match voters to candidates on a battery of salient issue items (Marschall & Garzia 2014). In Cyprus, the Choose4Cyprus VAA has been taking place for more than a decade and is considered as a very popular and useful tool for voters. Indeed, although the online tool was only launched nine days before the first election round, it received considerable media attention and was eventually consulted by close to ten per cent of Cypriot voters (see [Annex II](#) for technical details regarding the VAA). Part of the tool's success was that the three main candidates, Christodoulides, Mavroyiannis and Neophytou, completed the questionnaire on live national TV (Alpha Enimerosi-Alpha channel). This is quite unprecedented in terms of cross-national VAA experiences, and we are not aware of other instances in which the main presidential candidates complete a VAA on live national TV.

Although VAAs usually attract users already engaged and interested in politics, who may not fully represent the wider electorate, Choose4Cyprus's extensive participation, involving almost ten per cent of the electorate and wide dissemination through traditional media, significantly mitigates the impact of this self-selection bias. This increased involvement ensures a more reliable and representative sample, making the data more reflective of the general sentiment and preferences of voters. Therefore, while interpreting VAA results requires caution, the 2023 VAA for the presidential elections offers unique data on candidate positioning and voter preferences during the presidential election.

### *Ideological positioning of candidates and their voters*

The candidate positioning dynamic can be seen in [Figure 4](#), which is based on two familiar axes of political competition.<sup>4</sup> These two dimensions closely map what Kriesi et al. (2006) identify as the two main poles of political competition in contemporary Europe: an economic axis that pits state interventionism vs. free market economy and a cultural dimension that pits advocates of cultural demarcation (social conservatives) vs. cultural integration (social liberals). The economic axis in the present case consisted of issues, such as attitudes about the privatisation of semi-public institutions, redistribution of wealth from rich to poor, state intervention in the economy,



**Figure 4.** Two-dimensional representation of candidates and their supporters on the two axes of Cyprus political map. *Source:* Data compiled and elaborated by the authors from Choose4Cyprus 2023 (1st round).

and increasing taxation for corporations. The cultural axis included issues such as immigration, climate change, same-sex couples' rights, the legalisation of cannabis for recreational purposes, and the role of church in politics. What is noteworthy is that positioning on the Cyprus problem maps well on the cultural axis (Triga 2017). Thus, voters' positions on questions of cultural demarcation (e.g. more restrictive refugee policy, immigration policies and the political role of the Church) are highly correlated with voters' positioning on the Cyprus problem according to past analyses.

Understanding the ideological positioning of candidates and their voters is crucial for acquiring an overview of the dynamics of elections and the underlying preferences of the electorate. By dissecting these positions, we gain insights into how candidates align or diverge from their supporters on key issues that can influence voter behaviour and electoral outcomes. This

knowledge is vital to understanding the changing political landscape and the factors that drive voters' decisions.

Each facet in [Figure 4](#) corresponds to the positioning of each of the four candidates – Christodoulides, Mavroyiannis, Neophytou and Christou – and their voters. We use the Highest Density Region (HDR) mapping technique to identify areas of high data density. This method outlines areas within the 2D space where the VAA users' responses are most concentrated, highlighting the dominant economic and cultural trends among each candidate's supporters. The bolded areas show 50 per cent of each candidate's voter positions. This means that these areas contain the positions of 50 per cent of a candidate's voters, indicating the core, or most common, views and preferences within that group. By focusing on the 50 per cent mark, we can discern the central tendencies in the economic and cultural positions of each candidate's supporters. This approach allows us to visualise and compare the predominant stances within each candidate's voter base.

The dot in each facet represents the candidates' position on these axes based on the candidates' public answers to the VAA questionnaire (except for Christou<sup>5</sup>). The facet for Christodoulides (top left) shows his voters to be mainly concentrated around the ideological centre. Even though the majority of voters fall towards the upper left quadrant where economically left-wing and socially conservative voters are placed, overall, there is a wide spread of Christodoulides' voters across the ideological map. Christodoulides himself is positioned in the lower left quadrant yet towards the centre being more socially progressive and economically moderate than most of his voters. In contrast, Mavroyiannis' facet displays a significant concentration of his voters in the lower left corner, where economically left-wing and socially progressive voters are positioned. He is shown close to the bottom left margin but much closer to his median voter than Christodoulides. Neophytou's facet presents a spreading of his voters across the ideological centre, like Christodoulides' voters, with a tendency in this case towards the economically right-wing pole. Averof is located closer to the social progressive pole than his voters but is closer to them on the economic axis. Christou voters are spread significantly on the economic axis, with most, however, positioning themselves closer to the left. In contrast, they appear more concentrated on the value axis towards the conservative pole. Christou's position is almost adjacent to the conservative pole while being economically more to the left of his supporters.

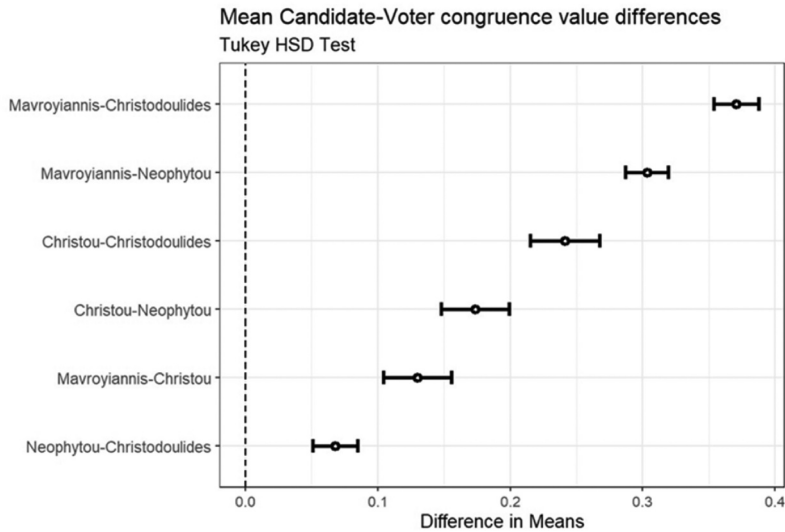
Voters' positioning on the ideological map can be better understood by examining the ideological stances of the parties that supported each candidate. Starting from Christodoulides, who had the support of ideologically 'centrist' parties (DIKO, EDEK and DIPA) that do not actually maintain a particularly consistent and distinct ideological orientation. This indeed is reflected in the greatest spread of the voters of Christodoulides and supporters of the above parties. In contrast, Mavroyiannis' voters are aligned



with the ideological space occupied by AKEL and the Greens. Neophytou, as the most economically right-wing candidate, seems to represent the traditional DISY voters who oppose state intervention in the economy, but, at the same time, he is more progressive on the cultural axis. The broad spread of Christou voters on the economic axis aligns with his party's (ELAM) ideological line, which accentuates an ultraconservative and nationalistic agenda that overshadows the absence of a consistent economic orientation. Finally, it is noteworthy that for two of the four leading candidates (Christodoulides and Neophytou) the core of their voters cuts across the ideological centre, thereby presenting a significant degree of heterogeneity among them.

So far, we observed that all four candidates adopted more extreme positions than their supporters, an outcome that is not surprising since they tend to be ideologically more consistent than ordinary voters. Still though, some of the distances between the supporters and candidates seem quite large, such as the far-right leader, Christou, and his supporters. This is explained by his constantly extreme positions on the issues related to the cultural scale. His supporters are less consistent on these cultural issues while on the economic scale, they are less keen on state involvement. The positions of the other three main candidates are also very revealing. Mavroyiannis has more extreme positions than his supporters on both the economic and cultural dimensions and this is also explained since AKEL has consented to some basic features of market democracy such as private ownership (Ellinas & Katsourides 2013). In addition, its AKEL's communist nature renders its base more conservative on other social issues, such as the liberalisation of cannabis use. Concerning Christodoulides and Neophytou, the gaps are mainly related to the cultural dimension. Indeed, there is a very small gap between Christodoulides and his supporters on the economic dimension (the x-axis) and a small one for Neophytou and his supporters. The larger gap on the cultural dimension (the y-axis) was actually caused by Christodoulides repositioning himself during the campaign on the issues concerning social issues. A similar dynamic, albeit to a lesser extent, emerged with Neophytou also adopting more socially liberal positions than his party during the campaign.

In addition to the visual representation of the candidates' positioning in relation to their voters, to draw robust results on the degree of agreement between each candidate and his voters, we calculated the level of candidate-voter congruence. Specifically, we computed the average distance between each voter and the candidate they intended to vote for on all 22 questions of the VAA. To assess whether the mean congruence differed significantly between candidates, we first conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA results showed significant differences, which prompted follow-up with Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (Tukey HSD) test for pairwise comparisons. [Figure 5](#) below captures the results of the Tukey HSD test.



**Figure 5.** Mean candidate-voter congruence value differences. *Source:* Data compiled and elaborated by the authors from Choose4Cyprus 2023 (1st round).

The Tukey HSD test revealed several key insights. The largest mean difference in candidate-voter congruence is between Mavroyiannis and Christodoulides, suggesting that voters who intended to vote for Mavroyiannis maintain a significantly greater political alignment with him compared to the alignment of Christodoulides voters with their candidate. The next highest difference is between Mavroyiannis and Neophytou, followed by that between Christou and Christodoulides. In summary, [Figure 5](#) indicates that Mavroyiannis voters exhibit the highest level of congruence with their candidate, followed by Christou voters, then Neophytou voters and finally Christodoulides voters, who appear as the least congruent to the ideological positions of their candidate.

The confidence intervals of these pairwise comparisons do not tangent to the null line, which is denoted by a dotted line in the graph, suggesting that these differences are statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level. The figure, therefore, offers a hierarchical view of candidate-voter congruence, useful for understanding Cypriot voters' electoral behaviour. The results of the Tukey HSD test statistically confirm what we observed in [Figure 4](#), namely that Mavroyiannis is closer to his voters (who demonstrate convergence in a particular segment of the ideological space) compared to Neophytou and Christodoulides, whose voters present significant heterogeneity.

## Results

### First round results

The first round of the presidential election took place on 5 February 2023 and did not produce an out-right winner since none of the candidates managed to pass the 50 per cent threshold. Nikos Christodoulides came first receiving 32.04 per cent of the vote with 15,500 votes more than Andreas Mavroyiannis who came second with 29.59 per cent. However, the opinion polls had significantly underestimated the electoral performance of Mavroyiannis – an unexpected outcome that altered the dynamic for the second round.

Averof Neofytou gained 26.11 per cent of the vote share, which disqualified him from the second electoral round. This result was a shock to the governing party of DISY, which ended up having no candidate in the second round of the presidential elections in Cyprus for the first time in its history. It was also considered a personal loss for Averof Neofytou who had lost a considerable number of DISY voters to Christodoulides.

The results for the other 11 candidates can be seen in [Table 1](#). Apart from ELAM's candidate, Christou, who managed to gain 6.04 per cent of the votes establishing once more that ELAM constitutes a stable power in the political system, the rest of the candidates performed poorly with only Achilleas Demetriades barely getting more than two per cent of the vote share.

### Second round campaign

The second-round vote takes place a week after the first-round vote leaving a short, but intense week of final campaigning. The key to the Presidency would be which of the two remaining candidates would secure the support of the large

**Table 1.** Results of the 2023 presidential elections (two rounds).

Candidate	1st round -Vote (%)	2nd round-Vote (%)	Difference with 1st round (number of votes)
Christodoulides	32.0	52.0 (204.867)	+20 (77.558)
Mavroyiannis	29.6	48.0 (189.335)	+18.4 (71.784)
Neofytou	26.1	–	–
Christou	6.0	–	–
Demetriades	2.1	–	–
Christofides	1.6	–	–
Colocassides	1.3	–	–
Savvidis	0.6	–	–
Aristotelous	0.2	–	–
De Petro	0.1	–	–
Others*	0.3	–	–
Total	100.0	100.0	
Abstention	28	27.6	–0.4
Blanks	0.4	1.0	+0.6
Invalid	1.3	2.1	+0.8

Source: Data compiled by the authors from official electoral results available from the Electoral Service (Department of Information and Technology Services) of the Ministry of the Interior, <http://results.elections.moi.gov.cy/>.

\*Others Zervides, Komninou, Efstratiou, Stavrou.

group of DISY voters that had voted for Neophytou in the first round. Both candidates immediately courted the DISY leader and met with him the day after the first-round election. Within DISY, Neophytou promptly called for a political bureau meeting to determine which of the two candidates would receive the official endorsement of DISY. The public and media anticipated the bureau's endorsement of Christodoulides, given his high-profile status as a party member and former foreign minister in the Anastasiades government. Mavroyiannis had already secured the backing of the traditionally centre-right DISY's opponent, the left-wing AKEL. The DISY political bureau took an unexpected decision, however. It did not officially endorse any of the candidates and advocated for a 'vote at will' for its members.

Neophytou's electoral defeat and the decision to adopt a neutral position in the second round triggered a significant divide within DISY. Supporters of the outgoing president, Nicos Anastasiades, openly accused Neophytou of mishandling the situation by not endorsing Christodoulides for the second round of the election. Conversely, Neophytou and his allies accused members of the Anastasiades government of working for Christodoulides' campaign and deliberately sabotaging the DISY candidate's chances of success. Despite the party's official stance of neutrality between the two candidates, certain members of the Anastasiades administration openly endorsed either of the two. For instance, Minister of Education Prodromos Prodromou and Minister of Agriculture Kostas Kadis supported Christodoulides, while Minister of Foreign Affairs Ioannis Kassoulides, Finance Minister Konstantinos Petridis, and Katie Clerides, daughter of DISY founder Glafkos Clerides, backed Mavroyiannis. Neophytou was asked about his preferred candidate for the second round and replied that he would not cast a blank ballot, but nor would he vote for a defector. This statement was interpreted as an implicit endorsement of Mavroyiannis. This remark further fuelled internal strife within DISY, with many perceiving it as a violation of the political bureau's decision to recommend a 'vote at will' (Triga & Ioannidis 2023).

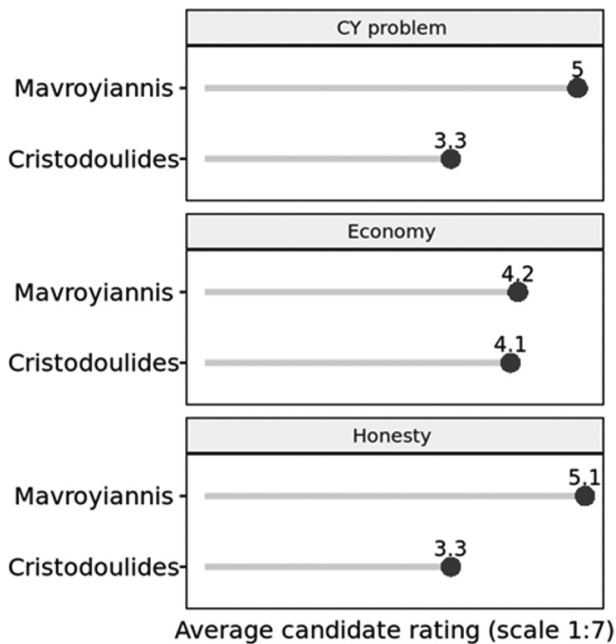
### *Second round results*

The second round of the 2023 presidential election resulted in Nikos Christodoulides becoming the eighth president of the Republic of Cyprus, winning 51.97 per cent of the vote against 48.03 per cent for Andreas Mavroyiannis. To better understand voting behaviour dynamics in the second round, we can look again at [Figure 4](#). The ideological map based on the first-round data depicts a relatively coherent ideological voter space. It suggests that the supporters of the two candidates that did not make it to the second round, i.e. Neophytou and Christou, and who together accounted for one-third of the vote share in the first round, had a very straightforward ideological choice for transferring their votes in the second round. Following a proximity theory of voting (Downs 1957), Christodoulides was the most proximate candidate in the

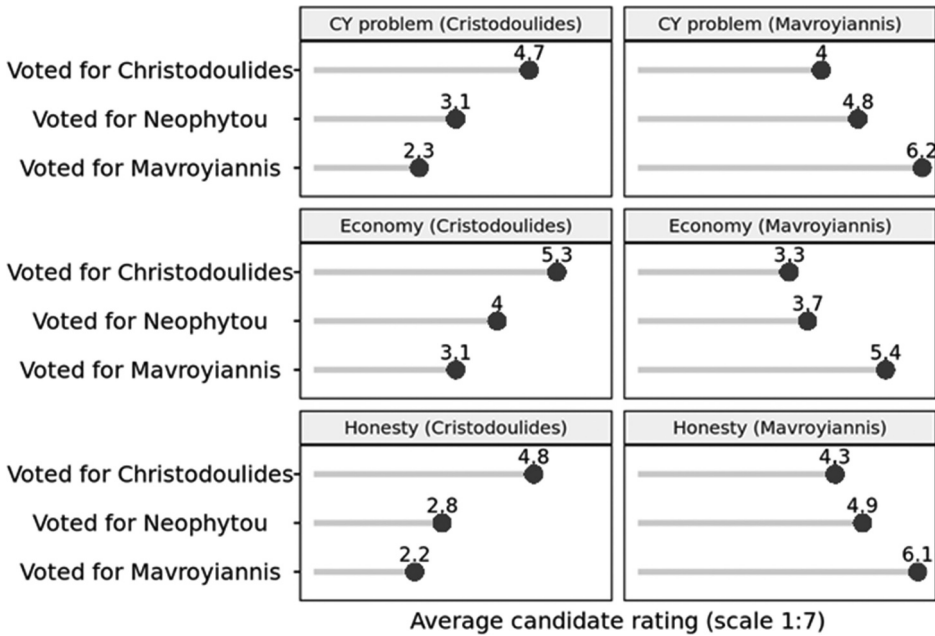
ideological space for these two voter groups. But the narrowness of Christodoulides victory -only fifteen thousand votes separating the two- points to significant support for Mavroyiannis in the second round from Neophytou and DISY supporters.

One possible explanation can be related to the phenomenon of ‘governmental fatigue’. Christodoulides both symbolically and rhetorically in his statements made no critiques of Anastasiades himself or his government. On the contrary, he systematically praised the government in which he participated. On the other side, the incumbent Nicos Anastasiades openly supported Christodoulides as his preferred choice. Inevitably this made him another version of the incumbent. Within the overall climate of disillusionment and disengagement from the political process, voters may have turned their back to him considering him as part of the corrupted status quo and the ineffective system of governance. As an alternative they turned to Mavroyiannis hoping for a change. To get further insight into this dynamic, we turn to data on candidate evaluations that was collected during the second round from the VAA.

Second-round voters were asked to rate Christodoulides and Mavroyiannis on three dimensions: (i) general honesty/trustworthiness; (ii) competence to run the economy and (iii) competence to manage the Cyprus problem. Measurement was on a seven-point rating scale ranging from: 1 = ‘Not at all’ through to 7 = ‘Totally honest’ or ‘Totally competent’. [Figures 6 and 7](#) show how



**Figure 6.** Average ratings of Christodoulides and Mavroyiannis in the second round by voters supporting the three main candidates in the first round. *Source:* Data compiled and elaborated by the authors from Choose4Cyprus 2023 (2nd round).



**Figure 7.** How supporters of the main candidates in round 1, rate the two final round candidates. *Source:* Data compiled and elaborated by the authors from Choose4Cyprus 2023 (2nd round).

voters who backed the three leading candidates in the first round, rated Christodoulides and Mavroyiannis on the three dimensions of honesty and competence.

It is important to bear in mind that these three groups of voters accounted for almost 90 per cent of the vote share in the first round. The data is thus highly revealing of candidate perceptions among voters. A distinctive picture emerges in Figure 6 with Mavroyiannis rated as significantly more competent on managing the Cyprus problem and in terms of general honesty/trustworthiness than Christodoulides. In terms of competence to manage the economy, the mean rating of the two candidates by this combined voter group is roughly the same. Even if these mean ratings are somewhat exaggerated by the very high ratings enjoyed by Mavroyiannis from his supporters, they nonetheless reveal important aspects of how the two candidates were perceived by the electorate.

In Figure 7 the mean ratings of the two candidates in the run-off are disaggregated for the three groups of supporters. They provide more nuance on the candidate ratings. Thus, we see that even Christodoulides voters rated Mavroyiannis very highly on the Cyprus problem, not far behind their own candidate. The Neophytou voters rated Mavroyiannis significantly higher on this dimension, almost two points out of a seven-point scale. A similar picture emerges on the honesty scale with Christodoulides supporters rating their

candidate only very slightly above Mavroyiannis, whereas Neophytou supporters rate Mavroyiannis by over two points -approximately 30 percentage points higher than Christodoulides.

Where Mavroyiannis' ratings drop is with regard to the economic management scale. Not surprisingly, both Christodoulides and Mavroyiannis supporters rate their candidate equally highly. For Neophytou supporters this is the only indicator where Christodoulides enjoys a higher rating than Mavroyiannis. What this data suggests is that Mavroyiannis was generally seen as a trustworthy and competent candidate. This made him a palatable candidate for some of the disillusioned DISY voters that felt betrayed by Christodoulides and viewed him as costing their party the presidency. It would be hard for many DISY voters, who in their narrative hold the AKEL-backed presidency of 2008–2013 largely responsible for the economic crisis in Cyprus, to back a presidential candidate supported by AKEL. Given the ideological gaps and the association of Mavroyiannis with their arch-rival party, it is striking that a significant portion of DISY voters backed Mavroyiannis. Ultimately the numbers fell short, which was aided by the absence of an efficient campaign by Mavroyiannis before the second round but produced an unexpectedly close run-off election. In the end, as revealed in [Figure 4](#), the ideological centre (and status quo) prevailed.

### *The aftermath*

In terms of the immediate electoral aftermath, the case of Mavroyiannis was most straightforward among the three main contenders. He declared the end of his political ambitions on the night of the electoral defeat. For AKEL, the party that supported his candidacy, the result was largely seen as a victory due to the narrowness of the election result. Nonetheless, there is still notable criticism within the party that it has, for the third consecutive term, failed to form part of the government. Moreover, despite performing better in the presidential election than in the parliamentary elections, AKEL remains uncertain about its ability to recover from its ongoing decline in membership. While party members have not yet raised serious concerns about leadership change, discussions about intra-party modernisation and a potential move towards the centre remain at the forefront of party discussions.

In contrast to AKEL, the climate within Cyprus' largest party, DISY, is less calm. Neophytou successfully promoted an intra-party election to select a new party leader within a month. He also revealed his intention to stand for the party leadership position. Two other individuals also declared their candidacy: Dimitris Demetriou, the party spokesman and Nicosia MP, who is a close associate of Neophytou, and Harris Georgiades, the current deputy president of DISY and former finance minister of the first Anastasiades government. Yet in an unexpected move, Annita Demetriou, the current president of the Parliament, announced her candidacy just before the deadline. Given Annita Demetriou's popularity, Neophytou and Georgiades withdrew their candidacies. On

March 11, Annita Demetriou convincingly beat her sole opponent, Dimitris Demetriou, to win the party leadership and herald a new era for DISY.

For the rest of the main parties, namely DIKO and DIPA, the victory of Christodoulides created a euphoric moment. Similarly, for EDEK, the electoral result is considered to have strengthened the position of the party's president, Marinos Sizopoulos, who had faced challenges and legal disputes involving party members and officials over the past year.

Turning to the new president, on February 27 he announced the much-anticipated formation of the new government. During the pre-election period, Nikos Christodoulides outlined five conditions that he promised to adhere to in forming his cabinet if he were elected based on what he used to call a 'government of wide acceptance'. These conditions included gender parity at 50–50, no appointments of individuals who had previously served in cabinets, no appointments of individuals who were members of party leadership, a low average age for the cabinet, and the appointments would not be influenced by the parties that supported his candidacy.

It quickly transpired that the new government does not fulfil any of these conditions. Most of his cabinet members are men, two critical ministries – Finance and Interior Affairs – were assigned to politicians who served in previous cabinets, and politicians from party leaderships were appointed, including the deputy chairman of the Solidarity Movement and the spokeswoman of EDEK. The average age of the cabinet is not significantly lower than previous cabinets, and the composition of the cabinet was the result of intense negotiations and conflicts between the parties that supported Christodoulides' candidacy (Hatzistylianou 2023). The deviation from pre-electoral promises did not come as a surprise to many and highlights the gap between the expectations of the electorate, who voted for Christodoulides hoping for a non-partisan and technocratic approach that transcends party identities, and the political elites that are not yet ready to respond to such demands.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of the election results highlights two significant interconnected trends. Firstly, there is a noticeable lack of consistency in the ideological stance of the electorate, a phenomenon already identified as party dealignment in recent elections (Katsourides 2016; Charalambous & Ioannou 2017; Triga 2017; Triga, Mendez & Djouvas 2019; Ellinas & Katsourides 2021). Parties played a limited role in the campaign, partly due to the growing apathy and detachment of voters towards them. This has prompted parties to support independent candidates as an alternative means to access power.

The decline in party identities became evident through a substantial number of DISY voters supporting Mavroyiannis in the second round. Particularly during this phase, the diminishing significance of ideology played a pivotal role since voters, in their final electoral decision, prioritised issue-voting and qualities like



honesty and pragmatic problem-solving over rigid ideological adherence. Such phenomena mark the onset of an era of 'post-ideology' (Mouffe 2005). Notably, one of the issues that took centre stage in the political debates of the second round was the Cyprus problem, echoing a similar dynamic observed in the previous presidential elections (2018). This emphasises that the Cyprus problem continues to be a salient issue on the classic cultural axis of the Cyprus political map that divides voters.

Observing the campaign and final outcome, Christodoulides recognised early on the diminishing role of ideology. He adopted and promoted a narrative emphasising efficiency, cooperation, and compromise rather than ideological posturing. This narrative resonated with a heterogeneous ideological electorate, evident in the incongruence between his voters' positions on the ideological map and their spanning both axes of the political spectrum. It was indeed this exact point at which critics targeted Christodoulides, for being vague on controversial issues, like the Cyprus problem, and avoiding clearer stances on debated topics such as LGBTQ+ community rights.

The implications of this fluidity and inconsistency in voter ideological positions for Cyprus' political future are uncertain but potentially perilous. One risk is a lack of coherent policy-making and a preference for compromise over effective solutions (Mouffe 2005). This was exemplified by the challenges in forming the new government under the new President, as mentioned earlier. Another danger is increased political apathy and disengagement from issues requiring fundamental societal change. Given existing political apathy and distrust in Cyprus, such a trend could be highly detrimental.

The second notable trend recorded in the recent presidential elections is a convergence of the candidates' positions towards the centre of the political map of Cyprus. The three most popular candidates, Christodoulides, Averof and Mavroyiannis shared many positions on a series of crucial issues regardless of their respective parties' ideologies that were supporting them. The shift towards the centre signifies the adoption of more moderate, less divisive policies and a rhetoric that promotes collaboration across party lines. Apart from the obvious idea behind convergence to the centre which is to broaden the appeal to voters and gain an electoral advantage (Laver 2011), it can also allow for adaptability in response to changing political dynamics. In the end, it was Christodoulides who most masterfully exemplified this dynamic.

In general, voters base their decisions on a combination of ideological alignment, policy preferences, and perceptions of candidate competence and integrity. Regarding ideological alignment and policy preferences, the analysis for the latest Presidential elections in the RoC revealed that the winning candidate garnered a diverse electorate, reflecting the varied ideologies of supporting parties. While this signals a lack of ideological consistency, it also poses a challenge in bridging political differences and managing expectations. Regarding competence, practical testing is yet to occur. Christodoulides'

thorough campaign preparation months before the elections seemed to resonate with voters, despite occasional missteps by his campaign team. Whether competence will be evident post-election, especially in dealing with crucial issues like creating a new opportunity structure for a potential solution to the Cyprus problem and other significant matters such as the economy, immigration, and Cyprus' relations with Russia remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. The Cyprus problem refers to the ongoing conflict in Cyprus, which remains divided between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. The conflict has its roots in the complex political and territorial disputes on the island and remained unresolved since the 1974 Turkish invasion. The discussion surrounding the resolution plan for the Cyprus problem is a major and contentious debate in Cypriot politics. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts, a comprehensive settlement has yet to be achieved.
2. Crans Montana (a resort town in the Swiss Alps) was the venue for the last major round of negotiations in 2017, aimed at resolving the Cyprus problem. These talks were attended by the leaders of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, as well as representatives of Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom. The United Nations facilitated the negotiations aimed at ending the decades-long division of the island. However, these talks ended without agreement, marking another setback in the long-standing efforts to reunify Cyprus.
3. The results of Green's intra-party nomination election were as follows: Mavroyiannis received 41 per cent, Christodoulides 25 per cent, Demetriades 16 per cent, Colocassides 16 per cent, and Blank two per cent. These results indicate that a majority of the party's members supported the two left-wing candidates, Mavroyiannis and Demetriades, who together garnered 66 per cent of the votes.
4. While the VAA questionnaire contained all salient issues that were discussed during the campaign, the issue of corruption, one of the governance sub-themes, could not be included. This is because corruption is a valence issue, i.e. no one is in favour of more corruption, and is therefore ill-suited as a VAA item (Gemenis 2013). Another governance issue, this one related to institutional checks and balances could be used but did not produce any substantive differences among the main candidates and was omitted.
5. Christou's approach differed from other candidates since, unlike them, he was not invited by Alpha TV to complete the VAA questionnaire on air. Instead, he submitted his responses to the Choose4Cyprus team via email, which largely confirmed the results of the expert survey.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Vasiliki Triga* (PhD, European University Institute) is an Associate Professor at the Cyprus University of Technology. Her current research lies in the field of Southern politics, elections and referendums, political communication and internet politics. She has published her

research in journals such as *Party Politics*, *JCMS*, *SESP*, and she is the co-author of the book *Referendums and the European Union: A Comparative Inquiry*, Cambridge University Press 2014.

**Nikandros Ioannidis** is a PhD candidate at Pompeu Fabra University granted with a scholarship of excellence from the Catalan government. His PhD research focuses on voter-party congruence, representation and public opinion. His research interests revolve around contemporary democracies, with a particular emphasis on Southern Europe, political participation, and public opinion.

**Constantinos Djouvas** (PhD, City University of New York) is an Assistant Professor at the Cyprus University of Technology. His research interests focus on Big Data and sociocultural phenomena. He has published in various journals such as the *International Journal on Artificial Intelligence Tools* and the *IEEE transactions on cybernetics*.

## ORCID

Vasiliki Triga  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6932-5389>

Nikandros Ioannidis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7182-6892>

Constantinos Djouvas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1215-7294>

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## Annex I: Computational analysis of the media articles

In this section, we describe the computational approach used to identify salient themes that appeared in thirteen national, online, news media during the official campaign period for the presidential elections, which spanned from 1 January 2023 until the second round of the elections. To ensure an unbiased dataset, we collected news articles from media outlets covering the entire spectrum of political ideologies. The list of the media outlets used is the following: Reporter, Philenews, Alphanews,

**Table 11.** Distribution of topics across the five weeks of the electoral campaign.

Weeks before the elections	Cyprus Problem	Economy	Foreign Affairs	Governance	Social Issues	Other
5	132	131	32	78	71	245
4	75	80	22	42	44	100
3	61	94	29	40	38	136
2 (First Round)	110	86	46	63	46	176
1 (Second Round)	243	59	36	63	42	463
Total	621	450	165	286	241	1120

Source: Corpus compiled by the authors from the 13 most popular online news outlets (see [Annex I](#) for details).

Signalive, Ant1, Dialogos, Omega, 24 h, Simerini, Offsite, Kathimerini, ToThemaOnline, Brief.

The first step in this process was the data collection. To accomplish this, we utilised web crawlers that implemented in-house, one for each media outlet. This resulted in a dataset of 18,777 unique entries, each one represented with the following: URL, section, title, main body, and publication date. Obviously, not all articles collected were relevant to the elections, so we cleaned the dataset before conducting any analysis. We identified the most important political actors in the presidential elections, which included all parliamentary parties (DISY, AKEL, DIKO, DIPA, EDEK, ELAM, and Greens) and the three main candidates: Nikos Christodoulides, Andreas Mavrogiannis and Averof Neophytou. We filtered out all articles that did not mention any of these actors, resulting in a clean dataset of 2,883 entries.

The next step was to classify the entries into different themes. After manually inspecting a random sample of 100 articles, we identified five main themes: Economy, Social Issues, The Cyprus Problem, Foreign Affairs, and Governance. We then used computational approaches to classify each article into one of these themes. By identifying the salience of each theme and how it changed over time, we were able to create a questionnaire for the Voting Advice Application (VAA), the *choose4cyprus*, that provided representative coverage of all salient themes discussed in the news media.

To classify the themes, we used a Few-Shot classifier called SetFit (Tunstall et al. 2022). This method involves fine-tuning a pre-trained model using a few examples. In our case, we used five examples for each of the five themes: Economy, Social Issues, The Cyprus Problem, Foreign Affairs, and Governance. We fine-tuned the model on text, but since news articles can be longer than the maximum length the classifier can handle, we tested three approaches to address this issue. These were: a) classifying a news article using its title, b) classifying a news article using the first 50 words of its body, and c) classifying a news article using its summary, which we derived using a text summarisation technique. The results showed that the third approach outperformed the other two, so we used article summaries to derive our results.

The classifier outputs the probability that an article belongs to each of the five themes. To assign an article to a theme, we set a threshold probability of 50%. If the probability of belonging to a theme was over 50%, the article was assigned to that theme. Otherwise, it was assigned to an 'Other' category, which was again controlled. We found that the salient themes identified in previous elections in Cyprus were also prominent in the 2023 presidential elections, validating our assumptions. We should note that the majority of articles assigned to the 'Other' category were related to different parties' issues and internal discussions. Between the first and second rounds, we observed a significant increase in this category due to many articles discussing the attempts of Christodoulides and Mavrogiannis to form a coalition with DISY and the discussions held in DISY on how to handle the results of the first round.

## Annex II: presentation of the Policy Issues included in the Choose4Cyprus

In this section, we present the items-questions that were included in the choose4cyprus Voting Advice Application (VAA) based on the media analysis that was presented in the main text and [Annex I](#) (in detail). In [Table 1](#) below, the first column shows all 22 questions included in the VAA, while the second column shows the category into which each question is loaded and used for the political map and candidate positioning.

**Table II1.** The Choose4Cyprus questions for the presidential election of 2023.

ID	Category	Item
1	Cultural	Environmental protection is more important than economic growth
2	Cultural	The Church should have a say in the appointment of the Minister of Education
3	Cultural	Immigrants make a positive contribution to the culture of Cyprus
4	Cultural	The installation of a fence along the Green Line is a solution to the immigration problem
5	Cultural	Same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples, including child adoption
6	Cultural	The use of cannabis for recreational purposes should be legalised
7	Cultural	Refugee benefits should be abolished if they are not working.
8	International Relations	The European Integration process should be accelerated
9	International Relations	Cyprus was right to vote in favour of the EU sanctions against Russia
10	International Relations	Cyprus should apply for NATO membership despite Turkey's veto
11	Economy	Privatisation of semi-public institutions leads to more efficient delivery of public services
12	Economy	The state should intervene as little as possible in the economy
13	Economy	The state should take steps to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor
14	Economy	Taxes on corporate profits should be increased
15	Economy	To address the housing problem, the state should institutionalise rent-for-purchase on state-owned land
16	Economy	Despite any irregularities that may have happened, the programme of granting Cypriot passports to investors was a sound economic measure
17	Cyprus Problem	After such a long separation, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots cannot live together again
18	Cyprus Problem	A bizonal bicomunal federation solution to the Cyprus problem will be viable
19	Cyprus Problem	The new President of the Republic should negotiate a resolution plan for the Cyprus problem following the talks in Crans-Montana
20	Cyprus Problem	The opening of more checkpoints is detrimental to the Greek Cypriot side
21	Cyprus Problem	A gas pipeline should be channelled through Turkey even before the Cyprus problem is resolved
22	Governance	Referendums are a proper way of making decisions on several issues (e.g. economy)

Source: Table elaborated by the authors from Choose4Cyprus 2023 (1st round).

**Annex III: presentation of the 40 pre-electoral opinion polls****Table III.1.** List of the 40 polls conducted before the first round of the 2023 presidential elections.

Date	Christodoulides	Neophytou	Mavroyiannis	Company
06/03/2022	36	11	–	IMR
20/03/2022	39	16	–	Symmetron
15/05/2022	42.3	16.2	13.7	IMR
19/05/2022	37	19	14	Prime
05/07/2022	33.1	11.9	12.5	RAI
07/07/2022	36.5	19.7	15.3	Prime
10/07/2022	34	15	13	Symmetron
14/07/2022	38.3	17.4	16.8	IMR
09/08/2022	36.7	12	11.9	RAI
22/09/2022	34	13.6	11.5	RAI
03/10/2022	31	19.3	16.5	Prime
06/10/2022	31	18	15	Metron
09/10/2022	32.3	17	15.3	Symmetron
12/10/2022	35.7	18.2	16.6	IMR
20/10/2022	35	14.8	14.4	RAI
27/10/2022	30.5	19	17	CMRC
29/10/2022	32	17	15	Pulse
04/11/2022	32.6	17.5	13.2	Noverna
07/11/2022	34	16	14	CYMAR
14/11/2022	30.8	19.6	17.3	Prime
17/11/2022	35.9	18.4	16.9	IMR
22/11/2022	30	20.5	17.5	CMRC
30/11/2022	34	16.6	16.5	RAI
09/12/2022	32	19	18	Metron
11/12/2022	33	16	15	CYMAR
11/12/2022	32	18	18	Symmetron
19/12/2022	29.5	17.2	15.9	Noverna
21/12/2022	32.4	21.9	21.7	Prime
22/12/2022	32.9	17.9	19.7	RAI
12/01/2023	29.5	21.5	20.5	CMRC
15/01/2023	32.4	20.5	21.1	Symmetron
20/01/2023	32	17	18	CYMAR
22/01/2023	25.4	20.2	18.6	Noverna
22/01/2023	32.9	21.5	21.9	Symmetron
26/01/2023	27	22	21	Metron
27/01/2023	30.3	22.8	22	Prime
27/01/2023	31.9	20.1	22.9	RAI
27/01/2023	26.5	22.5	21	CMRC
28/01/2023	32.7	21.4	22.5	IMR
28/01/2023	26.5	21.4	19.8	Noverna

Source: Table compiled by the authors from 40 published opinion polls.