

Proliferation of religious associations and local incumbency advantage: Evidence from municipal elections in Turkey

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Abstract:

For two decades, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey sustained its electoral performance at the local level. We offer and test a new mechanism that contributed to the party's success in municipal elections. We argue that patronage links with religious civil society served as an important instrument of building and sustaining local incumbency advantage. Employing a close-election regression discontinuity design, we address two questions: To what extent did religious associations proliferate in AKP-controlled municipalities? Was this civil society penetration instrumental for the party's electoral success?

Employing a close-election regression discontinuity design (RDD), we show that in districts with a small-margin AKP victory in the 2014 elections, the number of religious associations in 2016 were significantly higher than in districts where AKP lost narrowly. We also find that the AKP incumbency in 2014 in closely-contested districts increased the party's vote share in the next local elections. Our results empirically demonstrate a new channel of local incumbency advantage. Moreover, we highlight the role of civil society as an agent of clientelistic exchange in competitive authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: Civil society, religious associations, municipal elections, local incumbency advantage, Turkey, AKP (Justice and Development Party).

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Introduction

It is increasingly common for incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes to cooperate with some segments of the civil society to ensure their political survival. Civic associations create networks of societal penetration that can serve as mediators between voters and politicians. In a mutually beneficial patron-client relationship, they help the ruling party to disseminate propaganda, create regime loyalty, and harvest votes. In turn, these associations secure economic profits for their members and increase their political influence. The growing literature on the links between civil society cooptation and autocratic survival focuses mainly on the legitimation and control functions of civil society at the regime level¹. However, civic associations usually function at the grassroots level and have the capacity to penetrate into smaller societal units such as ethnically diverse neighborhoods, religious communities, youth groups, and families. By this token, even smaller associations can secure important gains for the dominant party in local elections. These associational penetration effects in municipal elections remain understudied.

In this article, we test whether the ruling party can use civic associations as organizational brokers to create a local incumbency advantage in municipal elections. To investigate the links between the government and civil society in competitive authoritarian regimes, we look at the proliferation of religious associations in Turkey over the last two decades. Turkey constitutes an excellent case for studying the logic of associational penetration in competitive authoritarian regimes. First, the regime trajectory under Erdogan's AKP is a case of sustained autocratization and democratic breakdown by all accounts.² From a problematic but institutionalized electoral democracy in the early 2000s, the country gradually moved into a competitive authoritarian regime with high levels

of political polarization and repression against the opposition³. Secondly, it is a perfect example of patrimonial and clientelist practices dominating electoral competition.⁴ Last but not the least; Turkey has a long and troubled history of democratization, and experience with a relatively robust civil society at various periods. Hence, the civic associations are generally organic in their formation stage, enjoying relative independence and a genuine social network. A plethora of field studies show qualitative evidence that civic associations are important mid-level actors that form and sustain patronage links between voters and their party.⁵ It is thus worthwhile for the ruling party to sustain their cooperation.

Guided by qualitative evidence from several field interviews, as well as an extensive study of secondary sources in Turkish language, we test two arguments using a close-election regression discontinuity design (RDD). First, we argue that AKP victory in a district is associated with a subsequent proliferation of religious associations. Our RDD results show that in districts where AKP won the 2014 local elections by a small margin, per capita number of religious associations in 2016 were about 47% higher than in those districts where AKP lost by a similarly small margin.

Secondly, we study whether the AKP incumbency in 2014 affected their vote share in the following 2019 local elections, and to what extent this can be attributed to associational penetration. We find that in 2019 local elections, AKP received around 11 percentage points more votes from districts where AKP barely won back in 2014 than in districts where the party barely lost. Moreover, penetration of religious associations is a significant driver of AKP's electoral success in 2019, even across districts with similar socioeconomic profile and similar baseline support for AKP and other Islamic parties in the past. We also show that this result is driven by municipalities that were controlled by AKP since 2014. These findings suggest that AKP electorally benefited from the formation and activities of religious associations in the municipalities that it controlled, implying

that Islamic civil society helps the ruling party maintain clientelist linkages and contributes to the local incumbency advantage.

Functions of civil society in competitive authoritarian regimes

That a robust and vibrant civil society should bolster democracy is prevailing wisdom in the literature, especially since the third wave of democratization.⁶ A robust civil society reinforces civic socialization and political education,⁷ creates space for pluralism,⁸ and upholds popular resistance against unchecked state authority.⁹ Empirically, the strength of civil society both before and after transition is positively associated with the deepening of civil liberties and higher institutional performance across third and fourth wave democracies,¹⁰ as well as with decrease in the probability of authoritarian takeover.¹¹

Nonetheless, there is also a long line of research questioning the pro-democratic function of civil society across different contexts.¹² Many times, the relationships created at the grassroots level can also be used and abused for authoritarian purposes. In her seminal article on associational penetration in the interwar Germany, Berman asserted that the density of preexisting networks, coupled with low institutionalization, led to the rise of the Nazi Party.¹³ Her argument about associational penetration in Germany has since been corroborated by further empirical evidence. For instance, Satyanath et al.¹⁴ show that denser social networks were associated with faster entry into the Nazi Party. Additionally, they find that the effects of social capital on party entry depended on political context, as stipulated by Berman.¹⁵

Examining NGO-state relations under authoritarian regimes, Heurlin¹⁶ argues that there are two alternative ways to control civil society: the corporatist strategy seeks to co-opt and control civic associations, whereas the exclusionary strategy marginalizes and replaces them. A growing body

of contemporary literature shows that when civil society serves a legitimating function for the regime, it can be allowed to survive in a controlled fashion instead of falling victim to outright repression.¹⁷ For instance, Toepler et al.¹⁸ define three different types of NGOs and argue that the work of loyal NGOs are facilitated by the state to the extent that they disseminate a supportive narrative and help regime legitimation efforts.

Civic associations in authoritarian settings can undertake various important functions for regime survival and stability.¹⁹ They serve as a democratic window dressing, limit and shape civic engagement, increase the output legitimacy of the regime, and strengthen its discourse.²⁰ Additionally, authoritarian leaders can foster and support a certain type of tame civil society to control political participation and to deter real opposition forces.²¹ The specific context of competitive authoritarian regimes also creates electoral incentives for the ruling party to work with pro-regime associations, in order to garner support for the regime, distribute rents, and collect votes in return. This helps the party to cultivate loyal and reliable local brokers and to strengthen its political hold at the municipal level. Holland and Palmer-Rubin describe this pattern as a “complementary relationship in which civic organizations enable clientelist exchange through their leaders and conversely, clientelist benefits spur organizational participation”.²² In a typical example of crony capitalism, associations that agree to collaborate with the ruling party can collect material benefits.

We concur with this premise that state-civil society links are reciprocally reinforcing. While the ruling party in a competitive authoritarian regime provide selective benefits to some civic associations, in return they can help its electoral performance. We argue that this relationship works in municipal elections to create an incumbency advantage. Intermediary actors such as civic associations are arguably more effective at the local level, where their bonds within the community

and face-to-face interactions with potential voters become important assets. In closely contested districts, a slight shift in votes can win the municipal seat for the dominant party. However, the literature on incumbency advantage posits that this effect is harder to establish at the local level²³. We aim to capture this effect in the case of Turkey. In the next section, we explore the links between the ruling party AKP and a particular segment of Turkish civil society: religious associations. There are two main reasons for this choice. First, the AKP is characteristically considered as a pro-Islamist party²⁴ and its special relationship with Islamic civil society organizations is well documented.²⁵ Second, the field-study evidence and secondary sources suggest that faith-based organizations play a central role in grassroots mobilization and clientelistic efforts by the ruling party.

The reciprocal links between the ruling party and religious associations in Turkey

The roots of patronage links can be traced back to state-society relations in the Ottoman Empire and early Republican era. The center-periphery thesis famously argues that the main social cleavage within the Turkish society is the one between the (formerly imperial) urban center and the conservative, rural regions²⁶. In this structure of strong centralization and weak peripheral integration, the local notables (*Ayans*) sustained the relationship between the empire and its regions. With the process of state-building and democratization in the early 20th century, these notables entered parliamentary politics in large numbers and began to assume leadership roles. Working first under the Committee of Union and Progress (1913-18) and then the People's Republican Party (1926-1945), they established the early connections between state institutions and the local population through networks of patronage²⁷. These single-party era relationships began to transform into modern party-based patronage and clientelism with the passage to multiparty elections in

1946²⁸. The notables gradually became party agents, this time predominantly working for the Democrat Party until the military coup in 1960.

Between 1960 and 1980, the evolution of patronage relations was marked by the strengthening framework of democratic institutions and electoral competition resulting from economic modernization and rapid urbanization. Mass immigration to the cities brought the expansion of party-based clientelistic practices in urban centers, where party brokers incorporated the newcomers into their networks through preferential resource distribution²⁹. The most important resources came from the state and bureaucracy, making access to them a critical part of clientelistic exchange³⁰. The types of brokers also increased and diversified during this period. The 1961 Constitution expanded the organizational capacities of civil society and led to a rapid increase in political participation across all segments of the population. However, there was also strict controls on which types of civic associations could form and flourish. The politicization of religious groups was particularly feared and highly regulated by the state³¹.

The military coup in 1980 constituted a critical threshold for the expansion of religious civil society. Since the junta saw a strong, organized political movement from the left as the main threat against its post-coup interests, it actively used religion as a tool to counter this force. The state policy of the ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’ emphasized both nationalist and Muslim identities, strengthening religious organizations in the process³². Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, political Islam organized by grassroots activism and ‘vernacular politics’.³³ Initially, the Welfare Party³⁴ used this strategy very successfully to increase its local electoral support. WP also developed its own political marketing mechanisms based on eliminating old rural patronage structures and local notables.³⁵ The systemic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in electoral volatility and a weakened party system, further exacerbated clientelism and made it the *modus operandi* of local

politics.

AKP inherited many of these new networks and developed its own clientelistic exchange model on top of the existing structure. From its earliest days, this model worked on the extension of public funds and benefits in return for political brokerage and loyalty. As the power of the party expanded over the course of its two-decade rule, so did the resources and mobilization capacity. Today, contemporary Turkish politics is characterized by dominant clientelism, “where one party is clearly making a greater effort and also is much more effective in producing votes with clientelistic techniques”.³⁶ Çarkoğlu and Aytaç³⁷ show some compelling evidence that the percentage of Turkish voters approached by AKP for vote buying may be as high as 35% of the population. Religious civil society is an indispensable tool in this regard.

The giving hand: From the ruling party to religious associations

The trends of civil society activity in Turkey over the last two decades show an overall increase in almost all types of associations. This proliferation is especially remarkable for religious associations, whose numbers soared from 14,957 in 2006 to 18,275 in 2015. This translates to a 22 percent increase in one decade. Religious associations serve as a social assistance network since the 1980s to garner votes for conservative parties.³⁸ In return, they benefit from direct public funds in the form of various transfers at the municipal level. For example, our data shows that an overwhelming majority of religious organizations in Turkey are associational entities established with the aim to build and maintain mosques and Quran schools. There are both jurisdictional and financial links between these associations and the municipalities. An example of this is the Article 14 of Law 5393 on Municipalities, which regulates the responsibilities of districts. In 2012, the AKP introduced an amendment to this article. This amendment states that the municipalities can “undertake the construction, maintenance and repair of temples”.³⁹ The initial interpretation of the

clause suggests that the “temples” only include places such as mosques, churches, synagogues, etc. and not the Quran schools, which are in essence private educational entities supported by civic associations. However, in 2015, the Turkish Court of Accounts (*Sayıştay*) issued a decision stating that interpreting Article 14, the maintenance and repair of Quran schools is also under the jurisdiction of districts.⁴⁰ Hence, the districts could underwrite the costs of maintenance and repair of these private schools as local public expenses to the district budget.

It is tempting to think that religious associations have proliferated not because of favorable government policies, but due to the increasing level of religiosity within the population during the AKP rule. However, one should note that religious associations in Turkey are widely varied in size and scope. Some organizations also have divergent ideologies from AKP. When these organizations garner votes for the party, this relationship is mainly based on the promise that they get the privilege to maneuver in the neighborhoods in return for their loyalty.⁴¹ An important pillar of AKP’s election strategy is to approach the leaders of vote-rich Muslim sects and congregations before the elections to secure their support. In return, these sects typically receive more freedom in their civic engagement and recruitment activities, and possibly preferential access to rent-seeking opportunities. Another important incentive for religious associations is to get the ‘public benefit status’, which allows them to start an aid campaign without permission from the governor’s office⁴² and to collect tax-exempt donations with no legal oversight. Pro-government civil society gains a vast organizational and financial advantage through this highly coveted status.⁴³ To put it in perspective, only 395 of 109,695 Turkish associations (less than 0.5 percent) qualified for this tax-exempt status in 2014.⁴⁴ Not only does this improve the financial standing of the association, but it also increases its opportunities of public outreach.

There are a multitude of other ways for municipalities to transfer funds to associations. These

include transferring the management of municipality-owned properties to associations, favoring loyal brokers in public procurement bids, and providing preferential access to public funds. The metropolitan municipalities (especially Istanbul and Ankara) and their districts became especially notorious for charges of corruption and clientelist links with civic associations over the past two decades. For example, according to the Turkish Court of Accounts report in September 2018, the total support provided by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (*İBB*) in the year of 2017 to various foundations, associations, schools, and school sports facilities amounts to 847 million Turkish liras⁴⁵ (around 223 million USD). In turn, civic associations are used for societal engineering and building extensive networks of patronage between the government's ruling coalition and the local elites.⁴⁶ In the early 2000s, AKP was able to legitimize its rule by using these networks to control economic activities such as procurement bids, privatization of commodities, and public land sales.⁴⁷ The links between the party and religious associations played a critical role for the discretionary allocation of contracts, especially at the municipal level.⁴⁸ For example, "several board members of Islamic Charities and Foundations such as Akabe, Birlik, and Ensar at the same time have firms that are awarded with procurement contracts".⁴⁹ With this (financially motivated) loyalty, religious associations become important tools that facilitate political organization in AKP-controlled districts.⁵⁰

You reap what you sow: From religious associations to the ruling party

Religious associations fulfill intermediary functions at the grassroots level and sustain local incumbency advantage through multiple channels. One of the critical tasks that they undertake on behalf of the ruling party is selecting the targeted voters for any clientelist distribution. Associations act as intermediaries to identify and reach people who need assistance such as employment, in-kind aid, or handouts.⁵¹ This is especially relevant for the urban poor in large

metropolitan areas, who usually have less access to other local support networks. While cash transfers to potential voters are relatively rare, low-income families can obtain goods (such as food, coal, or clothing), services, or jobs.⁵²

Besides identifying potential clients, the religious organization members can also personally help in the distribution of aid. This effort intensifies during electoral campaigns.⁵³ Ark-Yildirim writes that the human interaction is the necessary link between distribution and votes, to show that assistance “did not emanate from a distant and impersonal state, but [was] the result of the intermediation of known and respected individuals who became the necessary human face of the AKP”.⁵⁴ Our research also indicates that the personal relationships formed through associations are important, since it allows targeting entire families through a single connection.⁵⁵ The initial penetration into a family or neighborhood network can have a snowball effect and create further opportunities for garnering votes.

Religious associations do not only provide material benefits. They can also strengthen political identification with the party by ideological bonding and disseminating discourse. For instance, Özet notes that mosque construction associations serve the double purpose of uniting members around a shared aim both in practical commitment (raising money, organizing meetings, overseeing construction, etc) and in spiritual terms (working for the common goal of Islam).⁵⁶ The common goal also provides an overarching identity that obscures differences in class and economic status.⁵⁷ Associations bolster this ideological bonding through regular social activities such as group meetings, home talks, Quran readings, and excursions.⁵⁸ Especially for women in conservative neighborhoods where gender inequality is a persistent problem, these activities constitute acceptable (and even respected) forms of inclusion in daily community life. Moreover, social networks formed through these activities have spillover effects such as strengthening party

identification and increasing political participation. At election periods, this can translate into higher voter turnout from traditionally apolitical segments of the society. Last but not the least, opinion leaders work in (or in tandem with) religious associations to offer their support to the ruling party candidate. Since these people have some political influence within the voters in their area, they can convince the members of the association or sympathizers in the neighborhoods to vote for a certain candidate.⁵⁹

Empirical Framework and Data

The aim of our empirical analysis is twofold. First, we evaluate whether the control of district municipalities by AKP following the 2014 local elections had a meaningful effect on the prevalence of religious associations. Second, we study to what extent AKP incumbency in 2014 affected AKP's vote shares in the next local elections in 2019, and whether penetration of religious associations might be one of the forces underlying AKP's incumbency advantage.

The impact of municipal control on the prevalence of religious associations

To exploit the plausibly exogenous variation in AKP's municipal control among Turkish districts, we employ a close-election sharp regression discontinuity design (RDD). RDD leverages a cutoff or threshold in the assignment (or running) variable to create a quasi-experimental setting, allowing for a comparison of observations just above and below the threshold. In the close election RDD, typically, the assignment variable is the margin of victory or loss (in terms of vote share) for political parties or candidates in an electoral race, and hence the cutoff is zero percent. Units above this cutoff are treated with the political party or candidate in question while units below it are the control units. RDD isolates the causal effect of the treatment by assuming that units close to the threshold are similar in all respects except for the treatment received. This contrasts with conventional Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, which estimates average treatment effects

over a broader range of values without explicitly accounting for the discontinuity at a specific cutoff. By focusing on the local neighborhood around the threshold, RDD enhances the validity of causal inferences by reducing biases associated with non-random assignment and confounding variables that are common in OLS models. Our outcome of interest is the number of religious associations per capita in 2016 in a given district (*ilçe*). The treatment is the local control of the central municipality of a given district by AKP as a result of victory in the mayoral race that took place on March 30, 2014. Hence, the running variable x is the win/lose margin for AKP. Data on the 2014 local election results comes from the Supreme Election Council (*YSK*).⁶⁰ The turnout in this election was quite high. Out of the 48,724,241 registered voters 43,459,938 people voted, amounting to a 89.2% turnout. AKP won about 59% of the mayoral races, followed by Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) which won around 16% and 12% of the municipalities, respectively.

We exclusively focus on whether the party won the election for the mayor of the district center and not the other townships (*belde*) in the district, and we analyze the effect of winning the district center on associational penetration in the district as a whole. This is for two main reasons. First, our data on associations do not allow us to identify where in a district a given association resides. More importantly, the local control of the district administration center matters more than winning townships in terms of affecting district-level outcomes. We also do not analyze the mayoral races for metropolitan municipalities (in 30 provinces with metropolitan areas) given that our unit of observation is a district and not a province. Finally, after omitting the districts where mayoral races were cancelled, we are left with 961 observations. AKP candidates won around 61% of these districts (589 out of 961).

The win/lose margin for AKP ranges from -83.6 to 74.5 percentage points, while the sample

average is 3.8 percentage points. The cutoff for the running variable (AKP win/lose margin) is zero ($x_0 = 0$), at which the difference between the vote share for AKP and the second party is zero. The first key identifying assumption is that the expected potential outcomes are smooth at the electoral winning threshold $x_0 = 0$. In other words, the conditional expectation functions for the number of religious associations per capita under AKP victory [AKP defeat] should be a continuous function of the win/lose margin x as we move from districts with observed [potential] outcomes to the right of the cutoff ($x > x_0 = 0$) to potential [observed] outcomes to the left of the cutoff ($x < x_0 = 0$). The second assumption is that the density of the score (win/lose margin for AKP) near the zero cutoff is positive. These assumptions imply that units “just below” and “just above” the cutoff would exhibit the same average response if their treatment status did not change.⁶¹ Therefore, the difference between the average response of treatment and control units at the cutoff can be attributed to the treatment and interpreted as the causal average effect of the treatment at the cutoff. More specifically, the treatment effect of interest is given by

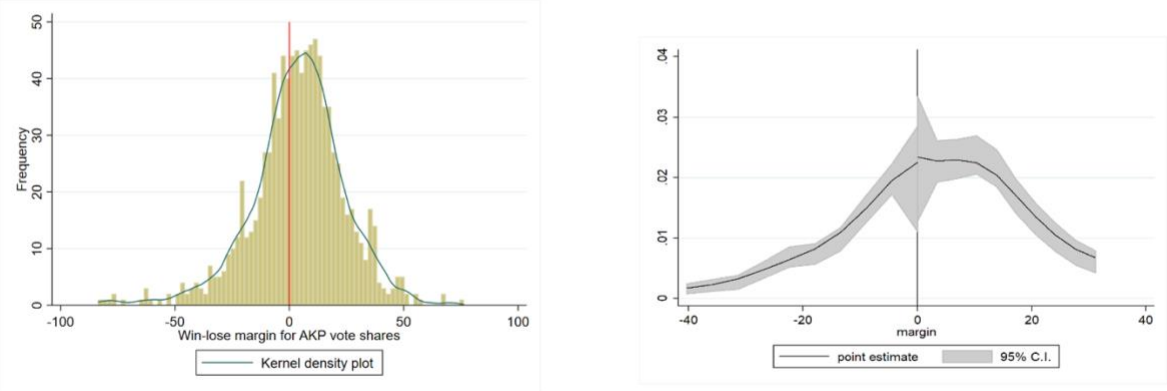
$$\delta = \lim_{x_0 \leftarrow x} E[Y^1|x] - \lim_{x \rightarrow x_0} E[Y^0|x], \tag{1}$$

where Y^1 and Y^0 denote the potential outcomes under treatment (AKP victory) and control (AKP defeat).

Some scholars questioned the plausibility of the identification assumptions of the RD design in the particular context of close U.S. house elections by documenting a systematic incumbency advantage in close elections. However, more recent work by Eggers et al.⁶² does not find any evidence of such incumbency advantage in other types of U.S. elections, or in elections of other countries. The authors contend that the RD design remains the most credible and transparent approach to estimate the political and economic consequences of election results.⁶³ However, each electoral setting has its own particularities. For example, there may be additional reasons to suspect

the credibility of close election RD design in hybrid regimes where electoral manipulation is more probable. Given the potential concerns, before our RD analysis we check if there is any statistical evidence of sorting in 2014 local elections around the win-lose cutoff that might be the result of incumbent candidate advantages, targeted electoral fraud, pre-election strategic campaign efforts, post-election legal challenges or just pure chance. We present a histogram and kernel density plot for win/lose margins of AKP in Figure 1a. We also conduct a binomial test of different probability of winning versus losing for AKP within different neighborhoods (2, 3, 4 and 5 percentage points) of the zero cutoff. We fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is 50% chance of AKP winning the elections in a district within any of the specified neighborhoods around the zero cutoff. We also check for manipulation near the cutoff using the local polynomial density estimators proposed in Cattaneo et al.⁶⁴ This test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in the density of treated and control observations at the cutoff (robust p-value= 0.6412). The corresponding density plot is presented in Figure 1b.⁶⁵

Figure 1: Distribution of AKP win-lose margin in 2014 local elections



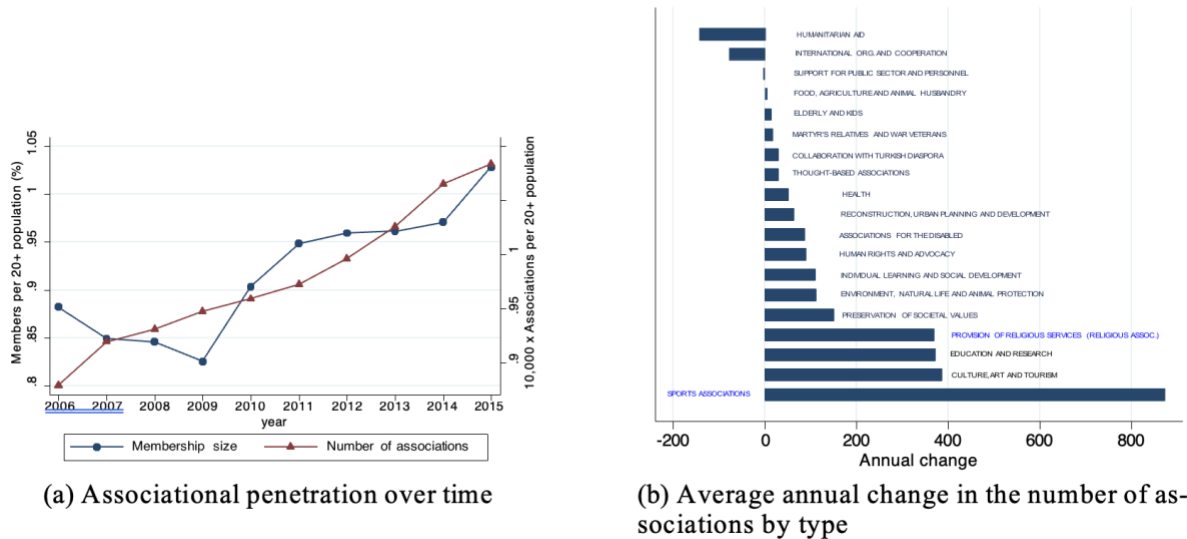
(a) Histogram and kernel density plot of AKP win-lose margin in 2014

(b) Manipulation testing using local-polynomial density estimation

The main outcomes of interest is penetration of religious associations, measured as the number of

such associations normalized by the size of 20+ district population (associations per capita in short). Data on associations is retrieved in July 2016 from the Department of Associations (*Dernekler Dairesi Başkanlığı*) under the Turkish Ministry of Interior.⁶⁶ Our data represent the universe of active associations as of the date of retrieval, thus about 28 months after the 2014 local elections took place. We compute the number of religious associations per capita in each district using district population figures in 2016 taken from ADNKS (Address Based Population Registration System).⁶⁷ A religious association is defined as any association registered with the Department of Associations whose main area of activity is to provide religious services or to facilitate religious practices. An overwhelming majority of these associations are entities that were established with the aim to build and maintain mosques and Koran schools. Some specialize in other services ranging from maintaining holy sites, building *Imam Hatip* (clergymen) schools and providing student housing. Some others are associations of clergymen or members and sympathizers of various religious sects and movements. In our sample, the average and median penetration of religious associations are around 0.34 and 0.25 per 1,000 citizens above 20 years of age. The average and median for all types of associations combined are 1.42 and 1.27 respectively.

Figure 2: Trends in Associational Penetration in Turkey, 2007-2015



Overall civic participation in Turkey is quite low by international standards. According to the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (2010-2014), Turkey is at the bottom quintile of the cross-country distribution of voluntary membership in humanitarian/charitable, environmental, religious, professional, and consumer organizations. One can see from Figure 2a that back in 2007, distinct memberships in voluntary associations was a meager 0.85 percent of the population over 20 years of age. This ratio has increased to around 1 percent over the next 8 years. It is notable that 2014-2015 was a period of relatively sharp increase in overall membership. Similarly, the total number of associations back in 2007 was slightly higher than 0.9 for every 10,000 people and it nearly rose to 1.1 associations for every 10,000 people over the next 8 years.

Figure 2b indicates that among the 19 categories, sports associations experienced by far the greatest average annual increase in numbers countrywide over the period 2007-2015. This is followed by associations related to culture, art and tourism and associations about education. Religious associations come a close fourth in terms of the annual increase in penetration.

One caveat with our outcome measure (associational penetration) is that it only provides a snapshot of the spatial distribution of the cumulative number of associations in 2016. Since we do not have information on pre-treatment (before the 2014 election) number of associations at the district level, we cannot measure the change in their number in the aftermath of the 2014 elections. However, we conduct various checks to verify that our results are not driven by reverse causality.

Measuring AKP incumbency advantage and assessing the role of religious associations

To evaluate AKP's incumbency advantage in 2019 elections, once again we employ an RD design, this time using the district level vote share of AKP in 2019 local elections as our outcome variable. Like before, our running variable is the win-lose margin of AKP for each district municipality in 2014 local elections. Data on 2019 municipal election results is retrieved from the Supreme Election Council Open Data Portal.⁶⁸

In this election, about 42% of the nationwide votes went to AKP candidates, and AKP won about 55% (538 out of 970) of all district municipalities. Although in big cities AKP did not fare equally well in 2019 as in 2014,⁶⁹ the party showed a very similar performance in terms of the share of district mayorships it secured and the overall vote shares it received compared to 2014 elections.

To empirically assess whether the prevalence of religious associations helped AKP maintain its electoral success at the local level, we estimate the following model:

$$akp_shr_19_d = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2(akp_shr_14)_d + \gamma(relig_assoc_16)_d + \beta_1(secular_assoc_16)_d + \beta_2(pop_16)_d + \theta'X + \varepsilon_d.$$

To evaluate whether AKP's incumbency advantage was more pronounced in districts with greater penetration of religious associations, we estimate an extended version of the previous equation:

$$akp_shr_19_d = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2(akp_shr_14)_d + \eta_1(relig_assoc_16)_d +$$

$$\eta_2(\text{relig_assoc_16})_d \times (\text{akp_win_14})_d + \mu (\text{akp_win_14})_d + \beta_1(\text{secular_assoc_16})_d + \beta_2(\text{pop_16})_d + \theta' \mathbf{X} + \varepsilon_d.$$

(3)

In these estimating equations akp_shr_19_d and akp_shr_14_d denote AKP vote share in 2019 and 2014 local elections. relig_assoc_16_d , $\text{secular_assoc_16}_d$ and pop_16_d denote the logarithm of the number of religious associations, the number of secular (non-religious) associations and population size in district d as of year 2016, respectively. akp_win_14_d is a dummy indicating that AKP won the previous election and hence was an incumbent in the district from 2014 until the next election in 2019. Finally, \mathbf{X} denotes the vector of other controls that include the share of votes for Islamic parties in 2009, university graduates per capita in 2014, and logarithm of average night-time lights over the period 2007-2013 as a local proxy for economic development. In the first model, the coefficient of interest is γ which captures the change in AKP vote share in 2019 in response to a unit change in the logged number of religious associations in 2016. We control for the number of other (secular) associations and the population size in 2016, so our estimates do not simply pick up the effect of overall associational penetration and district population size. Importantly, by controlling for AKP's vote share in 2014, our estimate explains the differences in 2019 election outcomes across districts where AKP performed equally well 5 years ago. Finally, the other control variables \mathbf{X} help us account for the role of socio- demographic factors like religiosity, income and education that might jointly explain AKP support and associational activity. If the activities of religious associations have any positive influence on AKP's electoral fate, we would expect that $\gamma > 0$.

In the second extended model, the coefficient of interest is η_2 which measures the extent to which the contribution of religious associations on AKP's performance differed across districts where

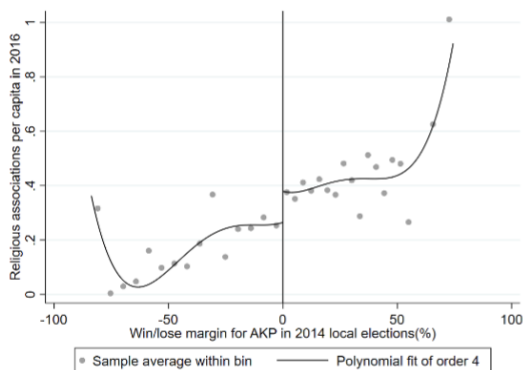
AKP candidates were the incumbents and challengers. If it was primarily those religious associations that were cultivated or supported by AKP (through the mayors governing the district) which contributed most (and positively) to AKP's votes in 2019, we would expect not only that $\eta_1 + \eta_2 > 0$, but also that $\eta_2 > 0$.

Results and Discussion

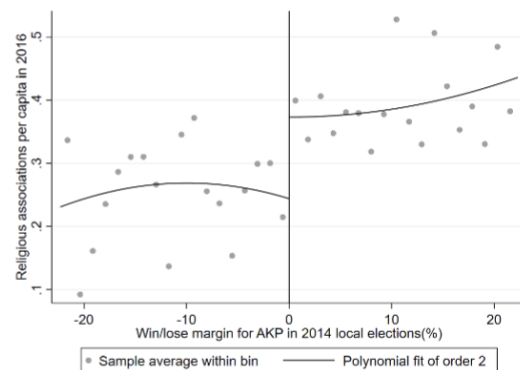
Municipal control by AKP and religious associations

In this section, we present our main results regarding the effect of municipal control of AKP and the proliferation of religious associations. We then probe if a similar effect is present for secular associations. We end the section with some evidence that the electoral outcomes in closely contested districts in 2014 are not systematically related to some pre-existing differences in district characteristics, which in turn may be correlated with associational penetration.

Figure 3: Regression Discontinuity (RD) plots for the penetration of religious associations



(a) RD plot for religious associations, bandwidth = full support, $p = 4$



(b) RD plot for religious associations, common MSE-optimal bandwidth, $p=2$

Moving to our main results, Figure 3 depicts two regression discontinuity plots. They suggest a robust RD effect of AKP victory in 2014 local elections on the number of religious associations per capita (as of July 2016) in districts that were closely contested between the AKP and another party. Both plots are fitted separately above and below the cutoff and show the global approximations to the unknown regression functions based on a fourth-order polynomial regression of the number of religious associations per capita in 2016 on the score,⁷⁰ i.e. the win/lose margin for AKP in 2014 local elections. The dots in these plots indicate the sample averages of the outcomes within each bin of the win margin. The number of bins are determined based on the mimicking variance method.⁷¹ The left-hand side plot is fitted by local polynomials of order four while the right-hand side plots are fitted via a local polynomial of order two.

Table 1: First order local polynomial RD effect of AKP victory in 2014 on the number of religious and secular associations per capita in 2016

Dependent variable:	(1) Religious associations per 1,000 residents	(2) Secular associations per 1,000 residents
Robust	0.125** (0.0583)	0.103 (0.0983)
Robust p-value	0.032	0.294
Robust 95% CI	[0.010 0.239]	[-0.089 0.296]
Observations	961	961
Obs. left of cutoff	372	372
Obs. right of cutoff	589	589
Mean outcome within BW	0.338	1.019
Std. of outcome within BW	0.3	0.52
Kernel Type	Triangular	Triangular
BW Type	MSE-optimal	MSE-optimal
Order Loc. Poly. (p)	1	1
Order Bias (q)	2	2
BW Loc. Poly. (h)	18.949	13.092
BW Bias (b)	32.629	21.820

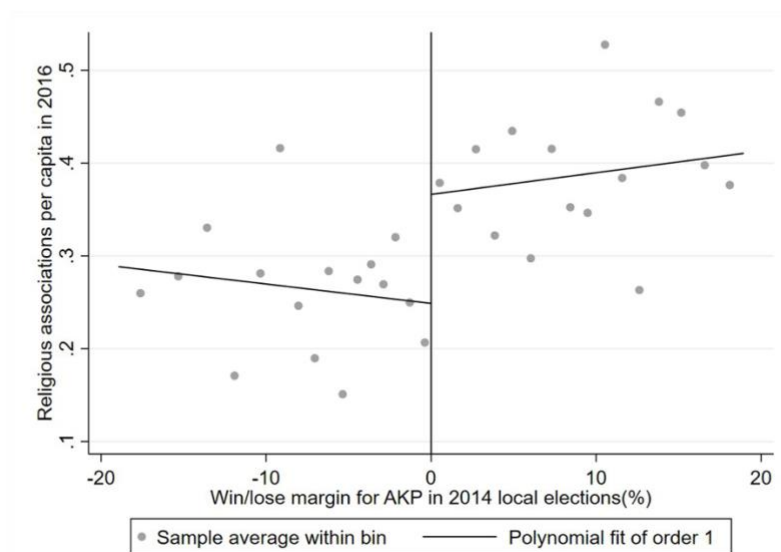
Notes: Standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the province level. * (**) (***) indicates significance at the 10 (5) (1) percent level.

The first column in Table 1 presents the statistics associated with a linear local RD regression and the resulting point estimate for the effect of local AKP control on per capita number of religious associations two years later.⁷² There are 589 districts where AKP won the election compared to 372 districts where it lost. The point estimate of the local RD effect on religious associations is 0.125 - indicating that in districts where AKP barely won back in 2014, there were on average 1.25 more religious associations per 10,000 residents two years later compared to locations where it lost by a small margin. This magnitude might seem small in absolute terms, but it amounts to 37% of the mean outcome over the entire bandwidth used in our estimation and is equivalent to 42% of a standard deviation. The RD effect corresponds to 47% of the mean outcome over the lower half of the bandwidth which consists of districts where AKP lost the election. The point estimate is significant at 5% level with a robust p-value of 0.032. Reassuringly, the robust bias-corrected 95% confidence interval excludes zero. However, a treatment versus control difference ranging from 0.10 (a 3% change relative to sample mean) to 2.4 (71% change relative to sample mean) religious associations per 10,000 residents is also reasonably compatible with our data.

A natural question is whether AKP victory has a similar effect on the prevalence of associations that do not specialize in the provision of religious services. In the second column of Table 1, we conduct a placebo check by repeating the same RD analysis on the penetration of secular (non-religious) associations. We do not have much information about the type of activities and causes each association pursues beyond the general classifications provided in the official data. Therefore, to avoid arbitrary judgements on the nature of each association, we group all non-religious associations as secular.⁷³ The results indicate no statistically significant effect on secular associations. The robust RD estimate is not only small relative to the mean (about 10%) and standard deviation of the outcome of interest (about 20%), it is also statistically indistinguishable from zero

at any conventional level. Thus, the two results in Table 1 support the view that AKP municipalities offer greater opportunities for religious associations to flourish compared to other parties. The RD plot in Figure 4 graphically illustrates the estimated effects presented in column 1 of Table 1 using the mimicking-variance quartile-spaced method to select bins.

Figure 4: RD effects on the penetration of religious associations, estimated using first- order local polynomials



As discussed earlier, the associations that oversee the construction and maintenance of mosques and Koran schools constitute the largest share of religious civil society organizations in our data. Mosques and Koran schools in Turkey are not merely places of worship and religious education. They are also known to be crucial instruments for religion-based political propaganda, ideological indoctrination, and mobilization.⁷⁴ Mosque and Koran school projects rely on construction permits, financial support, and regulatory oversight, all of which are usually provided by municipal governments. Therefore, our results likely reflect how AKP municipalities use their authority and resources to improve religious service provision and bolster religious associations in their districts. Next, we conduct various balance checks to assess whether any of the pre-determined co-variates

exhibit a statistically discernible discontinuity at the win-lose cutoff. If we observe a jump in these variables at the cutoff that is statistically significant, this will cast some doubt on our claim that the RD estimates we have presented reflect the causal effect of AKP control on the municipal government. If variables exhibit discontinuity at the win-lose threshold even though they cannot be affected by the treatment, this might indicate sorting near the threshold and possibly reverse causation.

In Figure A.1 of the Appendix, we present RD plots for eight selected pre-treatment covariates: Vote share of Islamic parties in 2009 local elections [panel (a)], AKP victory in the same election [panel (b)], per capita number of associations at the *province level* as of year 2013 [panel (c)] as well as the penetration of religious and sports associations at the *province level* in 2013 [panels (d) and (e)], density of nighttime lights as a proxy for district level economic activity [panel (f)], district population in 2014 [panel (g)] and the share of 15+ district population with at least a high school degree [panel (h)].⁷⁵

Table 2: Formal balance tests on pre-determined covariates

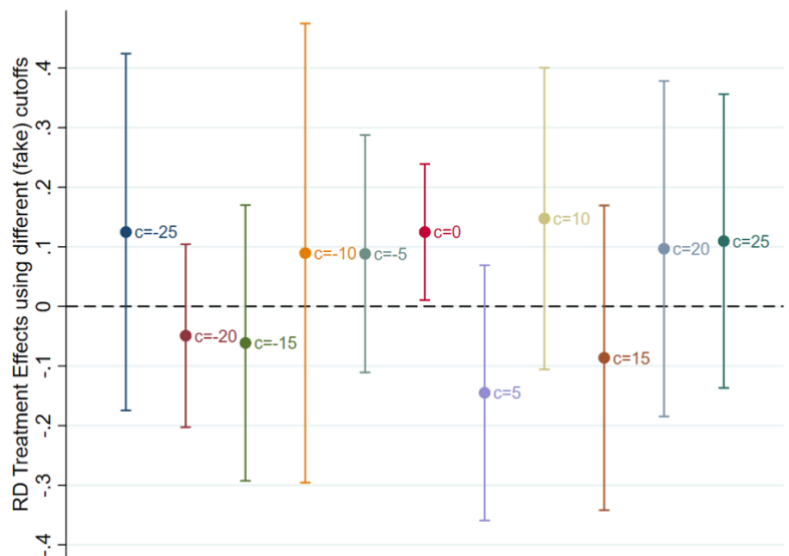
Covariate name:	RD estimate	Robust p-value
Vote share of Islamic parties in 2009	0.0169	0.6903
AKP won in 2009	-0.0331	0.5803
Vote share of AKP in 2009	-0.0109	0.4094
Number of associations pp in province, 2013	0.0000	0.4584
Association membership rate in province, 2013	-0.0084	0.7244
Religious associations pp in province, 2013	0.0000	0.3049
Membership rate in religious associations in province, 2013	0.0016	0.2447
Sports associations pp in province, 2013	0.0000	0.9703
Membership rate in sports associations in province, 2013	0.0009	0.5999
Share of sports associations in province, 2013	-0.0089	0.1598
Share of sports assoc. in overall assoc. membership in province, 2013	0.0039	0.8304
Share of religious associations in province, 2013	0.0143	0.3047
Share of religious assoc. in overall assoc. membership in province, 2013	0.0111	0.2497
Log population in 2014	0.0001	0.8462
Population share with HS degree or above, 2014	0.0249	0.1436
Population share with university degree or above, 2014	0.0111	0.1886
Nightlight density, 2007-2013 average	-0.0544	0.7571
Log GDP per capita in province, 2013	-0.0485	0.5179
Share of manufacturing employment in district, 2000	0.0085	0.7843
Share of agricultural employment in district, 2000	-5.3657	0.1145
Mean elevation	12.159	0.9902
Average annual temperature (1961-1990)	-0.3045	0.6521
Average annual precipitation (1961-1990)	55.2761	0.1544
Caloric suitability index for the district	267.5077	0.4411

Visually inspecting the plots, we see no clear sign of a significant discontinuity at the cutoff. Using an even larger set of predetermined covariates, we conduct formal balance tests based on first-order local polynomials and robust standard errors. The results are presented in Table 2. They suggest that districts where AKP barely won and barely lost do not significantly differ from each other with respect to any of the pre-treatment observables, including the ones analyzed in Figure A.1.⁷⁶

Robustness

In this section we present some further robustness checks. First, we start with a falsification exercise using placebo cutoffs instead of the actual cutoff for the win-lose margin. Then we check the sensitivity of our results to the selection of bandwidths. Then we carry out covariate adjustments on our RD estimates to improve efficiency.

Figure 5: RD estimates using placebo cutoffs



In Figure 5 we present RD estimates at various placebo cutoffs to the left and right of the true cutoff for the win-lose margin. Since the true cutoff of zero for the win-lose margin is the only score value

at which the probability of an AKP mayor governing the district municipality changes discontinuously, it should also be the only score value at which the outcome changes discontinuously. Thus, this analysis can be viewed as a hypothesis test for continuity of the conditional expectation functions of potential outcomes at fake cutoffs. We pick five placebo cutoffs to the left and right of the true win-lose threshold. To avoid treatment effect contamination, we implement this method for units below and above the cutoff separately. This way we only compare districts to the left of a fake cutoff where AKP won [lost] with districts to the right of a fake cutoff where AKP also won [lost].

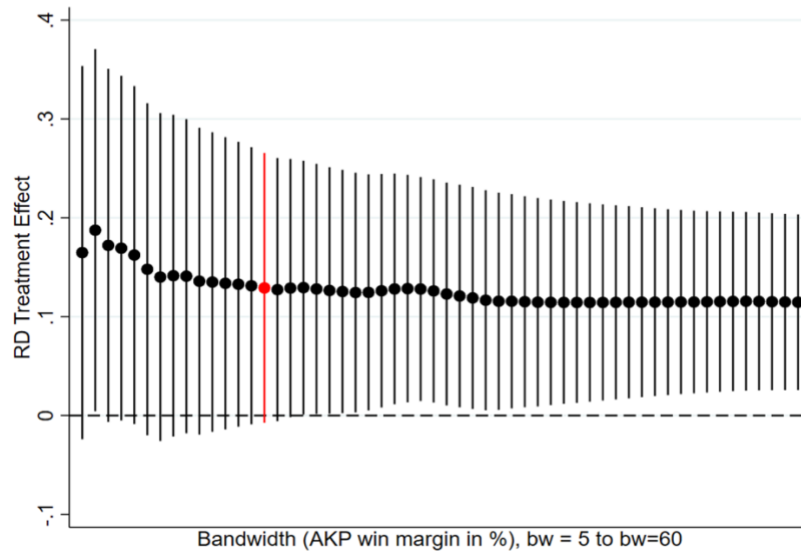
The results indicate that RD estimates for placebo cutoffs are statistically indistinguishable from zero. 95% confidence intervals for all RD estimates except that for the true cutoff contain zero. The placebo point estimates are for most part smaller than the true RD effects on associational penetration. The only placebo RD estimate that is slightly larger than the true effect is very imprecise. Overall, we conclude that there is no evidence of a statistically discernible discontinuity in our outcome measure except at the true win-lose threshold.

Next, we probe the sensitivity of our results to the bandwidth used. In our baseline analyses, we use a data-driven approach to bandwidth selection. In particular, we use one common MSE-optimal bandwidth for observations on both sides of the cutoff. Figure 6 displays RD estimates for the effect of AKP victory on the number of religious associations using 56 different bandwidths.

All estimates in this analysis are positive. The point estimate and the 95% confidence interval that are marked red correspond to the optimal bandwidth used in our baseline analysis. The choice of bandwidth does not have much bearing on the magnitude of the RD treatment effects although estimates that use larger bandwidths are more precise, as is commonly the case. Overall, the estimated magnitudes for different bandwidths are very similar to our main RD treatment effect

except for bandwidths between 5 to 9 (in percent) which are slightly larger.

Figure 6: Sensitivity of RD estimates to using different bandwidths

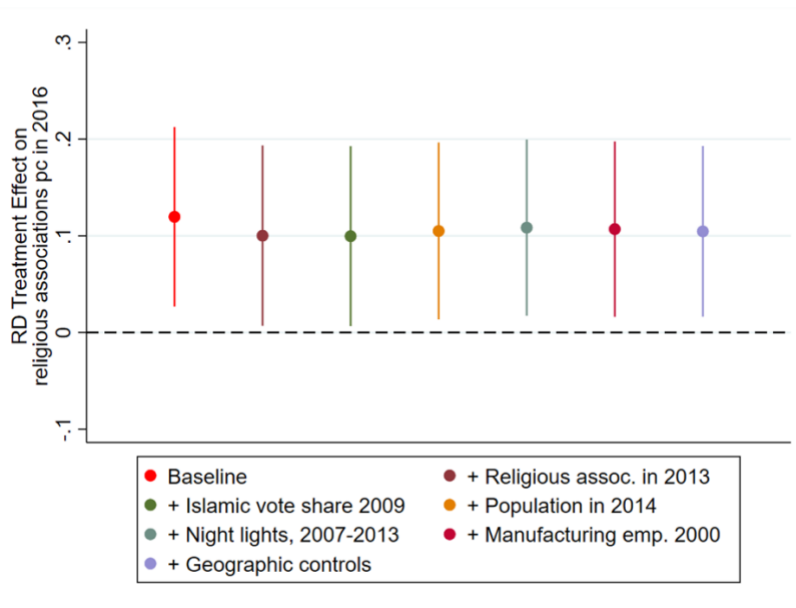


Finally, we adjust our RD estimation for various predetermined covariates to improve efficiency and power, while evaluating the stability of the RD treatment effect estimates. We confirmed earlier in Table 2 that there is no evidence of covariate imbalance. Therefore, we expect the RD estimates to be similar in magnitude and possibly become more precise with the covariate adjustment. Results are presented in Figure 7.

The first estimate reports the baseline RD treatment effect in the absence of any covariate adjustment. The subsequent estimates account for an expanding set of covariates.⁷⁷ Moving from left to right, in each step we add a new covariate (or group of covariates) onto the existing set as indicated in the legend.⁷⁸ Covariate adjustment only leads to some modest efficiency gain.

While not easily discernible by visual inspection, the confidence interval for the RD estimate for religious associations when adjusted for the full set of covariates is in fact 9% narrower vis-a-vis the unadjusted RD estimate (baseline model).

Figure 7: Covariate adjustment to RD estimates

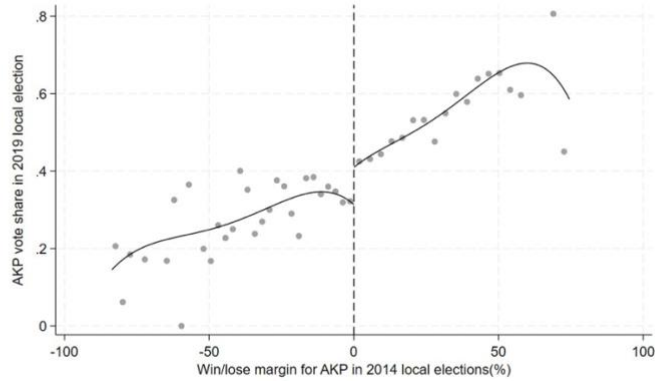


Do religious associations contribute to AKP’s electoral performance?

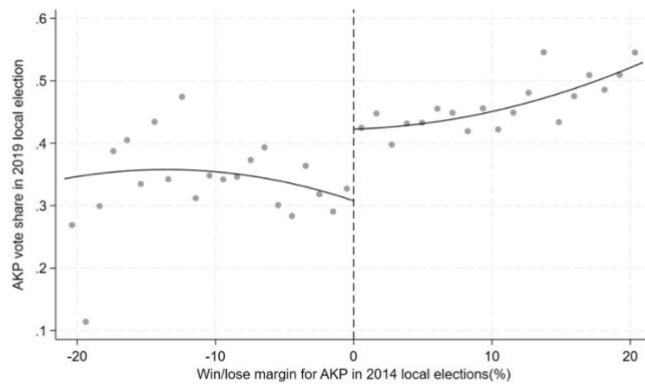
As outlined in section 4.2, the second goal of this paper is to evaluate whether AKP candidates running in 2019 local elections enjoyed an incumbency advantage in districts where AKP controlled the district municipality since 2014. If so, were religious associations instrumental for the electoral performance of AKP in 2019 and specifically, did they contribute to AKP’s incumbency advantage? First, we present the results from the RD analysis. The RD plots in Figure 8 indicate a clearly discernible incumbency advantage. The left-hand side plot is fitted by local polynomials of order four while the right-hand side plots are fitted via a local polynomial of order two. Both plots suggest that districts where AKP won by a small margin in 2014 were more likely to vote for AKP in the next local elections compared to districts where AKP lost by a small margin.

The RD estimates based on first-order local polynomials are presented in Table 3. The first column reports the results without covariate adjustment. The estimate is highly significant (p-value = 0.009).

Figure 8: Regression Discontinuity (RD) plots indicating AKP's incumbency advantage in 2019



(a) RD plot for AKP vote share in 2019, bandwidth = full support, $p = 4$



(b) RD plot for AKP vote share in 2019, common MSE- optimal bandwidth, $p=2$

On average, AKP received 11.4 percentage points more votes in districts where AKP barely won back in 2014 than in districts where the party barely lost. This is a large effect given that within the bandwidth of the analysis, AKP's average vote share is around 40 percent. The effect amounts to 67% of a standard deviation of the outcome within the same bandwidth. In the second column we repeat the estimation, adjusting for the full set of predetermined covariates we have previously used in Figure 7. Results are very similar in size and precision.

Table 3: First order local polynomial RD effect of AKP victory in 2014 on AKP vote share in 2019

	(1)	(2)
Dependent variable:	AKP vote share in 2019	
Robust RD estimate	0.114*** (0.0432)	0.120*** (0.0451)
Co-variate adjustment	No	Yes
Robust p-value	0.009	0.008
Robust 95% CI	[0.029 0.198]	[0.032 0.209]
Observations	961	909
Obs. left of cutoff	372	348
Obs. right of cutoff	589	561
Mean outcome within BW	0.41	0.40
Std. of outcome within BW	0.17	0.17
Kernel Type	Triangular	<u>Triangular</u>
BW Type	MSE-optimal	MSE-optimal
Order Loc. Poly. (p)	1	1
Order Bias (q)	2	2
BW Loc. Poly. (h)	17.263	13.212
BW Bias (b)	29.176	22.061

Notes: Standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the province level. * (**) (***) indicates significance at the 10 (5) (1) percent level.

Given that AKP's municipal control after the 2014 elections had a positive effect on the penetration of religious associations in 2016 and on AKP's the electoral performance in 2019, a natural question is whether the activities of religious associations may be one of the pathways that explain AKP votes in 2019. In Table 4 we address this question.

In all specifications, our coefficient of interest for logged number of religious associations is significant at 1% level. Based on our most conservative estimate in column 5, an increase in the number of religious associations from the 50th to the 90th percentile of the cross-district distribution is associated with around 3.6 percentage points increase in the share of votes AKP receives. This change amounts to one-fifth of a standard deviation of AKP vote shares, a modest amount. Crucially, as indicated in the last column, the significant relationship we estimated is almost entirely

driven by districts where AKP was the incumbent party (i.e. where AKP candidates won the previous election).

Table 4: Religious associations and AKP vote share in 2019 local elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable	Vote share of AKP in 2019 local elections					
<u>Log(# religious assoc.)</u>	0.0550*** [0.0100]	0.0363*** [0.0089]	0.0209** [0.0082]	0.0199** [0.0082]	0.0194** [0.0081]	0.0018 [0.0100]
<u>Log(# religious assoc.) × AKP won in 2014</u>						0.0250** [0.0104]
AKP won in 2014						0.0059 [0.0356]
<u>Log(# secular assoc.), 2016</u>	-0.0267** [0.0116]	-0.0143 [0.0110]	-0.0198** [0.0098]	-0.0042 [0.0149]	-0.0054 [0.0147]	-0.0100 [0.0142]
Log population, 2016	-0.0215* [0.0127]	-0.0184 [0.0119]	-0.0019 [0.0105]	-0.0102 [0.0123]	-0.0120 [0.0128]	-0.0073 [0.0126]
Share of votes to Islamic parties in 2009		0.3003*** [0.0450]	0.0768*** [0.0280]	0.0731** [0.0279]	0.0739*** [0.0275]	0.0563** [0.0257]
AKP vote share in 2014 election			0.6443*** [0.0626]	0.6170*** [0.0640]	0.6137*** [0.0641]	0.4787*** [0.0626]
University graduates per capita, 2014				-0.4585** [0.2271]	-0.5182** [0.2429]	-0.3924* [0.2355]
Log average night-time lights (2007-2013)					0.0076 [0.0068]	0.0067 [0.0066]
Constant	0.6148*** [0.1002]	0.4464*** [0.0929]	0.1513* [0.0859]	0.2303** [0.1045]	0.2502** [0.1091]	0.2744** [0.1089]
Observations	926	926	926	926	926	926
R-squared	0.0558	0.1238	0.2600	0.2647	0.2658	0.2850

Notes: Standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the province level. * (**) (***) indicates significance at the 10 (5) (1) percent level.

This result supports the view that it was possibly those Islamic associational activities that were stimulated by the AKP municipalities that helped the party gain those extra votes. Finally, in Table A1 in the appendix we verify that the results in Table 4 are robust to accounting for strategic inter-party coordination on candidate selections for the electoral race.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The first implication of our work is that politicians in competitive authoritarian regimes play an

important role in civil society formation. Governors encourage the formation of and form close ties with those organizations that can act as propaganda machines in exchange for funding and creation of private rents. We study the aftermath of 2014 local elections in Turkey and demonstrate that religious associations proliferated much more significantly in those municipalities where AKP was able to control the local government. Since AKP's core supporters are largely pious Muslims, it is not surprising to see more religious associations in these areas. Yet, selection effects do not explain the full picture. Our close election RD evidence suggests a causal link from local AKP incumbency to religious civil society growth. It shows that in the districts where AKP won a by a close margin in 2014, the number of religious associations increased 47 percent more than in districts where it lost closely. No similar effect was observed for secular (non-religious) associations, strengthening the argument that the AKP incumbency specifically encourages the 'loyal' civil society to foster. Secondly, we document a sizable electoral gain for AKP in 2019 elections in those districts that it won with a small margin in 2014. We offer evidence suggesting that religious associations played a significant role in generating electoral gains in districts with AKP incumbency in 2014. Several works on clientelism in Turkey offer qualitative evidence on the brokerage functions of civic associations. However, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study systematically testing the claim that associational penetration results in measurable local incumbent advantage. We also offer empirical support to the argument that civil society is not always a democratizing agent. On the contrary, a tamed civil society can be a useful tool in competitive authoritarian regimes. In Turkey, we argue that some religious associations became tools of authoritarian regime stability by garnering votes for the ruling party in local elections, by facilitating its societal penetration, and overall by serving a legitimizing function. Findings from our field interviews also support these arguments.

Last but not the least, we should point out that the brokerage potential of religious associations constitutes one part of the complicated patterns of voting behavior in Turkey. The local elections in March 2024 resulted in a victory for the main opposition party CHP (People's Republican Party), who took the lead from AKP in countrywide vote share after more than two decades. This marks a very definitive retreat for the AKP, whose votes dropped from 44% to 35% since the 2019 local elections. Multiple factors can explain the national outcome. These include the growing dissatisfaction of the voters with the economy, successful candidate selections by the CHP in key municipalities, the relative irrelevance of ideational legitimation factors (such as political polarization and the personality cult) in local elections compared to national elections, and the effects of opposition coordination in some districts.

Clearly, a detailed analysis of these results is beyond the scope of this study. However, given our results we posit that one of the factors explaining AKP's drop in vote share in the 2024 elections is the decline in their resource mobilization capacity since 2019. This is a direct result of the continuing economic downturn. Clientelist networks survive on the sustained flow of goods and benefits, be it to religious associations, political organizations, or individuals. In periods of economic crisis, the incumbent's resources diminish and selective redistribution becomes harder to sustain. Remaining resources are more likely to be used to retain the loyal voter base, rather than to attract the swing voters. In this setting, the brokerage efforts of civic associations will also remain limited, since they have fewer incentives to undertake such effort and fewer material benefits to offer their members. This severance of the patronage link between civic associations and the ruling party is especially critical in local elections, where personal relationships and clientelist promises are more prevalent compared to national elections. Therefore, based on our results we would predict a decline in the growth rate of both religious associations and their level of societal penetration for

the next electoral cycle. Subsequently, this can result in lower voter turnout and less votes for AKP in closely contested districts. The magnitude of this effect will no doubt depend on a complex interplay of multiple factors. In all likelihood, Turkey will continue to be a natural laboratory for the students of clientelism in the near future.

Endnotes

¹ Spires, “Contingent symbiosis”; Lewis, “Civil society and the authoritarian state”; Lorch and Bunk, “Using civil society”; Khatib, “Syria’s civil society”; Wiktorowicz, “Civil society as social control”.

² Arbatlı, “Turkey’s new path”; Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s democratic breakdown; Bayulgen, Arbatlı, and Canbolat, “Elite survival strategies”; Sözen, “Studying autocratization in Turkey”.

³ Arbatlı and Rosenberg, “United we stand divided we rule”.

⁴ Bilgin, “Political clientelism and democracy in Turkey”; Cengiz, “Proliferation of neopatrimonial domination”; Kalaycıoğlu, “Turkish democracy”, Marschall, Aydoğan, and Alper, “Does housing create votes?”.

⁵ Ocaklı, “Notable networks”, Arslan-Kose, “Faith-based organizations”.

⁶ Leonardi, Nannetti, and Putnam, “Making democracy work”; Paxton, “Social capital and democracy”; Fung, “Associations and democracy”.

⁷ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, “Voice and equality”, Putnam, “Bowling alone”.

⁸ Dahl, “Democracy and its critics”.

⁹ Warren, “Democracy and association”.

¹⁰ Tusalem, “A boon or a bane?”.

¹¹ Bernhard Hicken, Reeneck, and Lindberg; “Parties, civil society, and the deterrence of democratic defection”.

¹² Armony, “The dubious link”; Kotkin, “Uncivil society”; Spires, see note 1 above; Lewis, see note 1 above.

¹³ Berman, “Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic”.

¹⁴ Satyanath, Voigtländer, and Voth, “Bowling for fascism”.

¹⁵ Berman “Civil society and political institutionalization”.

¹⁶ Heurlin, “Governing civil society”.

¹⁷ Wiktorowicz, see note 1 above; Lorch and Bunk, see note 1 above; Khatib, see note 1 above.

¹⁸ Toepler, Zimmer, Fröhlich, and Obuch, “The changing space for NGOs”, 652.

¹⁹ Hsu, “Beyond civil society; Ziegler, “Civil society, political stability, and state power”.

²⁰ Lorch and Bunk, see note 1 above.

²¹ Yabancı, “Turkey’s tamed civil society”.

²² Holland and Palmer-Rubin, “Beyond the machine”, 1194.

²³ Trounstein, “Evidence of a local incumbency advantage”.

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- ²⁴ Gidengil and Karakoç, “Which matters more”; Kirdiş and Drhimeur, “The rise of populism?”; Yılmaz, Albayrak, and Ertürk, “Use of religion”.
- ²⁵ Doğan, *Mahalledeki AKP*; Arslan Köse, see note 5 above, *Özet, Fatih Başakşehir*; Yabancı, see note 21 above.
- ²⁶ Mardin, “Center-periphery relations”.
- ²⁷ Güneş-Ayata, “Roots and trends of clientelism in Turkey”.
- ²⁸ Sayarı, “Political patronage in Turkey”.
- ²⁹ Bilgin, see note 4 above.
- ³⁰ Gunes-Ayata, see note 28 above; Heper and Keyman, “Double-faced state”.
- ³¹ Sarkissian and Özler, “Democratization”.
- ³² Şimşek, “New social movements”; Sarkissian and Ozler, see note 32 above.
- ³³ White, *Islamist mobilization in Turkey*.
- ³⁴ Welfare Party is the Muslim conservative party that is the predecessor of AKP. The reformist cadres that broke off from WP, including Erdogan, formed AKP in 2001.
- ³⁵ Baykan and Somer, “Politics of notables”.
- ³⁶ Kitschelt, “Clientelistic linkage strategies”, 9.
- ³⁷ Çarkoğlu and Aytaç, “Who gets targeted for vote-buying?”.
- ³⁸ Ayata, “Patronage, party, and state”; Heper and Keyman, see note 31 above.
- ³⁹ <http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.5393.pdf>
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.sayistay.gov.tr/tr/kararlar/dk/?krr=20899>
- ⁴¹ Interview 3.
- ⁴² Arslan Köse, see note 5 above, 7.
- ⁴³ Yabancı, see note 21 above.
- ⁴⁴ Tocci, Keyman, and Wertz, “Trends in Turkish civil society, 19.
- ⁴⁵ Ağirel, *Şaki*, 134.
- ⁴⁶ Interview 1.
- ⁴⁷ Buğra and Savaşkan, *New capitalism in Turkey*; Gürakar, *Politics of favoritism*.
- ⁴⁸ Gürakar, *ibid*, 76-77.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 77.
- ⁵⁰ Interview 2.
- ⁵¹ Ark-Yıldırım, “Political parties and grassroots clientelist strategies”; Yıldırım, “Clientelism and dominant incumbent parties”; Arslantaş and Arslantaş, “How Does Clientelism Foster Electoral Dominance?”.
- ⁵² Sayarı, “Interdisciplinary approaches to political clientelism”.
- ⁵³ Ark-Yıldırım, see note 52 above, 480.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 484.
- ⁵⁵ Interview 4.
- ⁵⁶ *Özet*, see footnote 22 above, 53.
- ⁵⁷ Gülalp, “Globalization and political Islam”.
- ⁵⁸ Ark-Yıldırım, see note 52 above; Arslantaş and Arslantaş, see note 4 above.
- ⁵⁹ Erdoğan, “Derneklerin yerel seçimlere etkisi”.
- ⁶⁰ See <https://www.yhk.gov.tr>
- ⁶¹ Cattaneo and Titiunik, “Regression discontinuity designs”.
- ⁶² Eggers, Fowler., Hainmueller, Hall, and Snyder Jr, “On the validity of the regression discontinuity design”.

⁶³ For example, Snyder (2005) demonstrated that between 1926 and 1992, incumbent candidates won an outsized proportion of races decided by small margins. Caughey and Sekhon (2011) showed that victors in narrow U.S. House contests tended to raise and expend greater sums of campaign funds. Grimmer et al. (2012) showed that House candidates from the party holding key state-level positions systematically outperformed their rivals in tight races.

⁶⁴ Cattaneo, Jansson, and Ma, “Simple local polynomial density estimators”.

⁶⁵ This finding is consistent with Aksoy (2016) who found evidence of systematic AKP dominance in narrow races against right-wing contenders in 2004 local election, but no such evidence in 2009 or 2014 local elections (as presented in supplementary Appendix to his paper).

⁶⁶ Department of Associations has now been replaced by the General Directorate of Civil Society Relations <https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/>

⁶⁷ See <https://data.tuik.gov.tr>

⁶⁸ <https://acikveri.ysk.gov.tr/anasayfa>

⁶⁹ Notably, for the first time since AKP became the ruling party in 2002, it lost Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality to CHP in 2019 elections

⁷⁰ We re-scale the model by multiplying by 1,000.

⁷¹ In this method, the number of bins to the left and right of the cutoff is chosen so that the binned means have a total variability approximately equal to the overall variability in the raw data. In all plots, we use evenly-spaced bins.

⁷² The bandwidth is chosen using the MSE-optimal bandwidth selection method, and the resulting bandwidth limits the regression analysis to those districts where AKP won or lost by a margin smaller than 18 percent. The observations are weighted using a triangular kernel and the reported standard errors are computed using cluster-robust nearest neighbor variance estimation.

⁷³ In this definition, any association that is not officially grouped as pursuing activities related to provision of religious services is considered secular. Since this is a transparent but admittedly very broad definition of “secular”, it is possible that some of these civic associations that operate in the area of education, human rights or working on other advocacy issues may very well pursue agendas that instrumentalize religion or promote certain religious views.

⁷⁴ Friday sermons, known as “khutbah” is a good example. The content of these sermons are dictated by Diyanet, Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA), and delivered in mosques across the country by imams (clergymen) appointed by DRA. Although the sermons are often expected to focus on spiritual guidance and moral teachings, in many instances, they have been used as a tool of political messaging geared towards whitewashing the AKP regime and helping the government avoid blame from economic and political mishaps. The July 15 failed coup attempt against President Erdogan in 2016 is another vivid example of the critical role mosques and clergymen played for the mobilization of masses. In the night of the coup attempt, with the coordination of DRA, imams all over Turkey made emergency calls through mosque speakers to fellow citizens to go on the street and resist to coup plotters.

⁷⁵ All the plots are based on local second order polynomial regressions using evenly spaced mimicking variance number of bins.

⁷⁶ Looking at Figure A.1 one may suspect of a possible incumbency advantage in that AKP victory in 2009 elections appear to be somewhat more common among districts that AKP barely managed to win later in 2014. However, this conclusion is misleading as it breaks down once we use the optimal bandwidth instead of the full support. In fact, the RD estimate with optimal bandwidth is negative and statistically insignificant both using second-order and first-order local polynomials (see Table

2). Using an RD analysis where running variable is the AKP win-lose margin in 2009 elections, we have not found any evidence that AKP enjoyed an incumbency advantage in close races of the 2014 elections.

⁷⁷ The vertical lines around the point estimates show the 95% confidence intervals.

⁷⁸ Geographic controls include mean elevation, annual temperature, annual precipitation and caloric suitability index measuring the caloric yield one can obtain from the territory of the district under optimal cultivation conditions.

⁷⁹ Selcuk and Hekimci (2020) point out that in 2019 local elections the main opposition parties CHP and the İYİP agreed to support each other's candidates in forty-seven cities, including some big cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa, Antalya, and Adana. Using the list of candidates from each party who ran in a given district, we construct a proxy for inter-party coordination and confirm that all results in Table 4 are robust to accounting for this possibility.

Data availability statement

Data on Turkish municipal election results is openly available at the Supreme Election Council

Open Data Portal at <https://acikveri.ysk.gov.tr/anasayfa> .

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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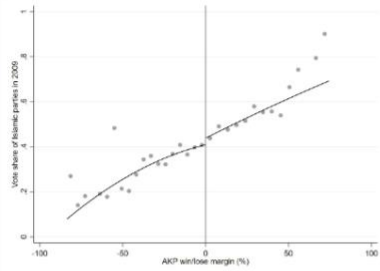
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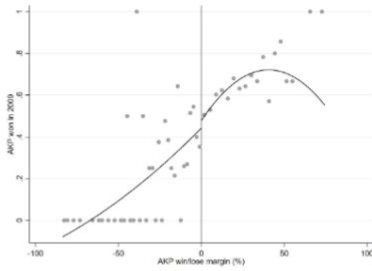
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APPENDIX

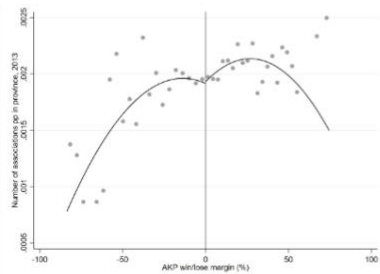
Figure A.1: Pre-treatment balance checks



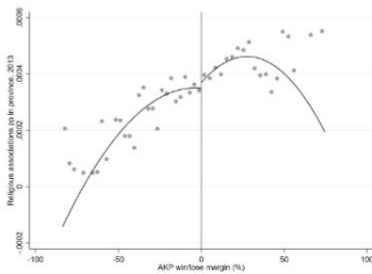
(a) Islamic vote share, 2009



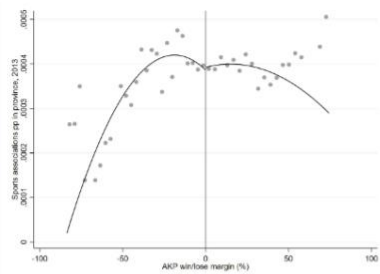
(b) AKP victory in 2009



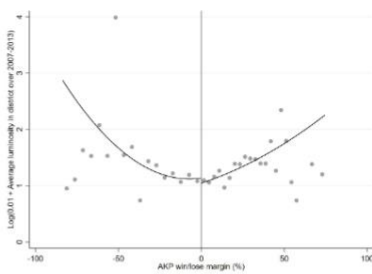
(c) All associations (province), 2013



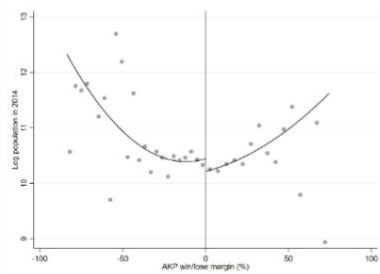
(d) Religious assoc. (province), 2013



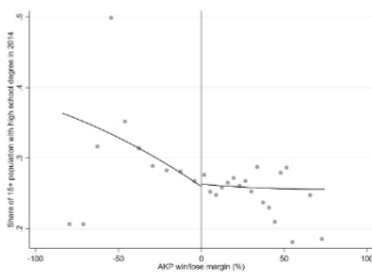
(e) Sports assoc. (province), 2013



(f) Nightlight density, 2007-2013 average



(g) Population in 2014



(h) Pop. share with HS degree or above, 2014

Table A1: Religious associations and AKP vote share in 2019 local elections: Robustness to coordination

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Vote share of AKP in 2019 local elections					
<u>Log(# religious assoc.)</u>	0.0543*** [0.0101]	0.0357*** [0.0089]	0.0204** [0.0083]	0.0195** [0.0083]	0.0190** [0.0082]	0.0015 [0.0099]
Log(# religious assoc.) x AKP won in 2014						0.0248** [0.0103]
AKP won in 2014						0.0056 [0.0353]
Log(# secular assoc.), 2016	-0.0280** [0.0120]	-0.0161 [0.0113]	-0.0212** [0.0104]	-0.0057 [0.0156]	-0.0069 [0.0155]	-0.0112 [0.0149]
Log population, 2016	-0.0176 [0.0131]	-0.0158 [0.0123]	0.0010 [0.0109]	-0.0071 [0.0131]	-0.0088 [0.0135]	-0.0044 [0.0133]
Share of votes to Islamic parties in 2009		0.3064*** [0.0447]	0.0791*** [0.0287]	0.0747** [0.0285]	0.0745*** [0.0280]	0.0558** [0.0265]
AKP vote share in 2014 election			0.6424*** [0.0627]	0.6157*** [0.0643]	0.6129*** [0.0646]	0.4798*** [0.0623]
University graduates per capita, 2014				-0.4524* [0.2274]	-0.5127** [0.2422]	-0.3906* [0.2337]
Log average night-time lights (2007-2013)					0.0075 [0.0066]	0.0068 [0.0065]
Opposition coordination	0.0147 [0.0215]	0.0246 [0.0201]	0.0175 [0.0176]	0.0166 [0.0174]	0.0155 [0.0170]	0.0128 [0.0162]
Government coordination	-0.0162 [0.0153]	-0.0025 [0.0141]	-0.0086 [0.0130]	-0.0092 [0.0129]	-0.0105 [0.0130]	-0.0109 [0.0133]
Constant	0.5784*** [0.1044]	0.4067*** [0.1005]	0.1186 [0.0954]	0.1975* [0.1165]	0.2178* [0.1196]	0.2461** [0.1181]
Observations	926	926	926	926	926	926
R-squared	0.0585	0.1273	0.2621	0.2666	0.2677	0.2866

Notes: Standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the province level. * (**) (***) indicates significance at the 10 (5) (1) percent level.

Table A1 probes the robustness of the results in Table 4 to accounting for coordination among parties in the 2019 local elections. [Selcuk and Hekimci \(2020\)](#) point out that opposition coordination was a salient feature in the 2019 local elections. In that election, CHP and the IYIP agreed to support each other's candidates in forty-seven cities, including some big cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa, Antalya, and Adana. Moreover, HDP, the Kurdish opposition party, decided not to nominate candidates in certain battleground cities, and most notably, supported CHP-IYIP candidates [Ekrem Imamoglu](#) in Istanbul and [Mansur Yavaş](#) in Ankara. Countering this joint opposition effort, AKP-MHP alliance nominated joint candidates and supported each other in 51 cities.

To test whether AKP vote share in 2019 elections is related to coordination among parties, we construct two measures of coordination at the district level, one between the opposition parties CHP and IYIP and one for the AKP-MHP alliance. Using the list of candidates from each party who ran in each district, we coded a dummy variable *Opposition coordination* that is equal to one if only one (but not both) of the two alliance parties (either CHP or IYIP) launched a candidate in that district. The dummy is coded zero otherwise. The idea is that the absence of a CHP (IYIP) candidate when IYIP (CHP) has a running candidate would indicate a potential coordination in favour of the CHP (IYIP) candidate that is deemed to stand a higher chance in that district. Similarly, we coded a dummy variable *Government coordination* that is equal to one if only one (but not both) of the two alliance parties (either AKP or MHP) launched a candidate in that district. In Table A1, we repeat the analysis in Table 4, adding these two coordination indicators as control variables. Our main results remain both qualitatively and quantitatively similar.



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