

Social Polarization and Electoral Incentives for Islamist De-Moderation: Evidence from Turkish Parliamentary Debates

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Abstract

The prospect of religious parties capturing power raises fundamental questions about the fate of secular state institutions. A prominent argument holds that participation in competitive elections incentivizes religious parties to moderate and set aside anti-systemic goals in order to maximize votes. We argue that deep-seated social polarization along the religious–secular cleavage fundamentally alters electoral incentives: when polarization is high, intensifying competition shifts the vote-maximizing strategy from centrist, broad appeals to religion-based appeals. Using a unique corpus of legislative interventions from Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), we scale legislators’ positions on the religious–secular dimension. Exploiting cross-district variation in polarization and legislator-level differences in electoral vulnerability, we demonstrate that increasing exposure to electoral competition prompts representatives from polarized districts to adopt stronger Islamist appeals. Thus, the link between competitive elections and the incentives of religious party elites to accommodate secular institutional constraints is contingent upon societal polarization along the religious–secular divide.

Keywords: Islamist parties, inclusion-moderation thesis, polarization, the Justice and Development Party, large language models, text analysis

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1 Introduction

The prospect of religious parties capturing power raises fundamental questions about the fate of secular and democratic institutions across much of the developing world. These parties are typically viewed as anti-democratic forces that would exploit electoral processes to dismantle pluralist institutions, leading many to advocate for their exclusion as a means to safeguard democracy. Others, however, argue that their inclusion in democratic processes would eventually encourage their moderation.¹

Whether participation in pluralist institutions encourages previously excluded groups to temper their ideological commitments has been a central concern since studies of radical parties in the first wave of democratization. Analyzing early European socialist parties, Michels,² for example, argues that the drive to scale up for electoral competition compelled them to establish bureaucratic institutions, ultimately reorienting their activities away from revolutionary aims. Research on third-wave democracies shows many radical parties softening their stances to reconcile with existing political regimes and attract votes.³ Examining Christian democratic parties in Western Europe, Kalyvas⁴ demonstrates that electoral incentives and the imperative of political survival drove these parties to embrace more moderate positions, despite their initial resistance to democratic and liberal principles. Taken together, these works underpin the inclusion-moderation hypothesis: participation in electoral politics incentivizes radical parties to adopt more moderate stances to broaden their electoral appeal.

Building on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, scholars examining Islamist parties examine whether these movements follow similar patterns of moderation or diverge due to unique ideological and contextual factors. Some studies support the view that incentives to appeal to a broad electorate drive moderation.⁵ Others, however, argue that factors such as state repression,⁶ interactions with secularist parties,⁷ or exposure to secular cultures are key drivers of moderation.⁸

The present paper focuses on the electoral drivers of (de-)moderation. We make two main contributions. Our first contribution is theoretical. We argue that the level of social polarization along the religious-secular dimension is a crucial intervening factor in electoral accounts of moderation through inclusion. Conventional accounts implicitly assume a unimodal distribution of voter preferences, an assumption that often breaks down in highly polarized societies.⁹ When polarization is low, elites are motivated to gravitate toward the median voter to gain broader support. Since centrist positions appeal to a wider electorate, the electoral benefits of moderation are likely to outweigh its costs, making it a promising electoral strategy. In highly polarized contexts, by contrast, party elites should face weaker incentives to cultivate broad, cross-cutting appeals. When political conflict is structured around a salient religious-secular divide, the electoral costs of moderation—in terms of alienating committed supporters and blurring partisan distinc-

tions—can outweigh the potential gains from attracting out-group voters. Under these conditions, elites are likely to double down on their core constituencies by emphasizing sharper, more radical positions rather than moderating their stance.

Our second contribution is empirical. Scholars typically study moderation on the group level by examining the collective positioning of political parties.¹⁰ By contrast, we build on prior research suggesting that theories of party moderation presuppose individual-level mechanisms¹¹ and examine the ideological positioning of individual party elites. This shift in focus allows us to more directly assess whether electoral competition drives changes in elite stances. While party-level accounts can show that parties as a whole moderate or de-moderate, such trajectories may reflect a combination of electoral incentives, leadership decisions, and national events, making causal attribution difficult. Our research design enables us to isolate the effect of electoral competition on ideological positioning.

Our argument is informed inductively by the Turkish case and deductively by the literature on social polarization. We provide evidence on the factors driving ideological positioning among political elites by examining one of the longest-ruling religious parties in the world: the Turkish Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). Scholars initially considered the AKP a case of moderation in the context of the larger Islamist movement in Turkey.¹² However, over time, the party increasingly embraced religiously charged discourse, representing one of the most striking cases of religious party de-moderation.¹³

To empirically test the role of electoral competition in the positioning of AKP elites, we leverage a unique dataset covering all legislators affiliated with the AKP in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) from 2002 to 2018. We develop a novel measurement strategy that builds on recent advances in computational scaling of political text with Large Language Models (LLMs) to locate legislators along the religious–secular dimension. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic measure of religious appeals in political speech. Methodologically, we exploit wide cross-district variation in polarization and differences in MPs’ electoral vulnerability to isolate the impact of competition.

Consistent evidence across alternative identification strategies shows that social polarization along the religious-secular dimension flips the logic of electoral incentives, with rising competition pushing elites toward more pronounced Islamist rhetoric. Specifically, findings demonstrate that legislators from highly polarized districts tend to rely more heavily on religious rhetoric when their seat is at risk due to increasing district-level competition. By contrast, electorally less vulnerable elites and those from less polarized districts show little inclination to amplify religiously based appeals.

2 Moderation and De-Moderation

Under what conditions are religious parties likely to moderate? This question has inspired a substantial body of literature at the intersection of party politics and social movement studies.¹⁴ European Catholic parties were at the center of scholarly debate well before the rise of contemporary studies on Islamist parties. Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Catholic parties' commitment to democratic politics remained tenuous at best. Their eventual moderation, therefore, played an important role in the consolidation of European democracies.¹⁵ Beyond religious parties, scholars have also examined the moderation of radical left-wing parties,¹⁶ both in the context of early twentieth-century Western European democratization¹⁷ and following Third Wave transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America.¹⁸

A key issue in the literature is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding moderation.¹⁹ Some scholars advance a substantive definition, equating moderation with the embrace of democratic or liberal values.²⁰ As Schwedler observes, “[m]oderation is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) tied to liberal notions of individual rights and democratic notions of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation.”²¹ We argue that such a substantive notion overlooks the contextual nature of moderation. We concur with the view that moderation cannot be solely defined in the abstract but must also be understood in relation to a specific political context.²² Because moderation fundamentally entails anti-systemic actors accepting prevailing social, economic, and political institutions,²³ it does not necessarily imply a commitment to universal democratic principles. After all, those institutions may themselves be undemocratic.²⁴ For example, Islamist parties in Tunisia's post-2011 democracy moderated by embracing electoral competition and constitutional constraints,²⁵ while Islamist movements in monarchical Morocco moderated by accepting the king's ultimate authority, reflecting each country's distinct political contexts rather than a universal standard of moderation.²⁶

Instead of linking moderation exclusively to universal democratic principles, we conceptualize it as a process through which anti-systemic actors come to operate within and, in principle, accept the norms and rules of the prevailing socio-political order. Such a contextual definition anchors moderation to the predominant political order, or what Somer refers to as the *political center*.²⁷ The notion of political center involves the combination of three country specific traits: (1) a political-institutional component, encompassing the values and interests of dominant state institutions and key actors within political society; (2) a social component, representing the preferences and values of the majority of citizens and influential civil society groups; and (3) an international component, shaped by the country's global alliances and its position in the international political and economic order. Moderation, in this view, refers to the process by which an initially anti-systemic actor adheres to these three specific configurations of a country's political center.

2.1 Electoral Incentives for (De-)Moderation

The inclusion-moderation hypothesis suggests that participation in electoral politics creates incentives for moderation. This hypothesis ultimately goes back to Robert Michels’s work on radical socialist parties of the early 20th century. He argues that the pursuit of vote maximization, along with organizational imperatives, transformed these parties from mass-based radical actors into elite-led vote maximizers acting within the confines of the existing order.²⁸ Versions of this hypothesis have been applied to a variety of radical religious parties as well, including radical Jewish parties in Israel,²⁹ Catholic parties in Europe,³⁰ as well as Islamist parties across the Muslim world.³¹

Different causal mechanisms have been proposed to link moderation to inclusion.³² Most prominently, models of moderation by inclusion rely on what Berman calls the Downsian mechanism,³³ or the “assumption that vote-maximization entails developing ‘centrist’ political platforms rather than radical platforms that have little public appeal”.³⁴ This mechanism is fundamentally driven by electoral dynamics and, in particular, the median voter theorem.³⁵ Other scholars, however, have argued that the relationship between inclusion and moderation is driven by different causal mechanisms, including (the threat of) political exclusion. Reflecting on the experience of European (left-wing) radical parties, for example, Berman emphasized the importance of sanctioning mechanisms in triggering the moderation of these forces.³⁶ In the case of the moderation of the Islamist movement in Turkey and elsewhere, scholars have also pointed to experiences with state repression to explain long-term trends of moderation.³⁷

Rather than attempting to adjudicate among all possible mechanisms, our goal is to systematically test the electoral mechanism that lies at the heart of Downsian models of moderation. In doing so, we depart from prior research by studying moderation at the individual level. While the dynamics of (de-)moderation are frequently studied at the party level, the mechanisms by which moderation is thought to occur play out on the individual level.³⁸ Party-level accounts can document whether parties moderate or de-moderate, but they cannot fully isolate whether it is electoral competition driving the shift. Observed trajectories may simultaneously reflect electoral incentives, leadership decisions, or national events, making causal attribution difficult.

Within parties, however, exposure to electoral competition differs due to variation in district characteristics and the degree to which an elite’s seat is at risk. As research demonstrates, to maximize votes, candidates often adapt national-level party positions to their local competitive context, at times diverging from the party line.³⁹ If electoral competition shapes ideological positioning, we should observe elites facing stronger electoral competition to position themselves differently than their co-partisans in safer seats, even as they share the same party leadership, organizational structure, and national political environment.

2.2 Social Polarization and the Divergent Impact of Electoral Competition

Building on the median voter theorem, we develop a simple framework to explain how electoral incentives drive (de-)moderation. We argue that the assumption of a centripetal dynamic inherent in the Downsian accounts of religious party moderation should be adjusted to account for the nature of electoral competition. In contexts of low social polarization, where voter preferences cluster in the political center, electoral competition should incentivize elites to adopt more centrist positions to appeal to a broader electorate. Where polarization is high, on the other hand, electoral competition can have centrifugal effects.⁴⁰

Central to our argument is the conceptual distinction between social polarization and moderation. While both concepts involve ideological positioning, they capture distinct phenomena. Moderation refers to elite strategic positioning: whether individual elites adopt radical or centrist stances relative to their country's political center. Social polarization, by contrast, refers to the structure of the electorate: the extent to which voter preferences cluster into distinct, non-overlapping camps along the religious-secular dimension. Highly polarized contexts are characterized by bimodal distributions, with voters clustering into distinct camps that exhibit minimal overlapping preferences. Low polarization contexts, by contrast, feature unimodal distributions where voters are not sharply divided into distinct camps.⁴¹

Given this distinction, we treat social polarization as a contextual variable that conditions the relationship between electoral competition and elite (de)moderation. While we recognize the likely reciprocal relationship between elite positioning and social polarization, voters do not follow elites unconditionally.⁴² Theoretically, we retain the core Downsian logic, in which elites respond to voter preferences in pursuit of vote maximization. Elite positioning, in this framework, represents a strategic response to electoral structure rather than an expression of fixed ideological commitments.

We assume that political elites, whether religious or not, are primarily motivated by the pursuit of political power, with securing political office as their central objective. Achieving this goal hinges on their ability to attract votes, which serves as the primary mechanism for gaining and retaining political influence in both democracies and competitive autocracies. To secure electoral success, parties must adopt political platforms that effectively mobilize a sufficient number of voters. For party leadership, this typically entails selecting candidates whose profiles align with the preferences and interests of key constituencies, thereby strengthening the party's electoral appeal in those districts. For individual elites, this often requires persuading party leadership that their platform not only reflects shared priorities but also positions them as the most effective candidates to maximize the party's vote share in each constituency. Thus, Islamist elites' ideological

positioning is conditioned not only by voter preferences but also by the need to signal to the party leadership that they are the most capable candidates.

While national party leadership constrains their ideological positioning, we argue that variation in local electoral dynamics creates divergent incentives for individual elites. Because constituencies vary in their preferences, the optimal political platform must be calibrated to local electoral conditions. A centrist stance may be advantageous in some electoral settings, but risky in others. In some constituencies, it can widen Islamists' appeal, whereas in others it may undermine their standing among voters and within the party.

We argue that the key factor shaping whether moderation constitutes an electorally viable strategy across these varying local contexts is social polarization along the secularist–religious dimension. In less polarized contexts, the benefits of moderation often outweigh its costs. Consistent with the classical median voter theorem,⁴³ heightened competition in these contexts may reward platforms capable of appealing beyond a party's core constituency. Because non-centrist positions risk party elites ceding pivotal voters to their rivals, moderation often becomes a strategic necessity.

By contrast, in highly polarized settings, moderation is a much less viable strategy. In such contexts, social groups often have incompatible policy objectives, making politics a zero-sum game.⁴⁴ Where partisan identities are deeply entrenched, party elites are incentivized to move toward the center of gravity within their own camp, anticipating little opportunity to attract out-group voters.⁴⁵ Departing from core ideological commitments risks alienating loyal supporters, who may not only abstain from voting but also defect to challengers that more closely align with their preferences.⁴⁶ Consequently, social polarization can incentivize Islamist party elites to reinforce their ideological identity and prioritize base mobilization over outreach to secularist voters.

In summary, we expect electoral competition to yield divergent incentives as a function of social polarization: in less polarized contexts, where out-group appeals create opportunities for vote expansion at low electoral cost, competition may encourage moderation; in high polarization settings, however, we expect competition to create centrifugal dynamics, pushing elites to sharpen identity appeals instead of courting out-group voters.

3 Islamist De-Moderation in the Case of Turkey's AKP

Emerging from the anti-systemic National Outlook movement, which opposed the foundational principles of Turkey's semi-democratic, secular-republican order, the AKP initially pursued a conciliatory approach toward the secularist regime. Branding itself as a conservative party, it sought to unite Islamist and center-right factions under the banner

of “conservative democracy”. Unlike its Islamist predecessors, the AKP avoided explicit references to Islam in its platform, instead emphasizing universal democratic values, accepting secularism as a fundamental pillar of democracy, and advocating stronger ties with the West.⁴⁷

While the party’s leadership, ideology, and organizational structure remained deeply rooted in the National Outlook tradition, it also incorporated elites from diverse political backgrounds, as reflected in its party lists, which included figures from the center-left and pro-secular camp.⁴⁸ During its first two terms in office (2002–2011), the AKP reinforced its moderate and progressive image by including key non-Islamist, liberal, and center-left figures among both its parliamentary ranks and government appointments. These individuals played a crucial role in broadening the party’s appeal beyond its traditional Islamist base, allowing it to attract support from diverse constituencies.⁴⁹ This strategic inclusivity and the accompanying moderation helped the party to secure parliamentary majorities in the 2002, 2007, and 2011 general elections.

Despite the AKP leadership’s efforts to distance itself from its Islamist predecessors, secularist regime elites continued to perceive the party as an existential threat to the secular order. This underlying tension escalated into a full-blown confrontation in 2007 when the secularist opposition attempted to block the AKP’s presidential bid. During the party’s early years in power, the presidency served as a key safeguard of the secular-republican regime, frequently vetoing government-backed laws and appointments of religious-conservative figures to state institutions. Viewing the presidential contest as a decisive battle for the republic’s secular foundations, secularist forces framed the AKP’s rise as a direct challenge to the country’s long-standing secular-republican values. Mass rallies were orchestrated to mobilize opposition, while in an unprecedented and provocative move, the military issued an online memorandum warning the AKP to uphold the secular principles of the republic. Amid this escalating crisis, the chief public prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals filed a lawsuit against the party, petitioning the Constitutional Court to dissolve it on the grounds that it had become a focal point of anti-secular activities. This confrontation invoked the country’s formative religious-secular divide, fueling societal polarization.⁵⁰

The AKP ultimately triumphed in this power struggle, harnessing a series of resounding electoral victories, most notably in 2011, alongside strategic constitutional reforms to systematically erode the influence of the secularist establishment, particularly the military. This gradual but decisive shift enabled the party to entrench its supremacy at the political center, profoundly transforming Turkey’s institutional landscape and recalibrating the nation’s power dynamics.⁵¹

Having consolidated its dominance over the political center, the AKP gradually gravitated back toward the National Outlook tradition from which it had once sought to distance itself. As Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s leadership evolved into an increasingly per-

sonalized form of rule centered on his image as a pious and unwavering leader, the party increasingly relied on religious identity claims to differentiate itself from its secularist counterparts.⁵²

Contrary to the expectations of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, heightened competition, especially after the 2015 parliamentary elections, did not incentivize greater moderation. This is largely due to macro-political dynamics and deepening societal polarization along the religious-secular divide, which made cross-group appeals a less viable strategy to maintain and maximize political power.

While this shift is well-documented at the party level, substantial subnational variation in the AKP's electoral performance suggests that individual elites operate under distinct local and intra-party constraints. We expect these constraints to create diverging incentives to moderate at the individual level, as elites must navigate the competing pressures of party loyalty, electoral viability, and local political dynamics.

Consistent with the Downsian model, research focusing on local electoral dynamics demonstrates that in secularist-leaning districts, where the AKP's success depends on expanding its appeal beyond its core supporters, the party is more likely to signal moderation by recruiting local elites with centrist platforms.⁵³ By contrast, in non-competitive AKP strongholds, where electoral victory is virtually assured, party elites tend to have weaker incentives to moderate.⁵⁴ Thus, although national-level trends suggest that the AKP leadership de-moderated despite growing electoral competition, the party tends to tailor its profile in accordance with local electoral dynamics.

Yet even within the same constituency, party elites differ in their ideological commitments and electoral vulnerability. Turkey employs a party-list system in constituencies of various magnitudes, meaning that list rank significantly conditions an elite's exposure to electoral competition, and thus their electoral vulnerability. AKP candidates at the top of the party list are highly likely to secure parliamentary seats, while those ranked lower face greater electoral uncertainty, especially in competitive districts.⁵⁵ As a result, electoral pressures are particularly pronounced for party elites running on less favorable list positions.

We expect the individual-level variation in electoral vulnerability to interact with district-level polarization in shaping elites' strategic positioning. In low-polarization districts where competition is high, AKP elites should have incentives to moderate to attract swing voters. By contrast, in highly polarized districts, heightened competition should not necessarily lead to moderation, as entrenched partisan divisions limit the viability of cross-group appeals. Instead, in such contexts, elites should be more likely to adopt less centrist appeals to maintain the support of their core constituency and signal their electoral viability to party leadership, especially if they are electorally vulnerable.

4 Data and Research Design

To test our argument about the conditional effects of electoral competition on individual elite positioning, we analyze legislative behavior in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) across every session from 2002 to 2018. During this period, Turkey’s legislative branch has witnessed major debates as the AKP pursued constitutional reforms to weaken the secularist establishment and implemented various legislations, such as changes to the education system, that sought to expand the role of religion in public life.

As scholars of intra-party politics have demonstrated, legislative speeches provide important insights into individual elites’ ideological positioning.⁵⁶ Parliamentary debates present ample opportunities for legislators to signal their positions on specific issues to the party leadership through speech-making. While strong party discipline in Turkish politics prevents legislators from deviating from the party line, especially when voting on specific bills, legislative speech-making is subject to fewer constraints. As in parliaments elsewhere, legislative debates are rarely subject to formal penalties, even for those who deviate from expected discourse. Party elites often view floor debates as a strategic outlet to signal their positions to the party leadership.⁵⁷

Against this background, we draw on all floor speeches by AKP-affiliated members of parliament (MPs) from the 22nd to 26th legislative periods. This covers the period from the 2002 elections, which saw the AKP’s rise to power, up to the general elections of May 2018. We construct a text corpus encompassing over 35,000 interventions by 874 MPs. To accomplish this at scale, we developed automated text extraction procedures that accurately assign each floor speech to its corresponding MP.

4.1 Dependent Variable: Measuring Islamist (De-)Moderation in Legislative Speech

To measure legislators’ positions along the religious-secular dimension, we build on recent advances in computational scaling of political text using Large Language Models (LLMs).⁵⁸ To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to systematically measure Islamism in political speech. Existing research has measured support for Islamist positions in public opinion data⁵⁹ or has relied on roll-call data to derive positions that were interpreted as reflecting the Islamist/secular dimension,⁶⁰ but Islamist rhetoric has not been directly measured before. Our approach leverages the fact that (Turkish) Islamists employ a set of specific frames across various areas and policy fields.

Following prior research, we conceptualize the AKP’s ideology as religious populism that constructs a distinction between a faithful Muslim majority and secular Kemalist elites.⁶¹ Turkish Islamists employ what Gümüşçü terms “righteous majoritarianism,” positioning themselves as representatives of a faithful Muslim majority historically discrimi-

nated against by Kemalist state elites.⁶² Specifically, this discourse manifests through: (1) framing the AKP as champions of historically marginalized religious citizens, (2) invoking past state discrimination (headscarf bans, restrictions on religious education, military interventions), (3) portraying secularist institutions as obstacles to majority will, and (4) emphasizing Islamic values in social and political life.

Even after the AKP’s consolidation of power, the anti-elitist element of their ideological discourse remains prominent, and AKP MPs frequently evoke the recent past to reinforce the point. For example, in a debate on education in the Turkish parliament on 11 December 2011, one AKP MP recalled the consequences of the ‘post-modern coup’ of 28 February 1997 on the country’s universities with the following words:

Remember how those grand rectors, deans, and professors, who considered saluting in front of weapons, epaulets, and boots a form of dignity, were dressed in black gowns and made to march behind banners reading “The army is on duty!”? The primitive and barbaric treatment inflicted on tens of thousands of our young girls at the university gates, the persuasion rooms, inspections, investigations, surveillance, and expulsions were the realities that modern Turkey experienced yesterday.

This intervention recalls the 1997 coup and portrays Kemalist elites as violating the rights of the faithful majority. By doing so, it constructs a contrast between an ingroup representing the pious majority and an outgroup of secular elites. Such exclusionary rhetoric against those championing secularism as a republican value continues to feature in parliamentary debates.

In line with our conceptualization of moderation, we measure legislators’ rhetoric along three dimensions that collectively reflect the components of Turkey’s political center introduced earlier:⁶³ (1) political-institutional: rhetoric challenging tutelary institutions or portraying them as barriers to majority will; (2) social: discourse emphasizing Islamic values in education, gender relations, and social life while delegitimizing secular norms; (3) international: expressing solidarity with Muslim causes (e.g., Palestine, Muslim Brotherhood). The more an MP employs such rhetoric, the further they position themselves from the secular-republican center.

We implement this measurement using GPT-4o via the OpenAI API with structured prompts developed from hundreds of randomly selected speeches.⁶⁴ For each intervention, the model assigns +1 for each Islamist element and -1 for each secularist element it detects.⁶⁵ To enhance measurement reliability and account for inherent variability in LLM outputs, we generate 25 completions per input and average the scores. This averaging procedure reduces noise from individual completions, yielding more stable and reliable estimates. The result is a continuous score for each intervention, where positive values

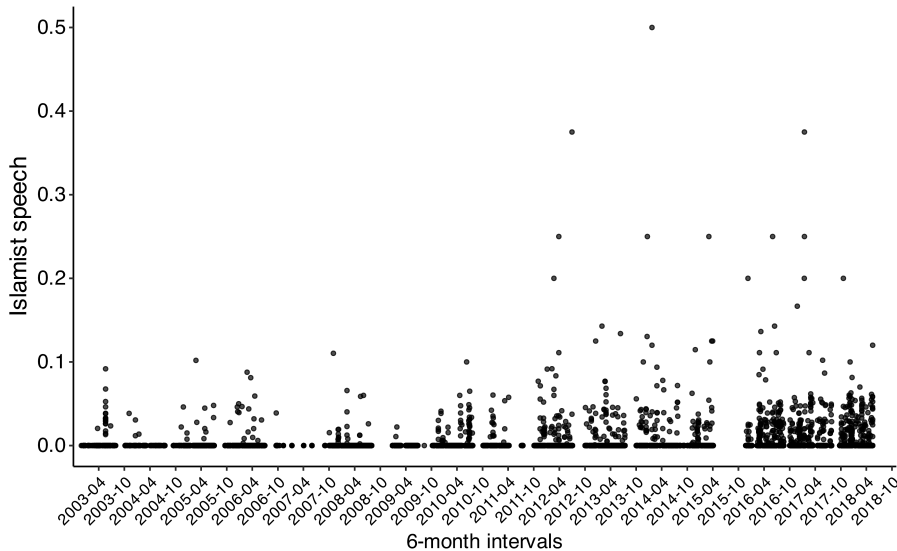


Figure 1: Increasing prevalence of Islamist rhetoric among AKP legislators, 2002–2018.

indicate greater use of Islamist rhetoric (and thus greater distance from the secular-republican center), while negative scores indicate more secularist positioning.

The distribution of Islamist rhetoric is heavily skewed. The most Islamist intervention makes around 21 references to Islamist tropes,⁶⁶ while the vast majority of speeches contain no content along the religious-secular dimension. This reflects the fact that many interventions are procedural and not all policy debates invite ideological positioning on religious-secular issues. Across the corpus, 2.3% of speeches contain Islamist rhetoric, while 4.7% contain any ideological content (Islamist or secularist) on this dimension.

To validate the measure, we had Turkish-speaking research assistants manually code 300 randomly selected speeches using the same rubric, achieving 91% agreement between human and LLM scores (Online Appendix). Figure 1 plots all speeches over time, with each dot representing an intervention’s Islamist score. Islamist rhetoric is relatively sparse during 2002-2007, when the AKP elites portrayed themselves as “conservative democrats.” Visible spikes align with specific flashpoints in religious-secular conflict, including the Constitutional Court case against the AKP in early 2008 and the 2012 education reform expanding religious schools. A marked increase in frequency and intensity of religiously charged rhetoric after 2015 coincides with the 26th parliament, during which Turkey experienced a coup attempt and adopted a presidential system through a controversial referendum. Taken together, the high agreement between human-coded and LLM-generated scores and the temporal alignment with known political events and the AKP’s documented trajectory lend credence to our measurement strategy.

4.2 Explanatory Variables

4.2.1 Individual Electoral Vulnerability

We measure individual-level exposure to electoral competition using MPs' list position relative to the last co-partisan elected from their district. While district competitiveness affects all co-partisans equally, individual MPs vary in their vulnerability to electoral outcomes based on their proximity to the electoral margin. In Turkey's closed party-list system, MPs ranked at the top of lists are insulated from electoral risk, while those whose list position approaches the last seat won are highly exposed to electoral dynamics, as a slight decline in party vote share could cost them their seat. We operationalize this as list position divided by the number of seats the AKP won in that district, using candidate lists from the Supreme Election Council or the Turkish Official Gazette.⁶⁷ This ratio ranges from low values for MPs ranked far above the margin to 1.0 for MPs holding the last seat won. Higher values indicate greater electoral vulnerability.

4.3 Social Polarization along the Religious-Secular Dimension

We operationalize district-level social polarization using the Dalton polarization index,⁶⁸ which combines party stances on the religious-secular dimension with district-level vote shares. We measure party positions using the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization Dataset (V-Party), the most extensive source on Turkish parties over time. The V-Party dataset rates parties on a continuous scale across election cycles, based on country-expert assessments of their positions on the religious-secular dimension. We merge V-Party's `v2parelig` variable with district-level electoral results from the Constituency Level Election Archive (CLEA).⁶⁹ The Dalton polarization index measures how much parties in a district vary around the mean position on the religious-secular dimension, with each party's district-level vote share weighting its contribution to the variance. This approximates the distribution of preferences in the electorate, where higher polarization indicates voters are divided between parties with divergent positions, while lower polarization indicates concentration of votes among ideologically similar parties.

Figure 2 visualizes the spatial and temporal distribution of social polarization across Turkey's provinces. While all districts experienced a sharp increase in polarization over time, the magnitude and trajectory of this change vary substantially across regions. Polarization has consistently been relatively higher in large metropolitan areas such as Istanbul and Ankara, where the electorate has long been divided between secular and religious-conservative constituencies. In line with recent survey-based evidence,⁷⁰ polarization that was once concentrated in central and eastern Anatolia has, in recent years, spilled over to the coastal regions of the Aegean and Mediterranean. This pattern indicates the diffusion of the religious-secular divide into areas that previously exhibited

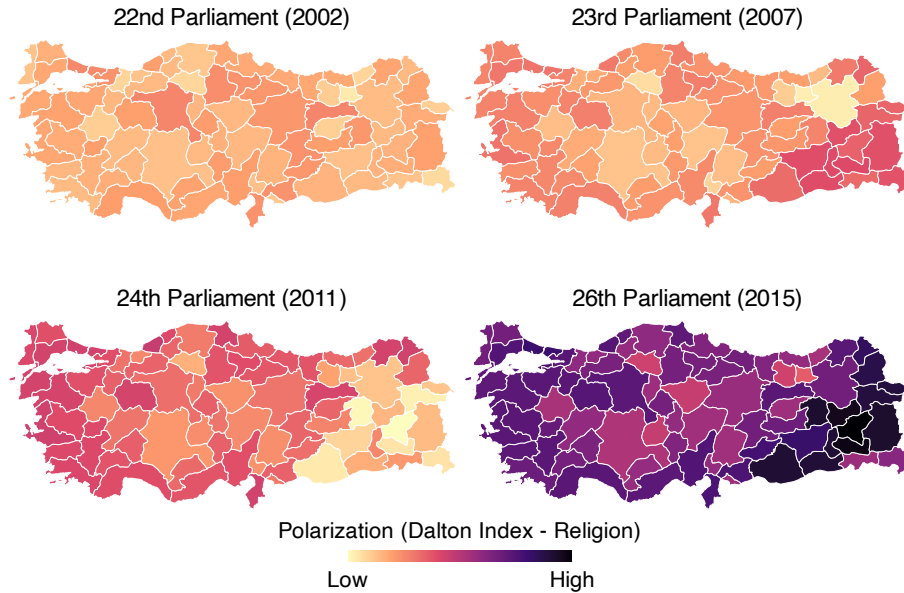


Figure 2: Rising social polarization along the religious-secular dimension.

more homogeneous voter preferences.

The most pronounced increases appear in southeastern Anatolia, where the electorate has become sharply split between pro-Kurdish secular parties (DTP, HDP) and the AKP. This divide results in a bipolar competition that intertwines religious-secular and ethnic cleavages. By contrast, Central Anatolian provinces such as Konya, Kayseri, and Yozgat have remained relatively less polarized throughout the period. In these conservative-leaning areas, competition occurs largely within the same ideological camp, producing little variation in voter preferences along the religious-secular dimension.

The substantial spatial and temporal variation in district-level polarization provides a basis for our individual-level analysis. It enables us to observe how elites facing electorates with differing degrees of preference homogeneity respond to electoral incentives. This contextual variation underpins our empirical test of how electoral competition shapes Islamist (de-)moderation.

4.4 Estimation Strategy

We employ two complementary identification strategies to estimate the effect of electoral vulnerability on Islamist rhetoric across levels of district-level social polarization.

Our first approach exploits within-district and within-legislative term variation in electoral vulnerability. We estimate two-part models to account for the excessive number of speeches containing no Islamist content. The first stage predicts whether an MP uses any Islamist rhetoric (extensive margin) with a logit regression. The second stage models the intensity of Islamist content among speeches containing such content (intensive margin) using a Gamma regression with a log link. This estimation approach appropriately handles zero-inflation in our data and the continuous distribution of intensity among positive cases.

We fit two-part models with district-by-term fixed effects (interactive fixed effects) and fixed effects for legislative sessions. The district-by-term fixed effects absorb all time-invariant characteristics of electoral districts within a legislative period. Session fixed effects control for common shocks affecting all MPs on a given day. We include an interaction term for electoral vulnerability and district polarization to test whether the effect of vulnerability varies with different levels of polarization. We also control for MP-level characteristics (party executive board and cabinet membership, legislative experience, profession, legislative leadership position, Arabic language knowledge, gender, and age) and employ two-way clustered standard errors to allow for within-MP error correlation and potential spillover of Islamist speech within sessions.

Although our interactive fixed effects design provides identification through within-district comparisons, it cannot address three dynamic sources of confounding. First, a legislator’s current electoral vulnerability may be influenced by past rhetorical choices if party leadership adjusts list positions based on prior behavior. Second, past rhetoric may drive current mass polarization, creating an elite-mass feedback loop that would contaminate the vulnerability-polarization interaction. Third, and more generally, some time-varying confounders, such as ministerial or party leadership appointments, may both result from past rhetoric and affect current rhetoric and vulnerability. Because these variables lie on the causal pathway from past to current rhetoric, controlling for them would block part of our effect of interest, while omitting them would induce bias.

To address these potential problems, we estimate marginal structural models (MSMs) and compute inverse probability of treatment weights using the covariate balancing generalized propensity score. We specify two treatment models. The first adjusts for the potential feedback between past rhetoric and current electoral vulnerability by predicting an MP’s electoral vulnerability in term t from lagged vulnerability, lagged individual rhetoric (any use and intensity), lagged district polarization, lagged district AKP vote share, MP characteristics (time-invariant and time-varying, including ministerial and party posts), and district fixed effects. The second model predicts district-level polarization in term t as a function of lagged polarization, lagged average Islamist rhetoric among the district’s MPs (both the mean share of speech with Islamist rhetoric and the mean intensity), and lagged district AKP vote share. By including lagged district rhetoric in

this model, we aim to block elite-mass feedback where past collective elite positioning drove current mass polarization.

From these treatment models, we compute joint stabilized inverse probability weights that create a pseudo-population in which: (1) vulnerability is independent of past individual rhetoric and other time-varying confounders, and (2) district polarization is independent of past aggregate legislator rhetoric and other district-level confounders. We then re-estimate the same two-part models as in our fixed effects approach, but with weighting observations by joint weights. We can interpret the weighted estimates as causal effects under the assumption that we observe all common time-varying causes of vulnerability, polarization, and Islamist rhetoric.⁷¹ This assumption is untestable, but the balance diagnostics indicate that the weights significantly reduce the strong persistence in vulnerability and polarization, and further weaken the already small association between a lawmaker’s Islamist rhetoric, their subsequent vulnerability, and polarization levels.

5 Results

Figure 3 presents our main results from two-part models estimated across two complementary identification strategies. Panels 1 and 2 exploit within-district and within-term variation using district-by-term fixed effects and session-day fixed effects, while panels 3 and 4 employ marginal structural models with inverse probability weighting to address potential dynamic confounding. For each strategy, we report both extensive margin estimates (the likelihood of Islamist speech-making) and intensive margin estimates (the intensity conditional on using such rhetoric).

We begin with the extensive margin to establish our baseline specification, before turning to theoretically more consequential intensive margin results. On the extensive margin, we find no evidence that electoral vulnerability conditions MPs’ selection into Islamist speech-making. The interaction term in Panel 1 is negligible and insignificant (0.002, SE = 0.002), and this null finding is corroborated by the MSM results in Panel 3 (0.127 [0.087, 0.341]). However, the 90% confidence intervals around the estimate of MP vulnerability exclude zero (0.219 [0.020, 0.418]), indicating that at mean levels of district polarization, more vulnerable MPs are somewhat more likely to employ Islamist rhetoric. The null interaction effect indicates that while individual traits predict Islamist speech-making, electoral vulnerability and district polarization do not shape whether vulnerable MPs select into such rhetoric.

The theoretically consequential results emerge on the intensive margin. Examining the degree to which MPs saturate their speeches with Islamist rhetoric, the vulnerability-polarization interaction consistently yields a substantial and statistically significant effect in both the fixed effects model (0.151 [0.018, 0.284], Panel 2) and the marginal structural model (0.127 [0.011, 0.243], Panel 4).

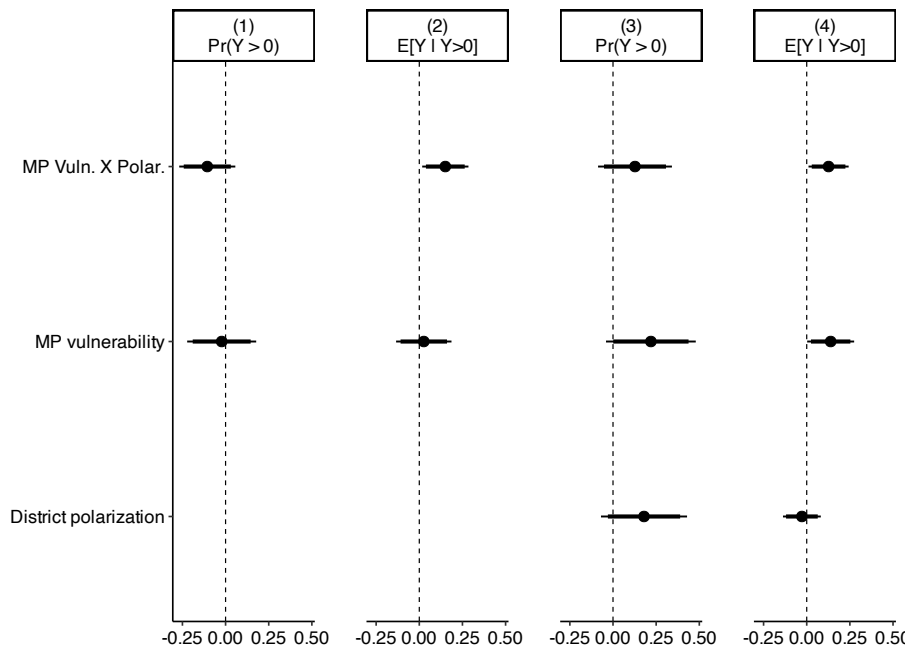


Figure 3: Electorally vulnerable MPs in polarized districts adopt more extreme Islamist positions in their parliamentary speeches.

Note: Point estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals from two-part models. The inner bands represent 95% confidence intervals, and the outer bands represent 90% intervals. Panels (1) and (3) display first-stage estimates predicting the likelihood of Islamist speech-making, $Pr(Y > 0)$, while panels (2) and (4) present second-stage estimates for the intensity of Islamist speech among nonzero cases ($E[Y | Y > 0]$).

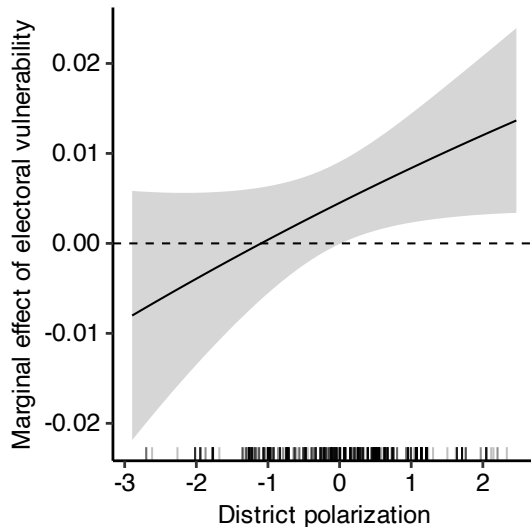


Figure 4: Marginal effect of MP electoral vulnerability on Islamist speech-making across levels of district polarization.

Note: The figure plots marginal effects from the second stage of the marginal structural model estimated with inverse-probability weights. The shaded areas show 95% confidence intervals, and the rug plot on the x-axis indicates the distribution of district polarization.

In substantive terms, a standard deviation increase in electoral vulnerability in a polarized district (above the mean on the religious-secular polarization index) is associated with approximately 16% more intense Islamist rhetoric (Panel 2), with the marginal structural model yielding a similar effect of roughly 13.5% (Panel 4). Figure 4 illustrates how conditional effects vary with district polarization. In low-polarization districts (below the mean polarization), vulnerability has essentially no effect on rhetoric intensity. As polarization increases, the vulnerability effect becomes increasingly pronounced.

Consistent with previous research, these results confirm the strategic nature of (de-)moderation among religious-party elites. However, our findings suggest that electoral incentives operate fundamentally differently depending on the level of social polarization. We find that in polarized districts that approximate a bimodal voter distribution along the religious-secularist divide, electoral pressures generate centrifugal effects. This pattern is consistent with our theoretical expectation: Elites in polarized districts cannot realistically compete for out-group voters; instead, when electoral competition intensifies and even modest vote shifts can cost them office, they face stronger incentives to signal ideological commitment to their base and to party leadership by adopting more radical rhetoric. Thus, social polarization fundamentally reshapes Islamist elites' electoral calculus, making electoral competition less of a moderating force than a mechanism that incentivizes de-moderation.

The consistency of results across different identification strategies, one exploiting

within-unit variation and the other addressing dynamic confounding through inverse probability weighting, strengthens confidence that our findings reflect a causal relationship rather than confounding from either time-invariant district characteristics or feedback mechanisms between elite rhetoric and electoral conditions.

6 Conclusion

Understanding when and why religious parties moderate, or fail to do so, carries profound implications for democratic consolidation and social cohesion across much of the world. The stakes are especially high in many Muslim-majority societies, where debates over Islam’s role in politics remain contested and where Islamist parties command substantial following. In this article, we revisit a core claim of the prominent inclusion-moderation hypothesis, which holds that electoral competition incentivizes anti-system parties to adopt a centrist position that downplays overt identity appeals in favor of broader, cross-cutting messages.

We argue that the relationship between electoral competition and moderation is more complicated than conventional accounts suggest. The standard Downsian logic whereby parties converge toward the median voter to maximize votes implicitly assumes a unimodal distribution of voter preferences. Where the electorate is polarized over the role of religion, and thus preferences cluster at opposing poles, the anticipated gains from courting swing voters are often outweighed by the risk of alienating and demobilizing core supporters, resulting in centrifugal competition.

Drawing on unique individual-level data and text analysis of parliamentary speeches delivered by legislators affiliated with Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, we demonstrate that greater electoral pressure encourages Islamist appeals among legislators from districts where the electorate is sharply divided along the religious–secular line. Our research design exploits substantial cross-district variation in polarization and MP-level differences in electoral vulnerability to isolate the effect of competition. Results based on different identification strategies consistently show that polarization fundamentally reverses electoral incentives: increasing exposure to electoral competition prompts elites to adopt stronger Islamist appeals.

Our results speak to a broader tension in democratic theory between inclusion and political stability. Including previously excluded radical actors in electoral competition may enhance procedural legitimacy. Yet in polarized contexts, inclusion may reinforce rather than dissolve ideological extremism. The conventional wisdom that participation breeds moderation through electoral participation presumes that voters are persuadable across group lines. In deeply divided societies, this assumption often fails, and electoral incentives may paradoxically sustain radicalism, which can, in turn, undermine political stability. Beyond religious parties, our findings have important implications for under-

standing party competition more broadly. The conditional relationship between electoral competition and ideological positioning that we identify is not unique to Islamist parties or the religious-secular cleavage. The same logic should apply to any party system structured around deep identity-based divisions, whether ethnic, linguistic, regional, or ideological. Radical left, right-wing, and ethno-nationalist parties all face similar strategic dilemmas when operating in polarized environments. When societies are divided along long-standing social fault lines, electoral competition can incentivize identity-based appeals.

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64. The full prompt is in the Online Appendix.
65. Some speeches contain content which is deemed problematic by OpenAI’s automatic content moderation. To avoid infractions of OpenAI’s usage policies, we build in a moderation step where we first submit each speech to OpenAI’s moderation endpoint. We then proceed to automatically rate only those interventions which have not been flagged as problematic by the automated content moderation. On average, around 1% of interventions are flagged, usually because of suspected harassment. Spot checks of the flagged speeches suggests that these are usually interventions which contain direct personal attacks or accusations of terrorist sympathies.
66. The scores are averages of the 25 LLM ratings
67. We downloaded and digitalized candidate lists from the <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/en/main-page> or from the <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr> if the lists were not available on the YSK website. We then measure electoral threat as the proportion of list positions to the number of seats won in a district $ElectoralThreat = \frac{ListRank}{SeatsWon}$; see André, Depauw, and Martin, “Electoral Systems and Legislators’ Constituency Effort: The Mediating Effect of Electoral Vulnerability.”
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